



The Duke's Untamable Bride

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Category: Historical

Description: "If you wanted an obedient wife, then you chose the wrong woman, Your Grace..."

After returning from war, Duke Colin must face a new battle: raising his nieces. And the only way to win is finding a wife...

With no way to avoid a marriage of convenience, Lady Jane chooses the lesser of two evils. Even if that means becoming a heartless Duke's wife...

But Colin soon realizes that his plan is backfiring. For, instead of taming the young hellions, his new wife is determined to infuriate him. So much so that he cannot think of anything but her...

*If you like powerful Dukes, loving Duchesses and a marvelous depiction of the majestic Regency and Victorian era, then The Duke's Untamable Bride is the novel for you.

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“I trust that I do not have to remind you to be on the best of behaviors today, Jane.”

Henry Dowding, the Viscount of Stonehave Manor glanced down at his daughter with a raised brow and a disapproving look in his eyes.

Jane refrained from rolling her eyes. It would only rile her father and send him into a spiral, lecturing her and reminding her why he felt the need to chide her at the age of one-and-twenty

“I should not have to remind you of this but you have managed to grow wings and prove that you can defy me at will...”

Jane tuned him out. She bit back a sigh. She should have known it was impossible for him to not go launch into a tirade as he barraged her slightly veiled insults.

Her lips began to turn down in a frown when Sarah’s fingers gently brushed her fingers, offering her a soft smile, her eyes conveying how terribly sorry she felt to have Jane in this situation... once again.

“I’m all right. You do not have to feel sorry,” Jane whispered to her sister, returning her smile.

“What are you whispering about? How are you to learn when you find it difficult to pay attention, Jane?” the viscount asked, running a hand across his temple as though chastising her had given him a headache.

“I do apologize, Father. Of course, I am listening to you,” Jane pacified, one of the

first times she has ever done so.

She refrained from smiling as her father cleared his throat to hide his shock. Somehow, that gave her more satisfaction than going head-to-head with him as usual.

“Well, I suppose it is good that you are in an amenable mood today,” he straightened his back, placing both hands on his cane.

Jane tensed as she watched him. He only ever did that when he was about to deliver news he knew would upset her.

“You will find that today, things will be... different,” he said, running a hand down his salt-and-pepper moustache.

“How are things to be different, Father?”

She swallowed quite loudly as she waited for his answer.

The viscount cleared his throat before answering her question.

“There is someone I would like you to be introduced to. He is to be your suitor,” he said matter-of-factly.

Jane’s eyes widened as she stared at her father.

“What?”

“Jane, please be more quiet,” her sister said, looking around. She followed her step and found eyes fixed on her as people nearby stared at them with eyes brimming with curiosity and the search for new gossip.

Jane's jaw ticked wildly as she struggled to calm herself. Her hands played with the fabric of her skirts while she waited for everyone to go about their business.

She had been so excited to be at the garden party to dance and laugh with her sister, but now, even as she stared at the colorful decorations with ladies' gowns that matched the beautiful flowers spreading their fragrance in the air, the last of her excitement dwindled.

"Why couldn't we have discussed this before we left the house, Father?" she asked, holding back the anger that threatened to explode if she didn't let it out soon.

This was the last place for an argument with her father. Heavens only knew the scandal they would create if that happened.

"And give you enough time to figure out how to mess this up?" he asked, his eyes showing a glint that proved he thought himself victorious.

"So, you would rather I be blindsided as opposed to having an opinion on whom I choose to marry?" she queried, amazed at his logic.

Her father's eyes held no remorse as he stared her straight in the eyes.

"Perhaps if I trusted that it was a decision you would ever be ready to make, I would have allowed you make it. However, you have proved to be incapable of something as serious as this, so, I will make it for you. I have found the perfect suitor for you and I expect you to impress him."

"Jane, Father, I do not think this is the place for such a conversation."

Sarah placed her hands on Jane's shoulder, steering her away from their father, but she was too riled up to listen to her sensible sister. Not on this. Not when it concerned

her future. A future her father was about to trade away.

“How could you do this to me, Father?”

Her heart beat fast in her chest. All along, she had been too angry to think about how she felt. She refrained from rubbing away the sting in her chest. She would not let him see just how much she was hurt by his betrayal.

“Did you know about this?” she turned to her sister who took a step back, staring at her in shock.

“Jane, I-” Sarah started, but was cut off by their father.

“Leave your sister out of this. There was nothing she could have done to stop this even if she knew.”

The viscount sighed. “Look here, Jane. Perhaps my methods are too old-fashioned for you to understand and that is why we have continued to clash on things, but everything I have done has been for the good of you and your sister.”

She stared at her father. Her lips opened to utter words she wasn’t certain of their direction but he spoke before she could.

“Moreover, you could certainly do a lot worse than the man I have found you. The Marquess of Pennington is of good age, powerful, wealthy, and titled. He has the means to care for you and you shall have no reasons to complain.”

Jane stiffened. “Ah, I suppose I should have known. This is just another business dealing for you, Father. Did you think of my needs first before you chose him to be my husband or were my needs merely an afterthought as you picked him based on his wealth?”

“Jane Dowding, you will not speak to me in such manner. You might have forgotten your manners but surely you have not forgotten that I am your father,” he blustered, his face turning a bright red as he stared her down.

“Jane! Do stop it, please,” Sarah chided, her eyes widening as she silently pleaded with Jane to be calm.

“I do apologize for her, Father. Perhaps it would have been best for her to have been more prepared before you sought to introduce them.”

Jane glared at her sister. She had always been appreciative of her sister’s efforts to take care of her and stand up for her when she was at loggerheads with their father, but now was not one of those times.

She looked around as people milled about them. The curious guests had gone back to their conversations, quickly bored by their inability to acquire the gossip they wanted as a result of their hushed tones.

“I did not realize that I had to consult with my daughter before making a decision concerning her welfare,” the viscount snapped, glaring between Sarah and Jane.

Sarah looked away from her father, biting her lips, following the anger in her father’s voice, however, the action only angered Jane as she moved closer to her sister, ready to come to her defense if need be.

“She is right. I should not have had to find out about this only moments before it happened, Father, and I will not be a part of this charade. I will choose who I plan to marry.”

The viscount looked around, his eyes searching for what Jane could not find. She looked at him in confusion as he turned back to her, wearing a look that made it clear

he was not backing down.

“I fail to see the men that are lining up, wishing to court you. Perhaps you would have a say in who you wish to marry if you had even one man coming up to me, seeking my permission to court you,” he chastised, his voice low and yet, carrying his ire.

Jane swallowed and looked away, feeling defeated. Her lids blinked rapidly as she struggled to control the angry tears that threatened to fall down her face.

Why can't he just understand that he does not have to control every part of my life?

She dug her fingers into her palm to stop the overwhelming urge to cry out to him and beg him to put an end to his plan. She would not beg, especially when it was clear that he would not be changing his mind on the topic.

“I sincerely hope that you can put an end to your childish antics long enough to see that I am doing this for you,” the viscount uttered with a long-suffering sigh.

“Do try to be on the best of behaviors tonight and rest assured that once the marquess asks for your hand in marriage, I will be accepting his suit. My mind will not be changed on the matter,” he said.

“Father, I cannot let this happen, I will not-” Jane started after her father as he walked away from her, waving at an old friend.

“Jane, please,” Sarah held her hand tightly, stopping her from following their father and causing a scene.

She stopped, distraught. She had known the day would come when her father would no longer be lenient with her and push for her to marry. But she had never expected it

to happen so soon, nor had she thought that it would happen with her father choosing a suitor for her, completely disregarding her opinion in the matter.

She smiled a small smile as an acquaintance waved them over, shaking her head politely in refusal. She could not very well indulge in small talks, not when her life seemed to be going down in shambles.

“Jane, I do not think it will do you any good to rile Father up. Perhaps it is best to follow his plan for the night. Let him see that you take his words into account,” Sarah suggested as she led her further into the party.

Unlike Jane, she smiled and laughed as she greeted some of the guests she was familiar with, a feat Jane had always marveled at. She had never been able to manage her feelings as her sister quite easily did.

“Oh, Sarah, he should have found a husband for you instead. You would make the perfect wife for such a man if he is as Father described,” she said, as the clogs in her head began to turn.

Sarah shook her head at her sister, offering a small laugh. At the age of four-and-twenty, Sarah remained unwed herself, now a spinster according to the ton, and yet, Jane knew any man would be lucky to have her as wife.

She should not have said it aloud. She knew that her father had no regard for Sarah, and called her ugly and useless since 3 seasons had passed with her sister failing to catch the attention of any man.

It was not that Sarah was ugly... it was that her quietness extended even to situations with suitors. The very thing that would make her a perfect wife had made it hard to hold the attention of suitors long enough to actually become one.

Jane wondered if she could make this man see how much better Sarah would be for him than her.

“Do not get any ideas in your head, Jane,” Sarah warned.

Jane grinned. Of course, her sister knew her enough to know she was already entertaining thoughts on how to turn this situation around. If only her father knew her just the same way so there would be no need for conversations as this.

She laced her hand with Sarah's, still wearing her wide grin as her mood started to lift.

“You have to admit, it would be more logical for Father to marry you off first before he thinks to do the same with me,” she said.

“Ah, but that would only be true if it were not for one important fact,” Sarah said, her eyes filling with a familiar glint.

“What fact might that be, Sarah?” she played along, excited to experience this side of her sister that only she got to witness, especially since she absorbed the role of mother to Jane.

“Father would much rather I remain a spinster than be stuck with you if he married me off,” she stated, laughing at the shocked look on her sister's face.

“Sarah, I cannot believe you just said that,” Jane said, feigning upset.

She burst into laughter when Sarah only stared at her with raised brows, not buying her hurt act. Jane gently shoved Sarah with her shoulder before pulling her close once again.

“You are lucky I love you, else I would take offence to that,” Jane said, intertwining their fingers.

“I could very much say the same to you, dear sister of mine. Only I could put up with you and Father, and your constant bickering.”

She put her hand on her chin in a dramatic fashion.

“Perhaps you are right. I should take you up on your offer and set my sights on the marquess so that I could be out of the house before you and Father set each other off again.”

Jane’s mouth dropped open as Sarah giggled, the action causing her face to crinkle and her eyes to turn into slit, causing her blue eyes to disappear behind her lids.

Jane stared at her as her lips formed into a smile. Her sister was beautiful and even more so when she let go of the need to mother her and allowed herself to be happy and smile.

“Ah, Lord Lewis, I had wondered whether you weren’t coming.”

Jane startled as she heard her father’s voice. She looked at her sister who had returned to her somber mood whenever their father was around and sighed quietly.

“I apologize, Lord Dowding. I was detained by some unforeseen circumstances,” he said, bowing slightly.

“That is no matter,” the viscount said before pointing at his daughters.

“These are my daughters. My older child, Miss Sarah Dowding, and my younger one, Miss Jane Dowding,” he said. “Girls, this is Lord Lewis, the Marquess of

Pennington”.

Jane curtseyed, as did her sister.

“It is a pleasure to be in the company of such lovely ladies,” the marquess said, although his gaze remained fixed on Jane.

Sarah smiled at him while Jane remained silent. There was something about his gaze that set her off. Yet she knew not to mention it to her father as it would only be seen as an excuse and would only make her father lecture her even some more when they returned home.

“The dance is about to come to an end. Might I ask you to join me for the next dance, Miss Jane? That is, if your card is not already full,” he asked, offering her a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Jane hadn’t truly looked at him until that moment. She regarded him now as he reached up a hand to push an errant strand of blond hair that seemed to be only inches away from poking his dark brown eyes. He pushed the lock into place and smiled at her again.

He was a handsome man, tall and strong. Many women would be lucky to have his attentions focused on them and yet, she wished for it to be anywhere but on her, because regardless of his good looks, there was something about his stares that she found rather unsettling. Something about the way he looked her made it impossible for her to see past that enough to admire his person.

“She has a space in her card for the next dance, Lord Lewis,” her father said eagerly, although his eyes shot daggers at Jane.

Jane had not realized that she had been staring at the man without saying a word for

quite some time. She nodded, still unable to get her lips to function and speak the words she needed. Perhaps it was because she knew she would only secure her father's ire if she said something.

"Splendid. Shall we?" he grinned, offering her his hand.

"Certainly, my lord."

She placed her hand in his, grimacing before allowing it to melt into a smile she did not feel.

As the dance began, Jane allowed herself to be led, uncomfortable as he pulled her close and yet, not wishing to cause a scene.

"I must admit, when your father broached the topic of securing a match between his daughter and I, I did not expect you to look the way you did. I had only agreed to this out of respect for him but now..."

He paused as he looked her up and down, his eyes lingering on her body in a manner that made her feel like she was naked. Jane bit the inside of her cheek until she could taste blood as she struggled to not rip her hands from his and cover herself up.

"Now, I'm glad that I did," he grinned at her. "I cannot wait to know you better."

Something about the way he said it let her know that he did not mean to have conversations with her. She shivered in disgust and his grin widened, misunderstanding her reaction.

"I fear I am not much of an interesting person," she said, deliberately acting obtuse.

He looked her up and down again, his eyes lingering at the wideness of her hips.

“Forgive me, my lady, but I find that very difficult to believe,” he said, emphasizing his words to an annoying degree.

She managed to flash him a faint grin, already tired of this conversation. Jane had not spoken much so she wouldn’t say anything that would jeopardize her father’s plan. She was, however, about to reply him when their attention was drawn to a man yelling at a woman who seemed to be his wife.

It was embarrassing, but Lord Lewis looked impressed by the man’s dominance. Most of the men there did.

“A woman must know her place at all times,” he said, turning to face her.

Her brows furrowed as a slight frown appeared on her face.

“But she did not do anything to warrant the embarrassment,” Jane said to him, trying to control the annoyance swelling within her.

“Just because you did not see it, doesn’t mean that she didn’t do it.” He clearly saw nothing wrong with the man’s behavior.

She was tempted to say what she was thinking, exactly the way she was thinking it. However, doing that would only make things worse.

“A woman should never speak when the man is speaking unless she is told to do so, don’t you agree?” he added with an annoying grin, making her wonder what it was that he found amusing.

“I’m a woman and I am speaking with you,” she said to him, trying to make a point and also get an insight of the type of man he was even though she already had a clue.

“Indeed, you are. But I am indulging you, am I not?” His gaze pierced through her eyes and he added after her silence. “I’m hoping that you’re nothing like that woman, because that would be a shame. I love my women submissive, pleasing only me.”

The way he spoke was quite alarming, like he was sending a subtle message to her, a threat perhaps. His expression went blank after his speech and she could see that he was starting to get upset. Maybe the thought of her not being the woman he wanted was the reason for the change in his mood.

Jane pushed her head back, looking at the man that she was going to tie the knot with. Disbelief flickered in her eyes and all she wanted was to get as far away from him as possible. She obviously would not last long in his house with her attitude. Jane was not the type of woman to not talk back and since that was the type of woman he wanted, then there was a problem.

She refrained from shivering in disgust once again as she counted the seconds before the song came to an end.

She ripped her hands from his and curtsied hurriedly, ignoring the surprise in his gaze as she shepherded him back to her family.

“Thank you for the dance, my lord,” she said, standing with her sister.

“The pleasure was all mine,” he responded.

I’m certain it was.

She smiled as she waited for him to leave and turned to her father and sister before they could ask her any questions.

“I am quite parched from the dance. I am going to get something to drink.”

She slunk off before either of them could stop her, approaching the table set out for refreshment. However, the moment their eyes were off her, she turned away, walking quickly in the direction of the garden, although slow enough to not attract any attention.

Jane walked deeper into the garden, mapping the path she had come through before she got lost in the maze. That was the last thing she wanted to happen. She sat down on a stone-carved seat and pressed her back to the backrest.

Jane breathed in the smell of flowers, allowing herself to relax and her head to body to expel the memories of Lord Lewis. She sat up straight when her ears picked up the sound of someone coming towards her through the trees.

“Oh no... anyone else but him,” she muttered under her breath. She had only begun to ease out the dreadful thoughts of him and was not ready for another encounter.

She gasped in horror. What if he had followed her here to compromise her? Had his words been some veiled threat she hadn't caught?

“I would love to hear your thoughts on what you think would be the best way to ensure your husband is well and truly happy, Lady Felicity.”

The stunned woman stared at his grandmother as though asking for help, before staring back at him. She masked her nervousness behind a giggle although it did nothing to hide it.

“I suppose I would do whatever he wants me to,” she said, unsure of how best to answer the question.

“So, you would lose yourself in order to ensure his happiness?” he asked.

“I- I -” she looked around desperately, relief flooding her as she turned back to him. “I believe my mama is in need of my assistance. It was lovely to meet you, Your Grace.”

She hastily hurried off, her retreat almost comical.

“Lady Maisy,” Colin turned to the last of the ladies that had surrounded him upon arrival.

“Y-Your Grace.”

Her voice no longer held the confidence with which she had addressed him before now.

“How would you care for my children if I already had some?” he asked, his stare a bit intimidating even as he tried to be as free as he could.

“Ah, Your Grace, I suppose I could always get a governess to care for them and ensure that they are well-educated,” she replied with a small shrug.

Colin raised a brow, he most certainly was not pleased by her response nor did he find the manner at which she replied without thinking twice wise.

“You would not be involved in their learning?” he asked, hoping she would think this time. His brows knitted and his expression was solemn.

Her eyes bulged as she looked between his grandmother and him. Colin could never understand why they constantly looked at her for help.

“I suppose I would if you wanted me to, however, they stand to learn more from a governess,” she replied strongly.

“I see.”

“Might I ask, Your Grace...” she requested his permission without a glint of fear in her eyes.

He couldn't rule out the fact that she was an impressive one, beautiful and bold. This was the longest conversation he'd had with women like her so far.

“Why these questions?” she asked.

Now, he was the one who looked at his grandmother before replying.

“Well, I'd like to know the type of relationship my future wife would have with my children if I had any,” he replied.

“I'm sure your children would be lovely, Your Grace.” She had a smile on her face that nearly prompted him to return the gesture but he didn't.

Colin's gaze was usually devoid of any emotions and most people found that very intimidating, so much so that it made them uncomfortable. Clearly, not this one.

“Indeed.” He looked her in the eyes. “Perhaps you can tell me how you would handle the situation should they misbehave.”

She laughed lightly.

“There are different ways to discipline children who misbehave, Your Grace.”

“And what might those ways be?” he asked, curiosity coloring his eyes.

She walked over to him and leaned forward, not too close but enough to whisper in

his ears.

“Marry me and you'll find out.”

It came as a shock to him but as usual, he had no expression on his face. She had the boldness to propose that with much confidence and he wasn't sure whether to be impressed or concerned.

She had not been intimidated enough to respond with answers that she believed he wanted to hear which made her different from the other women. However, the woman he would marry needed to play an active role in his nieces' lives and she didn't seem to be interested in taking on such a role.

“Thank you, Lady Maisy.”

She curtsied and walked away, turning back to stare at him with an expression that showed how baffled she truly was by him.

Her face over her shoulder reminded him of a painting and yet, he knew he could not be swayed by any of that.

Colin turned when Prudence sighed.

“What complaints do you have this time, grandmother?”

“Ha! What complaints do I have?” she looked around as though everyone was meant to join in in her laughter.

“Yes, grandmother. I would love to hear it.”

“You, my dear grandson, have managed to chase every woman within the vicinity

with your weird and intimidating questions. I am beginning to wonder if you truly want a wife or you just say so.”

Colin sighed. His grandmother was right.

“I do want a wife, grandmother. I suppose I have come with an expectation that no one can match, but I simply do not have the luxury to marry only for the size of her dowry or the fairness of her complexion.”

“Then, what is it you wish for?” she asked him curiously.

“I am being cruel, not because it is in my nature to be, but because I have to be. I cannot marry someone who will not be able to handle my nieces. They need motherly care but they also need someone who is able to draw the line and not coddle them into uselessness.”

Colin paused and shook his head.

“I will not do wrong by them by thinking only of my own needs when it comes to choosing a wife.”

Prudence sighed once again, but this time, in understanding.

“Thank you for thinking of the girls, however, I certainly hope you will not neglect yourself completely.”

Colin smiled but didn’t say a word.

Things had not gone the way he expected. He was in dire need of a wife and had hoped to find one at the garden party but so far, none of them had managed to meet up with his expectations.

“If you will excuse me, grandmother,” he said, leaving her standing and staring after him.

Although he tried not to think about it, he was extremely disappointed by how things had gone. If it continued like this, he would not be able to find the perfect woman for his nieces to call mother. He could not bear it if he married a woman who would not care for them or be able to take care of them without giving in too much to their demands. There needed to be a perfect balance of both.

Colin walked into the gardens, lost in thought and wanting to be alone. He’d spoken to more than enough women and did not want to speak to any more.

“Lord knows I cannot handle even more disappointment today,” he sighed deeply.

His mood had soured and it was seeming like an impossible task to come out of it.

He turned a bend, going around the corner and jerked back in shock when a face appeared in front of him. His hand came up and he grabbed hers just as she raised them to hit him.

He stared at the very strange woman in complete shock, his hand still holding hers as she tried to pull away from him.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

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“You are definitely not him.”

Jane stared at the strange man as her panic began to subside. Her panic had increased after her plan to hit the intruder she believed to be Lord Lewis failed.

She had gone through different scenarios in her head and yet, none of them involved her getting out of the situation with her reputation in tact or without ending up married to him.

“Him?”

She looked at the strange man and this time, when she pulled her hands from his, he released his hands, allowing her to wrench free.

“Never mind that.”

“Considering how close I came to being smacked due to this him, I believe I have a right to know who he is and what this is about.”

“Ah, but it is as you said. You came close to being smacked but you were not. So, why don’t you leave me alone and carry on your way,” she suggested with a raised brow.

“Leave you alone?” he scoffed. “I saw how tense you were when you thought I was him and that you had been unable to inflict harm. Do you still wish to be here and chance him finding you?”

Jane stared at the strange man in disbelief.

Are all men like this or am I just unlucky enough to meet only the ones who irk me?

“You, sir, have no right to lecture me on what you think I should or shouldn’t do. Pretend I am not here if you will and do go on your merry way,” she said, rolling her eyes at the absurdity of the situation.

It seemed there was no peace to be found whenever men were around her.

“In case you haven’t noticed, you are sequestered in a garden alone, with a man, and without a chaperone, a fact that should have been painfully obvious to you by now if you were not so intent on trampling on my good intentions.”

“Perhaps if I had asked for your good intentions, I would not be so quick to trample on them as you put it,” she responded, not ready to back down.

He had another thing coming for him if he thought he could push her around. Years of always arguing with her father had left her prepared for situations such as these.

“You should be thanking me, you know. I am doing you a favor,” he said with a voice filled with arrogance.

She would feel pity for him if he hadn’t been so quick to act like a man and try to tell her what to do despite knowing nothing about her to begin with.

“Doing me a favor you say,” she scoffed, utterly amused.

“Yes. You need to return to your chaperone so that you can leave me alone with my thoughts and the peaceful garden I expected when I came here.”

“Perhaps you should be the one to leave. Much like you, I came here to be away from the noise and chaos out there and I do not intend to return until I have had my fill of the peace that is to be found here.”

He shook his head, staring at her as though she has grown two more where one should be.

“Have you no care for your reputation if you are caught here with me?”

“If you cared so much about my reputation, then you would heed my words and realize that the best thing a gentleman could do at this point would be to leave me alone with my thoughts while you returned to the party and forgot that you ever met me here.”

He had another thing coming if he thought he could so easily intimidate her into giving in and running away because he said so.

“Jane?”

Jane’s eyes widened as she listened to be certain that she had indeed heard her sister’s voice.

“Are you in here?”

She swallowed back a gasp and jumped into action, grabbing the annoying man’s hand in hers as she pulled him with her, dragging him into hiding.

Stunned by her sudden move, he followed after her, not putting on resistance, although his face registered his confusion.

She crouched low behind some thick bushes, pushing him down to do the same as she

poked her head through the side, waiting to see if her sister was going to walk by.

“What do you think you’re doing? Why are we hiding from whoever that was when you should be going to them and away from the garden?”

“Shh.”

She covered his mouth with her hand, glaring daggers at him as he pestered her with his many questions. She could never understand why some people just didn’t know when to keep still.

“What do you think you-”

She tightened her hand around his mouth until his words came out jumbled and glared at him when he continued to try to speak through her hands.

“How is this not enough to deter you from speaking?” she asked, rolling her eyes at him when he finally quietened.

She poked her head out through the corner of the bush once again, and listened for her sister’s voice, relaxing when she could not hear her calling out once again, although she could not be relaxed enough until she was certain that her sister had gone elsewhere to look for her and would not return.

A hand clamped on hers and she looked back in shock. Her eyes widened as she stared at her hands that were pressed against his face, against firm lips that moved against her hands as he once again tried to speak.

Shocked, she allowed him remove her hand from his lips as she gazed at him. She looked down at their fingers that remained intertwined, hanging as they locked eyes at each other.

The strange man watched her with a frown on his face as she took in his appearance. Even crouching as they were, she had to look up to be able to look at his face. He was a tall man, his hands which held hers were large and firm, with broad shoulders that were an indication of just how strong he was. At first she hadn't noticed all of this due to his obnoxiousness.

His black hair was parted in the middle, with the short locks hanging down the side of his face and stopping just above dark green eyes. Those eyes that seemed to be staring straight into her soul, looking at her as though they could tell all of her secrets without much thought to it.

He was beautiful. Even with the frown that hadn't left his face, he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen in her life.

Her eyes trailed down to those lips that her hands had covered only moments ago. She ached to touch them once again, to run her hands against the thin, firm pinkness that formed his lips.

Despite herself, she slipped her hand from his and raised it up to his face slowly, as her eyes remained stuck on his dark green ones that reminded of her a swamp.

Colin could not say that he had ever been in a situation like this, crouched behind a thick bush as he stared down at a woman who only mere moments ago, had been about to deliver a blow to him

Self-preservation and his determination to be a gentleman meant that, although he wanted nothing more than to remain crouched behind the bushes with this mystery woman, he needed to find a way out of this situation.

Her blue eyes that reminded him of the time he's seen the ocean when he journeyed were fitting for just how feisty of a person she was. Much like the ocean, calm in a

moment and then violent the next, she appeared to be innocent as she stared up at him, although he knew that she was anything but.

She was by no means short, however, his tall build towered over her smaller one, a difference that was obvious even as they remained on their knees, crouched and waiting for whoever had been about to find them, to go away.

A lock of brown hair had strayed from its place, falling down her neck and curling up on her collarbone. His hand itched to run a hand down the length of it and curl it up between his fingers but he resisted.

Colin caught the hand that had slowly begun to creep up his face as her eyes lowered to his lips. He cleared his throat to put an end to the thick air that suddenly surrounded them and took a moment to steady himself as she jumped and stared up at him with wide eyes.

“Are you quite done?” he asked her, partly to bring her out of the trance she seemed to be locked in, although a small part of him wished to see her flustered and out of her element.

He could only imagine what she would do if she was caught off guard, nothing like the quick recovery he had encountered when she had thought him to be someone else and was about to hit him.

It was a topic that plagued his curiosity, however, something told him that she would never allow the details to slip out of her lips if he asked and so, he stayed his tongue.

Her cheeks pinkened, a soft color that did a lot to soften her expression but not by much. As she had done earlier, she snatched her hand away from his and leveled him with a glare.

“Yes, quite.”

She stood up, moving away from him as she dusted the grass that clung to her skirt.

Colin hurriedly stood up with her, although a part of him wished they remained bent on the floor. He frowned. Where had that come from?

He had only just met the woman and there should be no reason why he would wish to spend a moment longer with her, not when it could cost her her reputation. And that was definitely not the type of person he was.

“Do you always have a frown on your face or is that because of me?” she asked him, taking one last peek through the bush before she walked to the other side of the garden.

Colin chuckled, surprising himself with the sound. She was quite different from all the other women he had met today. He never would have believed anyone would have been able to treat him as she had, him, a Duke. Not that she knew he was one. Although he had a feeling she would not have treated him different if she knew.

“What is your name?” he asked, not answering her question.

“Why do you wish to know my name?” she asked him in return, moving away.

“I wish to know how to address you the next time I see you,” he replied and watched as something in her eyes changed.

“You were right. I should not be here and you should not have to address me if we ever met again because we should not have met,” her words rushed out as she looked around with panic in her eyes.

“I merely wish to know your name. Surely, that is not enough to cause panic?” he asked, confused by her sudden behavior especially after how brave and stubborn she had been all along.

“I should not be here. It is quite inappropriate for us to be alone in a garden, with no chaperone as you have said,” she carried on, pacing the open space as her eyes began to fill with even more panic.

“My father would have an even longer lecture for me if he finds out about this. That is if he hasn’t already discovered my absence and already has plans to do so anyway.”

Colin watched in fascination as she rambled on endlessly before pausing. She spared him one last glance and without a word, turned around and ran out of the garden, leaving him standing there, baffled as he contemplated what just happened.

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"Stop picking at your food and eat properly, Jane," The viscount's stern voice cut through the elegant silence of the dining room.

She listened to him in silence, her mind darting back to that unexpected moment in the garden. Jane was struggling with her thoughts as her father continued to talk but she was certain that it was only a matter of time before she gave in and allowed herself to reminisce on the event that happened two days ago.

"Now is not at all the time to eat like one sick. You must present yourself well for the Marquess in the days ahead." His gaze was unwavering as he addressed her. "Heavens forbid you turn up looking like you haven't had a proper meal in a while."

Jane's eyes rolled in exasperation at his exaggeration. "I'm certain my eating pace for one meal would not drain me of youth, Father." Then at his irritated frown, she muttered reluctantly, "But I shall eat properly, my apologies."

Henry raised his nose at his daughter as he continued, "I have arranged for you to see the Marquess over these coming days. You shall walk and talk with him and familiarize yourself with your soon-to-be husband."

"Absolutely not, I refuse." Jane felt a familiar, rebellious spark igniting within her as her head snapped back up to make a challenge. Her voice was filled with disbelief as she went on.

"I refuse to be a pawn in this matchmaking game, Father, I have stated, I do not love or want the man. So I will not marry him," Defiance dripped from her tone. "I will not succumb to a loveless union for the sake of status."

Her father's brow furrowed in disapproval, his voice filling with frustration instantly, "I am your father and you shall listen to me, young woman."

But she only let out a groan and stabbed the food on her plate in annoyance, which seemed to fuel his irritation even more.

"It would be my right to not even consider your opinion nor to let you talk back at me at this table, I would remind you that. You are a woman. And you know nothing yet of this world, daughter."

Jane's eyes blazed at his sharp tone. Surely, he was right in some sorts. Mustering all the patience and restraint she had, she pulled her fiery gaze away and fell silent, stabbing her food to release her frustrations instead.

After a short moment, the viscount's sigh graced her ears again, "You are being unreasonable, Jane. Graham is a respectable match, one that would elevate our family's standing. It would be folly to dismiss such an opportunity."

She had been trying to block out the thoughts of the man from the garden especially as her father was getting on her nerves. Now that he made mention of Graham being a respectable match, she found herself thinking about the man from the garden.

Her mind was consumed by thoughts of the mysterious man she'd gotten entangled with.

She felt a sense of unease clouding her every move. The knowledge that he did not possess her name offered a fragile comfort at the least, a thin veil of protection in their world where reputation was everything.

All she had to do was steer clear of him for the rest of the pressing balls her father was making her attend. If they never crossed paths again, perhaps he would forget

about her and their encounter completely.

Unfortunately, she, on the other hand, could not keep him from her mind. The memory of him lingered like a haunting melody in her mind, refusing to fade with each passing day.

The sensation of his strong, protective arms enveloping her in the secluded shadows of the garden filled her every waking moment.

The intensity of his emerald gaze boring into her with shock and question, left her breathless and unsettled to that moment.

The light touch of his hand on her skin that had sent shivers down her spine, igniting a barrage of sensations she'd never experienced before within her...

Despite her conscious efforts to push him from her mind, her thoughts failed to drift away from the forbidden encounter.

She knew she shouldn't. She didn't understand herself for even entertaining it, but, she found herself now ensnared in a web of intrigue for this man whose name remained a mystery.

"Jane!" her father's voice thundered in the room, forcing her out of her thoughts.

In a moment, she recalled his last statement and replied with a frown.

"I will not sacrifice my happiness for the sake of societal expectations, Father. I'm only one-and-twenty years of age... or have you forgotten that?"

"Don't delude yourself into thinking that you still have time, young lady!" he snarled at her.

“But I do, Father. Besides, I can find my own match myself,” she replied.

“Not with this attitude,” he said with a look of disdain etched upon his gaze. “With that sharp tongue of yours, I am certain you will not find a match. No man loves to be challenged; no man wants a woman who speaks without reasoning.”

She scoffed, seeing the father and the man he wanted for her have a lot in common. How ironic. Which was the more reason she wouldn't marry that man. Jane wouldn't escape her father's selfish, condescending, demeaning, and greedy attitude only to marry someone who was exactly like him. No. Never.

Her tone carried a steely resolve, “Well, I refuse to be shackled to a man I do not care for, what sort of life would that be?” She scoffed. “I have met the man. He is... He is...” She sputtered as she tried to find the right words to express her distaste.

“A callous, self-loving deviant! I spent time with him as you asked, and I assure you, you do not want such a man as an in-law, dear father.”

“Foolish girl,” he cursed impatiently. “What would you know of how to properly judge character, you infuriating child?” Henry's tone was pitched in anger at this point.

“I know enough to be able to tell when a man's look is inappropriate!” She countered immediately. “I am not his wife yet! It tells a lot on his morals to stare at me so brazenly.”

Henry lifted a brow and threw his head to the side as he scoffed. Jane kept her fiery gaze on him. She could see the wheels turning in his head. He knew she was right. But his pride and pre-conceived notions would not allow him give in.

Just as she was about to speak up again, giving him no space to relax, Sarah's soft

voice echoed across the silent table.

"Father is right, Jane," Her sister chimed in, her tone carrying a hint of persuasion as she sided with their father's wishes. "The Marquess is a highly sought-after match, both in status and character. You should consider the opportunity he presents."

Jane's lips curled in a mixture of defiance and amusement at her sister's attempt to sway her. "Then let him be sought after by those who desire him, Sarah. I will not be coerced into a union with such a character as he is."

Their father's patience wore thin as he interjected, his tone laced with authority. "Jane, why are you ever the problematic child? Now, what is the root of your defiance? Do you not see the advantages this match could bring to our family?"

"Father, I have stated my reasons—"

"All nonsense! Your reasons are of no matter compared to the bigger picture! You will do as I say!"

As his bellow echoed the room, a stubborn silence settled over Jane as she avoided his gaze, her resolve unyielding despite the pressure mounting against her.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the viscount massage his temples before finally continuing with a softer tone, "I will be expecting you to make an effort to cultivate a relationship with Graham."

His voice boomed through the room, his words heavy with authority, "He is a man of great standing in society, not just with wealth and status, but with connections that would benefit our family. The Marquess is respected amongst the ton; his name carries weight."

As her father carried on extolling Graham's virtues, listing his accomplishments and societal worth, Jane's gaze drifted, her interest waning with each word spoken.

"While I appreciate the Marquess' merits, but my heart cannot be swayed by such materials alone," Her tone, though softer, still carried on her steely resolve.

Her father's expression hardened at her defiance, his features a mask of disappointment and frustration. "You will do well to consider the practicalities of our situation. Graham is an ideal match in every sense; his alliance would secure our family's future and elevate our standing in society. You are being selfish, child."

Ever the obedient sister, Sarah stood by their father's side, her eyes pleading, a portrait of compliance as she chimed in again, "Sister, please consider Father's wishes. The Marquess' proposal is indeed an honor we cannot dismiss lightly,"

Jane turned to her sister, a flicker of disappointment crossing her features. "Dear sister, do you not see that this decision should not be made out of obligation but out of genuine affection? Marriage should not be commanded; it must be freely given."

The viscount's tone grew more insistent as he growled and interjected, "Jane, you shall put aside your romantic notions and think practically. The Marquess is a suitable match in every aspect of your reality."

He paused and his face returned to his food dismissively. "We shall speak of this no longer. I shall not find myself enraged on such a fine day as this. You will listen to me, young woman. And that is final."

Jane watched him stuff his face in annoyance and contemplated if it was worth speaking again and awakening the lion. She wanted to argue terribly, however, and her anger tethered on the edge of an explosion.

Aware of the delicate situation, Sarah finally spoke, her voice barely above a whisper as she leaned in, "Jane, perhaps if you reason with Father at a better time, he will understand your perspective. Still, we must consider the greater good of our family."

Jane shifted eyes filled with betrayal to her elder sister. However, before she could respond, the patter of familiar feet drew their attentions.

The atmosphere in the room shifted abruptly as the butler's voice cut through the air like a sharp blade, "Announcing the esteemed presence of the Duke of Montford, my lord."

Sarah and Jane's heads snapped back to each other immediately, their expressions mirroring a mix of astonishment and intrigue, questioning the purpose behind the Duke's unexpected visit.

A powerful person like the Duke had no reason to come to see lower ranking nobles like them. They were neither family nor friends.

"The Duke?" Their father sprang from his seat with a sense of anticipation, his voice steady but laced with curiosity, "Pray tell, did the Duke convey the nature of his visit, Jenkins?"

The butler shook his head and responded in his usual composed manner, "The Duke merely requested an audience with you, my lord, without divulging further details."

The room buzzed with a palpable tension as the mystery surrounding the man's visit hung thick in the air. The girls exchanged another meaningful glance, their minds racing with questions and possibilities.

Their father, now visibly intrigued by the Duke's enigmatic summons, adjusted his attire with a newfound sense of purpose, readying himself to meet the distinguished

guest.

“Then I shall take my leave from the table right away.”

As soon as he left, the sisters exchanged questions, which only left them more curious with no answers. A few moments went by as they rounded up breakfast before they heard the butler’s familiar tone again.

“Lady Jane, your presence is requested in your father's study.”

Jane's heart raced with a mixture of shock and bewilderment, her sister Sarah sharing in her astonishment.

Unable to form the proper question to ask for information, with trembling steps, she rose and made her way from the table, her mind swirling with questions and uncertainties.

As she approached the study, a sense of foreboding gripped her, the possibility of the duke himself seeking her presence sending shivers down her spine. The air crackled with tension as she held her breath and pushed open the heavy study door.

“Father, you requested for me? I-”

But before she could finish, as she fully stepped into the study, her eyes widened in shock, her jaw dropping instantly at the sight before her.

Standing in the opulent room was the none other than the very man she had encountered at the recent garden party, his imposing presence filling up the space in her father's domain.

“Indeed, dear daughter.” Henry’s smile filled his entire face as he quickly turned back

to the duke. "Your Grace, may I introduce my youngest daughter, Lady Jane of Stonehave."

In this moment fraught with tension and apprehension, his voice echoed the room, "This is His Grace, Colin Grove, the new Duke of Montford. He has come to pay us a visit."

Jane's heart pounded in her chest as her father's words continued to echo in her ears, her mind reeling with disbelief at the sight before her.

This man... The man she had met... was the duke??

Struggling to compose herself, she felt the weight of the moment pressing down on her with each second, her thoughts racing as she tried to make sense of this unexpected development.

The memories of their clandestine meeting in the garden flashed before her eyes, the complete realization hitting her that the mysterious man from her past now stood before her.

How did he find her?!

As panic gripped her, Jane's mind raced with fear and uncertainty, her fingers trembling with the weight of impending revelation.

There was no doubt. He had come to expose her debauch actions towards him to her father. It was the gentleman thing to do, after all. He would be praised for taking his time to ensure such a woman as she was would be kept in check.

The new duke's presence loomed ominously, a silent threat hanging in the air as she grappled with the implications that were to come.

"Jane? It is customary to greet our guests on sight."

Her father's stern voice finally shattered the fragile calm that enveloped her, her cheeks ablaze with embarrassment as she struggled to meet the gaze of the imposing figure before her.

Forced into a semblance of composure, she managed a timid greeting, "Your Grace, welcome to our humble abode." Her voice quivered, betraying the turmoil within as she grappled with the weight of her inescapable doom hanging in the air like a heavy curtain.

Frantically seeking to divert attention from the charged atmosphere, she seized upon the banal, "The- The weather has been quite pleasant of late, has it not?"

Her words, a feeble and all too sudden attempt at small talk, echoed in the tense silence of the room. Jane's mind raced, her heart continuing to pound with the intensity of the moment.

"Have you- Have you traveled far, Your Grace?" She inquired again, her voice laced with forced cheerfulness, a facade to mask the deafening emotions swirling beneath the surface.

"What a great time you chose to set out. Perfect clouds for a short journey in the carriage, is it not?"

A bout of forced giggles escaped her lips in a scattered manner accompanying her statement, and from the corner of her eye, she caught the look of horror on her poor, confused father's face.

Still she was not done. She simply could not give the man space to talk. "As a matter of fact, when I woke up this morning to meet the lovely weather, I decided upon

taking a quiet stroll in the gardens myself, and-”

"While the weather is indeed fascinating, Lady Jane, the topic is not the reason for my visit today."

The duke's interruption sliced through her rambling words, halting her mid-sentence. Startled, she fell silent, her eyes wide as she awaited his next move.

There was no point avoiding the inevitable any longer. She shut her eyes and lowered her head. Begging the heavens to make the moment hurry past faster.

"Look at me, Lady Jane."

The duke's voice, though soft, carried a quiet authority that demanded her attention. Stuck in the trance of his all too melodic tone, obediently, she met his gaze, bracing herself for what she anticipated to be a stern rebuke.

To her astonishment, she found not harsh judgment but a gentle determination reflected in the depths of the man's eyes. Before she could fully process or understand this, he spoke again, his words breaking the charged air of the room.

"I came here today to ask. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife, Lady Jane?"

The seconds went by and when the man before her did not retract his statement, or her rising from a wake, Jane could not help the sharp gasp of question that escaped her lips.

“Excuse me?”

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“I beg your pardon?”

Jane turned to the viscount, looking away from the Duke who had just leveled her with a proposal so casual as though they had known each other for so long and it all made sense to him.

“Father? Are you quite all right with this?” she asked the man although she knew the answer to her question.

His huge smile that spread across his face, widening his face in a way that she had never seen before was all the answer she needed.

“Certainly, my dear Jane,” he said softly, as his admiring gaze turned from the Duke and focused on her dazed one.

Jane shivered at the sight, tempted to take several steps back until she was out of the room. All of this was quite overwhelming, although no one else seemed to be overwhelmed by what was happening.

“I fail to see any other outcome that could be better than this one, do you?” he asked her with a smile.

Jane struggled to keep her face from showing all the many emotions that were running through her mind, none of them good. It was such a weird feeling to see him smiling at her since they were always at loggerheads.

She turned to the Duke. His eyes were fixed on her form, staring intently at her. It

was nothing like Lord Pennington's stare that seemed to undress her with his eyes, however, she couldn't tell which was worse. She feared the Duke could peer into her soul with those dark green eyes that possessed so much depth.

"The Duke has come all the way here to ask for your hand in marriage and you will do well to consider it," he said, his smile thinning his lips.

The veiled threat behind his words were quite easy to detect. Not only had she revolted against Lord Pennington's proposal but it clearly seemed to her father that she was about to do the same with the Duke and it was clear that he did not plan to allow it.

Unable to stop herself in time, she clutched her chest as her heart beat fast, threatening to free itself of its restraint and burst out of her.

'Calm yourself, Jane.'

"I must admit that I do not know what to say, Your Grace," she said, finally turning away from her father to look at him.

"There is only one way to proceed, Jane. And that is to accept the Duke's proposal," her father chimed in from behind her.

Jane closed her eyes and counted in her head as she struggled to not engage in a screaming match with her father once again. While the Duke had clearly borne witness to just how hard-headed she could be, having being on the receiving end of it himself, she did not want him to witness her and the viscount in an argument.

"Do hurry, Jane. You must not keep the Duke waiting now," he added, his tone chiding as it usually was whenever he addressed her.

Her hands folded into fists by her side as she fought to ignore him.

“I suppose you could say yes to my proposal,” the Duke said amusedly.

Jane narrowed her eyes as she stared at him. Of course, he would find her dilemma amusing. If only he knew just how much she had worried in the past two days since their eventful meeting in the gardens.

Before she could answer, he turned to her father, his hands clasped behind his back in a way that accentuated the muscles in his arms.

“I do apologize for the slight inconvenience, Lord Dowding, but if I could have a moment alone with your daughter, that would be greatly appreciated,” he said with a small smile.

“Ah but you might need me here to persuade her to accept your suit,” he said, his eyes bulging in a show of desperation.

Jane swallowed back the slight contempt she held towards her father in that instant. How was she not his first concern? Or the fact that she wasn’t supposed to be left alone in the company of some man she barely knew, Duke or not.

“Thank you but I do believe I am capable of convincing the lady myself, Lord Dowding,” he said, leaving no room for refusal on the viscount’s part.

“Very well, Your Grace. I shall leave you alone. You only need call out if you need me,” he conceded, heading towards the door without a glance in her direction.

“Father, you cannot possibly agree to this,” Jane said, annoyed and perplexed at her father’s ability to toss decorum aside as though it were of no consequence.

He whirled around immediately, almost as though he had expected her protest, and leveled her with a gaze that caused her to take a step back.

“I shan’t be too far away, my dear. The Duke means no harm as you have seen and it shall only be for a short moment. Moreover, you can call on your sister or I if you feel threatened,” he said, before quickly adding, “Although, I doubt the Duke has such intentions.”

Before she could say anything else, he was out the door, leaving the door slightly open.

Jane stared at the door for a moment as the awkwardness settled into the room. Now, with her father gone, she could speak freely about their previous meeting and question him about his true intentions. However, she did not quite know where to begin.

She looked at him now and shuddered as a ripple ran through the length of her body.

Calm yourself, Jane. He is only but a man. One whose intentions you know nothing about but a man, nonetheless.

“How did you find me?” she asked, partly to distract herself from how handsome he looked in his black coat with the green caveat that matched the beautiful dark pools that were his eyes.

He smiled at her and her breath caught in her throat.

Have I made it too obvious that I find him quite dashing? Can he tell?

She blushed.

Oh, he certainly must have caught on given how unabashedly you've been staring at him.

She turned away from him and stared at the small mirror her father had always kept in his study. Her cheeks were stained red with the heat that she felt.

"I must admit, you made it almost impossible to find you seeing as you dashed off before I could find out who you were. However, I would not get very far if I did not have my ways of getting information."

"What sort of a vague answer is that?" she asked, although she had not meant to say it out loud.

She saw the hint of surprise in his eyes, a reaction from her outburst, before it disappeared, leaving the endless pool of dark green from which she could deduce nothing.

"What did you mean by your proposal?"

"Exactly what I asked, my lady. I am proposing to you. I wish to marry you."

Jane blinked away the shock. It was the exact words that he had said when her father was in the room yet, it seemed more real now than it had then. Perhaps it was because her father had done all the talking and expected only a positive answer from her.

"Are you certain of what you are asking, Your Grace? Does this have anything to do with what happened in the garden?" she asked in panic. "Is this some sort of punishment because you felt slighted?"

The Duke took a few steps towards her until there was only a little space between them. His face gave off no clues as usual, nor did it hold confusion or anger.

“I would not be here if I were not certain, Lady Jane.”

Jane bit her lower lip to stop her gasp as her name left his lips.

Focus, Jane. What in heaven’s name is the matter with you?

“You are right in your assumption that I am here because of what happened in the garden, however, it is not as you see it. I hold no ill will towards you and do not seek to cause you harm in any way. I truly intend to answer all of your questions, however, I’m afraid I require an answer before I continue.”

Her eyes cut to his in shock. He seemed to have given it a lot of thought in the days that have passed, while all she had to think about were ways to avoid him and safeguard her reputation while avoiding her father’s disappointing glare once again.

“I do not know what you wish me to say, Your Grace. I am not prepared for any of this. You cannot expect me to say yes when I know nothing about you. We might as well have never met,” she protested as she moved away from him, taking a few paces back to put more space between them.

She needed the space if she wanted to think about things properly.

She paced the length of the study, caring nothing that he watched her. So far, the Duke did not seem to be at all menacing, and except he was quite good at masking his feelings, he appeared to be respectful towards her.

Besides, what other options do I have?

She looked at him, pausing in her steps as he watched her in silence, allowing her the time to contemplate.

There was only one other option, the one her father had been quite willing to marry her off to without a second's thought: Lord Pennington. She shuddered as she thought of his eyes watching her in the same way he had as they danced with his hands touching her skin. There was no one she hate more to be tethered to than the Marquess.

"I am well aware of your father's determination that you marry into a prestigious home," he declared keenly.

Jane squinted at him, unsure of how to feel about this; was it a subtle insult or what?

"My father's determination. Not mine," she corrected him with something that resembled a frown.

"Ah. Right." He slapped his forehead in a way that was clearly sarcastic. "However, I am not a man who fancies being an option," he said to her.

Nor am I a woman who fancies being belittled.

She cast a stern glare at him but he couldn't care less.

He walked up closer to her with gentle steps as she glowered at him faintly.

"Now, you have two choices," he began.

How arrogant!

"You can either agree to marry me, or go with whoever the other man is. The choice is yours," he concluded.

His nerves though. The man before her was speaking with the audacity that came

with his title. This was enough to get her all riled up but she knew he wasn't as bad as his competitor.

“There's something you should know about me, Lady Jane,” he said to her.

Jane was instantly intrigued, curious to know what he had to say.

“Shall I dare to ask what that is?”

“I hate to compete with anyone. Nevertheless, peradventure I find myself in such a situation...I never lose,” the slight pause came when he leaned closer to say the last words.

He stepped back a bit and watched the look on her face.

Colin was so like her father and Graham in a manner of speaking. But he was somewhat different. Cold but different.

“I can offer you three times what the other man is offering; wealth, jewelry, status in society...name it.”

She scoffed and was tempted to roll her eyes at him but refrained from doing so.

“You have me mistaken, my lord. I'm not moved by all of that,” Confidence was palpable in her speech and her demeanor. “Should I eventually accept your proposal, it shan't be because of all you have to offer, but because it shall be my decision,” she straightened him out.

He was quiet for some time before finally speaking.

“Fair enough. I have to inform you, however, that should you decide to marry me,

you will have my nieces to deal with. And believe you me...they are a handful.”

She was drawn to him regardless of his arrogance and pride. Jane wanted to accept him anyway because she felt like he was a better match for her than Graham.

“Surely they can’t be so much trouble that you feel the need to deliver such warning,” she said, her voice faltering.

The Duke shook his head.

“Oh dear, you have no idea” A smirk appeared on his face. “The girls have been left without a mother’s guidance for quite some time and it might take a while before they are used to your authority. However, they are truly wonderful children.”

Jane paused in her walk. His face as he spoke of them had told her all she needed to know. He loved them. She had watched as his face softened and the twinkle in his eyes grew, lighting up the dark pools a tad bit. It was the first sign of true human compassion he had shown since he spoke to her and although that should not be enough to tie her to him in marriage, it made her curious.

Besides, what other choice do I have? I can either be with him or be forced into marriage with Lord Pennington.

She shuddered once more. She’d been doing a lot of that since her father brought up the topic of her marriage to Pennington in the garden party.

“I am certain that the girls are lovely,” she said with a smile.

The Duke returned her smile with one of his own. “Raising them has been quite an adventure and they are a menace, however, I am certain that you can handle them.”

His knowing smile as he said that caused a small one to appear on her face. She was curious to meet these girls whom he was so certain she could raise. She also felt quite sorry for them. She knew what it felt like to lose a parent and they had lost both.

With a deep intake of breath, she made her decision. She only hoped she would be exactly what the girls needed as he was so inclined to believe.

“I accept your proposal.”

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"Sister, do you think the roses or the lilies would be more fitting for the bouquets?" She asked, her voice slightly trembling with her emotions.

With a gentle smile, Sarah gave her a knowing look and replied, "I already stated I think the lilies would complement your gown beautifully, Jane. Their elegance and simplicity will enhance your natural beauty."

She nodded as she added, "After all, you declared them, not so long ago, to be your favorite flowers."

Jane responded with a heavy sigh. "This is true, but times have changed, have they not, sister? I am to be marrying a duke. Father has not stopped boasting."

She bit her lip as she continued, "This is not something for us to take so lightly, sister."

Sarah only lifted her head and gave her a reassuring smile in response. Jane raised a brow at her sister. She could tell something was on her mind.

However, she'd learned it was sometimes best to let Sarah properly articulate the words she thought before speaking them. So she decided to wait.

She nodded thoughtfully, her fingers tracing the delicate embroidery on the veil she picked up next.

They continued to deliberate on the details of the wedding, their conversation ebbing and flowing with a mixture of excitement and an underlying apprehension.

In the grand sitting room of their ancestral estate, the hustle and bustle only increased the anticipation in the air. Then at last, Jane spoke, her poignant words piercing the atmosphere.

"I must confess, I feel very unprepared for this marriage, sister. I might just be beginning to rethink the whole thing," Her voice was filled with vulnerability and uneasiness.

Surprisingly, Sarah remained unusually silent in response, her quiet a stark contrast to the expected reassurance and care she would give out during their conversations.

Jane's brow raised high. Sensing the gravity of the moment, she turned to Sarah, her eyes searching for solace in her sister's gaze. The latter had an expression fixed, one she knew all too well.

She could see the wheels turning in her sister's head. She sat up straighter as she spoke.

"Just say it, sister. I know you have something on your mind."

Sarah's eyes shifted to hers. For a second, she opened her mouth, but the words seemed to backtrack before they came out. Her eyes shifted from Jane without a word.

Jane waited. As the seconds stretched into eternity, the room seemed to hold its breath, waiting for Sarah's words. Anxious now, Jane sat even straighter, eyeing her sister closely before she broke the silence again.

"I know you well, Sarah. Whatever it might be, I implore you, do please speak your mind," She urged, her voice slowly growing with urgency and desperation.

Sarah, finally seeming to gather her courage, met her sister's gaze and spoke with a quiet resolve, "Sister, I feel there are... aspects of this union you must consider before sealing your fate. I fear the path ahead may not be as rosy as it seems."

The weight of her words settled over them like a heavy shroud, spiking a slight confusion along with an unsettling in Jane's system.

"What exactly is it?"

Sarah bit her lip, her eyes reflecting a mix of concern and resolve. At last, she broke the short silence, her voice measured and cautious as she went on.

"Jane, I must speak my mind. I am deeply troubled about your impending marriage. I do not feel you should further this. It might be best to end things as it's quite early still."

"What?" Taken aback by this sudden suggestion, she raised a questioning brow, "And why would you not rejoice in this match? Marrying a duke is a great honor for our family."

Sarah shook her head gently, her words deliberate and laden with worry, "It is not the title that concerns me, sister. Not when there are heavier aspects to consider."

She paused and shook her head again. "The rumors surrounding this Colin Grove are dark and foreboding."

Jane's eyes widened in surprise, her heart quickening even more with curiosity and apprehension. "What rumors do you speak of, sister? You must tell me all you know."

With a deep breath, Sarah leaned in, her gaze locking with hers, "Whispers of his

character, Jane. They speak of deceit and cruelty, of a man who may bring you more sorrow than joy."

Jane's eyes widened in disbelief as she urged her to elaborate, "I am most confused. You shall have to further explain these rumors about him. I have never heard such things. From whence did you hear all this?"

Sarah, her expression grave, bit her lip once more, a silent plea for understanding in her eyes. "I mean no harm. You know I'm not one to judge lightly. But have you truly not heard the whispers that trail behind him?"

Jane shook her head, her curiosity piqued, awaiting further revelation. With a heavy sigh, Sarah hesitated briefly before taking a deep breath and beginning to unravel all she'd heard.

"Colin is not the man you believe him to be, sister. The tales speak of cruelty and violence that shadow his every step. He's been known to lash out on one too many occasions."

Jane's breath caught in her throat, her sister's words painting a chilling portrait of the man she was betrothed to.

"They say he carries the weight of a monster from his days of war, a darkness that haunts him still." As she delved deeper into the grim details, Sarah's voice, though steady, revealed her fears.

"You have heard of how some men fall into madness after the war. I fear your husband is likely to do the same. I cannot bear to let you get tied to such a man for life."

Jane listened in stunned silence, her world tilting on its axis as this new reality of her

impending union unraveled before her.

Despite the ominous tales that surrounded him, Jane found herself reflecting on her own experiences with him; she'd seen him as the intimating and commanding man that he was. In a moment of introspection, she realized that the rumors weren't far from the truth, however, she had always felt a sense of security in the man's presence, a feeling that had eluded her with quite a lot of men.

In a hushed tone, she finally broke the heavy silence, her voice tinged with uncertainty, "And you are absolutely certain about what you've shared with me?"

Sarah's gaze held firm, her conviction unwavering as she affirmed, "Yes, I am certain. These rumors have spread far and wide. I am quite surprised you do not know of them as a matter of fact."

Jane responded with a thoughtful hum, her mind grappling with the stark contrast between the perceptions of others and her own experiences.

As she mulled over her sister's words, she couldn't help but mull over how perceptions could be deceiving. Sarah's previous misjudgment of the Marquess echoed in her thoughts, leading her to question the validity of this societal gossip.

With a furrowed brow, she contemplated the complexity of human nature, realizing that the truth often lay beyond the veil of hearsay and speculation.

In that moment of quiet resolve, her eyes met Sarah's, a glimmer of determination shining through her gaze. With a gentle smile, she reassured her.

"Do not fret, dear sister. Though my time with Colin has been brief, my heart finds solace in his presence. I trust him, and my path is clear." She laughed, "After all, I would choose him over Graham without hesitation. This is settled."

Sarah seemed surprised, and for a moment, she seemed about to protest. Finally, her expression softened, her skepticism giving way to slow understanding as she nodded in acceptance.

"I may harbor doubts, but your conviction speaks volumes. I shall stand by you, sister, supporting your choice with unwavering loyalty. No matter what the ton might say."

Jane's heart melted at these words, and the sisters exchanged warm smiles of appreciation and encouragement.

"I expect that you two would be done with the arrangements by now."

As their father's stern voice filled the room, a tension gripped both sisters, prompting them to sit up with a new found alertness. His gaze bore into them, brimming with impatience as he eyed them.

Without pause, Henry directed his attention to Jane, his tone filled with reproach, "Remember, the Duke's trust in you to oversee such a grand event is a significant honor."

He scoffed before adding, "Quite an important event like this isn't one I'd ever have expected you to handle, yet here we are. Now, you must do your best."

Jane felt a surge of irritation at his words, but Sarah's reassuring touch served as a grounding force, offering silent support, keeping her from snapping in the face of his pointed remarks.

She drew a steadying breath, choosing to deflect his criticisms with grace. "I understand, Father."

As he continued to speak relentlessly, Jane felt the weight of his expectations pressing down upon her.

"You must prove yourself at all costs," He declared, his voice a stern reminder of the burden she carried. "Do not bring disgrace upon our family with any misstep in this crucial task."

The heavy silence that followed his admonition hung thick in the room, suffocating any semblance of ease. His gaze then shifted to Sarah, his eyes piercing as he delivered his next decree.

"And now you are the only one left unmarried and still a disappointment, eldest daughter," He pronounced, the weight of his words heavy with his ever standing belief in tradition. "I wonder if there is any I could convince to take you despite your shortcomings."

Jane's jaw clenched, a mixture of defiance and resignation warring within her as she absorbed his distasteful words.

However, Sarah, ever the embodiment of grace under pressure, met his gaze with a calm resolve that belied the storm brewing beneath the surface.

"I will do whatever I can to make you proud, Father."

Henry's icy demeanor cast a shadow over his daughters as he continued to berate her. "I don't know why it has taken you this long to do so anyway."

Sarah's eyes fell to the floor, a silent submission to his harsh criticism, while Jane's simmering anger threatened to boil over.

Thankfully, just as tension reached its peak, Henry shifted gears. With an air of

smugness, he declared, "I can at least take pride in knowing I raised a woman who attracted a high suitor."

Unimpressed by his self-congratulatory tone, Jane raised a skeptical brow, her silent dissent adding tension to the room.

Henry continued, "The Marquess had indeed been quite displeased at the broken engagement, but it's understandable to all that it is essential I secure a Duke as a son-in-law, regardless of the fallout."

Jane's eyes slightly rolled in exasperation at her father's materialistic values. "Now that I have settled this on every end, you must do your very best from now on to keep a good reputation, Jane."

Once again, though every fiber of her being rebelled against his narrow-minded views, she managed to find restraint due to her sister's wide-eyed stare and silent plea for compliance.

So with a simple nod that masked her inner turmoil, she acquiesced to her father's demands.

"I shall do as you say, Father."

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:41 am

Perched on the edge of a velvet settee, Jane tugged at the hem of her dress; a gown of soft lavender muslin, a color that complemented her fair complexion and brought a gentle warmth to her appearance.

The morning sun streamed through the grand windows of her room, casting intricate patterns on the polished wooden floor and draping the space with its glow.

She got on her feet and walked over to a standing mirror and had barely even had a second to look at her reflection when the door swung open and Sarah came barging in.

“She's here!” Sarah sprang over to stand behind her sister who was still trying to fathom this sudden entrance.

“Can you be a little bit more specific?” Jane asked, jerking as Sarah tightened a loose lace at her back.

“The dowager!” Sarah blurted, her voice carrying a hint of nervousness.

Jane's breath ceased for a moment and she swallowed. That instant, they heard the sound of neighing horses outside and looked at each other.

“Come.” Sarah grabbed her hand and they both rushed to the window.

Standing side by side, their eyes were fixed on the grand event unfolding outside.

The gravel drive, bordered by manicured lawns and towering oak trees, seemed

almost alive with anticipation as the dowager duchess's carriage approached. It was a stately barouche-landau, its dark blue body and polished brass fittings reflecting the late morning sun.

Clad in a formal livery of navy with silver trim, the coachman seated high on his seat handled the reins with practiced precision; a testament of years of experience.

As the carriage neared the house, he pulled the reins gently, bringing the horses to a smooth and precise halt in front of the entrance to Stonehave Manor. Two footmen, also in matching livery, quickly moved to the carriage, one opening the door while the other lowered the steps.

"It is her," Jane said softly, supposedly talking to herself but Sarah turned to her.

"Did you think I was joking?"

Jane exhaled sharply without taking her eyes off their unexpected guest. She should have been nervous like her sister, especially because it was her that the dowager was here to see. Obviously. But she was not.

"How do you do it?" Sarah's voice caught her attention and she took her eyes off the window to face her.

"Do what?" Jane squinted, puzzled by the question.

"Stay calm in times like this?" Sarah looked at her.

"She might be the dowager, Sarah, but she's still human," Jane said, her eyes crinkling at the corners with mirth.

"Yes. A very powerful one," Sarah responded, her voice laced with admiration and

reverence. "I mean look at her." Her eyes were focused on the carriage.

Jane returned her gaze to the entrance just in time to witness Prudence descend from the carriage with a sort of grace that belied her age.

The dowager duchess exuded majesty; she was dressed in an elegant and rich green silk gown that was adorned with delicate black lace trim at the collar and sleeve. She wore a high waist gown and a flowing skirt.

Descending from the carriage with an air of imperiousness, her eyes scanned the assembled staff with an expression that brooked seriousness. She acknowledged the footman with a barely perceptible nod, her lips pressed into a thin line of disapproval as she took in his slight hesitation.

The bonnet that framed her face and accentuated her discerning eyes was a masterpiece made of fine straw trimmed with green satin ribbons and some silk flowers. She was glowing, exuding wealth and power.

Her gaze swept over the manor's facade and grounds, her expression unreadable but clearly appraising. Jane could almost feel the weight of that gaze, as if the dowager was silently judging everything she saw.

"What is that smell?" she asked with a grimace, her voice cutting through the morning air like a blade.

"Oh, no!" Sarah whispered to herself, a little shaken by the dowager's displeasure.

The footman, taken aback, stuttered an apology but she paid no attention to him, slightly waving her gloved hand to dismiss him from her immediate concern.

"She's even more imposing than I imagined," Sarah whispered, a mix of awe and

apprehension in her voice. "I cannot believe this will be you someday." She turned to her sister.

"I will not be this formal, nor will I be so imposing," Jane replied, still gazing at the dowager whose presence seemed to have stirred up some tension in the atmosphere.

Jane thought that the footman really looked clumsy, running and asking the staff around what seemed to be giving off the odor which ironically, only the dowager herself could smell.

"I cannot...I will not," she added.

"I guess she must have said the same thing, a couple of decades ago," Sarah said to her. "Look how she turned out."

Jane knew that getting married to the Duke of Montford would come with a lot of expectations; she would need to act, dress, walk and eat in a certain way. None of this was new to her given that her father was a Viscount but it wouldn't be the same in the Dukedom of Montford. She hated to admit it, but Sarah was right.

Both sisters watched as Prudence allowed herself to be escorted up the front steps by her staff, walking with the dignity and authority befitting her station. With her head held high, her expression was serene yet commanding. As she disappeared into the manor, Jane felt a mix of trepidation and determination. Meeting Prudence would be a challenge, but one she was resolved to face with as much composure as the dowager herself displayed.

Sarah let out a soft sigh.

"Well, our guest is here. It's time to face her." She walked away.

Jane took a couple of seconds to brace herself. She was meeting with her future husband's grandmother, the cold and strict dowager whose imposing reputation she'd heard much about. She felt like she was going to war but was too brave to feel anxious or scared. The dowager was human just like her and besides, she hadn't done anything wrong.

“Jane!” Sarah called, straining the whisper. “Let's go,” she added through gritted teeth.

They left the room and from the hallway, they could hear the rhythmic clicking of the dowager's grand arrival at the foyer which heightened the anxiety of the staff of Stonehave Manor.

The butler seemed to be doing a horrible job at addressing the dowager who was clearly displeased by the manner at which he was struggling to speak.

Jane put her head down, ashamed on his behalf but Sarah rushed to his rescue with a charming and welcoming smile.

“Your Grace,” She stepped forward, majestic and composed in her movement.

The dowager turned to face her, her expression blank.

Sarah sketched a bow, a testament of her reverence. “Welcome to our humble home.”

Jane walked to her sister and did as she had done.

“Your Grace,” her voice, soft and sincere. “It's an honor to have you at Stonehave Manor.”

Prudence squinted, staring blankly at them.

“I suppose you know why I am here,” she said with a voice so cold and firm.

The sisters exchanged a glance.

“Which one of you is the bride-to-be?” she inquired.

For a second there, Jane forgot herself until Sarah pinched slightly.

“That would be me, Your Grace.” She raised her head and looked her in the eyes with so much confidence, devoid of any sort of disrespect.

She stepped forward and halted before Jane with an intimidating look that could cripple the fainthearted. She peered deeply into Jane's eyes and the latter neither cringed nor flinched, rather, she looked right back at the dowager; unmoved by her demeanor.

The dowager's lips quirked into a deadly smirk.

“Do you have a minute? I'd like to speak with you in solitude.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Jane replied, courteously.

“Excellent.”

Jane led the way to the drawing room and while in motion, she looked back and saw her sister at a distance mouthing Good luck.

Jane grinned subtly at her sister's care and affection; she was the closest thing she had to a mother and Jane always respected her for that. Sarah was worried and concerned because deep down she was afraid. But she didn't have to be.

Jane was not one to be easily intimidated and she wasn't going to start now. Sarah would learn to trust her with that, but for now, the mother role was very good on her.

They got to the door and Jane ushered them in, wondering if the escorts would be staying with them during the conversation.

“Perhaps some tea, Your Grace?” she offered, prepared to wave down a servant.

The older woman raised a hand, however. “That will not be necessary, I did not come for refreshments.”

This only made Jane more nervous.

The dowager duchess walked inside, scanning the room in silence as she made her way to the window, casting her eyes at her carriage outside.

“Nice view,” she said, turning to look at Jane.

Did she just say something nice to me?

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Surely, you must have seen me from up here,” she said to her.

Jane was quiet, unsure of how to reply since the dowager had simply stated the obvious.

“Leave us,” she declared.

Immediately, the escorts in the room, sketched a bow and excused themselves, shutting the door behind them.

Jane thought that this was the real talk and that she needed to be braver now they were left alone. But she was caught aback when the dowager let out a sigh of relief, taking off her bonnet.

“Finally,” she said exhaustedly, sitting on the edge of the bed as she set the bonnet beside her. “I can be myself.” She faced Jane with a warm smile.

It was strange, what had just happened and it prompted the Dowding girl to squint with a head cocked to the side. Her face was pale, aghast at the manner at which the dowager had quickly changed.

Goodness me! She actually smiled at me.

“Don't look so surprised, my dear,” Prudence Grove said to her, discerning the shock in the girl's eyes. “You see, being what I am comes with a lot of responsibilities and I have to keep the attitude because it is a standard that all dowagers must uphold.”

Jane was still struggling to wrap her head around what she just experienced but it was taking too long to sink in.

Ohh, Sarah would definitely lose it if she were here right now.

The dowager was a lot more beautiful with her bonnet off. For someone her age, she was still glowing and was still quite agile. She seemed nice and with what Jane had heard this past minute, the dowager was not imposing.

“Looks can be deceiving. And sometimes, they should be. I'm a dowager, I cannot let anyone forget that,” she explained.

“I understand, Your Grace,” Jane replied.

Prudence was quiet, observing the brave young girl. “You're wondering why I'm being free with you.”

“Not really...it's more a shock,” Jane said.

Prudence laughed lightly.

“You're getting married to my grandson, the Duke of Montford, which means that you'll be a duchess soon enough. Therefore, there is no point in scaring you away,” she added almost immediately. “After all, Colin says that you don't scare easily and from what I can tell...he's not wrong. You are fearless.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Jane blushed at this comment and her heart melted at the idea that Colin had not only mentioned her to his grandmother but also said nice things about her. She basked in the fact that the dowager could attest to Colin's good remark and that gladdened her heart.

Maybe this union would turn out to be great in the end especially with Prudence on her side.

“He talked about me?” She stepped forward, seeking just a fraction of what the dowager could divulge.

“He wouldn't shut up,” she replied with a serene expression on her face. “Come. Sit.” She tapped the space beside her.

Jane did as instructed, eager to hear what Prudence had to discuss with her. She was a lot calmer, her guard was down and she was attentive.

“It is my responsibility to guide you on this path you've chosen but contrary to what you might think...it will not be easy to be duchess.”

Jane had always known this, but hearing Prudence say those words with so much solemnity, shook her subtly.

“There's a lot that comes with the mantle, a lot that follows the title,” Prudence added. “Being a duchess involves a variety of responsibilities that are both an honor and a duty,” she began, her voice carrying the weight of centuries-old tradition. “It is our duty to represent our noble house at various official and public events. As a duchess you will have to do things, make decisions that might not necessarily conform to your beliefs and standards. But you're obligated to do so anyway. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Jane nodded subtly. “I'm willing to learn, to do my best at playing this role,” Jane promised, determination coloring her eyes. She was so composed and there wasn't even a glimpse of nervousness in her. “Perhaps, Your Grace, you can educate me on the things to avoid as duchess, now that I know my role.”

Prudence smiled at her.

“I admire your willingness to learn, Jane. It shows how teachable you are.” She sighed softly. “Anyway, it is of utmost importance that a duchess always be wary of flattery. Many will seek to curry favor with you, and not all have pure intentions. Therefore, maintaining a discerning mind at all times is quite necessary, my dear.”

Jane was quiet, letting the words sink in as she nodded in affirmation.

“It can be difficult to tell genuine kindness from ulterior motives. Believe you me, when I was your age, I learned that the hard way,” she added, looking at Jane.

Sounds like a story I'd love to hear.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I'll be careful,” Jane promised.

Prudence exhaled sharply, changing the subject and Jane couldn't help but think that whatever story lay behind the dowager's advice to maintain a discerning mind must be hurtful.

“Now, about your wedding plans.” Prudence flashed her a grin. “I hear you've been quite involved in the details.”

Jane laughed lightly.

“Go on. Tell me about it,” Prudence beseeched her.

“Well, I've chosen white roses for the flowers,” Jane smiled. “My sister says it symbolizes purity and new beginnings.”

“Your sister isn't wrong,” Prudence agreed admirably.

Jane continued. “For my dress, I'm thinking of a classic design with intricate lace and a long train.” She paused, contemplating her choice. “Do you think that's a bit too much?”

“No, my dear. It will be timeless and elegant.” Prudence replied, impressed. “I would suggest, however, that you add a hint of color, perhaps in the embroidery. It will make your ensemble stand out without straying from elegance.”

Jane thought for a moment; this was not such a bad idea. It was in fact quite insightful.

“Interesting,” Jane said approvingly. “Maybe a subtle gold or silver thread in the lace?”

“Precisely,” Prudence said.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Jane sketched a slight bow.

“One last thing, Jane,” Prudence said to her. “As a duchess, your conduct will be scrutinized. Always remain composed and gracious, even in trying times. Your poise will earn you respect and loyalty.”

“I will strive to live up to what's expected of me, Your Grace.”

“I know you will.”

Prudence stared at her as though she was trying to figure her out, her eyes hinting at the pride hidden within.

“You're not nervous...” she said to Jane. “I'm not surprised.”

“There's no reason for me to be,” she replied.

“It is needless to tell you that the faint-hearted cannot take up the role because you're not one,” Prudence beamed a smile at her. “You're brave and strong, not easily intimidated— and that alone is a major characteristic of a great duchess.”

Jane blushed a little. “You flatter me, Your Grace. Thank you.”

Prudence was quiet for a while.

“I can think of one thing that could make you nervous.”

Jane highly doubted that statement but she was open to hearing what it was...eager to find out.

“Colin's nieces,” Prudence declared in a rather dramatic manner, prompting Jane to squint.

Her brows shot up in astonishment as a flicker of disbelief crossed her face.

“Oh, believe me, child, those little devils are a force to be reckoned with and if you underestimate them, they will give you hell.” It sounded a lot more like a warning than an advice even though her tone was soft and smooth.

Jane laughed lightly, she could handle anything thrown at her and so those nieces of her husband-to-be should be a piece of cake. Right? Or was she being overly confident, underestimating the kids in the process?

“Believe me when I tell you; together, Louisa and Margaret Grove are a menace.” She chuckled. “But in time, you'll get to understand them and know that they are not as bad as they seem.”

“Looks can be deceiving, right?” Jane grinned.

“You catch on fast.” She reciprocated the gesture and rose to her feet, ready to leave.

Jane did the same, humbly standing by her side.

“I believe my work here is done...for now.” She picked up her bonnet and strapped it back on. “You take care, Jane.”

“You too, Your Grace.” She sketched a bow.

Prudence walked over to the door and stopped then turned back to face her.

“I look forward to seeing you make a family out of us all.”

Just like that, Prudence disappeared and the imposing dowager took the wheel again. With a blank expression, she opened the door and stepped out, leaving Jane alone to the myriad of thoughts racing through her mind.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:41 am

She heaved a sigh as she stared at her reflection in the mirror; her heart beating really fast, threatening to jump out of her chest. Jane tried to control her breath but she wasn't doing a pretty good job at that. This was the day she would become the duke's wife and for some reason, she was nervous for the first time in a long time.

Clad in a high waistline short-sleeved white wedding dress, which was made luxurious satin fabrics with intricate lace and embroidery she exuded elegance, glowing like the bride that she was.

Reflexively, she reached for the tiara on her head, adjusting it for a moment with a smile she managed to squeeze out. Her attention was drawn by the sound of her sister's soft grunt from behind her.

"All set." Sarah rose to her feet, dressed in light silk pastel fabrics adorned with delicate lace.

She'd been helping the bride with the train of her gown for the past few minutes.

"Thank you, Sarah." Jane turned to face her.

"What are you thanking me for?" she asked amidst chuckles.

"Everything. I'm thanking you for everything, especially for how you've been a mother to me all these years."

Her words melted Sarah's heart and her eyes started to blink rapidly as she tried to stay composed. Jane could tell that these few words spoken genuinely and with all

sincerity had affected Sarah positively.

“Is it part of your plan; to make me shed tears on your wedding day?” Sarah asked, gratitude flickering in her gaze.

“Tears of joy...yes,” Jane replied and immediately, Sarah slipped into her arms.

“You look gorgeous, by the way,” Sarah said to her.

“And you, my principal bridesmaid, look adorably stunning,” Jane replied.

“Okay, now you're simply over exaggerating.”

They laughed lightly and were soon interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Who is it?” Jane inquired.

“It is I, my lady,” the voice spoke from behind the closed door.

Jane recognized the speaker. It was Elizabeth, the housekeeper.

“Your carriage is ready and your father seems furious that you're running late for your own wedding.”

“We'll be out in a minute, Elizabeth. Thank you,” Sarah replied and they both heard the sounds of retreating footsteps.

“Are you all right?” She asked Jane.

“Yes. Yes, I am. Why would I not be?” came the reply.

Sarah looked closely at her sister, peering into her eyes with concern coloring hers.

“You're not having cold feet now, are you?”

“What? No!” Jane responded swiftly, squinting at the question.

“Good.” Sarah flashed a smile at her. “Okay.” She walked over to a table and picked up a bouquet of flowers and handed it over to Jane. “Let's go get you married.”

Jane accepted the flowers and smiled.

The church bell tolled and the doors parted while Jane stood at the entrance. Her slender figure was enveloped by the soft rays of sunlight steaming from behind. The illumination created a halo around her, brightening the lace of her veil.

The building interior was adorned with floral arrangements and ribbons. Garland of roses, lilies and other greenery draped over the pews, intertwining around the columns.

From the choir stand, a soft sound of string instruments filled the air as she walked down the aisle, her dress shimmering subtly as the beams from the sun caught her fine fabrics.

She exuded an ethereal grace as the sunlight bathed her in a warm golden aura. Walking down the aisle with majestic steps, heads turned but her gaze was fixed on the man she was about to say yes to. The man she was going to spend the rest of her life with; the Duke of Montford.

He was standing at the altar alongside his groomsmen, looking like a charming prince in his tailored cutaway coat, waistcoat, cravat, and breeches. Colin looked so handsome and she couldn't deny that fact.

As Jane walked to him, she could hear the murmurs amongst the young ladies seated in the pews close to her but couldn't quite make out what they were saying. She knew they were most probably gossiping about her but she didn't care.

Jane's eyes caught her sister as she smiled at her from that part of the altar. Jane smiled back. It was a small ceremony, only luxurious enough as to fit the name of the Duke and not get the tongues of the ton wagging. Still, only few were in attendance and Jane was grateful.

She got to the altar and Colin helped her up the steps. She smiled and muttered an appreciation as she stood facing him, both of them before the clergyman.

As the ceremony began, the clergyman's voice was gradually becoming distant to Jane. Her heart was racing and her hands were subtly trembling.

Colin leaned closer and whispered to her.

“I thought nothing scared you.” He smirked satisfyingly.

Jane squinted at him as if to say that she needed more clarity.

“You're nervous,” he declared almost inaudibly.

“No, I am not,” she responded with the same tone, hating the idea that he was able to detect it.

He took her hand and gently squeezed it. The feeling of his skin against hers was reassuring but what was more reassuring was the look in his eyes. He didn't have to say anything, his countenance and expression said it all, making her blush discreetly.

It was time for the most important aspect of the ceremony and the clergyman began

with the duke, reading him the ritual rites.

Colin looked at her with a faint grin and said;

“I do.”

The clergyman turned to the bride and read her the same rites to which she responded after a few seconds of hesitation.

“I do.”

He then pronounced them man and wife after which Colin leaned forward and planned a kiss on her lips to seal their union. A round of applause erupted from the crowd.

Amidst the flurry of congratulations and well-wishes, the newly-wedded couple emerged from the church, heading straight for the carriage that awaited them in the open.

Fingers intertwined, they walked down the steps at the entrance of the building with Colin holding her hand tightly.

Jane was tired and exhausted but she was obligated to smile and wave so she wouldn't seem rude. She was a duchess now and this was just the beginning. Prudence's words still lingered on the fringes of her mind, keeping her on her feet.

They headed toward the duke's carriage; a magnificent four-wheeled vehicle richly decorated with a glossy black lacquer finish with gilded accents that gleamed in the sunlight.

Four healthy horses with their manes adorned with white ribbons stood gallantly,

ready to pull the carriage.

As the couple approached the vehicle, Jane admired the intricate carvings and the Grove family crest emblazoned on the fine wooden doors.

Colin helped Jane settle into the carriage, making sure that her gown was elegantly arranged. When they were seated and ready, the coachman, dressed in a fine livery cracked his whip and the horses sprang forward.

“Hyah!” his voice echoed, blending with the sounds of the horses' hooves as the carriage rolled smoothly along the cobblestone path, its wheels turning steadily towards the Montford Manor.

Inside, seated on the luxuriously plush, upholstered seats, Jane exclaimed in her mind.

Finally!

Silently, she sat juxtaposed with her husband who could not stop staring at her. He was so handsome himself that she struggled to keep her eyes off him.

Jane was grateful this day was finally over. She had been anticipating this moment since the preparations began for one reason, to get it over and done with. She saw the event as too demanding and she wanted to have it done once and for all.

It's finally over,

She assured herself and then her husband spoke to her.

“I can't wait for you to meet my nieces,” his voice drew her out of her thoughts.

Right. The ones referred to as the menace. Great.

“I'm sure they're lovely and I'm eager to meet them,” she replied. This wasn't a sarcastic statement. Jane truly wanted to see for herself why these kids were considered what they were.

“Lovely?” He raised his brows in disbelief. “That's one way to describe them.” There was a hint of irony in his statement.

His fingers fixed back the button of his left sleeve that had loosened a bit. “Surely, my grandmother didn't use that term when she told you about them.” Colin jerked his head to look at her.

“You're right,” Jane replied. “She did not.”

Colin was quiet but his eyes never left her for a moment.

Jane felt awkward at the way he was staring at her but a part of her loved it all the same.

“Do I have something on my face?” she asked, politely.

“Can't a man appreciate the beauty of his new wife?” His lips quirked into a smirk.

Jane put down her head to hide her blush.

She was his wife now and her name had ceased to be Jane Audrey Dowding. She was now Jane Audrey Grove, wife of duke Colin Grove. She was a duchess now and everything had happened so fast. However, Jane was glad that she met Colin when she did, he was much better than that greedy Graham Lewis. She was willing to face anything with Colin starting with his nieces.

The carriage came to a halt and she heard the horses neigh for a moment.

“We're here,” Colin declared softly as he stepped out of the vehicle and stretched out a hand.

Jane took it and he helped her descend to the fine interlocked ground. She looked up to behold the grandeur of the duke's estate: an imposing yet elegant manor house with ivy-clad stone walls, tall arched windows, and intricately carved details.

The carriage had halted by a fountain and an expansive manicured garden stretched across the vast land, framing the estate with natural beauty.

With her hand in his elbow, they walked to the entrance and the uniformed sentries stationed there parted the doors with a slight bow.

Her heels clicked against the fine and well-polished floor, so polished that she could see her reflection beneath her. The surface was quite slippery, hence the need to tread with caution.

The foyer was very welcoming. Lights from the chandelier hanging from the high ceilings reflected against the polished marble floors gleaming beneath her feet.

From an elegant staircase with a wrought iron balustrade that swept vertically to the floors upwards, two little girls rushed down.

They ran around the space not minding how slippery the floor was. The two girls glided over the floor, playing and laughing hard. One of them lost control and ran into a silver armor by a wall. The other one laughed at her.

Jane didn't have to be a witch to know who they were.

The menace.

For little girls their age, these two were a little too rough and now she was starting to understand why Prudence had warned her beforehand.

She was still in her thoughts when one of them yelled;

“Look, Louisa! It's the bride!”

Oh no!

They raced each other to come meet her but before she could bend over to pick the first one up, the girl circled her so swiftly. The other one did the same, stomping on the train of her gown with a sort of laughter that was both cute and infuriating.

She tried to move but lost her balance in the process. Jane tripped and almost fell, her arms flailing weightlessly in the air. And the next she knew, she was bending backwards with one leg in the air.

The sounds of the kids laughing angered her, reminding her of what they were. She opened her eyes and met Colin's eyes watching her face. It was then that she realized that he had caught her and that she was in his arms.

They stared at each other in that moment and all she could think about was how handsome he looked. He was obviously staring at her as well given that his eyes were fixed on her. She felt awkward and wondered why; he was her husband now. But she clearly needed some time to get used to that fact.

He cleared his throat and helped her back to her feet.

“Still thinking they're ‘lovely’?” He smirked, reminding her of the term she had used

to describe them.

“You know what, I take it back.” She didn't even realize when she said it out loud.

He walked to the girls who immediately stood still before him.

“Do you think that was funny?” He frowned at them.

One was quiet, probably feeling a bit remorseful but the other snickered silently with stolen glances at Jane.

“We just wanted to meet the new duchess and say my greetings.”

“Is this how to say greetings, hmm, Louisa?”

Jane figured that Louisa was the calmer one, and maybe the one with an ounce of respect in her.

“It's not our fault that she almost fell— although it would have been a very great sight to behold. Aww!” The exclamation came when Louisa pinched her arm without looking at her.

“Margaret!” Colin scolded her instantly.

“What? It was probably her fault for losing her balance,” Margaret replied arrogantly.

Jane laughed at how the kids were evidently such a headache to Colin. He glanced back at her with a frown.

“You see, even she gets it,” Margaret added amidst chuckles, pointing in Jane's direction.

“Okay, that's it; you're done!” He snapped. “To your rooms, immediately!”

“But...” Louisa tried to protest.

“No ‘buts’, you are to remain there until you are called upon— do you understand?”

They hesitated with dropped shoulders and reluctantly agreed.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now go,” he commanded, a hand pointing at the staircase.

Jane watched them grumble as they headed up the steps with their tails between their legs.

Colin exhaled sharply, combing his fingers through his hair in a frustrated manner.

“They really were just playing around, you know. You didn't have to speak to them the way that you did,” Jane said to him. In a fraction of a second, she had flashed back to the times her dad used to yell at her and Sarah, although he used to be a lot worse. “No matter how they act, they're still children.”

Colin scoffed, massaging his eyeballs.

“You might not see it, but you're treating them like soldiers, forgetting that they're little girls,” she added.

“You've seen for yourself how they can misbehave,” he replied. “The reason you're here is to educate them properly, so I'm going to need you to start working on that.”

Jane could not believe her ears. She blinked rapidly, trying to comprehend what she

just heard.

“I’m not a governess, you should have hired one if that’s what you wanted,” the words burst out of her without second thoughts.

He frowned at her tone, displeased by it as he took gentle steps forward. Jane knew that she had crossed one of his lines and she probably should not have said what she said.

The closer he came, the further away she moved backwards until she ended up against a wall. He halted before her and used the back of his finger to dress her hair while looking blankly into her eyes.

Colin placed a hand on the wall and leaned forward.

“I am your duke and your husband. You will learn to speak to me as such. You will be more respectful,” he whispered into her ears.

She knew she had to work on herself and learn to speak less, however, she couldn’t if she tried.

Looking right into his eyes, she replied with the same tone, dead serious.

“Well, if you wanted an obedient wife, then you chose the wrong woman.”

She could tell that he was furious but even in his anger, he knew that she was right. He stepped away from her and called out with a loud voice.

“Martha!”

Swiftly, Martha appeared before him in the attire of a staff. Jane knew immediately

that she was the housekeeper.

“Your Grace,” Martha said with a slight bow.

“Take my wife to her room and do well to explain her duties to her.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” She walked up to Jane with a smile.

Colin took one last look at his wife and walked away without a word.

Jane was rather disappointed that he would just hand her over to the housekeeper like she was a purchased merchandise. She was mad but she knew better than to react now.

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It was a couple of days already since the wedding that ushered Jane into the Grove family. She had come to understand within this period that truly Margaret and Louisa were a force to be reckoned with like the dowager had said. They obviously still had a lot to learn and a lot to unlearn and her husband was counting on her to get the job done as though she was a governess.

However, Jane was certain that this life- being a duchess - was so much better than getting married to the Marquess of Pennington, the greedy Graham Lewis. She considered this a narrow escape and a part of her was grateful she accepted Colin's proposal.

Prudence had told her that she was looking forward to watching her make a family out of them all and Jane was willing to try despite the frustrations of dealing with the two little girls.

Louisa didn't have much of a problem; she was in fact an introvert who seemed to be very comfortable in her own space. Margaret, on the other hand, was the brain behind any misdeeds done by the two of them, she was the mischievous one; the real trouble, leading her sister into doing things she might not necessarily be interested in if it were up to her.

Jane appreciated the irony given that in the history of sibling drama, the younger one was often the hotheaded one while the older usually was the more reserved one. The case was different with these girls.

Somehow, Margaret reminded Jane a lot about herself owing to the fact that they were quite stubborn, rebellious and bold. Louisa was much like Sarah and watching

the two girls interact was like watching a version of her and her sister when they were their age.

Jane truly wanted to make this work on account of her desire to get closer to the kids, to be a part of the family, and to make Prudence proud. Taming the girls would subsequently build the bond between her and her husband.

Colin was a strict and cold individual, but she never saw his attitude as a threat. All the same, Jane was still a woman, a newly-wedded wife who wouldn't mind being treated right instead of being kept at a distance.

What a funny way of proving your love, my lord.

She was sarcastic in her thoughts as his words resounded in head.

'I am your duke and your husband...'

'Take my wife to her room and do well to explain her duties to her...'

She scoffed, staring out her window, thinking it rather ironic he couldn't see he also needed someone to explain the duties of a husband to him.

Jane was bored and had been indoors all day; she needed to meet the kids and give it yet another shot with them. It was heartbreaking knowing she would always have to prepare for battle whenever the kids were involved.

With a decisive spirit, she sprang to her feet and left the room, shutting it behind her. From where she stood, she could hear the governess's voice echoing through the hallways as she called on the girls.

"Margaret! Louisa!"

Jane's heart skipped a beat on hearing their names but this was her chance, moreover, she was looking for an opportunity to be with them today, anyway.

A plump woman in her early fifties clad in a woolen high-neck green dress rounded a corner, the heels of her boots, clicking against the polished floors, her fairly plain ankle-length skirt, flailing as she approached.

As soon as she saw Jane standing by her door, she immediately stopped in her tracks and dropped into a deep curtsy, lowering her eyes respectfully.

“Your Grace,” she called softly, her voice laced with surprise and alarm. “Please pardon my sudden appearance, I didn’t mean to crowd your space- I was only looking for the girls...”

“It’s all right, Mrs. Caldwell,” Jane said with a warm voice to help the governess feel at ease.

She was still getting used to all these formalities and she wished she could just make them all see her as simply as she saw herself but this was the downside of the position that she occupied.

“What happened? Where are the girls?” she inquired.

Mrs. Caldwell was quiet for a moment, probably rehearsing her replies in her head.

“Feel free around me, Mrs. Caldwell, I don’t bite.” She beamed yet another dose of smile at her.

It would take a while for the woman to adjust but for now, she still felt like it wasn’t her place.

“Tell me; what happened?” Jane reiterated.

“I’m at my wits’ end, Your Grace,” she fretted, clearly pained and frustrated. “They simply refuse to cooperate, no matter what I try.” She paused, her aura reflecting her desire to say something— make a request maybe.

Jane smiled at her, making the atmosphere much more conducive so she would feel free to make her request.

“Perhaps you might have better luck coaxing them out of their hiding spots?” she finally summoned the courage to ask and it sounded a lot like a humble suggestion.

“All right, I’ll help you find them,” Jane agreed without hesitation.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” She bowed slightly, appreciating the willingness of the duchess to partake in the search.

Jane and Mrs. Caldwell walked through the grand halls of the manor together calling out the girl’s names.

“Margaret, Louisa!”

Their voices echoed through the halls but they didn’t get any response, it seemed like they were playing hide and seek.

“Oh, these girls will be the death of me,” Mrs. Caldwell complained.

As they passed by a window, Jane caught a movement outside amidst the towering trees.

“Mrs. Caldwell,” she called her attention and the governess stopped in her tracks.

“I think we should expand our search to the woods,” she suggested. “I have a feeling that our young ladies are there.” A grin spread across her face.

Together, they left the building and headed to the woods. Jane could hear the whispers of the girls who had by now known of the presence of the adults.

She signaled Mrs. Caldwell to be silent as she tiptoed quietly, going for the tree behind which the kids were hiding.

They were still talking, whispering to themselves when suddenly, Jane jumped out of the blue, appearing before them with a scary gesture that made both girls scream, Louisa's voice being louder.

“Got you, didn't I?” Jane laughed, enjoying the fearful look on Louisa's face and the annoyance flickering in Margaret's eye.

“Yes. Yes, you did. Good one, Jane,” Louisa replied, chuckling at her ridiculousness.

“Well?” Jane shifted her gaze to Margaret who had her arms spread across her chest, looking defiant.

“Unlike my sister, I'm not easily impressed nor am I easily frightened,” she answered, her arrogance a little subtle.

“I beg to differ given that a few seconds ago you were screaming,” Jane said to her.

“I only screamed because Louisa screamed not that I was frightened,” she explained, exuding confidence.

“We have a lot in common, you and I,” Jane said to her. “Now, Mrs. Caldwell has searched high and low for two beauties and since I'm the one who found you, you're

going to have to go with her and attend your lessons.”

“Are you punishing us?” Margaret asked with a frown.

Jane sighed and stepped closer to the girls. “Children are punished or reprimanded by adults not out of hatred, but out of love— so the children will understand their wrongs and avoid it next time.”

“You're justifying your actions,” Margaret said to her.

“Maybe.” She shrugged her shoulders. “But where’s that justification for what you did to Mrs. Caldwell?”

The girls were silent.

“Look, after the lessons, we'll have some fun time together, what do you think?”

Louisa's eyes lit up immediately.

“Really? You'd do that?”

“Of course. We can do whatever you want,” Jane replied, glad to see the excitement in the girl's expression.

“Why don't we just skip to the fun part?” Margaret suggested. “I don't want to do lessons,” she declared blatantly.

Jane looked at Mrs. Caldwell standing a few paces behind her and then returned her gaze to this girl who had proven time and time again to be exasperatingly difficult to handle.

She knelt down to the young lady's level.

“I understand that learning can be annoying sometimes,” she began in a soothing tone. “So annoying that you might feel the urge to skip a day in class because the lessons can be...”

“Boring,” Margaret and Jane chorused the word.

Jane smiled after she watched a faint grin appear on Margaret's face.

“See? We're not so different, you and I,” she added.

Margaret was silent for a while.

“But do I really need to learn?”

“Yes, sweetheart, because whether we hate it or not, learning is important. And I promise, it'll go by quickly. Afterwards, we can have our fun.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” Jane said, holding out her pinky finger. Margaret hooked her pinky around Jane's, sealing the deal.

With the young ladies in tow, Jane and Mrs. Caldwell led them back to the schoolroom and Jane stayed back for a couple of minutes until Emma, the housekeeper, showed up at the entrance.

“Your Grace,” she called, her voice tinged with reverence.

It was then that Jane remembered that she had a schedule with her this afternoon.

“Are you set for the tour around the estate?” Emma asked.

“I can take you on the tour. I know everything and everywhere there is to know around here,” Louisa said delightfully, taking her eyes off the book on the table before her.

“That's really sweet of you, honey, but I think Emma has got that handled.” Jane rose to her feet. “You keep feeding those big brains until I get back.” She kissed both girls on the head and left with Emma.

Through the opulent halls, Jane followed her guide, paying rapt attention to the lessons about the Montford Manor and its history.

As they walked, Emma pointed out various rooms and notable features of the manor, explaining each in detail.

Jane was intrigued by the knowledge this young housemaid had about her new home and the passion with which she taught was admirable. She spoke like she was there when the historical events of the manor unfolded, which led Jane to ask. As it turned out, Emma had grown up in the Duke's estate, assisting her mother who was the previous housekeeper.

The library, filled with towering shelves of books, the grand dining hall with its long, polished table, and the drawing-room with its elegant furniture and artwork. Each feature and room they stopped by seemed to carry a significant story that was marveling to Jane.

They eventually made their way to a quieter wing of the house. Emma paused by a large portrait of a handsome man in his early thirties.

“Who's that?” Jane asked her, looking at the portrait as well. There was something

about it that seemed familiar but she hadn't placed her head around it yet.

“That...” Emma replied. “That is the late Duke of Montford, older brother to His Grace the current Duke,” Emma explained softly.

“Did something happen to him?” Jane inquired.

“You don't know?” Emma turned to her.

“Know what?” Jane's curiosity was pricked but she could feel Emma's resistance to talk.

“He passed away a year ago.”

Peering closely at the portrait, she noted the resemblance with Colin.

“He must have been a great loss to the family,” she said to Emma.

“Indeed, especially to the girls.”

“The dowager said the girls were the duke's nieces, Lord Algernon was their father wasn't he?”

Emma nodded in affirmation and Jane noticed that she was not comfortable discussing a matter of that gravity with her.

“I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for the girls,” Jane said, sympathizing with the young ladies.

“I don't know about that, Your Grace,” Emma said as though she was in opposition.

“He wasn't...” She sighed. “He wasn't really close with his daughters.”

“I uh...I think I may have spoken more than I should have,” she said, unwilling to keep talking. “If it pleases you, I'd love for us to go back to our tour, Your Grace.”

Jane let out a sigh. She could press on and get Emma to tell what she knew but she wasn't going to do that. She would respect the lady and not use her power to cajole her into doing something she didn't want to do.

If Lord Algernon was anything like her father, then the girls would have turned out to experience the same treatment she and her sister got from their father.

She wasn't wrong, there indeed was a lot that she had in common with them and she was going to be there, to be the mother that they lacked.

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"Louisa, could you please pass the butter?"

Margaret and Louisa were seated in their usual seats at the usual time on the breakfast table, but today, something was strikingly different.

In a surprising turn of events, they were conversing politely, passing items to each other with a grace that was a stark contrast to their usual mealtime antics.

"Would you like a mix with the milk, as usual?"

Margaret, usually the one leading the chaos, gave a warm smile now as she shook her head. "No, thank you. Just the butter."

Louisa, her blue eyes wide, seemingly trained to the change in atmosphere, carefully handed the butter to Margaret, avoiding any of the expected spills or mishaps.

"Why, thank you, sister."

In turn, Margaret received it with a smile, spreading it on her toast with precision and care, again, a far cry from their usual hurried and messy ways.

As they nibbled on their toast and sipped tea, the two maintained their new found composure, each bite taken with elegance and each sip with grace.

The clatter and spills that often accompanied their meals were more than notably absent, replaced by a serene and refined air that enveloped the breakfast table. It was a delightful sight, yet worrying and thought-provoking.

With their golden curls neatly pinned back, and their lace-trimmed dresses spotlessly fit, they whispered various topics with impeccable manners, all while eating smoothly and properly, much to the amazement of their uncle seated with them.

Colin stared at the girls in wonder and contemplated whether to question their behavior. At last, as Margaret took tiny bites out of her favorite bakeries, unusual to her expected immediate wolfing of the food, he couldn't keep quiet any longer.

Looking on in astonishment, he remarked, "Margaret, Louisa, my dears, you both are quite the picture of genteel behavior this morning." He squinted his eyes at them suspiciously. "I must say, I'm thoroughly impressed by this sudden grace and poise."

With a twinkle in her eye, Margaret replied, "Why, Uncle Colin, we thought we'd challenge ourselves to be proper young ladies today. It's rather enjoyable for everyone, don't you think?"

Louisa, her dimples deepening as she smiled, added, "Indeed, Uncle, we wanted to show you that we can eat and converse quietly just like the characters in our favorite stories. It's quite fun, actually."

She turned to her sister with joyous eyes. "I always wanted to try this approach. It's so much fun!"

Colin chuckled softly as Margaret squinted eyes of betrayal at her younger sister. If he hadn't known them beforehand, it would be abundantly clear that Margaret was the instigator and ring leader of all their crimes.

The girls went on eating, and despite his confusion and slight worry, he couldn't help but appreciate the effort and charm displayed by them. For once, the breakfast table was a delightful scene of refinement and elegance in the heart of their home.

"Good morning everyone, what a lovely morning it is, is it not?"

Jane's melodious voice echoed through the breakfast room, seeming to bounce off the tapestries and clink through the fine china, creating a delicious tune.

"Good morning, duchess!" Margaret piped up immediately, her smile wider than most Colin had seen before.

"Duchess?" Jane pushed her head back in surprise, a smile slowly spreading across her face.

"It's good to see you this morning, Your Grace!" Louisa said to her.

Her laugh was genuine as she nodded at the girls as well. "And it's very good to see you both this morning as well!"

Demure in a delicate gown of pale blue silk, embellished with fine lace that cascaded down the bodice like a waterfall, the light dancing upon her fabrics, only enhanced her ethereal beauty.

Colin felt a rush of emotions as he beheld his radiant new wife. Her presence was captivating, the smile on her face like sunshine on a rainy day.

The air crackled with unspoken tension as he struggled to tear his gaze away from her. For a fracture of a second, his breath caught in his chest, confused by this sudden bodily reaction, completely lost in the sight of her.

Jane lifted a curious brow then and he finally realized she was awaiting a response. He cleared his throat and with a subtle nod, finally acknowledged her greeting.

"Indeed, the morn is fair, duchess. The young ladies are displaying an unexpected but

welcomed decorum this day." His eyes were alight with surprise and pride as he returned his gaze to the girls.

Jane's smile widened as she turned to face the girls as well, her voice gentle yet playful, "Is that so, my dears?"

The little girls, in a chorus of excitement, greeted her eagerly, "Yes!" Jane laughed as Margaret continued, "It is indeed a lovely morning!"

"Okay, who are you and what have you done to Margaret?" Jane teased.

"I'm just trying to turn a new leaf, that's all," came the reply with carelessly shrugged shoulders.

Acknowledging their enthusiasm, she reciprocated their greetings with warmth, "Well met, my darlings."

A mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes as she winked at them affectionately. Expressing her pride in their good behavior, she continued to commend the girls as she settled in her seat, her tone filled with maternal affection.

More to Colin's astonishment, Margaret spoke up with joy and genuine excitement in her tone, "You must keep your promise now, dear duchess. We behaved well today, like we'd agreed."

Oh, a bargain had already been struck. That makes sense.

He thought to himself.

Echoing her sister's sentiment, Louisa chimed in eagerly, "Yes, yes, Lady Jane, you promised!"

Jane's laughter tinkled like crystal as she popped a small piece of cake in her mouth, feigning contemplation with a hand on her chin, "Oh, my dears, I seem to be at a loss. Pray, enlighten me. What is this promise you speak of?" Her theatrical gesture betrayed her sarcasm.

Louisa's eyes widened in disbelief, her voice tinged with urgency as she spoke, "Lady Jane, have you truly forgotten?"

Margaret's expression was a mix of disappointment and determination as she interjected with a slight pout, "You promised, Lady Jane. You said we would play after our lessons today." She frowned.

Jane's laughter danced through the room again, enchanting Colin's ears. With a nod towards the girls, she reassured them, "Of course, my dears, I remember."

A playful glint in her eyes, she pointed a finger in jest, teasing, "You may play, but only if your good behavior continues."

The girls' joyous outburst filled the air, their excitement palpable. Raising a playful brow at their exuberance, Jane observed as Margaret gently tapped her sister, prompting them to regain composure instantly.

The girls, now poised, offered her a respectful nod. In an overly hushed tone, Margaret expressed their elation. "We are truly overjoyed by this, duchess. We appreciate you keeping to your word."

Louisa, following her sister's sentiment, chimed in with a sudden maturity, "Indeed, Lady Jane we are."

Colin sat transfixed, his gaze locked on the unexpected scene unfolding before him. The sight of his nieces, transformed into paragons of decorum, filled him with more

astonishment than he could describe.

Perplexed, he pondered the enigma of his wife's influence over the girls. He marveled at the genuine affection shining in their eyes, a testament to the bond they shared with her.

As he observed the graceful, continued interaction between her and the girls, a whirlwind of thoughts raced through his mind. Colin's heart swelled with admiration and bewilderment at the mystery of her gentle authority.

The realization dawned on him that her approach must be one of kindness and understanding, for the girls responded not out of fear but out of genuine fondness. Still, it felt all but too sudden for such magic to have occurred.

What has this woman done to my nieces and who are those girls?

Colin was shocked and impressed with what he was witnessing. Jane had managed to influence the girls for the better within only a few days. And all because of a simple deal like this? She must have some experience as a diplomat for there was no other explanation.

The more he observed the interaction between his wife and the girls, the more his heart swelled with emotion. One he couldn't place exactly. Was it admiration? Bewilderment? Or worse, fondness?

Jane chuckled at the girls' antics once more, telling them, "Go on, enjoy your food. We'll have fun in the garden later."

The girls squealed softly, exchanging excited glances before nodding eagerly at her. "Yes!"

Louisa spoke, barely containing her excitement, "We can't wait to play outside with you."

Margaret chimed in, "It's going to be so much fun...I hope."

Not being ready to accept the jealousy that grew as he sensed a mysterious undercurrent in Jane's interaction with the girls without him, he interjected in a tone that brooked no argument, halting their expressions of gratitude.

"Absolutely not. There will be no playing outside." He declared firmly, his voice cutting through the room like a sharp blade.

An immediate silence enveloped the table like a heavy mist, each person's gaze turning towards Colin, their expressions a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

Jane, her eyes now filled with confusion turned to him. "Why? What seems to be the issue?" She questioned, her voice tinged with a hint of surprise and slight annoyance.

Colin, resolute in his stance, shook his head, his words carrying an air of authority. "It should be evident. I cannot permit such behavior. Ladies should not engage in activities that soil their attire."

He scoffed and shook his head. "Louisa and Margaret are not babies. It's silly for them to be 'playing' anyway. They have better things to do, like focus on their studies."

"They simply are not allowed to do anything else. Else, it'd be inappropriate." He proclaimed matter-of-factly, then let his gaze return to his plate as if to emphasize his point, leaving no more room for the conversation.

After his decisive statement, a thick tension hung in the air. The once harmonious

breakfast scene now fractured, a clear clash of opinion creating a rift in the formerly genteel atmosphere of the room.

Jane's brow furrowed in contemplation, and he could see the disappointment and confusion on the girls' faces. .

"And who, pray tell, decides what is appropriate or inappropriate?"

Her voice was steady yet laced with subtle defiance. Her raised brow spoke volumes, adding to the heaviness of the question hanging in the air.

Colin's eyes widened in astonishment at her audacity to question him. "Is it not common knowledge?" He retorted, his tone edged with disbelief, "That ladies must maintain cleanliness above all?"

Undeterred by his stern stance, Jane held her ground, her words a gentle yet firm rebuke. "Fortunately, the girls are within the confines of their home, so none of that is of importance here, Your Grace."

He attempted to speak but she cut him short before he could carry on, "And aren't Margaret and Louisa all but ten and eight? They are, indeed, babies, don't you think?"

Dismantling his stance, she carried on, "It makes no sense to have such rigid views in a place that should be their haven. Confining ladies to the absurdity of the constraints of societal norms that stifle their natural inclinations, in their own home?"

"What absurdity? How is it wrong to train them to be respectable ladies of society at a young age?" His eyes were nearly popping out their sockets at her countering. "And is it not said it is best to teach the woman in the confines of her home so she can be accustomed to such behavior when she steps out in society?"

He glared at her, daring for another response, and Jane delivered instantaneously. "Train her? You speak as though women are mere chattel for you to groom and send off for benefits."

Colin lifted a brow. "That is not at all what I said. You-"

"I'd have you know, Your Grace, if there was anyone to be able to speak on matters such as this, it would be I, as I have lived in their shoes, and I have more than enough experience as a woman myself to say what is proper."

He scoffed and eyed her curiously, more than surprised at her ability to banter. "And that's because you have been such a picture of perfection in society?"

Jane's jaw dipped slightly, "Excuse me?" She laughed incredulously, "No matter, the point is I am a woman. Thus, I know more about what is expected and what could affect our performance in the long run."

Her eyes were demanding as she argued on, "The girls can enjoy a bit of playtime, and they will be fine. A few minutes of leisure surely would not wreck their chances at finding grand suitors in the future."

The air in the room grew heavy with tension as they continued their heated debate. Despite the measured tones, their voices clashed like thunder in the midst of a storm.

Colin's tone was firm, his words cutting through the charged atmosphere as he lifted his hands in the air, cutting Jane short on a rant. "I have made my decision, and it stands final," he declared, unwavering in its resolve.

"My nieces shall not waste their valuable time playing around in the grass like the common folk."

Jane, undeterred by his finality, pressed on with her argument, her words a mix of anger and bewilderment. "Your Grace, you told me to take care of your nieces, and that is exactly what I am doing. You must understand that I know what I am doing," She implored, her voice tinged with urgency, "I beg you at least let this day be, we can discuss this later. I have a made a promise I must keep."

"I shall discuss nothing with you for I have no need to do that. I make the decisions." His patience wore thin as she persisted, his expression hardening with the passing second.

"Enough, Jane," He bellowed sharply. His authoritative tone left no room for negotiation, and emphasizing the finality of the decision, he dropped his utensils and noisily rose from his seat.

As he strode away, the echo of his footsteps filled the room, leaving Jane with her responses unsaid, her gaze fixed on the empty space he had occupied moments before.

The tension lingered in the air still up until he reached the door, and Jane had to hold herself from screaming after him.

Her eyes followed his departure out the door and she waited for the minutes to pass, ensuring he would not make a return.

Then, with a mischievous glint dancing in her gaze, she beckoned for the girls to come close. As they leaned in, she lowered her voice conspiratorially, the air thick with secrecy and excitement.

"Don't worry," She whispered, determination ringing in her tone. "We're going to sneak outside once we've finished here."

Margaret's eyes sparkled with delight, her excitement bubbling over as she exclaimed, "Lady Jane, I never thought I'd say this but...you're the most amazing lady I've ever met!"

Surprisingly, Louisa was the one who hushed her sister, worry and caution in her expression as her eyes darted towards the door.

Jane's laughter rang through the room, a blend of amusement and camaraderie as she reassured Margaret, "And you're just as astounding, my dear."

With a sly smile, Jane urged the girls, her eyes glinting with anticipation. "Hurry up, my dears, so we may have more time for our little escapade."

The girls, their faces illuminated with the thrill of the forbidden, exchanged knowing glances, a silent agreement passing between them.

"Yes!"

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As the last morsel of breakfast vanished, Jane sprang up from her seat, a spark of mischief dancing in her eyes.

With a subtle gesture, she motioned for the girls to stay put, her steps light as she approached the door, peeking cautiously to ensure Colin's absence. Satisfied, she turned back to Margaret and Louisa, a wide grin playing on her lips.

In a hushed yet excited tone, she asked, "Are you both ready for this daring escapade?"

The girls, their eyes gleaming with excitement, rushed to the door and crouched down beside her then nodded eagerly in response.

"All right, let us-"

"But, are you sure it will be all right, Lady Jane? What do we do if Uncle Colin finds us?" Louisa's brows raised in concern, worry etched all over her little face.

"It will be fine, little Louisa. Lady Jane would make sure we're not caught, is that not so?" Margaret's eyes gleamed with excitement and a clear welcome to the danger in contrast to her sister.

"How do we know Uncle Colin won't find us?" She bit her lip in worry.

Margaret pouted and shook her head. "He is usually in his study by this time, you know this. And, because of Lady Jane, we will finally be allowed outside. This is what we've always wanted!"

Margaret was practically bouncing with joy as she peeked outside the door, desperate to make a run for it. However, Louisa still looked skeptical.

“I know this, but-”

“Come on, do you not trust Lady Jane, sister?” Margaret pouted again, staring at her with accusation.

Jane frowned at the scene before her, contemplating if perhaps it would be best to cancel the whole ordeal entirely. Yet she knew that this on its own could cause a rift between the young girls, and blame would be cast.

She racked her brain as quickly as she could for a solution, but nothing was coming up. At last, she crouched lower to Louisa’s position and gave the little ball of nerves a smile.

“We do not have to go now, you know. We can take a few hours and make sure your uncle would be far from catching us.”

Louisa’s brows raised in question and Margaret’s pout grew even bigger.

“But, Lady Jane-”

“We could wait for him to fall asleep, girls,” Jane cut her short before the situation could get worse. “I’m quite certain he would take a nap eventually! We can sneak out then.”

“Uncle Colin doesn’t take siestas today. He has a strict schedule for every week, today is not his rest day.” Louisa shook her head immediately.

Jane’s brows rose. She wondered and marveled at just how much the girls knew

about her husband, and how they managed to acquire such information at all.

“Okay... So, we shall try on a day he rests by noon then,” Her tone was questioning.

“No!” Both sisters echoed. They turned to each other and burst into giggles.

“Today is fine, duchess. I really wish to play with you.” Louisa took a deep breath and when she opened her eyes again, excitement filled them. “Let us go, now!”

Jane grinned and her eyes moved between both of them for confirmation. “Are we sure?”

After the girls nodded, her grin widened and she nodded as well, a silent agreement passing between them. She waited a couple seconds for effect before she declared.

"Alright, then. Let's... go!"

With her signal, the trio snuck out through the servant's door, a chorus of giggles trailing in their wake.

The servants, caught off guard by the sudden commotion, gasped in surprise as the girls whizzed past them with their hearts pounding with exhilaration and the thrill of the unexpected.

"We did it!"

Louisa's voice rang out in a victorious squeal as they finally reached the gardens. "I can't believe it, we did it!"

Her excitement bubbled over, causing her to bounce up and down with unrestrained joy, a sight Jane could not help but find enchanting.

“Yes, we did! You see that?” She could barely contain her laughter and excitement herself.

Amidst Louisa's exuberance, Margaret did not restrain her own delight, joining in the chorus of squeals that filled the air.

Caught up in the infectious energy of the moment, Jane added her voice to the symphony of jubilation, grabbing both girls' hands and bouncing around in a circle of shared triumph.

In the secluded beauty the three of them reveled in the freedom of the moment, their laughter mingling with the rustling of leaves and the distant chirping of birds.

Jane began a playful dance with both little girls, the sun casting a golden glow upon their laughter-filled faces. The girls' eyes sparkled with mischief as they twirled and spun.

After that, they engaged in a series of lively games, the little girl's youthful spirits egging Jane to find more entertainment with the passing moment.

As they frolicked amidst the blooms and verdant pathways, she encouraged their competitive spirits as well, igniting a fire of determination in both of them as they played.

"Faster, Louisa, you can do it! That's right!" She urged, her voice a blend of encouragement and playful challenge.

Louisa, her cheeks flushed with exertion, pushed herself harder, determined to outpace her sister in the race they were partaking in.

Margaret, not one to be left behind, reveled in the fray with gusto, her laughter

ringing through the air as she raced ahead of her little sister without restraint.

"I'm coming for you, Margaret!" Louisa exclaimed, her eyes alight with the thrill of the chase.

"Hurry up then, will you?" Margaret called back, laughing as she raced towards the finish line.

Jane, her heart brimming with affection for the girls, cheered them on, reveling in the bond of the moment, and the good memories that was blossoming between them.

The sun was finally set high in the sky, casting long shadows across the garden. Thus the trio paused, breathless and exhilarated, their hearts remaining intertwined in the moment of pure, unbridled joy.

Jane knew that this day would be etched in their memories forever. She felt as though she was reliving her days with Sarah, and each second felt precious.

With a wide grin, she huddled the girls close again. "All right, this would be our last game today. We're going to-"

"What's going on here?"

The tranquility of the gardens shattered as the abrupt arrival of the too familiar stern voice bounced around the area, sending the trio into a startled frenzy immediately.

Colin's tone was laced with unmistakable fury, his eyes ablaze with a mixture of annoyance and disbelief as he looked upon them.

Caught red-handed, Jane and the girls stood frozen, their faces a canvas of shock and apprehension.

“I asked a question, what is going on here?” Colin bellowed again, sending shivers down their spines.

Jane, her voice tinged with sheepishness, attempted to offer an excuse, "We... we were just enjoying the fresh air, Your Grace." She let out a forced laugh. “It is my fault. The air inside was a bit humid, so I simply thought...”

But before she could finish her sentence, his thunderous voice cut through the air, drowning out any attempts at justification.

"Why would you disobey me?" His words reverberated with authority; his frustration evident in every syllable.

He stepped closer, shrinking their figures as he towered over them. In the moment, he was a formidable figure of authority and discipline, his gaze piercing through their guilt-ridden expressions.

As Jane and the girls stood under him, the weight of his reprimanding aura hung heavy in the air, a stark reminder of the consequences of their defiance.

Colin's fury blazed like a wildfire, his voice thundering through the garden as he demanded again, "Tell me, why are you out here? I explicitly forbade it!"

His eyes bore into them, a mix of disappointment and anger spread across his features. Jane, shrunk in his gaze, tried to defend them again.

“The girls and I only needed a break. A lot has happened, as you know, Your Grace. This is healthy and-”

His patience worn thin, Colin's tone grew even more commanding, "No excuses, Jane! When I give an order, it is to be followed without question!"

The force of his words resonated with authority, and from the corner of her eye, Jane caught the girls exchanging uneasy glances, their hearts clearly heavy with regret for their transgression.

“This is not the battlefield. What use is giving orders here?”

Colin was immediately dumbfounded by her reply and he was probably thinking why she was such a defiant woman, always having something to say in every situation.

“The girls aren’t to blame...I take full responsibility for this,” she said to him. “However, we were bored inside, surely having a little fun outside wasn’t such a terrible idea.”

His words lashed out like a whip. “You appear as though you belong in a pigsty rather than a refined estate,” he replied, gazing at her, anger evident in his glare.

“They only wanted to play outside, Your Grace,” she said to him. “Do not punish them for being children and doing what regular children do.”

With a deep, ragged breath, he attempted to rein in his anger at last, though the fire in his eyes still burned bright. Pointing towards the grand house in the distance, he growled, "Go back and change! You are not to be seen in such a state!"

The gravity of his command hung heavy in the air. The little girls, caught in the crossfire of the frustrations, exchanged guilty glances, their youthful innocence overshadowed by the intensity of the moment.

With a heavy heart, Louisa and Margaret turned on their heels, their footsteps heavy with the weight of their disobedience, as they made their way back to the house.

However, as Margaret and Louisa obediently retreated towards the house, Jane’s face

filled with a frown.

In a burst of thought, her fury was written upon her face. Her legs strode purposefully towards Colin, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Taken aback by her sudden approach, Colin found himself at a loss for words, his usual composure shaken by her sudden action.

With each step she took closer, a sly smile playing on her lips, his confusion deepened, his pulse quickening with apprehension and intrigue.

"What is the meaning of this, duchess?"

His voice wavered slightly, betraying his inner turmoil as he attempted to make sense of her unusual behavior. His demand hung in the air, unanswered by the plotting woman, who continued her advance with a tantalizing air of mystery.

"Stay back!"

He commanded her, emotions in disarray. However, Jane remained silent, her silence a taunting challenge that only fueled his bewilderment further.

"I demand an explanation! Why do you approach me in this manner?" His voice rose with a blend of command and vulnerability, his eyes searching for any hint of her intention in the depths of her gaze.

Yet, with her enigmatic smile unyielding, she persisted in her silent advance, each step bringing her closer to him.

Her fast approach caused his heart to race faster than a galloping horse as he knew that there was no way he would stop her. She did not seem like she was ready to halt

or heed to his words.

“What are you doing? I said stay back! Why won’t you listen? You-You!”

A sudden flurry of action disrupted him as she, with a daring move, lunged towards him, catching him off guard.

Colin's startled gasp echoed through the air as he instinctively tried to break their fall, landing amidst the greenery with a thud, much to the shock of the young onlookers.

Gasps of surprise and whispers erupted from the watching girls as they beheld the unexpected spectacle unfolding before them, their jaws frozen in shock.

Colin, still reeling from the abrupt turn of events, struggled to comprehend the situation, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he attempted to make sense of his wife’s audacious actions.

With a devious smile playing on her lips, Jane found herself in a rather compromising position, yet brazenly continuing to straddle him as he lay beneath her.

“What on earth is the meaning of this?!” Colin managed to sputter at last, his bellow echoing the garden.

However, Jane's grin only widened, a devious glint in her eyes as she pointed out the spots of leaves and dirt now adorning his attire.

"What in heaven's name are you playing at?" His voice carried a blend of shock and exasperation, his eyes searching hers for some semblance of reason behind her antics.

Jane's response, delivered with a gleeful and wicked smile, painted a picture of playful defiance as she declared.

"You're just as dirty as I am now, Your Grace. It seems you've become an accomplice to our little escapade."

Colin's astonishment at this behavior was beyond words, yet he seemed to be suddenly captivated by her beauty in this unexpected moment. He looked like his heart was racing within his chest as she hovered above him, a vision of insanity and allure.

Despite the shock, he couldn't help but be drawn to her enchanting presence. As she cackled triumphantly, her eyes sparkling with mirth, his gaze lingered on her, taking in every delicate detail.

She smiled and caught him staring as he attempted to reach for her cheek.

Jane's laughter faded into a small gasp, the atmosphere shifting into a charged silence. Their eyes met, filled with silent feelings, and the edginess in the air was almost palpable.

As the realization of the position he was in dawned on him, Colin cleared his throat and swiftly shifted his new wife off him, his actions driven by a whirlwind of conflicting emotions.

Standing tall, he regained his composure, the air thick with unspoken words hanging between them.

Desperate to break the charged atmosphere, he struggled to fix a steely gaze upon her, his words cutting through the tension like a sharp blade.

"Never have I encountered a lady with such appalling manners as yours, Jane."

The immediate hurt that flashed across her face was undeniable, her eyes betraying

confusion at the obvious change in his eyes as he looked at her.

Before she could form a response, still reeling from the unexpected turn of events, he took charge, his voice laced with authority.

"Come, nieces, it is time we depart from this unsettling scene."

With a firm yet gentle grip, he led the young girls away, his heart pounding in his chest, the echoes of their intense encounter lingering in the air.

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“Ah, Colin! My dear friend, do come in.” Mark laughed as he turned his head to face him. “You know when I was told that your carriage had pulled over in my compound, I did not believe it at first.” He rose to his feet with a warm smile. “Welcome, my friend.”

They embraced one another for a moment.

The Earl of Ashborne had been Colin’s dear friend for as long as he could remember. He had lost contact with Mark while at war, but it was no matter as they had been quick to rekindle their friendship upon his return. The Earl would have been at his wedding, had he not been away on business.

This was the first time he was taking up his friend’s offer to visit him whenever. Even without reaching out first. He wondered if his arrival would be frowned upon

Draping his coat over a fine wooden chair, Colin reclined on the sofa with a deep sigh. Tension rolled off him, dampening the warmth of the room. This was also the first time he had visited his friend ever since his new title as the Duke of Montford.

“So, how are things at Montford Estate? Most importantly, I must inquire of your new bride. How are things with her?” Mark asked, his voice tinged with concern. “Leave us,” he declared with a careless wave and his servants all left, including Colin's.

Colin sighed deeply, feeling a strange mix of despair and concern. “I must confess, I think this marriage was a mistake.”

Mark remained calm, his gaze on Colin. “Whatever do you mean? Are your nieces proving too difficult for your wife to handle?”

“What wife? She’s a child!” Colin sputtered, his face heating up with embarrassment and frustration. “I should have known better. She has no bloody idea on how to take care of children, manage a household or how to respect a husband. She speaks back to me and doesn’t listen to whatever I ask of her.” He sighed, trying to control his frustrations so he would not whine too much.

With a calmer voice, he continued.

“The kids have shown signs of warming up to her...

“Okay, that's a good thing. Is it not?” Mark asked. “I mean if your nieces, being who they are, in fact, willing to warm up to your new wife, then I don't see the problem.”

Colin massaged his eyeballs.

“Jane and I... we’re like night and day, like the sun and the moon, like different ends of a spectrum. She’s headstrong, unyielding, independent and....” He trailed off, frustration evident in his voice and furrowed brows.

Mark chuckled lightly, the sound doing little to lift Colin’s spirit. “Interesting. It is a transformation most unexpected, from adversaries to the warmest of companions.

“Mark, I did not come here for you to make a mockery of this dire situation. If this marriage doesn’t work out, I shall have to give the children to Prudence to take care of, which would lead me to break their trust.” Colin lamented; his face etched in a frown.

Mark raised an eyebrow, “I must say, I have never seen you so openly annoyed. You

have always appeared composed, reserved and calm, it made me wonder if you were human at times. This woman must be so special, seeing as she has managed to make you rattled.”

“You know,” Colin began. “I thought I was going mad when I tried to find the right match for myself. I required one who would be able to take care of the home, teach my nieces how to act accordingly, and be a pliant wife. It was a simple request, yet I couldn’t find one person to fit into those requirements.” He paused and continued. “But when I saw her in that garden, I knew I had to convince her to be my bride. I was enamored by her confidence and how much of a spitfire she was.”

Shaking his head, he added, “I should have known she’d be a thorn in my flesh. She’s so adventurous, it’s unsettling. She wishes to seek the world beyond and explore, having free rein to do anything. I’ve tried to make her see reason; I’ve tried to make her understand how the wife of the duke is expected to behave. But, no. It is apparent that she doesn’t seem to want to heed to my words of advice,” the words burst out of him in a frustrated manner.

Colin’s gaze flickered to the fireplace, entranced with the crackles it made.

“This isn’t just about your marriage, is it?” Mark asked, concern coloring his eyes.

Colin let out a sigh. “No. It’s about everything,” he began. “My brother’s death, his children, my new title, the estate, reminders of the war...I just feel like I’m constantly fighting a battle that I shall lose.”

“Do you know why you are finding it difficult to handle your nieces?” Mark cast a serious look at him as he sat in silence.

“It’s because you treat them like soldiers, expecting them to carry out your orders with no hesitation or questions!” Mark pointed out, his voice firm but not unkind.

“It's funny...Jane said the same thing,” he confessed, a faint grin tugging at a corner of his lips.

“Then she's smarter than you give her credit for,” Mark declared. “The way you react to your nieces is why they never listen to you. I suggest you give Jane a chance and do away with any sort of prejudice you might have towards her. Who knows, she might end up being great with the children. Begin on a fresh slate, try to be friends with her.”

Colin scoffed, “Friends?” he spat out the word with a bitter tone. “You cannot possibly expect me to form a friendship with someone who has child-like tendencies which are worse than my nieces. It's ludicrous!” Colin wasn't cut out for friendships. He was too honest. Brutally honest to be exact.

He had no problem putting people in their place, if necessary. Perhaps it had to do with him being a captain. Either way, Colin didn't have many friends and the friends he did have were either dead, out of the country or living in solitude, like Mark.

“Yes, friends,” Mark affirmed, his voice stern. “I understand that you were once a soldier and you have your way of doing things, in the most brutish manner, of course. But dear friend, that is definitely not the way to go about it.”

“How would you know what to do? You are without a wife nor a child.” Colin interjected, a challenging glint in his eyes.

“I might not have a wife nor children, but you forget that I am an uncle myself and my nieces and nephews all adore me.” Mark stated with a smug grin on his face.

Colin grunted in response, taking a sip of the chamomile tea before him. Mark was once again on his no liquor journey, although it doesn't usually last long.

In a somber tone, Mark advised him. “You want to keep your nieces on their best behavior? You want them to be properly behaved and attuned to society? Work hand in hand with Jane and see how everything pans out. Your nieces require a female’s presence in their mind and Jane can serve as their mother figure. You need to get rid of your crude ways of getting things done. Don’t be standoffish to your nieces, you’re their uncle for goodness’s sake. You don’t have to be rigid in all of your endeavors, it can be unappealing at times and completely unnecessary.”

There was a moment of silence as Colin mulled over Mark’s words. He made a lot of sense, albeit how difficult his words were to swallow. Colin knew he needed to tone down just how hard he’d been on the girls. His brother’s face flashed in front of him, a subtle reminder of the constant burden he carried. He loved his brother, but he couldn’t help but feel a slight tinge of resentment and bitterness towards him. Why didn’t he fight harder to be a responsible father to his children? Why didn’t he fight harder to keep the title he had fought for all his life? Why did he have to take the easy way out by dying and leaving everything in his hands?

“Sometimes, I wonder why my brother chose to pass on to the other side rather than be with his girls,” he said to Mark. “I am not caught up for this position, Mark. I was trained to be a soldier not a duke. That was my brother’s calling, he had all the teachings and trainings and our grandmother’s advice.” Colin massaged his eyeballs tiredly. “You know, there was once a time when I was jealous of Algernon.” He scoffed at the ridiculousness of it.

“Why was that, if I might ask?”

Colin sighed.

“I used to feel like I didn’t matter, like he was the favorite child and I always felt neglected. I was young then and I went as far as refusing to speak with him throughout that period.” Colin laughed lightly as memories of those good old days

came flooding his mind. “Algernon, being the compassionate brother that he was, did not deter in reaching out, nor did he relent.” Colin rubbed his palm over his mouth. “Algernon loved the duties of a duke; why then did he give it all up just because he lost his wife?” He looked at Mark as if expecting him to give an answer.

“Love is the most powerful emotion, my friend- which also makes it the most dangerous,” came the reply.

“I do not want this life,” Colin blurted out. “Never did. You know me, Mark, my dream has always been to live up in the mountains and explore the entire country.” He sighed. “Now, I can’t do any of that because my dreams have all been shattered to pieces.”

“Will you heed my advice?” Mark asked.

Although Colin didn’t reply, his expression made it palpable that he was paying attention.

“This is your reality now, Colin. So, instead of complaining about it, you should embrace it and move on. You have a wife now with two little girls to cater for. Your life might have changed, it might not have turned out the way that you planned it- but my friend, such is life. It happens to the best of us and the best way to live and survive these changes that life does to us and our plans is to accept it. Accept the things you cannot change and change the things you can,” Mark concluded.

Colin was quiet, his mind thinking about a million things at the same time but one thing was certain; Mark was right. This was his reality now and he had to accept it.

The clock suddenly chimed, signaling how late the night had become. Colin got to his feet., “Thank you, Mark. I shall have to take my leave. It was great seeing you again my friend, let’s not do this again.”

Mark chuckled deeply, clasping his hand in Colin's. "The pleasure is all mine."

The door made a creaking sound as Colin quietly opened it only standing at the doorstep, checking up on his nieces. They were already asleep, limbs tangled against each other, loud snores filling the air. It was surely a sight. A wry smile formed on Colin's lips, as he shook his head amusingly and shut the door.

"I need a drink," he murmured. He made his way to his room desperate for the bitter taste of whiskey. His footsteps came to a sudden halt- in front of his room. His friend's words came echoing in his mind, try to be friends with her. He could almost feel Mark's disapproving gaze on him as he sauntered past the room.

My apologies, Mark, not tonight.

A few hours later, after downing a whole bottle of whiskey, Colin staggered to the sofa in the library where he was least likely to be found. Immediately he laid there, he succumbed to sleep. However, memories from the past hit him like a ton of bricks. Memories of his late brother, images of his lifeless body, echoes of gunshots during the war, screams of the soldiers... they all flooded his mind like a torrential downpour of rain.

He shook his head, desperate to free himself from the shackles of the past that clung to the corners of his consciousness. "No, no. Stop!" he mumbled, a sheen of sweat covering his forehead. His legs thrashed violently, while his arms stuck right beside him, almost like he was afraid to wield them. He could feel the metallic taste of blood on his lips from his first kill, he could feel the heat at the camp. He could feel everything.

"Wake up! Colin, wake up!" An urgent voice called out his name.

Who's that? What is happening? Why can't I wake up?

The voice persisted, trying to lull him out of the deep hole he dug for himself.

Suddenly, he felt a soft hand, gently caressing his hair, as the voice, tinged with concern continued too quietly.

“I need you to wake up now, Your Grace. You are frightening me.”

With a loud gasp, he suddenly sprung awake, breathing heavily. His unsettled gaze fell on the one person he wouldn't have guessed in his wildest dreams – Jane. And she was staring at him with a puzzled look in her eyes.

“What in God's name happened to you?” She whispered hauntingly.

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Jane lay in her bed, unable to sleep as thousands of thoughts tugged at her brain.

Restless, she tossed and turned, the memory of her husband's harsh words ever burning brightly in her mind like a flickering flame in the darkness.

He was all things frustrating.

He is so incredibly handsome.

The memory of their intimate moment, his gentle touch against her cheek, lingered in her mind as well, like a haunting melody, refusing to be silenced.

Determined to quiet her restless mind, she opted for a cup of tea.

Rising from her bed, she made her way through the quiet halls, each step a conscious effort to push thoughts of her new husband aside.

The house lay still, enveloped in the hush of the night. Then suddenly, as she neared the library, she heard faint grunts and grumbles from within. Her brows creased in confusion and she quietly turned into the entrance.

Entering the library, Jane's eyes widened in surprise as she caught sight of a figure laid out on the sofa in the dimness.

A gasp escaped her before she recognized her husband, his form illuminated by the soft glow of a solitary candle. He was... tossing and turning...

“Your Grace?”

Jane's voice held a note of surprise as she regarded him, her brow arching in question.

Colin's appearance, somewhat disheveled and wearied, tugged at something within her, causing her heart to flutter uncertainly.

As his tossing continued, he let out strained whimpers that made her rush to him, waking him worriedly.

“What in God’s name happened to you?” She sought to understand the turmoil etched upon his face.

As their eyes met, a fleeting moment of vulnerability passed over him. Yet, just as quickly, a veil of reluctance descended, walling away his true emotions.

"I am free to be wherever I please in my own home, duchess."

Jane remained silent, her own gaze unwavering.

His voice cut through the silence again, "And what are you doing here? Can you not tell the hour is late?" His sharp tone was laced with accusation.

Jane lifted a brow as she countered, "And I just inquired of you the same, Your Grace. What brings you to the shadows at this hour?" She eyed him suspiciously as she continued, “If you have no reason, then I do not as well. After all, this is my home too.”

It was Colin’s turn to remain silent. He was avoiding her gaze.

"Why have you been avoiding me these past days?"

Colin's reaction was immediate. He cleared his throat and mustered a response, "I have not been avoiding you."

The air between them crackled like a storm on the verge of breaking. Jane's eyes flashed with annoyance as she confronted him directly.

"Do you really think me mannerless?" Her voice, though controlled, carried the weight of her indignation.

Colin's retort was sharp, "You did act quite manner-less, did you not?" He scoffed, "You pushed me to the ground, tarnishing my clothes on purpose in front of the girls."

With words laced with accusation, he stood his ground, refusing to yield, "And you were so bold to announce that had been your intention. If you didn't know, that is not the proper behavior of a lady."

Jane's temper flared at this, her voice cutting through the air like a blade. "Excuse me? I was merely trying to inject some levity into the situation. I am not to blame if you cannot appreciate a bit of fun without labeling it as improper."

Colin's scoff was laden with disdain as he countered, "A woman like none other, indeed, with that sharp tongue of yours. You're nothing of what is expected from a lady."

His words stung. With her hands now folded tightly in front of her, Jane shot back angrily, "And yet, you chose to marry me, did you not? Wasn't that your reason for springing this marriage on me, anyway?" She glared at him purposefully.

"Springing it on you?" He scoffed in disbelief. "I asked properly, and you so eagerly accepted, if I can remember correctly. You were nearly jumping for joy."

Jane's cheeks flushed and her eyes flashed with indignation as she squealed, "I was not eager about it! I merely chose to help you!

C-Calling me eager after you declared your-your need for help with your nieces! I chose to do a good deed."

Colin raised a brow at her, light amusement twinkling in his eyes as he shook his head. Then he paused and nodded, a sign of acknowledgement of her words.

He sighed and lowered his head. "Jane, I must beg your pardon for the hurtful words that escaped me. My heart was heavy with frustration. Yet that is no justification for my actions."

She gazed upon him, compassion softening her resolve. Unable to resist the pull of his sorrowful eyes, she cleared her throat at last, her tone a delicate balance of firmness yet with understanding as she spoke.

"If your heart truly seeks absolution, then I must request the presence of my sister as our honeymoon nears its end, Your Grace." She stared at him purposefully. "And you shall agree."

Colin's eyes lit with a sudden surprise. His smile holding a touch of amusement as he remarked, "You never heed my words, yet now you seek permission for what is rightfully yours."

Jane couldn't look away from his face. Why did he have to be so handsome?

"Of course, you may invite your family whenever you wish," He conceded, a flicker of warmth in his tired eyes.

"Thank you," Jane murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. .

His tongue clicked softly before he delicately asked, "Tell me about your family. I wish to know more about you."

"It's quite the story."

He responded with a small smile holding a world of understanding as he gestured gracefully to the vacant seat beside him. With a grateful nod, she accepted the unspoken offer and easily settled into the plush chair.

"I lost my mother when I was but a child," She began, her voice quivering. "After that, I was tossed into the arms of my ever-steadfast sister."

"Sarah became my guiding star in the dark days. Despite not being much older than me, she took on the mothering role without a single complaint."

She shook her head as the memories filled her mind. "I recall a moment when I fell ill after that, and she was the one who stayed by my side, like our mother would have done, tending to me with unwavering devotion. I remember how her gentle hands cooled my fevered brow, her soothing words like a healing balm to my young and troubled heart."

Her smile grew wider. "In those moments, she was all I had. I knew that I was not alone. Her presence was always a beacon of light in the dark hours."

Her tone shifted slightly and her voice held a tinge of bitterness as she recounted, "Our father, however, was a man consumed by his desire for a male heir and cared little for his daughters beyond their marital prospects."

"Sarah, ever the obedient daughter, bore the burden of his expectations with grace, always the one to appease his whims. However, she was too quiet to hold the attention of suitors and father quickly gave up on her as the seasons went by without

her finding a match, considering her undesirable." Her words exposed her brokenness and upset.

"I, on the other hand, refused to be a pawn in his game. I stood up to him, for both myself and her, every single time." She paused, and her voice filled with sadness.

"I see it as the reason I'm terribly argumentative now, a trait born of necessity rather than choice," She added at last, a sardonic laugh escaping her lips.

Colin stared at his wife in silence yet his gaze never left her eyes.

"You have been through quite a lot, haven't you?"

Jane felt a magnetic pull, unable to break free from the intensity and affection in his stare.

Suddenly, he stretched a hand towards her, his touch, gentle and unexpected, sending shivers down her spine as his fingertips brushed against her cheek.

Her eyes widened in surprise, mirroring the astonishment reflected in his gaze. Warmth. That was all Jane could feel. She barely remembered what came before this moment.

As he withdrew his hand the next moment, Jane couldn't bring herself back to reality.

No.

With a delicate touch, she reached out as well, her fingertips tracing his jawline, a mirror of his earlier gesture.

Colin's breath caught and his eyes were wide as his husky voice broke the silence.

"What are you doing?"

A soft smile graced her lips as she met his gaze steadily. Her voice a whisper in the charged atmosphere, "Since you did it to me, I thought this was okay."

Colin cleared his throat.

Jane knew he would likely take her hand off him, or move away from her touch, yet, he didn't. But Jane realized what she was doing soon enough. She pulled her hand away quickly.

"You know, a little dirt would not be the end of you," Her tone held light humor as it danced in the air.

"What I am trying to say is, Your Grace, spending more joyous moments like those with Margaret and Louisa could work wonders for their spirits." She gave him a smile as she continued.

"The girls have gone through storms that have left their marks. Through playfulness and displays of affection, we can mend some of those wounds." Her voice was soft yet resolute.

"I shall give it a try."

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“Oh, how I’ve missed your face!”

The moment her sister stepped out of the carriage, Jane's exclamation rang through the air, setting the tone for a reunion filled with warmth and familial affection.

Sarah, enveloping her in a tight hug, replied with a laugh, "It is good to see you as well, dear sister."

Meanwhile, their father, a stoic figure in the backdrop, had his eyes fixed on the vastness of the estate as he climbed out, his appearance causing instantaneous tension to the gathering.

With a slight nod towards Jane, he greeted Jane with formality, "Good day, Your Grace."

His gaze swept the surroundings once more, then he nodded again as he commented, "You've done well."

Both sisters exchanged surprised looks at this unexpected remark. Sarah’s eyes twinkled with amused delight as she grinned broadly.

Dramatically curtsying, she playfully declared, "Yes indeed, what a fine day it is, dear duchess."

The air filled with the sound of their shared laughter as the sisters, caught in the whimsy of the moment, exchanged knowing glances before hurrying inside.

In the serene ambiance of the drawing room, the trio got settled after indulging in light tea. At last, with a touch of pride in his voice, Henry remarked.

“The Montford Estate is truly grand, indeed. Quite bigger than the expected dukedom estate.”

Jane frowned internally at her father’s materialism. After weeks of not seeing each other, what he chose to pay attention to was the wealth that surrounded her and not her well-being instead.

However, she managed to respond with a gentle nod, her eyes reflecting a myriad of emotions. “Indeed. I can only be happy for it.”

The sunlight danced around the room, casting a warm glow on the intricate decor as their short exchange lingered in the air. With a tone laced with superiority, Henry cleared his throat and turned sharply to Sarah.

“I doubt the Marquess' place would match the grandeur of ours. Still, you must endeavor to be content, dear. You are receiving more than most ladies could dream of,” He stated firmly, his gaze unwavering.

Sarah's expression faltered briefly, a flicker of disappointment almost unnoticed crossing her features, but she quickly composed herself.

With a forced smile, she nodded and replied, her voice tinged with resignation, “Yes, Father.”

Jane’s mind began swirling in confusion. She raised a brow as she cautiously questioned, “I apologize. Can we... Did I hear correctly, Father?”

Henry, a flicker of question in his eyes, regarded her intently before inquiring, “What

troubles you now?"

She pressed on, her voice tinged with curiosity, "What connection does Sarah have with the Marquess? What... is she to be content for?"

Henry's expression shifted. He hesitated in contemplation. Then at last, realization washed over his features. He eyed the frown on her face before speaking, "Ah, you are unaware. That is true."

He cleared his throat and gestured nonchalantly in Sarah's direction. "Your sister here is now in courtship with Graham. You should congratulate her, she very quickly found herself a respectable suitor."

The room fell silent while his revelation hung in the air, shattering Jane's mind with horror with every further passing second. She desperately hoped it was a cruel jest played by her own ears.

"What?" Her voice trembled with disbelief, her heart racing as she struggled to comprehend the news.

Stammering, she fired off questions, "When did this occur? How could this come to be? Why... Why is this allowed?" Her emotions settled on rage as she glared brazenly at her father in question. "Why did you allow this to happen?"

"Who are you to question my choices as head of my household?" His gaze turned steely with annoyance, his tone firm as he countered immediately. "Why should it not happen? You are married now, and such affairs do not concern you."

Jane's frustration bubbled to the surface, her anger spiking as she challenged him, "Is it not evident the Marquess is guided by ill intentions, moving from one sister to the next?"

She let out a heavy groan and her eyes turned pleading as they tried to locate his reasoning, “Consider it, Father. What sort of a man does that? Don’t you find this strange?”

Yet in a swift rebuttal, he dismissed her claims. "Nonsense, child." He shook his head at her. “Men are determined creatures. It is but a good thing to find one who possesses a one-track mind as well.”

He clicked his tongue as he went on. “If you can’t get what you want, you opt for the closest option. It is only business.”

“Business, you say?” Jane could barely believe her ears. She laughed incredulously, shaking her head at the wonder of his mindset. “And is that what you believe your first daughter is, Father? Business? Is she a second option item or a person?”

“You will not speak to me that way, child. Hold your tongue.” Henry’s eyes blazed with a composed anger.

Jane's worry for her sister gripped her heart, the memory of her own experience with Graham haunting her thoughts. The image of sweet Sarah entwined with such a self-serving man sent shivers down her spine, igniting a sense of urgency within her.

As she glared at her father, ready to unleash her depth of her anger, Sarah's voice cut through the tension, halting her in her tracks.

“You must understand that everything is fine, dear sister.” Attempting to reassure Jane, her soft words floated in the air, “As a matter of fact, I am quite content with the situation.”

Yet, Jane's eyes, filled with skepticism, bore into her until she added, "In truth, I might harbor an interest in the Marquess as well."

Jane's astonishment was clear as day as her eyes nearly appeared to be falling out their sockets. She froze for a moment. Finally, her voice was filled with shock as she questioned, "Truly? Do you speak the truth, sister?"

Sarah's nod confirmed her words, leaving her momentarily speechless again.

A profound silence enveloped the room as she grappled with this unexpected revelation. Despite her intense disbelief, the realization that her sister might find happiness in this arrangement softened her resolve.

After all, all that mattered was that sweet Sarah was happy. Just because the Marquess was a wrong match for her did not necessarily mean it'd be the same in Sarah's case.

With a reluctant nod of acceptance, she murmured, "If you find peace with this, then I can only hope for the best, Sarah."

Sarah's grateful smile in response caused Jane to smile as well. The two nodded, a silent sign of exchange of sisterly support.

"Enough of all that. What is your allowance from the Duke? I need details, if you can provide."

Their father's interruption cut through the moment; his inquiry delivered with unwavering directness. He was clearly fishing for information about the Duke's finances.

Despite knowing him to be a blunt man, both sisters couldn't help but raise a brow at this. Sarah's widened eyes portrayed her surprise, but Jane masked her amazement better.

Irritated and annoyed, she decided that the best option would be to ignore the abrupt shift in conversation. She delicately lifted her tea cup to her lips, as though she never heard a word.

“Duchess! Duchess, where are you?”

“Your Grace!”

Right as Henry opened his mouth to speak again, a delightful interruption emerged, embodied by the lively entrance of Louisa and Margaret.

They called out in unison, their voices filled with excitement and urgency, eyes scanning the room eagerly for a glimpse of their new beloved.

Their joyous expressions transformed into pure elation upon finally spotting her, their faces lighting up with delight. However, their jubilant dash towards her came to an abrupt halt right as it started as they realized they were not alone in her company.

Margaret, displaying a maturity beyond her years, gently nudged her younger sister, prompting them to swiftly regain their composure. With practiced grace, they executed a perfect curtsy, along with an apology for their exuberance.

Jane's laughter filled the room as she reassured them, "It's quite all right, my dears. You are most welcome to join us. I want to introduce you to my family.”

The tension of the moment dissipated as the two, now composed and demure, approached the table.

Yet, Henry's expression twisted in shock at the girls' previous behavior. Jane, with a defiant grace, chose to overlook his disapproval.

"Come here, my darlings," She beckoned, guiding the duo to face her, shielding them from his disapproving gaze. With a wide smile, she introduced them to Sarah, then her father.

Sarah, in a gentle and welcoming tone, responded to their greetings with a soft coo, "Oh, aren't you both so lively and adorable?"

Louisa's gaze lingered on Sarah, a mix of shyness and curiosity dancing in her eyes. In contrast, however, Margaret's stare held contemplation, a gleam of mischief sparking in her eyes.

Without delay, she leaned in, whispering something in Louisa's ear. In an instant, their expressions transformed, fixating on Sarah with an intensity that Jane had come to know well.

Sensing the shift, she arched an eyebrow, hoping her sister could see the scheming on ground. However, Sarah remained oblivious, cooing at the girls in repetition.

"I want to see the rest of the manor. I am intrigued."

Before Jane could intervene, their father's commanding voice cut through the room. His authoritative tone left no room for negotiation as he rose to his feet.

With a furrow forming on her brow, Jane rose from her seat as well. There was no reason to refuse.

"Shall we venture outside then?" She declared. Sarah, ever the agreeable soul, nodded in acquiescence and stood up gracefully, ready to follow.

"Can we come outside with you, Duchess?" Margaret's plea was accompanied by earnest eyes. With a light laugh, Jane graciously consented, nodding in agreement.

“Of course, as long as you behave.”

"Surely, thank you," The young girl expressed her gratitude with a wide grin. Louisa, following suit, added her own thanks, a smile playing on her lips as well.

In a fleeting moment, Jane caught a glimpse of another quick scheming look passing between the sisters, and she wondered what they were up to.

Suddenly, Margaret reached out and clasped Sarah's hand, surprising her momentarily. Recovering quickly, Sarah chuckled and leaned down towards her. “What can I help you with, darling?”

Her question was met with an over-the-top pleading performance. Margaret batted her lashes as she expressed her wish to walk alongside her.

Louisa, not to be left out, seized Sarah's other hand, joining in the request, her gaze pleading as well. "I wish to accompany you as well, Lady Sarah. Please?"

"Very well, let us walk out together," Sarah's laughter bubbled joyfully as she blindly agreed to the girls' request.

Succumbing to their infectious enthusiasm, she allowed herself to be led outside ahead of Jane and their father, the trio's laughter intertwining harmoniously.

Upon stepping into the fresh air, Margaret turned and gave her a wide smile. Her tone was polished and polite as she requested again, “Would you please, oh please join us to play?”

“Oh...” Sarah was initially hesitant, but as she caught sight of Louisa's imploring expression, her words trailed off.

Her laughter, tinged with a hint of uncertainty, filled the air as she nodded, yielding to the girls' plea once more.

"All right, I shall partake in your play," She conceded, her tone a blend of amusement and acquiescence.

The morning sun cast a golden hue over the estate, illuminating the delicate flowers in the garden as the game began.

To everyone's surprise, Margaret's eyes sparkled mischievously as she retrieved a gnarly worm from the flower bed, a sly grin playing on her lips.

"Lady Sarah, run!" She exclaimed, holding the squirming creature aloft.

Sarah's shocked gasp filled the air as she instinctively began to step back, her eyes wide with horror.

Undeterred by her reaction, Margaret advanced, the worm a peculiar offering in her outstretched hand. Louisa's laughter bubbled forth, a symphony of devious amusement that echoed through the morning air.

"Girls..."

Jane called out in this moment of stress, raising a quizzical brow at the unfolding scene, sensing the dynamics shift in this new relationship.

From that pivotal moment, a playful teasing dynamic had emerged. Margaret and Louisa, emboldened by Sarah's expected and welcomed reactions would clearly only find delight in teasing her further.

"Oh Lady Sarah, what a fright you are!" Margaret cackled and teased as she chased.

“Girls, stop that now! You two-”

Jane tried to come to her sister’s aid, but was cut short by her father’s sharp demand.

"While your sister has the children occupied, come walk with me. There are matters we must discuss," Henry's tone brooked no argument, his eyes fixed on her with a stern gaze.

After one last look in Sarah’s direction, reluctantly, she acquiesced, her expression a mix of resignation and apprehension as she fell into step beside him.

They walked in silence, the distance between them and the rest of the family providing a semblance of privacy for their impending conversation. Henry, a man of few words, wasted no time in getting to the heart of the matter.

"We must discuss the matter of you providing an heir to the duke," His words were direct, leaving no room for evasion or delay.

Jane's heart raced at the weight and suddenness of his words, the gravity of the situation settling heavily upon her shoulders. She coughed then steeled herself, meeting his gaze with nonchalance.

“Is that what we’re out here to discuss?” Despite her heart thumping loudly in her chest, she rolled her eyes in frustration. "I don't want to speak on it, Father," She stated firmly, shaking her head. "Such a matter is between me and the duke, not for you to meddle in."

Her father fell silent for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then, with a tone that brooked no argument, he continued, "Every man desires an heir, Jane. It is essential that you focus on providing His Grace with one. This is of utmost importance."

His words hung heavily between them, laden with expectation and duty. At last, he sighed and his tone shifted slightly, “I only say this out of concern for you. You have been thriving.”

He paused and stared at her matter-of-factly. “It would be a shame to lose all of this because you couldn’t focus on your duty.”

Jane's frown deepened as she lapsed into a contemplative silence, her thoughts swirling with questions and uncertainties as his words echoed in her head. To her dismay, she could not find a counter.

As they walked on in quiet companionship, the weight of his words danced around in the air, casting a shadow over the morning stroll.

Jane couldn't shake the nagging curiosity that tugged at her mind. It was not the first time she had contemplated this matter. Did Colin truly desire an heir, and if so, why had he not taken steps to secure one?

She had no desire to pressure him. However, the unanswered questions danced in her thoughts, wishing they could be provided a response immediately.

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“Who is it? You may come in.”

Jane knocked on the door of her husband's study and stepped inside with a smile, her heart leaping at the sound of his voice.

"Good day, Your Grace," She greeted him, her smile ever fixed on her face.

Colin had his nose buried in papers, but his head raised completely and his eyes lit up at the sight of her. A small smile lifted his handsome face, and Jane tried to stop her heart from beating at the sight.

"Good day, duchess," He responded, his voice carrying a tinge of tenderness. He pushed his hands out in a stretch as he went on, “To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

Jane tried to keep her eyes away from his wide arms and pouted playfully as she asked, "Am I not allowed to see my husband whenever I please?"

He let out a soft chuckle and motioned for her to take a seat on one of the chair facing his desk, but she shook her head with a teasing glimmer of defiance in her eyes.

"I'm not here to sit, Your Grace," She declared, her tone hinting at a playful determination that demanded his attention. “You know why I am here.”

Colin's face showed a slight confusion. He raised an eyebrow, prompting her to speak, “I don't believe I do. Why indeed are you here, my dear wife?”

Jane's felt her heart leap once more. She tried to keep her cheeks from flushing at the sweet melodic sound of him referring to her with an endearing term, to no avail.

She managed to clear her throat and with a teasing smile dancing on her lips, she locked eyes with him, her gaze filled with amusement and challenge. "Indeed, what am I here for then?"

Colin raised a brow once more and laughed lightly. "Did you per chance miss my face?"

Jane fought the blush that attacked her cheeks. With a forced frown, she asked, "Have you truly forgotten, Your Grace?" She squinted at him, her tone holding accusation, "You have indeed, have you not?"

He went silent, seeming to be racking his brain and coming up with nothing. Looking at the sincerely confused expression on his face, she gasped again.

"Your Grace, you gave your word you would engage in playtime with me and the girls today. We agreed it was essential to helping them in these times."

"Ah."

Reminded once again of the pressures that came from his newly inherited workload, Colin gently rubbed his forehead and nodded in recognition.

"I got so caught up in work and the accounts, I nearly forgot," He admitted.

Jane's eyes widened in understanding. She gave him a comforting smile as she spoke, "You can take an hour break, and I'll inform the girls. We'll play when you're ready."

However, Colin shook his head resolutely. He rose from his chair and walked slowly

towards her. His voice was low as he spoke, "That won't be necessary."

As Colin stood before her, his frame towering over hers, Jane's heart raced with anticipation. His eyes were fixed on hers with an expression she couldn't place. She felt like she was about to explode, wondering what it was he wanted.

He had something on his face that resembled a smile and this made her heart skip a beat. Slowly, he approached her and her breath was gradually becoming hard to catch. She tried to look away, nervous but he flashed a charming grin that held her gaze.

Colin reached out, and with a gentle touch, brushed a stray curl away from her face, eliciting a soft gasp from her lips at the unexpected contact.

Instinctively, she closed her eyes, her heart pounding beyond control. When she opened them, she was met with a smug, satisfied smile on his face.

"I'm ready. Let's go meet the girls," He declared, then swiftly moved past her and headed for the door.

Jane stared at his receding back in shock, doing her best to calm the pumping going on in her chest.

After getting the girls, they all stepped outside together. Margaret and Louisa's excitement were at an all-time high, their joy radiating as they bounced on their toes, eagerly anticipating the start of the games.

Jane, with a laugh, playfully urged them to settle down. Her tone was filled with warmth and amusement as she spoke, "You need to be calm to understand the instructions of the game, that is, if you want to win. Or do you not?"

After a moment, as the girls finally calmed their jumping, Jane grinned mischievously, ready to reveal the day's activity.

"Today, we're having a treasure hunt around the estate," She announced, her words met with gasps of excitement and admiration from the girls. Their collective oohs and ahhs filled the air in a comedic manner.

Colin, standing aside, couldn't help but chuckle at the girls' reactions. Noticing his amusement, Jane inquired, "And what puts such a smile on your face, Your Grace? Do you find the game that silly?"

He chuckled and responded, "Oh, not at all, dear duchess. I'm just excited to see how this treasure hunt unfolds."

And, in truth, he meant every word. This surprised him too. The game commenced, and Colin found himself more and more pleasantly surprised by the unfolding events.

This newfound relaxation in his interactions with the girls was a novel experience for him. Engaging in the treasure hunt alongside them, he discovered a different side to his nieces as well.

Each playing individually but united in the quest, they followed Jane's clues with enthusiasm and determination. As the game progressed, laughter mostly filled the air.

However, in the midst of the fun, a slight dispute came up, and in turn, shed light on a hidden aspect of Louisa's personality.

Colin realized then that beneath her usual accommodating demeanor, his niece harbored a fierce competitive spirit, perhaps even more so than Margaret. This revelation intrigued him, challenging all his preconceptions about his nieces.

The realization that Louisa possessed a strong sense of independence and drive, contrary to his initial assumptions, brought a sense of pride and admiration. He was excited for what else there was to discover.

Observing Jane's support and encouragement of this aspect of Louisa's character further deepened his appreciation for her role in nurturing the girls' as well. She was everything he had wanted and more indeed.

Time went by and Colin did his best to try to keep his eyes off his wife. However, she seemed to not be making it easy. Time passed, and she only seemed to look more radiant by the second.

Her gorgeous laugh was like magic, pulling his eyes to her scenery every time she began. After a few rounds, he realized he was hopeless and close to falling in last place.

His lack of concentration added to this, but Colin also sensed something else was going on. He began to notice a pattern. However, he needed to be certain, so he waited.

When the next round began, as expected, Jane handed out special cards to the girls for the near fourth time, leaving him out. He chuckled and raised a curious eyebrow, then decided to confront her.

"Might I ask, what's the deal with those cards? Why do I not find one for myself?" He inquired, a hint of amusement in his voice.

With mischievous eyes, Jane met his gaze and retorted, "Oh, Your Grace, you're playing with children." She laughed, the beautiful sound filling his welcoming ears.

"You are ancient compared to these sweet girls, and with every advantage, thus I'm

just leveling the playing field," She expounded, a playful grin dancing on her lips.

Despite already having this guess, he gasped playfully as though it just dawned on him. He'd connected the dots throughout the game, understanding her subtle attempts to challenge him by withholding better clues.

"It's only right." She grinned and stuck her tongue out cheekily as she finished.

Taken aback by this small action, Colin couldn't help laughing. He found her childish and adorable demeanor endearing. Jane turned in the direction of the girls, and at that moment, nothing else mattered but getting her to look at him again.

"Oh, Louisa dear? Not that way, do you need me to-"

Right as she attempted to follow after Louisa to help her as the next round had started, Colin instinctively reached out and grabbed her hand, stopping her immediately.

Caught off guard by his sudden move, Jane gasped. Her gasp doubled when he swiftly twirled her and pulled her. She felt her heart race as he pulled her into him, his hand firmly around her waist.

As she stood frozen in place, shock coursing through her veins, his warm breath tickled her ear as he whispered, "You're not playing fair, my dear, and we both know it."

He watched as her cheeks flushed, her eyes widened with a spark, and her breath hitched ever so slightly, her reaction unmistakable.

Colin could feel the tautness in Jane's body as she stood before him, her entire system racing with excitement and nervousness. The proximity of his strong presence

seemed to heighten her senses.

When his chest brushed against her back, he noticed her breath hitch as she tried to steady herself against him. The intensity of the moment enveloped them, making everything else around them vanish.

With each touch, he saw the effect he had on her—waves of heat spreading across her skin, her cheeks flushing, her eyes widening with a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. Time seemed to stand still as they teetered on the edge of something unspoken yet undeniably potent.

Jane's struggle to maintain composure was evident. Finally, she managed to clear her throat, stumbling over her words as she tried to convey, "You're a grown man, you shouldn't need clues like the girls." Her voice trembled slightly, her eyes reflecting the turmoil within her.

With a playful glint in his eyes, her husband countered immediately, "But I'm your husband, it is only right you help me." His low and husky tone sent another wave of shivers all over her body.

“You’re to choose me, always.”

Jane’s cheeks exploded with ferocity. She struggled as she finally attempted to free herself, unable to take it any longer. However, Colin held her in place. Then suddenly, softly bit her ear, his tone teasing when he spoke.

"That's for being unfair."

At last, he released her with another satisfied smile, leaving her unable to calm her racing heart.

The game came to an end, with Margaret happily victorious. Despite the little girl running around wildly in excitement, Jane found herself unable to resist stealing glances at Colin.

As he laughed and protested the unfairness of the game, she struggled to focus on his words. Her body tingled with the memory of their previous interaction, leaving her feeling a mix of excitement and confusion.

Colin, noticing her distracted state, attempted to engage her, lifting his brow high as he spoke, "You can't deny the game was rigged, could you, dear duchess?"

His words held a teasing tone, adding to the playful dynamic around them. However, Jane's internal turmoil only intensified as she tried to maintain composure in the face of her growing attraction to him.

"Now, isn't it a lovely and peculiar sight to see the family all gathered together?"

All four eyes turned to meet the dowager duchess' gaze, smiles lighting up everyone's faces. The girls, excited by her presence, rushed towards her with joy.

"Granny!" Margaret's tiny voice was the first to ring out. "Oh, it's so good to see you again!"

Colin, with a charming smile, greeted his grandmother with a nod, "When did you arrive, Your Grace?"

Prudence, with a twinkle in her eye, replied, "Not so long ago, Your Grace."

Her gaze swept over the scene where the family was gathered. She chuckled softly and remarked, "I was told the whole family was outside playing a game; yet, I had to see it for myself to believe it."

Her laughter filled the air as she continued, her eyes shifting to Colin. "Surely, the most shocking sight has to be seeing you out here, beaming with smiles."

The atmosphere was filled with more excitement as the Dowager Duchess' presence seemed to add an even more familial feeling to it.

"And good day to you, our wonderful duchess." With her eyes keen, Prudence turned her gaze to Jane. Her eyes squinted as she inquired, "Why are your cheeks so flushed, my dear? Have you truly been running around that much?"

Jane, feeling the heat of embarrassment rising within her, forced out a laugh as she stammered, "I... I haven't been running around at all, Your Grace. I... I am not quite sure why." Her cheeks flamed even brighter as she nervously chuckled, trying to mask her discomfort.

However, still pressed down with the weight of the Dowager's scrutiny, she fanned herself, in a subconscious attempt to cool the rising tension in the air. With a forced laugh, she added, "The air just feels... warm today."

Her words hung in the tense atmosphere, adding to the questioning presence that enveloped the group.

Automatically, Jane's eyes shifted to Colin's at her last sentence. They both exchanged a heavy glance; he offered her a knowing smile, his eyes holding a silent conversation with hers.

The charged exchange between them added a layer of complexity to the already tense scene, as unspoken emotions crackled in the air.

Sensing the undercurrents of emotion, Prudence observed the interaction with a keen eye, raising a brow at the telling moment.

The awkwardness in the air was almost tangible, each word and glance laden with unspoken meaning. Jane's attempt to deflect attention only seemed to intensify the scrutiny, creating a sense of discomfort that hung heavy over the group.

Jane's cheeks burned even brighter as she met the Dowager's gaze again. Noticing the suspicious gaze, she realized she had been caught and a wave of discomfort washed over her.

Desperate to diffuse the mounting tension, she turned towards the girls, and with a forced calmness, she urged, "You've had enough play for today, my dears. It's time to wash up and settle down for the evening."

Margaret and Louisa, sensing the underlying unease, offered little protest, their voices soft when they finally acquiesced.

Despite their compliance, the atmosphere remained charged with unspoken emotions, each word and action layered with unexpressed feelings.

Jane, her heart pounding in her chest, managed to guide them inside, her grip on their hands a lifeline in the midst of the swirling emotions while the weight of her husband's watchful eyes felt heavy on her back, adding to the tension that hung in the air like a heavy veil.

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“Girls, why don't you allow your granny her space.” Jane sweetly cajoled the kids. They giggled and held on tighter to Prudence. Colin groaned at this, and Jans shot him a quiet plea not to interrupt.

“Remember our deal, girls. You always have to do the right thing, especially when an older person tells you to.” She shook her head as they still held on tight to their grandmother's skirt. Margaret's eyes shone with mischief as she whispered into Louisa's ears sending her into a giggling fit.

They wanted to play dirty. Jane had the right trick up her sleeve to get them to do her bidding. Hands placed on her knees, she squatted to reach their height “When the dark comes, I won't check under your beds for monsters. No! I'd rather call them out and they'll feast on your skin,” She croaked.

The girls squealed in fear, letting go of their great-grandmother's clothes and running into the house. Jane chased after them begging them to slow down.

“Let's have tea and socialize for a bit once you are done, Jane?” Prudence shouted after her and got a shrill as a positive reply. She had come back a few minutes later, panting like a dog chasing a cat.

Jane would have found it pleasant if they had sat under the canopy to take their tea. As it would have allowed her to keep enjoying the lively afternoon. However, the dowager had suggested the tea room. She complained that it had been left unused for years and she'd love Jane to use it often. Colin had agreed on this.

A tea room exists in this house?

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Prudence led the way as Jane and Colin followed closely. Jane soon found out why she never knew about this room. It was located at a secluded corner of the quartet wing of the house. The housekeeper had somehow skipped this room when she showed her around.

Was that intentional or did she not know of the room?

“The room has been locked for some years now. Tea parties used to be hosted in it. But it lost its use after the former Duchess passed on.” Pain laced with her voice. “I’m sure the room wasn’t shown to you.” She tried for a laugh. “Most of the staff have forgotten it exists,” she finished, unknowingly answering Jane’s raging internal questions.

The door was left wide open. At Jane’s first glance at the room, a small gasp escaped her. It was a bright and airy room. The walls were painted white but appeared light blue in places where the sun’s rays hit. There were about seven medium-sized wooden tables with four cushioned chairs each surrounding the table. Several windows allowed for fresh air into the room.

“It was their mother’s favorite place,” Prudence muttered as she went around the room, touching the furniture and antiques that decorated the room. Her eyes darkened with grief that disappeared as fast they came.

It transferred to Colin. He bowed his head as if in reverence. He had not been close to his brother or his wife. Still, he had grown up under this same roof with his brother. It must hurt being in a place his brother and wife often used. Jane was saddened by their grief but she was glad Prudence insisted they use it..

One way to heal from pain was to move forward. And what better way to do that than

to open the tea room again?

Immediately, they were seated, and a maid rushed in with tea.

“It’s my favorite,” Prudence announced. She stretched out to pick up her tea cup. In one swift movement, she pinched her index to her thumb through the cup handle and supported the cup with her index.

“You must have heard of the upcoming ball. It has been the talk among the ton.” She gracefully sipped from her cup before leaning back in her seat.

Jane squeezed her face, confused.

What ball?

Jane was a lady. However, she found Prudence’s movement to be graceful compared to hers when she drank tea. So, she copied Prudence’s movement, keeping a coy expression while at it. Her eyes caught Prudence’s sharp ones and noticed approval. She took a sip and placed her cup back on the table.

“If it is the talk of the ton like you put, why haven't we gotten an invite?” It was a rather curious question seeing as the ball was popular yet news to her, a new Duchess of the ton. Although she asked no one in particular, her gaze was fixed on Colin.

Colin had been quiet for most of the time. During the walk to the tea room, he had offered polite but empty replies. Jane had assumed he had pressing issues in mind and had focused on Prudence for conversation. Now he stroked his chin as if lost in thought.

Jane’s eyes narrowed in annoyance. Colin was purposely evading her question. She turned to Prudence who sat quietly watching them. If anyone knew Colin best, it

would be Prudence. “Why is he being so difficult?” she asked, concealing her displeasure.

“Colin, why does the newest duchess of the ton not know about the impending ball?” Prudence sternly questioned.

It was obvious to Jane that even as an adult, the dowager still had a sway over Colin. She knew his buttons to push. And she was gently pushing it at the moment. Jane knew Prudence would get Colin to speak. But she wished he had replied to her when she had asked.

“Well, I would not deny that I got an invite,” he briskly stated.

“And did I get one too?” Jane asked staring into his eyes. She couldn’t believe her husband. He knew about the ball and said nothing about it knowing full well that her position in society was currently fragile. If she gets an invite she would have to attend to avert bored minds from probing into her absence and life. He should know better that she needed these balls to socialize with other high ladies of the ton.

She suppressed a scream. Her blood was pumped with righteous anger. She shot daggers at Colin. He had the decency to fidget with his hands, losing her intense eye contact.

“When I get an invite, you get one too, my sweet.” he teased her to pacify her fire. It worked when she sighed and smiled at Prudence.

Her mind began to spin with what she was going to wear for the occasion. Since it was the talk of the ton, several influential members of the society would be present. Aside from that, this was her first official ball since she became a Duchess. She would have to be elegantly dressed to give the people a good first impression. None of the clothes in her wardrobe could effectively achieve this.

Will I get a new dress? What color would it be? Who will sew it?

“Nonetheless, I won’t be attending the ball.” Colin’s words punctured a hole in her thoughts, dragging her back to reality

“Why?” Jane shot at him. He couldn’t be serious, right?

“No reason...” he drawled. “I do not feel the urge to be surrounded with silk and velvet fabrics blowing around and sweeping the floor. Neither am I keen to engage in conversations with other men when I should be handling my estate issues.” He finished with a flourish of his hand. Shaking the cup he held without spilling the contents.

For someone who said he had no reason, he had a lot to say. Jane turned to Prudence again, hoping to recruit her assistance. But Prudence rolled her eyes at her and shrugged. She found it amusing. But, Jane was in no mood to laugh.

Why would he get an invite and not tell me? Why should he decide not to go?

If he wasn’t going. She wasn’t going to either. She could imagine herself standing alone in the big ballroom. The thought didn’t boost morale.

Instead of chastising Colin, Prudence focused on Jane. “You should still go, regardless.” She dropped her tea cup and saucer back on the table. Her expression was a manifestation of her determination to guide the new Duchess. Jane knew she pleased the dowager. But she knew there was much more she needed to do and learn as a Duchess to fully gain the dowager's approval.

“I can go without my husband?” Jane asked incredulously.

“Yes, you can,” Colin answered beating Prudence to it.

Jane wondered why he didn't tell her about the invite and was now urging her to go. She sometimes wished she could see into his mind. Maybe then she would know what sometimes plagued him and understand his actions better.

"But I don't want to go anymore," she muttered under her breath

"Going to a ball alone doesn't mean anything. You are already a titled woman. Your position in your household is secured. However, your position in society isn't just yet." Prudence lectured, cutting the air with her hands as she spoke.

Jane listened attentively as she went on.

"You must attend this ball. Especially as your husband won't be going. You'd have to adequately represent him," she finished.

"That, I do understand, however, I do not wish to go to my first ball as Duchess alone," she said to Prudence but shot an accusatory stare at Colin who was busy drinking his tea.

"But you have to. And you won't be alone, you'll be surrounded by men and women of caliber." Prudence assured her.

That was what she feared. But she smiled and agreed to go to the ball.

"That's splendid!" Prudence exclaimed and winked at Jane. "Tomorrow, we go shopping for an elegant ball gown befitting you, Your Grace." She let out a smile on the last statement.

She would get a new dress after all. One good thing out of all these. She smiled at the thought.

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“I’m thankful we didn’t have to pull tricks to get them to act right today,” Prudence stated. She had grown rather bored of the silence in the carriage. Jane had come to learn some of Prudence’s telltales.

“Aren’t we all? My whole body aches from last night’s drama.” She whined and tugged at her blouse.

“Hmmm,” came Prudence’s reply.

Jane let out a frustrated groan. “The girls have become hyper monster and are now exasperatingly difficult to handle.” She exhaled sharply. “I was so frustrated last night- they almost pushed me to the wall.”

Prudence chuckled at this.

“They are a handful. But sometimes I wonder if they can tone it down. My governess used to say this to me. Now I say it to them. When did I get this old?” She laughed and Prudence joined in.

“I love the girls so much. They are beautiful and smart. They remind me of Sarah and I when we were young. I am committed to be there for them. I’d do my best,” she vowed.

Prudence clasped her hands together. Her sharp eyes shone with respect. Jane could almost feel the increase in Prudence’s appraisal of her. Of course, she had always expressed passion for her great-grandchildren, Prudence may have thought she’d become less passionate once she got to experience them. Saying this out loud again,

Jane could tell she had fully convinced the dowager that she was a real one.

“Do you know of their parent?” Prudence asked abruptly.

Jane was taken aback by the question. She had been briefed about the late Lord Algernon by the housekeeper who had shown her around a few days after her arrival. However, she couldn't put her in trouble so she lied. Besides, she didn't really know anything anyway.

“No... I don't.” She answered after a while.

Prudence smiled softly “The servants didn't give you a gist or two about them?” She teased.

Jane caught on quickly and vehemently shook her head “No, they were quite reserved about the matter.”

“My son had Algernon at his youthful age. He was so proud of his son when he was born. When I saw him wrapped up in a white towel, all pink and smooth I cooed in love.”

Jane looked at Prudence. As she spoke it was obvious, she was reliving the past and a ghost of a smile visited her face.

Jane sat still. She was captivated by Prudence's voice. She felt such strong emotion in it that it resonated within her. Jane could just imagine little Algernon in Prudence's arms. She smiled back at Prudence.

“I thought he'd live longer than me. I thought he'd live to see his children grow. But I was wrong.” She bowed her head. A tear threatened to drop down.

The noise from outside the coach had long been forgotten. Jane could hear Prudence sob softly. She wanted to console her. But didn't want to overstep her boundaries. Another sob from Prudence helped her decide.

She stretched out and placed her hand on Prudence's wrinkly ones. "You need not tell me this if you can't bear it." She caressed her hands.

Prudence sniffed and ceased her sobbing "No, I need to tell you. You ought to understand better what you are into." She placed Jane's hands in the middle of hers, reciprocating Jane's touch. "I am good now."

"Algernon was the heir to the title. So, he mostly concentrated on that. He was offered the best. And when it was time to settle down, he married the love of his life. I can still remember that day. It was beautiful to see their love match." Prudence tapped Jane's hand.

"I bet." Jane provided with a sly smile.

Prudence's expression hardened "When she died, Algernon was not there. He had earlier gone out on an important trip. When he came back, his wife was dead. It broke something inside him. I watched my grandson become a ghost of himself." She sighed.

Jane could feel her pain. Her eyes were slowly pooling up as Prudence spoke. Losing a loved one was never easy. The pain would subside over time but it never fully goes. She had lost her mother at a young age. Even if she had not had much time with her. Jane had missed her. She still did

"Algernon was a responsible man of the ton. He'd visit White just as every other man. But he never drank himself to a stupor till the days after his wife's burial."

She could never wish this sort of pain on someone. No. For a brief moment, she pondered how she'd act if she lost the person she loved so much.

Colin

She was sure she had grown strong feelings for Colin although she would not outright admit it to anybody. So, the thought of not seeing him again, not hearing his voice, would break her. But to the point of alcoholism? She didn't think so.

"We have arrived at the dressmaker's." the coachman announced.

Jane and Prudence had been so caught up in their conversation that they didn't realize when the wheels stopped moving. They shared knowing looks and giggled like little girls at a girls' night party.

"We'd continue our conversation as we shop and consult the dressmaker," Prudence declared.

The carriage door swung open. A small wooden strait attached to the bottom of the carriage was released and laid to rest on the floor. Prudence gracefully walked down the stairs with the help of the coachman. Jane followed suit.

Her eyes widened in surprise as Prudence led her to the dressmaker's shop. Despite Prudence's glowing praises, Jane had expected a grand establishment. Instead, it was a small shop on a corner aisle, painted bright yellow with a large glass window displaying a variety of clothes and fabrics.

Prudence cleared her throat, indicating they had arrived. Jane, realizing she had been standing by the carriage lost in observation, hurried to catch up. Following Prudence inside, Jane was once again impressed. The interior was spacious, painted a soft pink, with exquisite ball gowns on display and the scent of lavender in the air. The contrast

between the exterior and interior was striking.

Jane felt like she was in a different world. The energy in the room was lively as women of different stations went about checking, trying, and buying different garments. Help scurried around attending to the women.

“Give us your finest. My duchess is going to a ball and she must dazzle.” Prudence loudly announced.

It gathered the attention of some women in the shop. Those who recognized her muttered greetings her way. Her face poised calm, she beckoned to the woman Jane had earlier seen. j

“Juwan Miguel at your service, Your Grace,” the woman swiftly approached. She curtsied to both Prudence and Jane. She was beautiful. Lips full and red. Eyes brown as melted chocolate. Her black hair curled around her face in a beautiful swirl.

Some minutes later, they were in a private room going through gowns on ten different racks. Once they were left alone, Prudence cleared her throat and continued the conversation from earlier on with no preamble.

“When he became a drunkard, he changed completely. He became a negligent father. Louisa and Margate were also grieving. Algernon couldn’t see this. He was so consumed by his grief that he couldn’t see that his children needed him. Those little girls had to toughen it up and go with the program. I wish he had focused on them... maybe he’d have not been dead by now.” Her voice broke at the end. She gave a soft laugh. “Can’t cry over spilled milk they said.”

Jane noticed how Prudence kept cycling back to humor. Anything to numb how painful it was to talk about it. Jane gave a small laugh in return.

“He also neglected his duties. I had to step in at some point because he was letting the estate finances dwindle. I was scared for my grandsons, my great-grandchildren, and their heritage.” She flipped through the ball gowns on the first rack Juwan the dressmaker had provided.

Jane was more meticulous in her pursuit.

“Colin, my second grand baby was at the war at the time. He didn’t know how his brother had gotten worse. He had no idea until I called him back home after Algernon’s health started declining,” she continued.

Jane sighted a blue dress and pulled it out from the rack. It had small blue gems sewn into the bodices with long hands and a deep V cut that would show a lot of cleavage. It was beautiful but not for her.

“Colin left the war for his brother. He tried everything he could to help his brother’s alcoholic behavior and took the girls in. But try as he did, Algernon’s health didn’t get better. He drank till the day he died.” Her hand paused on a deep blue gown. “He died after one year of Colin’s return. It was tragic. We were all grieving. No one could effectively console the other. And we had to move on fast. The estate matter was to be tended to. The girls were to be seen too.” She sighed.

“They were devastated after their father died. Their spirits were down. It was their uncle who helped bring back their spark. He took them in and loved them... you see, Colin was neglected as a child too. His father saw him as the spare son. Colin understood the girls’ feelings better than I did as they were also neglected. He’d never admit to this, but I know...” She said as she turned to see Jane holding a turquoise gown with a sad look etched upon her face.

“Oh my sweet.” Prudence rushed to her and held her.

“It’s so disheartening that they all went through that,” she said quietly, imagining the pain they must have felt.

“I know. I am glad you are in their lives now. Your existence makes everything better,” Prudence consoled her. “Did you find anything you like?” she asked.

“I want this gown,” Jane declared, holding up the turquoise gown, “and I found some beautiful gowns for my sister and the girls. I’ll get them.”

“Yes, yes, Jane my darling. You do that” Prudence smiled. “While at that, why don’t you get something for Colin?” she muttered.

“I didn’t get that,” Jane probed.

“I said you should get some nightgowns, they would look good on you,” Prudence suggested.

“All right,” Jane complied as she hugged her new gown to her chest.

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It was dark by the time she got home. The house was eerily quiet.. She was ready to be assaulted by Louisa and Margaret. But nothing like that came. It also seemed like the servants had called it a night.

She beelined to the girls' room and saw the light on in the library.

Colin.

Her heart danced with mirth. He was home and awake.

As she got closer to the library, she peeped through the slightly opened door. Colin's head was bowed, and his dark hair, now in need of a trim, covered his face. Jane watched as he flipped through some papers, muttering words she couldn't decipher as he went on.

Silently, she blessed the heaven for that day in the garden. It would have been Graham, not him. She shuddered at the thought and pushed it to the far reach of her mind.

Colin was busy and needed to be alone. But, she couldn't move from where she stood.

A brief greeting cannot be considered a disturbance, right?

As she pondered on this, the door gave a creak as a result of her weight on it. Colin's head snapped up. His beautiful green eyes went wide, startled. Then he smiled sweetly when he saw her.

Jane could give all her possessions away for that smile “Greetings,” she greeted with a sweet smile of hers.

Colin placed a finger on his mouth, shushing her.

Jane’s smile fell. She was a disturbance after all. She was about to leave when he beckoned her in with a wave of his hand.

“Come in,” he mouthed

Her smile returned. He wasn’t pursuing her away. She walked into the library beelining for the table Colin stood at. She blushed as Colin watched her with a coy smile.

She was almost close to his table when he pointed to his corner. Without hesitation, she turned to see the girls sleeping peacefully on the settee. Her heart warmed.

So that why was he had hushed me.

She turned to look at Colin. He shrugged when she gave him a questioning look.

This was the first time the girls and Colin were together without her. He was one of the first person to warn her of their peculiarities. It was not from a good standpoint when he did. And it was for this reason he had taken to marrying her. So, she had not expected him to be here with them without her.

“How long have they been sleeping here?” she quietly asked him. She considered their small bodies on the settee. It wasn’t a comfortable place to sleep on for a long time.

“Give or take one hour,” he promptly replied.

Their necks will hurt them by morning. She squatted down and caressed their faces.

“Hope they were not a handful.” She hoped they had behaved themselves like they did in the morning. But one doesn’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

“When have they not been?” he smirked at her “We had no problems if that’s what you are concerned about.” He stood up from his chair and walked to her

“Where have you been all day?” he asked, avoiding her gaze.

Jane couldn’t figure out the emotion she heard in his voice.

“Prudence and I went shopping. It took the whole day.” She offered a brief explanation.

“What did you get?” he asked, eyes lit up.

“Just a couple of things,” she replied.

By this time, a couple of servants walked past them with some boxes from the store.

Colin glanced at them and went quiet.

Margaret coughed, stealing Jane’s attention from Colin.

They had to get them up their rooms “Let’s take them to their rooms first,” she suggested. Colin nodded and bent to carry Louisa.

But, Louisa's eyes came open. She squinted as they adjusted to the room’s light.

“Aunt Jane,” she squealed, stirring Margaret from her sleep.

Colin and Jane groaned as Margaret yawned and scrubbed at her eyes.

“Where have you been all day?” Louisa accused. Colin snorted and earned a glare from Jane.

“You told us you would be back soon. And you took a whole day. We waited for you.” Margaret was better at her accusation.

Jane let out a rather faint grin, as she knew she already had something to help pacify their agitation.

“Why are you smiling?” Margaret inquired with an offended expression.

Jane bent over to her level, still grinning.

“Because, I got beautiful gowns for my girls,” she proudly announced.

The smiles that lit their faces were proof she had succeeded in distracting them.

Colin seemed to have caught up with her ploy. He shook his head in mock disapproval.

“Did you?” Louisa asked in excitement

“Let me see,” Margaret shouted.

“Yes, let's see them.” Colin gave a small laugh. The sound of it filled Jane's stomach with butterflies. She flushed when she caught the linger on his face.

“Okay, then.” She raised her hands in mock surrender. “How about we go over to your room and we'll find out, hmm?”

Screams filled the night as Louisa started jumping on the seat, filled with joy while Margaret stood there, smirking to herself.

Colin groaned at Louisa's cheerfulness. "Stop with that fooling around and jumping," he commanded.

Immediately Louisa sat down back on the settee, smiling sweetly at Colin as if to disarm him.

"What are we waiting for, then?" Margaret asked impatiently, "Shall we go try them on?"

"Yes, we shall," came Jane's response and as Margaret was about to take a step forward, she added. "However..."

"Oh, what now?" Margaret grouched.

"Now, we have to know if any of the maids are awake."

"That's not a problem, we'll wake them up even if they're asleep!" Margaret frowned. Jane gave a disapproving shake of her head.

"Lanny is up." Louisa provided. "She promised to read a bedtime story to me. So, she will be in my room waiting."

Jane could tell that the girl was fond of her maid. Unlike Margaret who always got into a fight at every chance she got with almost everyone in the house.

"That's good," said Jane. "Now go up to Lanny and let her help you try them on." She finished.

“Then you’ll come down and show us,” Colin added.

The girls ran out of the study, not even bothering to look back. Jane and Colin could hear their heavy steps as they ran and shouted at each other till they got to Louisa’s room. At this rate, they’d wake up the whole household.

“For someone who spent the whole day at the dressmaker’s, you don’t seem to have a bag of yours.” Colin pointed out once the girls’ noise subsided.

“Who said I didn’t?” Jane smirked. She sat on the settee and yawned heavily. Her whole body ached. She needed a bath, food, and sleep

“You seem fatigued,” he observed

“Yes, yes I am,” she admitted “but the girls will have my head if I disappear to my room, after all, they waited all day for me.”

“Sadly,” his eyes warmed, “Not to be an uncaring husband but I’d love to see you try on your dresses too.”

“I’d love to show them to you, the boxes are just outside....” She stood mid-speech as Colin walked towards the door as if to retrieve them.

“Where are you going?” She pointedly asked.

“To get the clothes for you, of course.” He stopped in his tracks and turned to look at her.

Jane’s face flushed furiously as she remembered the nightgown Prudence had convinced her to get made when she went to the modiste a few days ago.

“Colin will love you in this,” the dowager’s voice resounded in her mind. Originally she had gone to get clothes for the girls, but she had given in and done as the older woman suggested.

She covered her face with her hands, but Colin had already seen her blush. He tilted his head and watched her curiously.

“No, you don’t have to go get it,” Jane vehemently spoke. “I’ll get it.” She painfully stood up and retrieved the rest of the boxes.

He kept watching her as she kept them by the side of the settee and sat down back.

Jane saw the look on Colin’s face and knew she was up for some interrogation. She knew that look oh too well. Colin would try to push her till she showed him what she bought. There was no way she was going to let that happen. She steeled her mind, ready for his mental assault.

“So, would you change into them here or would you go up to your room?” he pushed.

“I won’t be changing into them.” She answered

“But why? I know you are tired, but it will be a better use of our time if you let me see you in them.” He said with a smirk on his face and Jane was certain he was doing this on purpose.

“Colin. I’d rather not,” She sternly replied

“Why not? I’m your husband, I should be the first to see you in them.” He said in exasperation.

Her cheeks burned again. He didn’t have to say that. It only made her remember the

nightgown. He shouldn't just be the first to see them. He should be the only one to see them.

Colin seemed amused by her reaction. He sat on his table, hands crossed on his chest, and pointedly look down at her. She fidgeted with his gaze on her.

"If you won't wear them. I would love to just see them, bring them out from the bag," he commanded.

She wished she had hidden them before coming to meet him. But she couldn't do anything about that now. She couldn't bear the embarrassment if he saw her nightgowns among the dresses.

"You won't speak, you won't try on the gowns neither do you want to show them to me." He acted offended. "It's only making me more curious,"

But Jane was resolved. She feared he would grab the bag and go through them but she was saved by the girls.

Thundering noise filled the house as they ran down the stairs. Soon, they floated into the room like little princesses.

"Uncle, look at me, I'm a princess!" Louisa exclaimed as she danced around Colin who was beaming like the sun. Her gown was a beautiful green with puffed sleeves and a flowing skirt. It had a beautiful white ribbon bow attached at the back. It complemented Louisa's skin perfectly. Jane was pleased with her selection.

Margaret stood tall in a similar gown but in a dashing purple. She threw around her skirt and soaked in her uncle's admiration.

"You both look so beautiful," Colin cooed. He held their hands and played around in

circles with them, making their long skirts flow beautifully.

Jane clapped and smiled. They danced for a while and blessed Jane with kisses and thanks. Shortly after, they ran back up the stairs to change into their nightgown and prepare for bed.

“They would stay up all night if we let them,” Colin joked

Jane was so overjoyed with Colin’s behavior, she couldn’t help but voice it. “I am so impressed with how gentle you’ve become with the girls.”

“Well, I now live with three menaces. It was either I get with the program or I suffer for it.” He grinned.

“I’m glad we could change you,” came her soft reply.

“So, will I get to see you in your new gown?” he abruptly changed the conversation.

“No.” she shot back.

“Why? My money paid for them.”

“Just because your money paid for them doesn’t give you the right to see them.” Jane argued and picked up the bag ready to flee the room.

“That’s a silly stance Jane.” He clouded her space.

“No, it is not.” She puffed.

Yet again, she feared he would pull the bag from her grip. But he didn’t. He just stood still and stared deep into her eyes. He was so close, she could feel his body’s

warmth and her heart sped up when he licked his lips.

He leaned in. She prayed it was for a kiss, but he stepped back and smiled.

“I hope you picked a blue gown, they’d complement your beautiful eyes,” he said as he strolled out of the library.

Jane held her chest as her heart drummed fast. She could still feel his lingering warmth. He could set her on fire faster than anyone she knew. He knew where to push and didn’t hesitate.

She knew she had feelings for him. But she had not known how deep it ran. Standing there, staring at where he just walked she realized she was falling in love with her husband.

What a great way to end a day, Jane.

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“Mercy! Show mercy!”

Jane sprung from her bed in shock. She recognized that voice.

She jumped out of bed and raced to his room without a second thought. But when she found herself in front of the door, she paused, her heart racing. She knocked, but there was no answer. His cries had quietened down.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she slowly turned the doorknob, the creaking sound echoing through the quiet hall.

Only when she stepped inside and moved closer to where he lay, did she find him sweating and crying in his sleep. Her heart dropped, and she rushed over to him.

She woke him up gently, "Your Grace... It's alright, Your Grace. You are having a nightmare. Wake up, you're fine. Open your eyes, please."

His eyes were startled as he began coming out of the nightmare at last. "What... where... what happened?" His voice trembled with confusion.

"You were having a bad dream. You're safe now, you're at home."

His eyes darted around the room, clearly still caught in the remnants of the nightmare. "I thought... I thought..." He stuttered, trying to make sense of his surroundings.

Jane placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, "It's over now. Just take a deep breath and relax." She rubbed her fingertips on his skin gently.

"It's alright, Colin. You're safe," She whispered, her voice filled with reassurance. Yet, he seemed to struggle to calm down, the remnants of his panic still lingering. She held him close, allowing him to rest his head on her chest.

"Just breathe, Colin. You're alright, it's all fine," She cooed softly, her words echoing a soothing melody in the night's quiet.

At last, he seemed to calmed down, the tension in his body easing as he began to recognize his familiar surroundings. "Thank you, Jane..." He whispered gratefully focusing on her presence.

Uttering her name appeared to dump the reality of the situation on him and his eyes fluttered open suddenly, shock stretched across his features. His body tensed up again, and with a sudden jolt, he sprang up off her chest, his movements frantic.

He turned from her and cleared his throat as he quickly attempted to compose himself.

"Your Grace..."

"I'm sorry for waking you, duchess. I'm quite alright now, you may take your leave," He uttered, his tone clearly formed to mask any form of vulnerability. As he resumed his seat on the bed, Jane watched as he erected a barrier, his expression stoic, shutting her out.

"You don't have to be alone tonight," She spoke softly, her words filled with warmth and sympathy. Sitting beside him on the bed, she gently added, "Let me keep you company, Your Grace, I-"

"I want to be left alone for the night. Could you please leave now?" His words cut through the air before she could finish. "I appreciate the concern, duchess. But I need

my space.”

Despite his cold demeanor, she remained rooted in her place. She did not know what horrors troubled this man, but the way he’d clung to her just a few moments ago made it clear he did not truly wish to be alone.

Instead of retreating, she moved closer to him on the bed.

"I am not leaving, Your Grace. I will be staying here. No matter what you say or do, I will not let you shut me out."

She didn’t break eye contact because she could tell by the look in his eyes that he genuinely needed her.

“Jane, I wouldn't want to be rude, so don't make me,” he said, his threat subtle yet glaring.

“What kind of a wife would I be if I left you at a moment when I knew you needed me?” She drew closer.

“An obedient one,” he replied, whereas in his tone, there was a hint of amusement at her defiance.

“Have I ever been the obedient type?” she teased.

Colin scoffed, shocked with himself.

“I want to be of help to you.”

He stared at her and said nothing.

“I will not let you be alone, you cannot expect such of me after what I have just seen,” she repeated.

“You don't listen, duchess,” he declared. “Why is that?”

“Because I am your wife, Colin!” she replied with no hesitation, her loud tone surmounting his. “You chose me as I did you, and heavens know, you surely did not pick me for my malleability! So I would advise you to accept your fate and sit back down!”

Colin's jaw titled slightly, “I beg your pardon?”

Yet, Jane did not acknowledge his words, pushing on with no hesitation, “No matter whatever circumstances led us to this moment, I will be your support. No matter how hard it gets, I'll stand by you through thick and thin, as I promised! That is my duty!”

Her tone turned pleading. “Do not push me away, I will not let you.”

As she finished, her chest heaving and gaze locked on his eyes, a silence settled over them, echoes of the argument bouncing about.

Colin could not pull his eyes from the angry, beautiful woman before him.

He pondered on her words for a brief moment. Colin knew that she was right— that he needed her but his pride was in his way.

It took everything in him before he was finally able to summon the courage to accept defeat. To actually admit that for the first time in his life, he needed someone.

“You're right.”

Shocked, Jane's eyes widened.

“Pardon?”

“Don't make me repeat myself,” he said softly, watching as a grin flashed across her face. “I owe you an apology.”

She stood there, waiting to hear him say those words even though she was still a bit surprised by his acceptance of defeat.

“I understand what you're trying to do, I really do.” He sighed. “It's just...I am not used to this— letting people in.”

“I know,” she said with a calm, soothing voice, “But I am not ‘people’, Colin. I am your wife.”

“You're right.”

The weight of his confession hung in the air as he continued in a subdued tone, his eyes unable to leave hers.

“Can you stay with me, does the offer still stand?” At last, his plea revealed the depth of his emotions, his chest feeling lighter almost instantly.

“Of course, husband,” she replied, staring into his eyes. “I am not leaving your side.”

He felt a wind of relief wash over his face at the sound of her reassuring words.

Colin's internal struggle intensified as he now wrestled with the forbidden allure of his wife's presence.

The smile, love and affection so evident in her eyes seemed to beckon to him towards her. Colin cared deeply for her and she did not deserve the coldness he'd shown her earlier. Regardless, she still innocently offered him comfort.

She looked so beautiful and her alluring form caught his eyes but he knew this wasn't the time to get distracted by her physique.

"Tell me about your nightmare."

Colin's expression shifted, a veil of pain descending over his features as he revisited the harrowing images from his dream.

"I fear it is far too gruesome details for a lady to hear," He hesitated, his voice tinged with reluctance.

"Then we shall call it a good thing you said it yourself; I'm nothing like a normal lady."

Her teasing banter cut through his somber mood, prompting a soft chuckle to escape him as he shook his head in disbelief.

He let silence fill the room, feeling her heavy gaze of anticipation on him.

"I lay to sleep and found myself back on the battlefield, the acrid scent of gunpowder filling the air, the sound of cannons thundering in the distance."

His voice quivered slightly as he began to recount the haunting details of the wartime nightmare to Jane.

"Men lay fallen around me, their cries of pain echoing in my ears, unmoving bodies beneath my feet." His voice cracked with emotion as he described the chaos and

devastation that surrounded him, painting a vivid picture of the horrors he had witnessed.

As he continued his harrowing tale, his hands trembled imperceptibly, the memories of loss and suffering threatening to engulf him once more, "I saw faces of comrades long gone, their accusing eyes haunting me in the darkness."

His voice wavered "They held unto me... Judging me... Questioning how I got out. Questioning why I got to live while they lost their lives so brutally..."

Jane placed a hand on his. In the midst of the recounting, her gentle touch and soothing presence acted as a lifeline, pulling him back from the brink of his nightmare.

"You're safe. It's all over. And it is not your fault, Colin. None of all that happened is." The warmth of her hand on his arm grounded him in the present, a stark contrast to the harrowing visions that had gripped him moments before.

He gave her a sad smile, and placed a hand over hers. His voice, typically steady and strong, now carried a heavy burden of pain and anguish as he spoke.

"Most of my soldiers, they bear the same scars as me, Jane. The nightmares, they haunt us long after the battles end. Sometimes, I feel like I'm trapped in a never-ending dream, reliving the horrors of war even in waking moments."

"I'm so sorry for everything you've endured, Colin. I know it might be of little help, but I want you to know that I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

Slowly, he brought her hand to his lips, his tone grateful as he breathed words across her skin.

“Thank you, Jane.” The words felt strange on his lips. “I...” He hesitated, “I would like if we could continue to converse till slumber takes us once more. The longer I stay up, the less I...”

She placed a gentle hand over his as he trailed off. With a warm smile, she nodded. “I do not mind. Converse we shall, Your Grace. Till dawn, if needed.”

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"So, what do you think, Your Grace?"

Jane asked, standing in front of him with the most amazing smile etched upon her face, looking gorgeous in an elegant gown. "This is what I intend to wear to the ball."

He had been seated in the silence of the drawing room before her footsteps prompted him to turn and face her.

His heart quickened its pace in his chest as he stared at the lovely woman standing before him. Colin was unable to contain the rush of emotions surging through him.

Jane's eyes sparkled as she looked at him, her voice soft and endearing as she spoke.

"Your Grace, you seem captivated," she said, gently swaying in her dress.

His eyes widened subtly as her words brought him back to the present.

He looked away quickly and cleared his throat.

"So, what do you think?" She smiled, turning around. "Or are you shy?"

Frowning slightly, he forced the compliment out, "You look breathtaking."

"Breathtaking, you say?" Jane teased, her confidence growing as she moved forward to peek at his face when he turned away. "I'm flattered, truly."

"I'm rather at a loss for words," he admitted grudgingly.

She blushed.

“At a loss for words? Hmm. That's a first.” She met his gaze, her expression turning more vulnerable even though her words still teased him.

His wife's intense blush only added to her allure, her eyes meeting his with a depth of desire that stirred something profound within him.

He had done his best to avoid her after that night, struggling to even hold her gaze. He thought that nothing could take away the embarrassment he felt after opening up to her that much. However, it took her nothing to disarm him again.

Colin, consumed by her beauty in her gown, yearned to etch this memory of her into his mind, wanting to savor every detail. His thoughts drifted to the upcoming ball, where he imagined her radiant presence.

The idea of others beholding her stirred a protective instinct within him, feeling that no one there who'd be present deserving of witnessing her magnificence.

The mere thought of them ogling his wife, especially in her solitary state, caused a tumultuous storm of emotions in his stomach.

No man deserves to look at her like this...

"I shall accompany you, wait here," He declared, surprising them both with the impulsive words. Releasing her hand, he swiftly ascended the stairs.

Confusion clouded Jane's expression as she stammered, shocked by this sudden change of plans. "Wait... W-What? Your Grace?"

Despite her bewilderment, he continued his mission, hurrying to his chambers, so his

valet could help him dress and he could return to her side without delay.

Jane's incredulous gaze met him as he descended the stairs quickly, her laughter breaking the tension of the moment.

Upon his reaching her, she gestured in amusement, questioning, "What's all this?"

With a smile gracing his lips, Colin gently took her hand, bringing it to his lips in a tender gesture that elicited a blush from her cheeks.

"I am going to the ball with you, it is only right we show up as a couple."

Colin was accustomed to the scrutiny of society, however, he found himself more attuned to the gazes directed at them as they finally arrived and stepped into the grand ballroom.

Despite his usual indifference to such attention, the presence of his wife by his side heightened his protective instincts to ensure no ill intentions lingered in the stares fixed on her radiant form.

Of course. She is my wife. It is my duty to protect her. That is what this feeling is.

When Jane's eyes landed on her sister and father, a wave of excitement overcame her.

Ever vigilant, he trailed closely behind, his gaze mirroring hers until it fell upon a figure standing beside her family - the Marquess, Graham.

Colin's eyes narrowed as he noted his wife's expression momentarily clouded by the sight as her lips compressed with a flashing annoyance.

She shifted closer to Colin, her shoulder slightly brushing against his arm. He

instinctively moved closer, a protective stance, not wanting to lose her warmth..

"Lady Jane, What a pleasure to see you again. I must say, you look absolutely radiant in that dress!"

His words dripped an unsettling familiarity. Jane's brows furrowed as she acknowledged the Marquess with a nod, her gaze quickly shifting to her sister and father.

Turning towards Colin with the most obviously feigned enthusiasm, the Marquess remarked, "A surprise to see you here as well, Your Grace." He paused, "What a pleasure." Colin doubted he meant it.

Colin offered a nod in response, masking the multitude of unease within him.

Quick to divert the conversation, Jane greeted her sister and father, as she clutched her sister's hands affectionately. "Dear Sarah, how are you doing? It's so great to see you."

"I am well, and I'm so glad to see you, too."

"You look overly beautiful in your dress, I must say."

Sarah's cheeks flushed and she let out a laugh that seemed to have been gone for a while. "Thank you. You look radiant in yours as well. I'm grateful to you for giving me this dress. It truly is a beauty, I-"

However, before she could continue, Graham interjected, his focus solely on Jane as he spoke, "And you are most certainly right on that, milady. Lady Jane does look radiant in her dress; it would be impossible for one to look away from her."

Colin felt a tightness in his stomach just from his words. He knew this man was someone he wouldn't want to associate with. Yet there was more to this feeling than simple disdain. But Colin didn't have time to intervene.

"Duchess." Jane's expression had turned stern with her curt words, her tone sharp as a knife.

Taken aback by her abruptness, the Marquess raised a brow and inquired, "What?"

"I'm the duchess now, no longer to be referred to as 'Lady Jane'. Society demands you address me correctly. I believe the term you're in need of would be 'Your Grace'."

Clearly caught off guard by her assertiveness, Graham smirked with a nervous laugh, acknowledging. "Of course, yes, Your Grace, you're now the Duchess of Montford." He gritted his teeth subtly at the humiliation and tried to stay composed

His eyes shifted to Colin, revealing a hint of jealousy in his gaze before he redirected his attention.

Acute to the exchange, Colin met the man's stare with a fierce and dominating gaze, as he took a step forward.

Jane and Sarah's conversation continued to flow smoothly after that until Graham's persistent interruptions became too frequent to ignore.

The Marquess leaned in, his body angling toward Jane, with a look she found rather disturbing.

Colin's jaw clenched, his fists tightened as he refrained from throwing a punch at this relentless man who clearly had no regard for him.

Jane's body stiffened, her shoulders squaring as she subtly leaned away from him. She took a step back, her hand reflexively reaching for Colin's arm.

“Have you lost your balance, my lord? I think you've overstepped and I would hate to see you hurt yourself.” He glared at the Marquess who in turn returned the gesture.

For the next few seconds, an awkward silence hovered over them as the two men wouldn't break eye contact.

Finally, before things could escalate, the Marquess finally budged.

“You’re right, Your Grace. The wine must have gotten to my head.” He chuckled lightly. “Now, if you'll excuse me, there are more important things that need my attention.”

He once again cast a subtle glare at Colin before taking his leave. Colin felt like he going after him. He wanted this man to never talk to his wife again. Never look at her again...

What am I even thinking?

As soon as the marquess was far from hearing distance, the Viscount turned to Sarah, his low tone stern as he reprimanded her. "You should have been more attentive to the Marquess. Are you trying to win his attentions at all? What feeble attempts you’ve made!"

Colin was taken aback by Henry’s directness, surprised by the man’s public scolding of his daughter and the unjust blame placed on her. Sarah, bowing her head in submission, remained silent, absorbing her father's words without protest.

However, to no surprise, Jane was unable to stay silent, "Father, could you not see

that Graham is not the right match for Sarah?"

A small smile lifted Colin's face.. He was filled with admiration for her courage to speak up against the man's unfair treatment.

"Keep your mouth shut, child. Your insolence has no place here. I've certainly enjoyed your absence from my home."

He watched as his wife's face fell, hurt evident on her face despite how she tried to mask it. Colin's anger could no longer be sustained.

"Are you forgetting yourself, Viscount Dowding? You will do well to not speak to the duchess that way."

His voice cut through the tension, words laced with quiet anger as he addressed Jane's father. The man turned his eyes to him in surprise, raising a brow at the rage plastered on his face.

With a gaze locked firmly on the Viscount, Colin continued to lash out, "One would only expect you'd possess the grace to remember the difference in posts, do not be unfortunate."

He took a step forward, towering over the man menacingly as he brazenly issued a stern warning, "If I ever hear you addressing my wife in such a disrespectful manner again, be prepared for the consequences."

With that final warning hanging in the air, he turned his attention to Sarah, "It was a pleasure to see you again, however, we shall be taking our leave now."

Jane, still reeling from the confrontation, struggled to find her voice amidst the turmoil. "Please, do come visit me again soon."

Colin wrapped an arm around her waist and gently guided her away from her father and sister, creating a physical barrier between them and the world around them.

His hand remained around her waist, a simple yet intimate act that turned eyes in their direction as they walked past. Yet his hands never left her waist.

However, at this point, everyone was relegated to the background, and Colin's focus was solely on his wife, her trembling figure against his palm.

The sound of her heavy breathing only served to heighten the emotional intensity between them.

As their eyes locked, he found himself captivated in her gaze. He could sense her gratitude as she leaned close to him.

Drawing her even closer, Colin's next move was instinctual. He couldn't let go of her just yet. . In a husky tone, he leaned close and asked, "Shall we dance, my dear wife?"

Jane's eyes were filled with an emotion he couldn't quite read. But he loved seeing it on her. "I would love to."

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"Your Grace, why do you not desire an heir?" Jane asked hesitantly.

Jane's thoughts spun with each graceful twirl on the ballroom floor, her mind consumed by thoughts of Colin.

Could he care for me? Does he care?

However, a sense of urgency crept into Jane's thoughts, fueled by her father's ominous warning from a while ago.

All she could think about was that she was going to lose him. And all the questions she had kept to herself was tumbling out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Colin seemed taken aback, but he recovered quickly and joked instead, "I have always admired your boldness. I must say I have never had a lady be so direct. You are one of a kind."

Jane's cheeks flushed a loud crimson at his remark. She could see that he was deflecting, but she did not relent. "You flatter me, Your Grace. But I just want to understand why you haven't broached the topic of an heir."

Colin raised a brow even higher, a soft chuckle escaping his lips. He leaned closer, his voice teasing, "And do you know the intricate steps required to make an heir, my dearest duchess?"

Jane's cheeks burned even brighter at this provocative question. While she wasn't well-versed in the specifics of baby-making, she understood the general idea involved

laying together, a notion she had gleaned from her governess.

Her face was hot as she spoke, “I am no expert, but I do know we have to lay together.”

Colin let out a surprised chuckle, like he did not think she would truly say it. For a moment, her worries were forgotten as she was wrought with embarrassment

“Are you saying you wish to lay with me, my duchess?” Colin smirked.

Jane frowned at him, her blush going all the way to her ears. “Should I not? I believe it is to be expected as we are married.”

A soft gasp escaped her lips as her husband leaned in suddenly, brushing his lips against her ear as they swayed on the ballroom floor, his voice a low, intimate murmur.

“Perhaps I should consider your offer,” He said, pulling her in tighter by the waist as he continued, “You make a compelling argument.”

Jane was red as a tomato as she tried to shy away from his gaze, until a laugh interrupted the spiral of her thoughts. It was Colin.

He is laughing. I have never seen him laugh so openly before.

She couldn’t believe her own eyes. The sight was captivating. Jane thought that she could never forget this moment. She couldn’t form any words. All she could do was stare at him as he was stealing her breath with every short breath.

With a courteous bow, they retreated from the dance floor, staring at each other with love flickering in their gazes. She didn’t want this to end.

“One more time,” Extending his hand once more as the next dance loomed, he invited her back to the floor.

"You've changed quite a lot since the beginning of our marriage, Your Grace." She said once she managed to regain her composure.

Colin's eyes met hers with a smile, his handsome face lighting up with care as he nodded slowly.

"I have," He took a minute before adding, "and it's because of you."

Before Jane had any time to respond, their dance came to an end again. "Take a walk with me around the garden, the night is beautiful."

The fragrance of the flowers mingled with the cool night air, creating a sensory symphony that enhanced the magic of the moment.

Don't get your hopes high! Don't get your hopes high!

Colin's voice broke the silence, his smile genuine as he faced her. "I want to introduce you to Mark. He's a very dear friend of mine."

Jane's eyes lit up with excitement at the prospect of seeing her husband with a friend. Would he laugh like he did before?

"I do not mind heading back in to meet him right now."

"Mark isn't at the ball, but I'm sure you'll like him." With a mischievous glint in his eye, he playfully nudged her shoulder. "He's a troublemaker like you, after all."

Jane laughed as she gasped in disbelief. Feigning offense, she retorted, "Whatever do

you mean by that?"

"Surely you can't deny how much of a troublemaker you are."

"You dare call me that, when just moments ago, you nearly made me lose my composure in the ballroom."

Her laughter filled the air but Colin's expression shifted slightly.

As their eyes met once more, he inquired, "Did my simple words really affect you that much?"

"Isn't that what you wanted all along?"

A soft smile graced his lips as he nodded in acknowledgment.

Don't get your hopes up!

A moment of silence enveloped them but Colin's eyes were on her. Not moving away for even a second. She almost forgot how to breathe.

Until Colin's hand reached out, gently caressing her cheek.

"Did you know?" He began, "You shine brighter than the stars tonight." He continued with a murmur, his eyes taking in her elegant form.

Do not get your hopes up!

"Your Grace, I must confess that your teasing seems to be working." A coy smile played on her lips.

“Is it now?” He reciprocated the gesture, unable to take his eyes off her.

“Indeed,” she replied. “One might almost think you were trying to be a loving husband.”

He froze for a moment and his hand fell from her face.

“Ah, yes. But who would I fool, right?” The smile he gave wasn’t convincing. And Jane didn’t want to see this. She wanted the coy smile he had before. How desperately she wanted it back!

Don’t...

“Me.”

Jane realized she could hear her heart beating. But only her heartbeat and nothing else. The deafening beat she was making. She could bet Colin could hear it too.

But she was saved from another sound. Colin’s boot as he took the final step towards her.

He closed the distance, capturing her lips in a fervent kiss.

Her world dissolved completely into a whirlwind of sensations as he touched her lips. Nothing had ever burned her so passionately. Her eyes had never felt so heavy. She never knew how much she wanted this until he kissed her.

Colin's hand gently grazed the small of her neck, sending shivers down her spine leaving a flutter in its wake. Jane's pulse quickened as Colin's fingers trailed along her waist.

But Colin suddenly withdrew, leaving her cold and empty without him. His expression betraying a sense of pressing urgency.

"I never should have done that." Breathing heavily, he avoided meeting her gaze as he continued, "We should return to the ballroom."

What?

Her mind clouded with confusion and hurt as she tried to make sense of his sudden change. Her cheeks still flushed from the intensity of his touch, she started to shiver.

‘I never should have done that...’

His voice resounded in her head for a moment as she tried to comprehend why he would pull away so suddenly.

She was his wife, why would he have regretted attempting kissing her?

Does he not find me attractive enough? Did I do something wrong? Why be so sweet and tender with me only to leave me hanging?

Despite her bewilderment, her pride stung as she turned around. Straightening her near disheveled hair, she began to walk towards the ballroom alone, her heart pounding in her chest, the sound of his footsteps echoing behind her.

Jane was embarrassed; her husband literally rejected her, leaving her to deal with her shame and hurt.

Why did he have to be so cruel?

As she walked, the realization took root - she was foolish enough to fall in love with

her husband.

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"Uncle Colin, may we come with you on the hunt now? Please?" Margaret's eyes sparkled with excitement as she tugged at his sleeve.

Colin who had been so absentminded the entire time sprang out of his thoughts at the sound of the girls' cheerful voices.

"Unfortunately, my dearest, you cannot," he replied, bending over to her level.

"Why not?" She frowned.

"Because we're little girls and future women. We should not engage in such activities— it's unbecoming for us," Louisa replied.

"Remarkable!" He beamed with pride. "Absolutely remarkable."

"I knew that," Margaret said. "I just don't think it is fair to have us behave in a certain way simply because we're little girls or potential women," she protested.

The manner with which she spoke defiantly reminded him of the other defiant woman he had hurt; his wife.

Things had been rather awkward between them since the night of the ball and he had not really attempted to make it right. He'd been dodging Jane ever since he pulled away from kissing her.

Her coldness toward him was evidence that she wasn't ready to speak with him just yet and maybe he would go to her again but for now, he hadn't gathered his words

yet.

“Why the long face?” Jane said, directed her question at Margaret as she approached them.

“Thank God you're here,” she said, relieved at the sight of the duchess.

“What's wrong, Margaret?” She halted before her, concern flickering in her gaze.

“Uncle Colin says we can't go hunting with him because we're girls,” she reported with a stern look.

Jane stole a glance at him as he stood there, observing in silence.

“Well, we've talked about this, Margaret?—”

“I know we have,” she cut her off. “It's not fair!” she grouched.

“I understand you, I really do.” Jane took her hand. “Maybe someday we'll do something about what society says we can or cannot do. But in the meantime, let's try to adapt.” Her voice was calm and steady as she addressed the girl. “Can you do that?”

She was quiet for a moment before replying;

“I can try— but only because you said so.”

“That's my girl.” She smiled.

“What about me?” Louisa whined, feigning being left out.

“Come here!” Jane laughed, pulled them together in her embrace. “You’re both my girls.”

Colin felt the connection between his nieces and his wife. She’d done her best to be a mother to them and didn’t deserve being treated like anything less.

Gently, she rose to her feet with a hint of annoyance in her eyes and finally looked at him. He wanted to apologize but he had already apologized once to her and didn’t want this to become a habit. He was a man— a duke; her duke and he should act like one.

There was a deafening silence that only broke when Margaret cleared her throat, innocent of the tension between them. Startled, the two broke eye contact and faced the girls.

“Alright. Can you both rush back to your rooms now?” Jane asked. “I’ll come meet you so we can do something more fun than going hunting. How does that sound?”

“Fantastic!” They chorused and raced each other up the steps. “Don’t take too long!” Margaret echoed.

“I won’t!” Jane replied and her smile immediately vanished as she turned to face Colin.

His heart almost skipped for a moment. Or did it? Colin was overwhelmed with a feeling of guilt gnawing at his mind, pushing him to at least say something. A part of him knew that he was starting to fall for her yet he couldn’t come clean with it. Back at the ball, he’d led her on, hinting at what he felt and he meant every word he said, every flattery. The conflicting emotions swirling within him made him feel like he was losing his mind. He needed to say something quickly.

“How do you do?” were the words he was able to summon.

Ridiculous!

He thought to himself.

“I am well,” she replied, her expression blank.

He had never felt so tense before and, right now, all he wanted to do was run away from her. He needed to be away from her, just for a little while. He couldn’t think when she was around.

With all of that confusion, there was only one person he knew held the solution he needed.

“You should go up to the girls,” he said but that was not at all how he had intended for it to sound.

Now, she squinted at him, probably feeling like he was trying to send her away.

“I should, shouldn't I?” her voiced was laced with anger and disappointment.

Oh God.

He grumbled within himself, unable to grasp his inability to handle this situation.

“Have a good day, Your Grace,” she added and left him by himself.

Colin massaged his temples and drew in a deep breath.

Hastily preparing for the day, he hurried to the waiting carriage, eager to escape

before their paths crossed. As he settled inside the carriage, a wave of relief washed over him at last.

However, nearly immediately, his heart began to ache at the thought of not being able to see her face the entire day. A sigh escaped his lips as he dropped his head on the back of the seat dejectedly. He had become utterly and completely lost in love.

"Where to today, Your Grace?"

The coachman's voice echoed in his ears, eliciting another round of quarrelsome decision angles.

Colin's mind was a jumble of conflicting thoughts, but he knew he had to get away. Without hesitating any longer, he instructed, "Head to my grandmother's estate, please."

"Well, isn't this an unexpected sight! What a pleasure it is to have you over, Your Grace."

Colin responded with a warm smile, presenting her with a bouquet of flowers he had bought along the journey for her.

"The pleasure is all mine, grandmother," he replied, but he was sure he couldn't make it believable.

"Oh, please. Don't be modest around me." She chuckled.

Already, these few words shared with her were enough to reassure him..

Prudence's eyes sparkled with appreciation as she thanked him, "Thank you for the flowers. I feel twenty years younger."

Colin managed a chuckle but the frown on his face seemed to be stitched in place.

She paused, taking a long look at him before she motioned towards a nearby chair, inviting him to join her. "Here, sit."

As he settled into the seat, the tranquility of the garden seemed to envelop them. The dowager took pride in her flowers, and they were the brightest, calming stretch of land one could find.

For a moment, Colin felt his worries disappear behind the fragrant blooms and gentle rustling of leaves.

"Now, tell me, what has brought you to come see me?"

He hesitated for a moment.

"Just go ahead and tell me what's wrong, will you?" her voice came at him again.

He jerked his head and looked at her, his eyes revealing but a glimpse of the turmoil within.

"You never did know how to lie." Prudence, undeterred by his silence, pressed on with unwavering resolve, "I know when something is wrong with you, boy, tell me everything."

"It's my wife," he finally answered.

"Of course it is," she said, smiling.

"It is not amusing, grandmother," he said to her.

“Oh, but it always is when it comes to couples— that is you, my dear Colin; you're always so serious,” came her reply.

“I am the Duke of Montford, I am supposed to be serious,” he said.

“Not with your wife, you're not,” she responded keenly, forcing him to go silent for a minute.

“In all sincerity, I really thought that it'd take a lot longer than this before Jane would grow weary of you given how daring she is,” the sound of her voice revealed her liking for the woman.

Colin's brows furrowed at the statement. Deep down, he had known it was risky coming here, knowing how perceptive she was.

“Jane is different, Colin. Why haven't you realized that until now?” she inquired.

“I know she's different— but that is in fact the reason we're...” he swallowed his words and continued. “Grandmother, she is everything I want and more.”

“Then what is the problem?”

“The problem is...no matter how hard I try, I just always somehow mess things up,” he confessed. “For instance, she's not speaking to me at the moment.”

“Ohh. Why is that?”

He paused, contemplating the content of his reply. “It's embarrassing and somewhat personal.”

“Well.” She let out a sigh. “Do you know what I think?”

He shook his head.

“I think that you are holding back, Colin. I think you're afraid.”

“That's preposterous,” he said defensively. “I am everything but afraid.”

“The most dangerous lie in the world, Colin, is the one you tell yourself,” she replied.

“How do you expect to solve a problem when you have refused to accept the problem?”

He stared at her knowing she was telling the truth that he didn't want to hear, or perhaps he did and that was why he came here.

“You're afraid that you do not deserve her, that you're no good for her. You believe that you're too broken for Jane.”

Her words cut deeper than a knife and the truth he had long run away from had finally caught up with him.

Colin's voice quivered with raw emotion as he spoke, his words heavy with self-doubt and pain, “I am damaged, grandmother. I'm haunted from the war.”

As he had begun, everything came tumbling out; he laid bare his deepest fears and insecurities, “I've never been the good kind of man. The kind one. I don't think I would ever be able to love Jane as she deserves.”

She stared at him in silence.

“She's better off without me. I have tried to be that man but, grandmother, I simply can't. With me, Jane cannot find the happiness that she wants, the happiness that she deserves.”

“So, you're being hard on her, not for yourself, but because you believe you're protecting her from you,”

He thought about it for a moment then replied. “Yes.”

Prudence's unwavering gaze bore into him. “You're disrespecting your wife with such talk, don't you know?”

Her belief and appreciation for Jane's character shone through as she declared, "I've seen the kind of woman the duchess is, so I can tell you outright that you're talking nonsense."

Colin remained seated, stunned by her directness, his mind reeling from her unexpected words. Her piercing gaze held his, but he could not keep contact any longer, allowing his eyes to fall to his lap.

Prudence's expression softened as she extended her arm to gently pat him. "You're not the terrible man you want to believe yourself to be. I see it, and so does your wife. A man so damaged would not be able to love nor be ready to lose what he wants for the sake of protecting the woman."

Her words struck a chord within him, resonating with the turmoil he grappled with for so many days.

In a tone that was both gentle and resolute, his grandmother urged him. "You should let Jane decide whether you are worthy for her or not. I'm certain that she feels the same way for you, too."

"Come in," Jane called out, curious at the sudden visitor.

The door creaked open, revealing her lady's maid. "Good day, Your Grace." There was an awkward expression on the maid's face as she walked forward, "A... letter has arrived for you."

"A letter? Not an invitation?" Jane's eyebrows furrowed in surprise. She hardly got any letters. She peered at the item, "And who is it from?"

However, her maid's response only added to the enigma, "It is most surprising, but there are no sender details or further explanations, Your Grace; only that it was meant to be urgently read."

She hesitated with the envelope in hand. "It was delivered by an unusual mailer. It had been unclear... if it was right to hand it over to you."

A sense of confusion mingled with curiosity clouded Jane's mind as she reached out to accept the letter. But she maintained her composure, and with a soft-spoken thank you and a nod, she sent the maid on her way.

In the quiet of her room, feeling suddenly surrounded by secrecy and unanswered questions, she unfolded the mysterious letter, her hands moved quickly, curious of what message lay inside. Her eyes began to skim the delicate paper, the words on the page seeming to jump out at her, sending a chill down her spine instantly.

"My Dearest Lady Jane,

I trust this message finds you well, for the same cannot be said for your dear adopted nieces; Louisa and Margaret. Fear not, they are quite fine at the moment. However, should you fail to heed my words, they shall bear the consequences of your defiance.

Meet me at the abandoned churchyard by the old oak tree the moment the sun dips below the horizon, or soon witness the fate I have in store for them.

Your absence will not be tolerated, for my patience wears thin. The shadows of dusk shall reveal the price of your disobedience. Remember, my Lady Jane, your actions have consequences, and the lives of your loved ones hang in the balance.

Yours faithfully,

The One."

The sinister tone of the letter sent shivers down Jane's spine as she read each threatening word. Her hands trembled as she clutched the ominous letter, her heart pounding in her chest like a drum of dread. The words leaped off the page, each line a chilling picture of her loved ones in danger.

Jane couldn't stop reading it over and over as if the words would suddenly change.

The girls! My girls...

Her feet started to move before she could even realize what she was doing, leading her to the end of the hallway.

"Your Grace, is anything the matter?" Margaret's eyes were wide with worry when Jane appeared, a picture of fright and panic.

Only then did Jane let go of the breath she'd been subconsciously holding. From what she had heard earlier, both girls were having their last piano lessons for the day, as usual.

"All is well, my darling." She answered with as little tremble as she could muster. The demand to meet at the specified location within an hour never left her mind.

With the weight of the ultimatum pressing down on her psyche with each passing moment, she ended up having to excuse herself, a suffocating sense of helplessness enveloping her as she grappled with the harrowing decision she had to make.

Colin's absence only added to the turmoil in her mind. The uncertainty of his whereabouts amplifying her isolation in this moment of peril. The seconds ticked by relentlessly, hanging over her like a dark cloud.

Without a moment longer wasted, with her nerves on edge and her shoulders tense, she slunk out of the house. Heading straight to her carriage.

Arriving at the desolate location under the cloak of darkness, she felt a shiver run down her spine as the chilling isolation of the place enveloped her. The shadows danced menacingly around her, casting eerie shapes in the dim moonlight.

This feels like a nightmare.

At last, her eyes spotted a figure looming in the darkness, sending a jolt of fear through her.

"Who's there?" Her voice trembled as she called out.

It was all happening too fast. Way too fast.

The silence that greeted her plea only added to the sinister atmosphere, pushing her to the brink of panic. Summoning courage, she continued her approach, the tension thick in the air as she drew closer.

As the features of the person slowly emerged from the shadows, her breath caught in her throat, her eyes widening in disbelief at the revelation before her.

"Greetings, my dear Lady Jane."

In the eerie glow of the moonlight, the Marquess' countenance twisted into a menacing visage as he greeted her with a chilling single phrase. The familiarity of his address sent a shiver down her spine, disbelief and fear warring within her.

Jane stammered in shock, her voice barely above a whisper as she questioned him, "I don't... Wha-What is going on?"

"Be quiet," Graham's command to silence her with a raised hand struck Jane nearly like a physical blow, dropping a rock in her stomach. His eyes gleamed with a manic intensity that sent a new wave of terror crashing over her.

"Here is how it shall go. You will either get an annulment or I will harm Louisa and Margaret, it is that simple."

As he laid out the ultimatum with such cold determination in his tone, Jane felt the ground shift beneath her feet.

"But, I do not understand, this makes no sense, you're threatening... children? Why... How...?"

She could not accept this was happening, her mind raced as she stared at the man before her, his once esteemed facade now a mask of malevolence.

The discrepancy between the public image of the beloved Marquess and the sinister figure before her left her reeling, questioning how he had managed to deceive society for so long.

Desperate to voice her protest, her words died on her lips as his menacing presence loomed over her, cutting her off before she could speak any more.

“Yes, I am. Must I repeat myself?” His eyes were soulless as they stared back at her, seeming to dare her to utter another word.

“You’re handling this well. I’m so excited to finally be able to say this,” Pleased at her silence, Graham's voice quivered with excitement as he confessed, “I've been in love with you for a long time, my Lady Jane.”

Her heart pounded in her chest, disbelief mingling with dread at his revelation.

"It was crystal clear, everyone, and I mean," He cackled again, making a round gesture with his hands, “Everyone, knew you were to be my wife. But of course...That bastard duke stole you from me!"

His sudden outburst, reverberated through the night, a sharp accusation that pierced the air and made Jane take a small step backwards. As she quivered in fear, his demeanor shifted, his voice lowering as he attempted to reassure her with a smile that sent a shiver down her spine, "I'm here to make things right, you do not need worry or fear."

The false sense of security in his words only heightened her unease, the darkness of the night seeming to close in around her like a suffocating cloak.

Taking a menacing step forward, Graham extended a hand towards her, his intentions clear, but Jane's instinct for self-preservation kicked in, propelling her to jump back

in terror.

With a quivering voice, she mustered the courage to warn him, "I have one of my husband's valets waiting for me in the distance. If I scream, he will hear it."

The threat of exposure hung heavy in the air, a fragile lifeline in the face of Graham's menacing advances.

In a chilling turn of events, his anger simmered beneath the surface. "Get the annulment before I lose my patience. I can be a very angry man!" His tone turned sharper as he taunted, "Or is it that you do not believe me?"

His gaze darted around before he leaned in with a sinister whisper, "Your sister would be proof enough for you to believe. Would you like me to leave a bruise for you to find on her?"

Jane's breath caught in her throat, a gasp escaping her lips as she recoiled in horror. "You would not dare."

, "Oh yes, I will. Your sister is a doormat, she will not say anything."

His callous disregard for her sister's well-being sent a shiver down Jane's spine.

"Even if she did, your father shall not care to do anything about it anyway, would he? Nobody likes damaged goods."

The weight of his words crushed Jane's spirit, her heart sinking with despair as she realized the depth of her helplessness in the face of his cruelty.

Her world spun out of control. Her heart raced with fear, a primal instinct urging her to fight or flee, yet she was paralyzed by the sheer horror of the situation.

“You wouldn’t dare...”

“You can test that theory if you want.”

His words hung in the air for a moment. Her heart ached with the weight of her sister's sacrifices, realizing that Sarah had likely been masking her discomfort to shield her. It was just like Sarah to do such, the knowledge, only igniting a fierce determination to protect her from any further torment.

Forced into a corner, Jane found herself reluctantly agreeing to Graham's proposal. With a trembling voice, she said, “I promise to get an annulment. But you stay away from them all, my sister, my nieces, too.”

The words tasted bitter on her tongue. But she refused to let him see her cry. "Give me a bit of time to get everything in order."

Graham's eyes gleamed with a twisted sense of triumph, his gaze filled with a sickening sense of victory. "You made the right choice, dear Lady Jane. You will be mine soon."

Her entire being was shaken by the terror of being bound to a monstrous threat of a man like Graham.

The mere thought of marrying him brought her to the brink of tears, yet, the thought of any harm befalling her loved ones pierced her heart with a sharp ache, solidifying her resolve to sacrifice her own happiness for their safety.

But Colin...

The realization that Colin's feelings might not mirror her own brought a bittersweet acceptance.

Jane found the strength to move her body again as she quickly made her way back to her carriage.

I never managed to escape my cruel fate after all...

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:41 am

“Have you been waiting for me?”

Jane jumped at the sound of her husband’s voice. She had indeed been waiting for him, but now that he was here, she was not certain what to do.

She closed her eyes, praying for the strength to say what she had to say. None of this was as she had imagined things would happen between them but how else was she to ensure the safety of the girls. She couldn’t jeopardize their safety for a chance to be happy.

“Yes, I have.”

She cleared her throat and turned as his footsteps hit the wooden floor announcing that he was advancing towards her. Her heart broke as she watched him.

He looked so beautiful, standing there with that wonderful smile. She looked around the drawing room as she tried to steady herself.

You must not allow yourself to be distracted, Jane. You must be strong.

“I’m quite glad that you waited actually, although I suppose I would have loved it also if you were already asleep,” Colin said. “It is quite late after all.”

“Why are you glad that I waited?” She asked, trying to postpone the inevitable.

She could not bear the thought of seeing his lovely smile disappear from his lips and knowing that she was responsible for his absence. Alas, there was nothing to be done.

She had thought long and hard about this as she sat in the empty room with nothing else to occupy her mind. There was no way out of any of this, at least, none that did not expose the children to harm. She would not be able to look at herself if that happened.

Colin chuckled, smoothing his hair back. His hand shook a little and she frowned as she noticed it. Had something happened.

She fixed her legs to the ground as she fought to regain composure. She couldn't go to him, couldn't touch him, not when it would be so difficult to let him go if she did that.

"Oh, good heavens, the look on your face. You need not be so concerned. It is not quite terrible news. Quite the opposite actually," he paused and frowned. "I certainly hope that it will be."

Her heart sank. Here she was about to deliver news that was bound to sting. It would hurt his ego even if it did not hurt his heart.

She could not very well, for the life of her, let him speak before she did. She feared that she would lose the strength and push it to another day, continuing with that until she could no longer do so.

"I-I do have something to tell you as well, Colin. It is why I have waited this long to speak with you and I fear that I must go first."

Colin raised a brow as he watched her with a funny expression on his face.

"All right then. I suppose you should."

Jane closed her eyes and bit her lip, welcoming the pain that shot through her. With a

huge sigh, she said the words that would turn his smile upside down.

“Colin, I want an annulment.”

Colin’s eyes bulged and for a moment, his smile remained as he tried to make sense of what he had just heard.

“Pardon?”

Jane repeated her words.

“I would like an annulment, Colin. I am not quite fulfilled in this marriage. Perhaps it has run its course for me.”

Colin closed the remaining distance between them and wrapped his fingers around her shoulder.

“What do you mean, Jane? Has something happened that I should know about?”

Jane pushed his hands off her although she wished only to wrap them tighter around herself, push into him, and tell him how sorry she was for the words that she uttered. Instead, she watched as they fell to his side.

He can’t know. I can’t put him in danger, too.

“There is nothing that you should concern yourself with, Colin. I am merely unhappy and while I have tried to be, I simply cannot force it anymore.”

The words coming out of her felt like bile burning the inside of her throat. But Jane would never forgive herself if something happened to him.

His brows had furrowed in confusion and surprise when she'd suddenly blurted that out and now, it deepened, changing his face.

“What do you mean? In the time that you have been here, your smile has been bright. You’ve enjoyed the company of the children as they have come to enjoy yours, too?” he stated emphatically.

Jane shook her head.

“No, Colin. I have only done what you asked of me. You married me because you wanted someone who would teach your nieces and I have done as you asked but that does not mean that I have been happy.”

Colin’s face fell. She could see the confusion in his eyes as he stared at her, wondering what had gone wrong.

She held her hands behind her back as she spoke. How could she tell him the truth? He would set out to find Graham if she did.

A part of her wanted to tell him and hoped that he would so she would be free of the monster, however, she could not. Not when it could result in Colin’s harm. She couldn’t see how else this would go.

“Jane, whatever it is that has caused you to come to this decision, I’m sure we can come to a decision that does not involve you leaving.”

Jane bit her lip to stop the tears that stung at her eyes. She did not think he could hear it himself, but the desperation in his voice was very clear to her. She had never heard him sound like that.

Does he want me to stay that terribly?

She closed her eyes and sighed. I cannot.

“I believe there is nothing to be said that could change my mind, Colin. I have thought long and hard about this,” she answered. But she needed to be sure he would let go. “Surely, you do not think me incapable of making my own decisions and standing by them that you would seek to argue this,” she added.

He stepped back as though she had struck him and stared at her like she was a stranger he was only just seeing for the first time.

“Would you choose to see me as a monster who does not respect you, Jane?” he asked. “Have I given you reason to believe that I would not respect your wishes?”

She remained silent although a part of her begged her to apologize for her words that had clearly struck a nerve.

“I do not accuse you of being a monster, Colin. I merely speak from my heart. I do not wish to be in a marriage with you any longer. I am quite unhappy and unfulfilled.”

She walked up to him and looked him in the eyes.

“I merely wish to be free of this torment in my heart every time I remember that I am stuck in a marriage that I do not wish to be in, Your Grace.”

Colin sucked in a breath at her use of his title instead of his name and closed his eyes for a moment. She'd known the repercussion of doing that. When he opened them, her heart sank. She knew that he would grant her what she wanted because he would never try to be the reason for her pain.

It was what she wanted and yet, every part of her begged her to scream at him that

she had been wrong and she did not want to be apart from him for a moment.

“Jane,” his tone was pleading.

He took her head in his hand when she turned away from him and held her gaze.

Her body ached to let out a sigh as she relaxed into his hands, instead she defied her feelings and pulled away from his reach, remaining silent.

His jaw ticked wildly and his eyes seemed lost. He nodded.

“Very well. I will give you what you want.”

He clasped his hands behind his back and Jane noticed everything about him change. Gone was the man she had come to love.

“We will get the annulment as quickly as possible if that is what it will take for you to be happy again. The girls...” he paused and Jane wanted to cry. They would be heartbroken. “I will explain the situation to them.” I will never be happy again.

Her world had been destroyed right in front of her and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“Thank you,” she murmured, her voice like a whisper that carried into the still of the night, haunting and filled with so much of her fears.

If only things could have been different. We would have been happy together.

“Goodnight, Lady Jane.”

He turned away before she could say anything although there was nothing to be said.

This was the end of her happiest moments. “Goodnight, Colin,” she whispered, as she watched him go.

She stood frozen in place. She deserved the misery she was feeling after what she had done. But she had no choice.

I have to become the villain to keep them all safe.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:41 am

Jane stepped out of her carriage into the familiar lands of the Stonehave manor, immediately met with the sight of her father and sister in the distance, expressions of shock and disbelief fixed on their faces.

She let out a tired sigh. Despite having sent a letter ahead to avoid immediate reactions, their astonishment still appeared incomparable. Not that she could blame them. It was shocking to her as well that she'd truly ended up at this point.

"Thank you, Williamson," She acknowledged the coachman as he began immediately unloading her luggage.

"Jane!"

She drew in a deep breath as Sarah's voice sounded merely a couple feet away, her footsteps pattering louder by the second.

Of all the explanations she had set out to give, she hadn't managed to perfect her performance for her sister. Sarah knew her all too well. It would be hopeless to lie. Yet, she wasn't sure if it was safe to let her know about the truth either.

"Jane."

When she turned, she was face-to-face with her elder sister's worried and anxious expression. Sarah, unable to contain the curiosity seeping from her, grabbed Jane's hands and shook her head in confusion. "Oh dear sister, what is happening?. Tell me this is all a misunderstanding. Surely, it cannot be true?"

Doing her best to keep her calm, Jane jumped past the questions and greeted her sister with a smile, "Greetings, dearest Sarah, it is good to see you again."

Then swiftly and smoothly, she shifted her eyes away from Sarah and back to her coachman as she instructed, "Do make sure all my belongings are taken inside properly, please. You may as well call on the servants to help you, they are quite a lot."

"Of course, my lady."

With a small smile, Jane nodded and her eyes began roaming everywhere other than where her sister stood before her, waiting. She made her nose scrunch in confusion as she replied with another question, desperate to stall the topic as long as she could.

"Where are all the servants anyway?"

Sarah shook her head. "Father instructed them to stay in the house and not come to offer their services unless they are called upon."

Jane's heart plummeted as she realized the situation she was in once again. She sighed; there was nothing she could do other than face the storm now.

"Now, putting all that aside," Obviously still in shock from the events unfolding before her eyes, Sarah implored Jane to pause. "Father said you sent a letter, sister. You must tell me, is it true that you are ending your marriage with the duke?"

Jane stood there, feeling the weight of Sarah's worried gaze upon her. She looked at her sister, her mouth opening and closing as she struggled to find the right words.

There was nothing else to say other than to agree, however, doing such would only serve to make the situation true. Somehow, not yet saying the words made it seem as

though all this was a bad dream and she could still return to Colin as his wife.

"Is it... Did the duke do something to you? It's impossible that any of this is true, right? It must be some sort of misunderstanding?" Sarah paused, and a surge of anger seemed to flash behind her eyes as she continued, "But rest assured sister, if he did indeed hurt you in any way, I would let Father know and make sure-"

"Oh no, sister, please," In response, Jane quickly reassured her, "No, the duke did not do anything wrong, nor harm me in any manner."

The gravity of the situation weighed heavily on her as she gazed at her sister, whose worried eyes held even more questions at this revelation. Taking a deep breath, Jane opened her mouth and allowed the words as she finally admitted.

"Yes, it's true. I ended my marriage with the duke, and I have returned home."

. "For what reason?"

Jane hesitated for a moment, contemplating her response. She glanced around at the bustling activity of the servants moving about them. Even if she was going to let her sister in on the situation, it was not the right time or place for the conversation.

With a small sigh, she shook her head, indicating to Sarah that it was a private matter to not be discussed in the open.

Sarah's eyes widened slightly; having followed hers for the few seconds she was staring at the movements about. She nodded slowly, and gave Jane's hands another gentle squeeze.

Both sisters turned, and nearly immediately locked eyes with their father in the distance, his expression of intense irritation unmistakable as he glared their way.

Sarah, offering silent support, gently squeezed Jane's shoulder and whispered, "It shall be fine. You need not worry."

Jane simply nodded, clinging unto the beacon of light that came from being in her sister's presence as they slowly made their way towards their father.

Upon reaching Henry, his glare pierced through Jane as he demanded immediately, "And what do you think you're doing?" His tone boomed his disappointment and anger. "Why would you return to my estate when you have very clearly and openly already been married off?"

Jane had well expected this. Feeling the weight of his accusatory gaze, she remained silent, unable to muster a defense for her actions. After all, he was the last person she could trust to share the truth with.

After a tense moment of silence, Henry's voice lowered as he took a step forward, glaring down at Jane intensely, "I am horribly disappointed in you." There was so much sincerity in his tone as he spoke.

"I knew you were a problem, but I certainly had neither the idea nor expectation you would turn out to be this much of a disgrace."

Jane's heart sank at his harsh words, each syllable cutting deeper. With her head bent, she blinked rapidly, doing her best to prevent the tears that quickly began gathering at the corners of her eyes.

Sarah's gentle squeeze did little for soothing at this point.

"Father, I'm sure she's tired from setting out so early. Perhaps, it would be better to discuss this situation during the--"

“Shut your mouth, child. I am not nearly finished with her!” Henry’s sudden bellow echoed around the area, causing both girls to shrink into silence.

Jane braced herself for the difficult conversation that lay ahead. Her choices had led her to this moment of tongue-lashing from her father. There was nothing more to do than to take it.

Henry's harsh words cut through the air as he admonished her once again, "You should be ashamed for leaving your home and your husband! Do you hear me? It's not nearly been half a year since you got married, yet here you are!"

His accusations continued, feeling like hot coal against Jane’s skin as he lashed out at her without restraint, "Yet, I should not be surprised after all. No man would tolerate you, not with that unbridled tongue of yours. I'm certain the duke sent you away, and who could blame him?"

He snarled as he took a step closer, yelling in her face, “You were a duchess! A duchess! You would never come to such an achievement ever again, you were to know this, yet, you squandered it all!”

"We do not know what went wrong yet, let's not jump to conclusions, Father." Sarah’s voice asserted.

Her sharp, clear tone called forth a new form of tension as Henry and Jane turned towards her in shock. Jane wondered if her ears were playing tricks on her. For the first time, her sister’s gaze met their father’s unabashedly, clearly challenging him.

Henry's frown deepened as he squinted at Sarah and spoke, "And why do you think your sister didn't clarify in her letter why she was coming back?"

Sarah’s face formed a frown as she opened her mouth to respond, "If she could not

tell the truth via the letter, she certainly would not be saying it now."

Cutting off Sarah's attempt to speak again, Henry turned to Jane, his eyes piercing, his tone daring as he questioned, "Aren't I correct in my assumptions?"

Jane's eyes fell to the floor. Speaking to Henry in any form might have her living on the streets. Despite how it hurt, she swallowed her words and kept silent.

"And there it is!" He let out a shocked laughter, "You could not keep this attitude around your husband, could you?"

Sarah's protective instinct seemed to flare as she drew Jane close, her voice firm as she snapped at their father, "Stop talking to Jane like that. You have no idea what she might have gone through."

Both Henry and Jane's jaws tilted slightly at her fierceness. However, Henry managed to recompose himself quicker, laughing and sputtering with rage flashing in his eyes. "You have no room to talk, either. Your only option for marriage is gone due to your unworthiness!"

Jane's eyes widened at this, and she turned to Sarah once more, "Graham broke off the engagement?"

Before Sarah could respond, Henry gnarled through gritted teeth, "Seems I was cursed with unsuccessful women And here I have been, doing my best to keep your failed engagement discreet, and this is how I'm repaid!"

"As I had been saying earlier, I shall take Jane inside and help her get settled. We can discuss as a family when emotions are not so high."

Henry's eyes were nearly popping out their sockets, stunned by Sarah's sudden

boldness. He struggled to react, only managing to call out for them to return as the girls had already made their way to the door.

Ignoring Henry's yells, Sarah rushed in with Jane, without making a stop, headed straight for her room. Only when they were settled and Jane had eaten, did Sarah speak up again.

"Now that you're a spinster again, I fear you'll have to pay more attention to staying away from Graham, sister." Her face twisted in distaste, she continued, "There's something terribly wrong with the man."

At the mention of his name, Jane stared at her sister blankly. Already feeling overwhelmed from all that had happened, the words fell out of her mouth before she could stop them.

"Graham threatened to harm you and Colin's nieces if I don't end my marriage with Colin."

Sarah's mouth froze as it was open, her face displaying shock, fear, disgust, and realization as she fought to process Jane's words.

As she had said it, Jane continued to pour everything out, her voice cracking as she disclosed the painful truth. "He is the reason I'm seeking an annulment, nothing else."

"Does the Duke..."

"Colin does not know about this, and I can't tell him because I'm afraid of what Graham might do."

Sarah, deeply moved by her sister's plight, expressed her shock and sympathy, her eyes telling her she understood the gravity of the situation. She nodded her head

vehemently as she spoke, "I knew that man was a scam."

Jane was drowning with guilt as she reached out for her sister's hands, "I am so sorry for what you had to go through because of me. He only came after you to get to me."

"Oh, that was all too clear." Sarah, with conviction, reassured her, "You were never at fault. He is severely disturbed, and you are not to blame for that."

Sarah's eyes betrayed her anger as she directed her frustration towards Henry, proclaiming, "It's all father's fault for not listening to either of us. All he cared about was making Graham his son-in-law. He could have put an end to this obsession, and-" Her eyes were frantic as they returned to Jane, insisting, "Sister, you must talk to the duke about this."

Jane shook her head, struggling with the tears that attacked her eyes again. "I will not risk those little girl's lives, neither yours. This is for the best."

Sarah tried to interject once more, but Jane cut her sister off, "Please, sister. All I need is some time alone."

When Sarah left, she curled up on her bed and shut her eyes, doing her best to stop her tears from flowing.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:41 am

“I cannot say that I know how you feel but I am sorry that you have gone through all of this, Colin,” Mark said, shaking his head as Colin filled him in on all that had happened.

It had been a few days since Jane left his home after the grueling conversation they had in the drawing room. He snorted.

“How could she say that she felt trapped? All I have ever done is ensure that she is happy and that my nieces have a woman in their life that would care for them and teach them how to behave like proper women. How is it that she feels trapped?”

Mark heaved a breath and clapped him on the back, handing him another glass of whiskey.

“I cannot claim to know the mind of a woman. Perhaps what you believed to be freedom, she saw as different. I wish I could say that she would see the advantage of her marriage to you and return but I do not wish to lie to you.”

Colin looked at his friend and rolled his eyes.

“You sure do know how to comfort a friend when he is down.”

He threw his head back and poured the stiff drink into his mouth, wincing as it burned all the way down. He welcomed the sting it brought, hoping it would distract him from the pain in his heart.

“I had hoped that she would remain in my home until after the annulment had been

finalized before leaving to return to her father's house. Perhaps it would have given me enough time to show her that I love her and perhaps she loves me too and we could find a way to work this out and be happy together."

He got up from his chair to pour himself another drink and sighed as he swirled the golden liquid in the glass. It had done nothing to help his situation, instead, it seemed to have him more focused on his feelings and what he had lost.

Colin still could not fathom how this was his life. How could things have gone horribly wrong so suddenly? Finding out he was in love with her had been quite terrifying for him. Dealing with his feelings had been even worse.

Colin had only managed to come to terms with his love for her and his decision to tell her about how he felt after speaking to his grandmother but he hadn't been given the opportunity to do so.

He had been robbed of his moment when she told him she wanted an annulment.

"I wish she had given me an opportunity to tell her that I love her," he said, voicing the thought that had plagued him since she left.

He'd had dreams of that night over and over again, except in his dreams, he had told her that he loved her. Her reaction to his feelings was never the same.

On some days, she was happy and reciprocated his feelings, putting an end to any talk of annulment while on other days, she had laughed in his face before telling him that it hadn't been part of their arrangement when he sought her hand and she could never love him back. "I do not know how long I can fake being happy in front of Margaret and Louisa. I can tell that they have begun to suspect that Jane will not be coming back. What am I supposed to tell them has caused her to leave?"

“Perhaps you do not need to tell them anything yet. You should take some time to yourself and feel better and then you can broach the topic in a way that will not hurt them.”

Colin shook his head. He could already see the hurt in their eyes when he told them the truth. The girls had already been abandoned so many times already. He did not want them to feel that way again. He doubted they would recover from it this time.

“The girls are going to be hurt no matter what I say. They have been through a lot already but they welcomed her and loved her. It would hurt them to know that she left. For now, they think she has only gone to visit her family. I do not know how long I can continue to sell them that lie before they realize that she is not coming back.”

It hurt that things might have to come to that, however, he could not blame her leaving if she did not feel satisfied. Although there was a part of him that simply could not believe it to be true.

“I cannot for the life of me believe that she was truly unhappy with me. Perhaps that makes me egotistical but it is a matter that boggles my mind. Jane has never been one to shy from saying her mind. If she truly was unhappy, I do not think she would have faked a smile for my sake.”

Mark listened in silence as his friend lamented his woes. He hummed as he took in all that Colin had said.

“Perhaps it is not for you that she faked her happiness but for the sake of the children and she merely could not take it anymore,” he said.

Colin looked at him in amusement despite the pain he felt.

“You really are quite terrible at consolation, aren’t you?”

Mark laughed. “I believe in the truth and the truth is that I do not know for certain how she feels. I wish to console you and tell you that all will be right but I cannot do so as you would know it to be a lie.”

Colin nodded. “You’re quite right. It is for that reason that I am speaking to you about this.”

Mark held his chest comically, trying to lighten the mood.

“You mean to say that you have not asked me because of my amazing conversation skill and dashing handsomeness?”

Colin glared at him as his lips curved slightly.

“Perhaps it is time you took your dashing handsomeness and headed home. It is night time after all,” he joked back but Mark merely waved him off, taking no offence and paying him no mind.

“Your Grace, you have a visitor.”

Colin’s heart skipped a beat as his thought first went to his wife but then he frowned. There was no need for her to come see him at night. Not when she could meet him during the day.

“Who is it?” he asked, looking at his friend who mirrored his confusion.

“It is Lady Sarah, Your Grace,” the valet responded.

Colin jumped to his feet.

“Let her in.”

The valet left, quickly returning with Sarah who had wrapped herself in a cloak.

“Lady Sarah, I admit I am quite surprised to see you here, especially at this time of the night,” he said, motioning for her to take a seat.

He took a seat and looked at Mark who was staring at Sarah with so much interest.

Colin smiled and pointed at him.

“Lady Sarah, this is the Earl of Ashbourne, Mark Harding. Mark, Lady Sarah, my wif- Jane’s sister.”

Colin stared off into space in embarrassment at almost calling Jane his wife. While the two had not yet been separated legally, there was no point in calling her his wife any more since she wanted nothing to do with him.

“Pleasure to meet you, Lady Sarah,” Mark said, bowing with a flourish. He stared at her with a grin and a sparkle in his eyes.

“Thank you, Lord Ashbourne,” she said, curtsying slightly.

Colin shook his head. He knew exactly what his friend was thinking. While Mark was a flirt, he was never truly interested in knowing ladies as he did not wish to be trapped by overzealous mamas, however, his interest in Sarah was unmistakable.

Mark’s gaze lingered on her, prompting a smile from Colin who watched the event play out with interest.

“Lady Sarah, I must admit you shine brighter than the stars that grace the sky on this

very night,” he said poetically.

Lady Sarah’s cheeks reddened. “I do not quite believe that you have been out long enough to see the night sky otherwise you would know that the sky is quite bare of stars tonight.”

She turned to face Colin who found it difficult to hide his smile.

“Ah, I suppose I must apologize for my unintentional slight, my lady. Perhaps you will allow me redeem myself. You are like a flower that blooms in the summer, bright and colorful and gracing the world with your beauty.”

Lady Sarah blushed some more, however, her lips remained firmly sealed in a straight line.

“Thank you for your kind words, Lord Ashbourne, but I must speak with His Grace,” she said, cutting him off harshly.

Mark smiled not at all put off by her words. He motioned for her to carry on with what she wished to say and sat in a chair, content to sip his drink.

“What do you wish to speak about, Lady Sarah?” Colin asked, utterly curious.

Surely it had something to do with Jane and if that was the case, he was quite eager to hear it.

“I have some concerning information that I fear I must let you know. I believe it will change how you feel about my sister’s decision to annul your marriage. She is not aware that I am here but I couldn’t let this go on for longer, not if waiting might lead to something dire.”

Colin sat forward in his seat when he heard the graveness in her tone and because of the look on her face.

“What has happened?”

Sarah stood and paced the length of the floor.

“I recently found out why Jane chose to put an end to your marriage. My courtship with Lord Graham was a ploy by him to get close to my sister. He made sure that I could not say a word by threatening to harm her and now, he has done the same to her. Lord Graham is threatening Jane.”

“What?”

Colin shot up from his seat as his anger began to build. All this time, he knew that everything seemed wrong and did not believe that she would willingly seek to end their marriage and now, he had proof of that.

“I fear that is not all, Your Grace,” Sarah said, halting the angry rant he was about to spew.

“Lord Graham threatens to harm your nieces if she does not annul her marriage and leave you to be with him. He plans to elope with her and force her into a marriage she has no desire to be in.”

Colin’s mouth fell open and he stopped in his tracks.

“She did this for my nieces?”

His voice held amazement. He truly was amazed by how much she cared about his family. She had gone out of her way to ensure her safety, even if it involved denying

himself of happiness.

“She loves you and your nieces, Your Grace. She will do anything to ensure that she keeps you all safe, even if that means denying herself of happiness.”

Colin has never felt so angry in his life. “Graham will pay for what he has done to my wife,” he vowed.

He took the last sip of his drink and got up to exit the room.

“Thank you for letting me know. I’ll have my carriage prepared for you. In the meantime, I have somewhere I need to be.”

“Where are you headed?” Mark, who had remained silent in all of this asked suddenly.

“To find Graham. Surely that must have been quite obvious.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “I know that you are angry but you cannot go looking for him without a plan.”

“He threatened my wife and nieces, Mark.”

“Yes, however, without a plan you will come off like a mad man to the ton.”

Colin opened his mouth to argue but Mark held up his hand.

“I understand that you wish to seek revenge and you will, however, you must do it in a way that ensures he is out of your lives forever. A man like him will not take kindly to being embarrassed and just might seek to wreak havoc,” Mark advised.

Colin slowed down and sighed. “What do you advise I do?”

“Perhaps it is worth mentioning that Jane will be meeting Graham tomorrow,” Sarah added.

Colin turned to her just as Mark snapped his fingers.

“There. Tonight you plan and tomorrow, you make him pay.”

Colin nodded after some deliberation. He turned to Sarah.

“Thank you, Sarah. I promise I will take care of this. He will not be escaping after all that he has done.”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:41 am

Jane was filled with dread as her carriage rolled into the Pennington estate the following day to deliver the news of the annulment as she had been instructed to.

Usually she would be unable to visit a man alone, but as a married woman she had the privilege to move as she liked without a chaperone.

As she emerged from the carriage, her eyes fixated on the imposing building, her heart was heavy with the realization that she was on the brink of solidifying a future with Graham.

The weight of the events to come made her legs weak, but she steeled herself, knowing she had no choice but to face him.

As she stepped into the house, she was immediately met by the butler, who greeted her warmly. "Welcome, Lady Jane. The Marquess is expecting you."

The address reminded her once again that she was no longer the duchess and would likely never be anymore. However, the man's kind smile offered a brief moment of respite in the midst of her worries.

"This way."

Despite her entire bodily reluctance, Jane mustered her courage, swallowing her apprehension as she nodded in acknowledgment and followed his lead.

As she ventured through the unfamiliar halls of the Pennington home, her eyes darted around, taking in the surroundings she had never seen before. Compared to the

grandeur of the Montford estate she had grown fond of, the modesty of the Pennington residence struck her somewhat oddly.

A pang of sadness gripped her heart at the realization that this humble abode would now be her new dwelling, likely never setting foot in Montford again.

The butler guided her through the corridors until they stopped at a grand door, where he turned to her with a warm smile and spoke, "The Marquess eagerly awaits your presence, my lady."

Overwhelmed with different emotions, Jane found she could no longer speak, so she simply nodded in silent acknowledgment, her thoughts swirling with uncertainty.

After the butler excused himself, she stood alone before the imposing door, gathering her courage before she raised her hand to knock.

"You can come in."

A shiver of dread ran down her spine at the familiar, chilling voice that beckoned her inside.

Heart pounding, she pushed the door open to find Graham seated at his desk in the study, his eyes alight with excitement and indescribable lust. His presence alone was suffocating, his smile baring manipulative undertones.

With a welcoming gesture, he urged her, "Step forward, my darling."

The affectionate term felt like insects crawling all over her body. Taking a deep breath, Jane approached the desk where he sat, doing her best to calm her shaking hands. She greeted him softly, "Good day, Lord Pennington."

Anxious to leave as quickly as she could, she delivered the news she had come to share, keeping her voice steady as she informed him, "I have done as you demanded. I have severed ties with the duke and obtained an annulment."

A twisted grin crept across Graham's face and his eyes gleamed with a malevolent joy as he exclaimed, "Marvelous news!"

Seemingly overwhelmed with happiness, he leaped from his seat, closing the distance between them in a rush of elation. Startled, Jane instinctively took a step back, her heart pounding with fear.

Observing her reaction, Graham's expression flickered with a hint of annoyance, quickly replaced by his usual sickly charming smile.

"We shall depart as soon as the formalities are concluded," He declared with excitement, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. He sighed softly as he eyed her, "Finally, we will be together forever, my love."

Feeling trapped and desperate to escape, Jane mustered the strength to utter, "Yes, I shall go get my belongings ready."

With a trembling resolve, she turned to leave, her steps quickening in a bid to put distance between herself and Graham's menacing presence.

Unfortunately, before she could make her escape, his hand shot out, gripping her own with a force that made her heart plummet in her chest.

His voice, low and husky, slithered into her ears like a venomous serpent, "Where do you think you're going?"

Jane's voice quivered as she replied, "I- I have to leave to prepare. I said so."

Her attempts to free herself were futile as his grip tightened, pulling her closer to him with a cruel force that made her cry out in pain and terror.

She fought to keep away the tears that threatened to stream down her face, her only available defiance against the sheer horror events unfolding before her.

"Stop squirming and look at me, woman!" His words filled with such dominance and cruelty, echoed in the air.

Her throat threatened to expose her tears as she pleaded with desperation, "Please, let me go, Lord Pennington, I beg of you. Release me! This is unacceptable, Lord Pennington! Please!"

With a menacing glare, his voice thundered through the room, "Unacceptable? Are you not to be my wife soon?!" His words dripped with possessiveness and entitlement, "Don't you dare play games with me, woman! I can do as I wish with you, you are mine!"

His fingers dug deeper into her skin and Jane's cries filled the room as a surge of adrenaline coursed through her veins. In a moment of instinctual self-preservation, she lashed out, delivering a swift kick to his leg.

A groan escaped his lips as he momentarily loosened his grip, giving her a flicker of hope.

However, just as she turned to flee, his wrath flared anew. His fingers dug deeper into her skin as he yanked her back to his side, seething, "You're going to regret that!"

The sharp pain of his nails cutting into her flesh elicited a piercing scream from Jane, the sound of anguish and fear echoing past the study.

Suddenly, the door burst open with a resounding bang, and to both her and Graham's surprise, Colin stormed into the room, his voice a thunderous roar as he demanded, "Let go of my wife, you worthless cad!"

Colin's fury erupted as he landed a powerful blow on Graham's face, sending him reeling backward and instantly loosening his grip on Jane. Jane, in a state of shock, began sobbing uncontrollably as Colin hoisted Graham up once more.

He shouldn't be here!

Her breath caught as she saw his arm, ready to deliver another punishing punch to Graham. Just then, the timely arrival of the constable intervened, bringing a swift end to the chaos unfolding in the room.

As Graham was apprehended, he spat out vile profanities, his voice laced with venom, "You'll pay for this, you coward! She was mine from the start! You believe this to be the end? I will have my revenge! You will pay for this!"

Colin's voice cut through the chaos, firm and resolute, "You should thank your stars the constable showed up in time. For I swear I would have made you swallow that tongue of yours."

As soon as Graham was out of sight, Colin gently pulled Jane into his embrace, her tears flowing uncontrollably as he tried to soothe her. "You're safe now..."

All the emotions Jane had been keeping in came pouring out in the form of her tears. She clung unto her husband, weeping continuously and freely.

"You should have told me what was happening, Jane," He murmured softly, his voice filled with concern. "I'm your husband, and I'm here to protect you, I will always be here to protect you."

He continued to reassure her, his words filled with tenderness and determination as he held her.

Amidst Jane's tears, she opened her mouth, everything pouring out along with her cracks and sniffles, "I'm so sorry, Colin. I was scared, and I thought agreeing to Graham's demands would be the best solution for everyone."

"I would have given everything up to keep you all safe. But I was weak." she hiccupped as she pulled away, her eyes red and voice wavering with emotion. "Deep down, I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. The pain of it all was unbearable, Colin, it was oh, so unbearable..."

Colin's gaze was filled with adoration as he wiped a tear from her face, his voice soft as he spoke, "You will always be mine, and I will always be yours."

With a tender touch, he released their embrace, still holding her hand affectionately.

"I love you, Jane," He confessed, his voice brimming with sincerity. "I've loved you for so long."

Her heart raced uncontrollably at his heartfelt words, emotions soaring at the declaration. A new wave of tears erupted as she reciprocated, "And I love you, I love you too, Colin."

Colin's lips landed on hers. And everything felt right in the world. She forgot everything that happened. She forgot her fear, her desperation, her anger towards Graham. None of them mattered! For he was holding her tight and meant every word he said, every word she so desperately wanted to hear.

The soft caress of his lips left her, but his face remained close. And she could still feel his erratic breathing. Neither wanted the moment to end.

“Ahem.”

Jane’s brow raised slightly at the sight of the unfamiliar man standing at the door. But before she could question, the man announced triumphantly, "Graham is gone now, and he will never bother you again."

"And was it truly necessary to state the obvious?" Jane could hear some irritation in his voice. He must have felt the same thing she was feeling.

“It was only right I interrupted.” The man raised an eyebrow at him as he admonished, "As a duke, it is improper to engage in such activities in a house that isn't yours." His emphasis on the words caused Jane's cheeks to flush with embarrassment.

The trouble from before seemingly forgotten, Colin began a playful banter with the man and Jane stood by observing the exchange between the two men in quiet amusement.

“Oh, we shall continue this conversation another time,” At last, the man shushed Colin. Turning back to Jane with a wide smile, he introduced himself, "I am Mark Harding, Earl of Ashbourne."

With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, he added, "And your husband’s only friend, given his terrible attitude. It is quite a pleasure to finally meet you."

Jane let out a laugh at his remark and warmly greeted him, expressing her delight at finally meeting him in return.

“Your sister...”

They were making their way out of the Pennington estate when Mark suddenly turned

to Jane once more, his eyes heavily inquisitive as he asked, "Might I know if she's engaged or in the process of courting anyone new?"

Jane's eyes widened at the unexpected question and she raised a brow as she replied, "Not that I know of, no."

"Ah, well that is... Excellent news." Mark nodded, a smile that caused her brows to shift even higher playing on his lips.

When they arrived home at last, Jane rushed through the door, her heart brimming with joy at the sight of Margaret and Louisa. They enveloped in a warm embrace, their words filled with love and longing as they gushed at each other.

"We missed you so much. Oh, please do not ever leave us again."

"I will never my darlings, I am so sorry." Jane pulled little Louisa into a tighter hug, her heart leaping with joy from the embrace.

"Yes, and you must apologize to Uncle Colin as well, he missed you tremendously more!" Margaret pointed towards Colin in the corner.

"Is that so?" Jane laughed lightly, turning to find her husband's face crimson.

"Oh yes! Uncle Colin clearly felt it the worst." Louisa chimed in immediately. Her words painted a vivid picture of Colin's struggles in her absence, "He looked terrible every day!"

"He did not eat, nor wash or sleep properly. He walked around looking like a starving butler." Margaret nodded as she added.

"Is that true?" Colin's cheeks flushed even deeper when Jane playfully teased him,

"Can you truly not live without me now?"

"Yes, indeed." To her surprise, his response was swift.

Jane couldn't help but blush furiously, her cheeks aflame with the intensity of her emotions.

Amidst Margaret and Louisa's delighted squeals, her nervous laughter rang through the room.

Margaret's little surprised face at her uncle's confession mirrored Jane's.

Her heart continued to beat rapidly as her husband pulled her aside once they were done with the girls.

Her cheeks were flushed as he towered over her with a gaze she had seen only a couple of times.

With a gentle pull at her waist, he drew her close, planting a soft kiss on her lips, leaving her gasping in delightful surprise, her eyes wide as he pulled away with a smile.

"My wife is back, I can finally live in peace and happiness, can't I?"

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:41 am

“One day, you will have to tell me where you find the funds for your infamous parties,” Anna said, laughing as she sipped her lukewarm tea.

She and the Countess of Grayling had gotten so lost in their conversation, that she had quite forgotten to drink the tea before it cooled. A common problem when she met with the countess for one of their fortnightly afternoons. A woman of many names—the Countess of Grayling, the Sorceress, the Silver Widow, the Cunning Countess—but Anna knew her simply as Beatrice: friend, mentor, and fount of all society knowledge.

Beatrice chuckled and tapped the side of her nose. “I could not possibly. I trust the vault of your loyalty entirely, dearest Anna, but once a secret is shared it is no longer a secret. It amuses me to keep people guessing.” She hesitated, flashing one of her delightfully wicked grins. “But I shall tell you this—it is a far duller secret than anyone suspects.”

“I shall not relent until I find out.” Anna smiled, taking a bite of a lemon cake. “But speaking of dull, did you see that dear Lady Emily has found a husband at last?”

Beatrice gasped, scandalized. “I am surprised at you, Anna, calling a poor soul like Lady Emily ‘dull.’ It is most unbecoming.”

“No, no, that is not what I meant!” Anna’s hand flew to her chest, a ripple of horror running through her. “I meant, because you find talk of marriage and engagements so dull. Goodness, I would never call a fellow woman something so unkind!”

Beatrice smiled and reached over to pat Anna on the arm. “I was only teasing, dear

friend. That was unkind of me.”

“I doubt I shall ever grow accustomed to your sense of humor.” Anna relaxed, her heart returning to a more ordinary beat.

She would have insulted herself before she insulted another woman, especially one who had, until recently, been in her position of spinsterhood. Indeed, she knew better than anyone what it was like to be a wallflower of society. Worse, an unmarriageable. At six-and-twenty, she was well beyond the age of being anyone’s first choice, and as the years had gone on, she had come to confirm what she had long suspected—that she would never be anyone’s choice, first or last, or anything in-between.

Beatrice insisted that it was a liberating situation, but her situation was not the same as Anna’s. For one thing, Beatrice was twenty years her senior, though she did not look it. For another, Beatrice had been married, and when her old, cruel, vile husband had died, she had petitioned the Royal Court to gain the title of Countess of Grayling in her own right. How she had managed it was another secret that no one knew the answer to, though Anna hoped that she might be privy to that information one day. Not that it would change anything for her.

“What manner of husband has Lady Emily found for herself?” Beatrice prompted.

Anna smiled. “A fine gentleman. The Viscount Marchmont. They were friends in their youth, but the Viscount married another. He had been a widower for some years when he happened to meet Lady Emily again, just three months ago. At one of your balls, in truth. It was love at second meeting! I received an invitation to their wedding this morning.”

“And Lady Emily has never been married?”

Anna shook her head. “She is rather like me, I suspect.”

“This has been happening rather a lot of late, do you not think?” Beatrice toyed with the pearls at her throat, deep in thought. “In the past year alone, I have read of countless matches that have seemingly emerged from nowhere. Yes, I remember reading an article about it.”

She twisted on the drawing room settee, sifting through a small pile of papers on the table beside her. She plucked the telltale rectangle of the scandal sheets from the stack and smoothed it out on her lap, eyes darting left and right as she skimmed the words for what she was looking for.

“Here it is!” She passed the sheets to Anna. “What do you make of that?”

It was a short half-page regarding a mysterious figure called ‘The Matchmaker’ who had worked miracles for the ladies of the ton, particularly those who might otherwise have been overlooked:

Nobody knows their identity, but for the past two seasons, she has brought hope to the hopeless, marriage to the unmarried, and salvation to countless spinsters. It is said that you cannot go to this mystery Cupid, but they will come to you in your hour of greatest need, in the form of letters suggesting one’s ideal match and signed ‘The Matchmaker.’ All you need do is give consent to proceed, and wedding bells will soon be tolling!

Anna’s eyes widened, her heart swelling in her chest. “I think one would have to ask Lady Emily if her impending marriage is a result of ‘The Matchmaker.’ Perhaps, she has been told not to say.”

“I should like to meet her. The Matchmaker, I mean,” Beatrice said.

Anna raised an eyebrow. “You are reconsidering your position?”

“Mercy, no!” Beatrice burst out laughing. “However, I am intrigued by such a woman. Her rate of success is unheard of. Famous matchmakers have come and gone, but I have never seen anything like this.”

Anna tilted her head, rereading the article to see if she had missed something. “What makes you certain it is a woman?”

“Only a woman would do this for the women that society has cast aside,” Beatrice replied solemnly. “A man would say, ‘Hard luck, ladies’ and concentrate on pairing the debutantes and beauties with sickeningly wealthy old men. A man would work for the benefit of the men, not the women.”

Anna could see the wisdom, and no small amount of the resentment, in her friend’s words. Beatrice spoke very rarely of her time as a married woman, and everything she had done since her husband’s death had been an act of powerful defiance, no doubt partially driven by her desire to make her husband turn in his grave. At least, to begin with. And, sometimes, doing good deeds and inspiring things had no choice but to come from the darkest of places.

“I do wish she would hurry along and find me a match, then,” Anna said with a sigh, passing back the fortnight-old scandal sheets. “Although, I assume there is a rather long list, and I am nowhere near the top of it.”

A sad smile graced Beatrice’s lips. “I could find you a husband, if you would but ask me. I judge no one, dearest Anna. You know already that my own experience does not mean I am against the institution of marriage, and among your friends, I have seen some of the happiest examples of what marriage should be. An act of love. A promise of the heart, not the coffers.”

Anna’s own heart flinched a little, as it still did every time she thought of her beloved friends and their blissful unions. It had been several years since ‘The Spinsters’ Club’

had all actually been spinsters, and when Olivia, Leah, and Phoebe had found love, she had been overjoyed, championing their pursuit of romance with everything she possessed.

But when Matilda, her last ally in spinsterhood, had been forced into a marriage of convenience that had become a union of love, it had knocked her to her very foundations. She still was not certain she had recovered, though she was happy for Matilda and her husband, Albion. It just hurt to be the last spinster in The Spinsters' Club. And it hurt all the more, considering she was the only one of them who had never actually wanted to be a spinster in the first place. That had been a matter of shyness and circumstance.

"I think I am beyond such hopes," Anna confessed, adding with a laugh, "It would never be what my heart desires, either. I have read too many romantic novels and love stories to settle for anything less. I have poisoned myself with my own passions. However, my brother could certainly use the talents of this Matchmaker."

Beatrice sipped her tea, amusement dancing in her honey brown eyes. "Ah, whatever shall we do with dear Dickie? Always falling in and out of love. I suspect he secretly read some of your treasured books when you were younger, but missed the part pertaining to one powerful love, forever."

All Anna could do was chuckle at that, for she had long ago decided it did not serve her to keep despairing over her brother's rakish antics. She had tried to scold him, Max had tried to rein him in, but he had ignored both of them and done as he pleased anyway. It did not help that he was endlessly entertaining and charming, so it was impossible to stay angry at him.

"Apparently, he has changed his ways," Anna said, flashing her friend a pointed look. "He announced to me and Max at breakfast the other day that he fully intends to find a wife this season. I suspect it has something to do with Max's recent inheritance, and

a few brotherly threats that he will not petition the Royal Court if he does not change his ways.”

A distant relative had died a few months prior, leaving no heirs aside from Max. Having already inherited the title Earl of Greenfield from their father, Max had thought it rather too greedy to be both a Duke and an Earl, and had promised to petition for the title of Earl to pass to Dickie. Of course, it had come with a few stipulations, but society had already heard of what might be unfolding, making Dickie one of the most eligible bachelors in the country.

“I doubt he will struggle,” Beatrice said. “Not with the matching part. The marriage part might be slightly more difficult than he is anticipating, but at least he will have a title and a beautiful residence to soothe his sore eyes when they begin to wander. Nevertheless, I pity his wife, and he has not even met her yet.”

Anna nodded. “As do I. Although, we might be surprised. He might meet his match in more ways than one.”

“That would be a fine thing.” Beatrice grinned. “And what of Maximilian?”

Anna tilted her head from side to side. “Reluctant.”

Just then, the carriage clock on the mantelpiece chimed out three o’clock in the afternoon. The last soft ting made Anna sit straighter in her seat, a prickle of panic shooting up her spine.

“Oh, Beatrice, it has happened again! I swear, time moves too fast when I am here,” she cried, getting to her feet. “Goodness, Max will be cross with me. I am supposed to be back at the manor by four o’clock for the party.”

It was at least two hours from the Grayling Estate to Max’s new residence of

Harewood Court, and as it was Max's first garden party since accepting the title of Duke, she had promised she would be there.

"Your brother could never be cross with you," Beatrice assured, rising from the settee to lead Anna out. "Will I see you at the Westyork Ball next week?"

Anna nodded, quickening her pace. "I would not miss it."

"Nor would I." Beatrice pulled Anna in for a swift embrace as they reached the grand double doors of Grayling House. "Journey safely, dear Anna, and enjoy the garden party. I always think it is best to make a late, dramatic entrance anyway."

Anna chuckled. "I would not know how to be dramatic, even if I were shoved upon a stage."

"You could borrow a gown?" Beatrice's brown eyes twinkled with mischief.

"For Westyork, perhaps. Something red and bold." Anna snorted at the very idea of herself in one of Beatrice's striking ballgowns, dripping with jewels. "But I shall make no promises. It has been a delight, as always, but I really must hurry."

Beatrice followed her out to the carriage, acting as footman to open the door, much to the shock of the actual footman. "Will our old nemesis Percival be there? It is summer again, after all."

So jarred by the question that she nearly missed the edge of the squabs as she sat down, Anna's face contorted into a grim look. "I shall hope and pray that he is not, for the entirety of the journey."

Over the recent years of their unexpected friendship, she had told Beatrice everything about Percival, and had been endlessly grateful to have the older woman's support in

her hatred of the man. Mainly, during the times when she did not want to—or could not—bother the rest of the Spinsters' Club with her complaints.

“If he is there,” Beatrice said, “remember all I have taught you about such men. Make him rue the day he was born.” She flashed a wink and closed the door, banging on the side to let the driver know he could move away.

As the carriage began to rattle down the lengthy driveway, Anna slumped into the velvet squabs and clasped her hands tightly together, praying with all her might that she would be granted just one summer without a single glimpse of Percival Sinclair.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:41 am

“Still have trouble telling the time, Catchweed?” Percival’s voice greeted Anna like a blade on glass.

She had barely made it onto the wide terrace that bordered the immaculate lawns, barely managed to steel herself for the party, barely managed to shake off the fear that he would be there, and yet there he was, standing in front of her with a smirk on his lips.

At social gatherings, she had been forced to listen and simmer with irritation at other young ladies commenting on his remarkable good looks. She, however, could not see it. Yes, he was tall and possessed of an athletic physique, with broad shoulders and exemplary posture. Yes, he had silky chestnut brown hair that framed his chiseled face in gentle waves, and striking, dark green eyes that might have been considered beautiful, but all she saw was ugliness whenever he opened his mouth.

“Still have trouble circulating at parties?” she retorted, feeling the heat of the past two hours stuck in a carriage upon her skin. “Why are you always on the periphery, lurking as you do?”

It had been a year since she had last seen him, and it appeared nothing had changed.

He sipped his drink, but a tightness appeared around his eyes, as if he did not like what he had heard. It seemed Beatrice had been right—the only way to contend with arrogant, taunting men like this was to taunt them harder and with greater wit. She was no Matilda or Phoebe, quick with her tongue, but she was determined to do her best.

“The conversation bored me,” he said with a light shrug.

Anna sniffed. “In order to know if the conversation was dull, you would have to actually converse with your peers. Now that I think of it, I do not believe I have ever seen you do anything but trail my brother around at social occasions.” She paused, smiling. “Perhaps, you are the catchweed.”

“I see no reason to be the center of every conversation,” he replied, raising his eyebrow at her.

“Are you suggesting that I do?”

He smirked. “I would not dream of it, Buttercup.”

“Do not call me that. Do not call me anything but my name and title, as is proper. If you cannot do that, I shall have to consider calling you ‘Barnacle.’ I find that more fitting for you than Catchweed.” She put on the voice that her governess used when she was being particularly stubborn, feeling more comfortable in her authority than she had in years. All thanks to Beatrice.

He laughed tightly in the back of his throat. “Can you and I never be civil?”

“That depends entirely upon you, Barnacle,” she replied. “You are the one who seems intent on antagonizing me. Maybe, you have forgotten that you are a grown man now, and ought to behave accordingly.”

Percival eyed her. “And you should learn not to carry grudges.”

“What grudges?” She folded her arms across her chest and looked outward, if only to avoid Percival’s green eyes.

She searched the emerald lawns, where fine ladies and gentlemen reclined on picnic blankets, beneath canvas awnings, in the warmth of early evening. Platters and baskets had been picked clean of delicacies, the bare sight making her stomach rumble. A lake shimmered in the distance, the landscape truly beautiful, though not nearly as comforting as Greenfield House.

“It matters not,” Percival said evenly. “Now, I know the reason for your ire.”

She glanced at him with cold eyes. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I think everyone as far as London heard your stomach growl, just now.” Percival sipped his drink with a delight that rankled Anna. “Your brother was the same when we were at Eton—had a foul temper if he had not eaten. I suggest you scavenge for what is left before you say something truly unkind.”

It was rare for Anna to anger, and she could count on two hands the number of times she had actually lost her temper, but whenever she was around Percival, he seemed determined to increase that number. She was not even certain if he did it deliberately, or if he was just irritating and provoking by nature. Then again, he never behaved out of turn with Max or Dickie, so perhaps it was part of his nature that was aimed solely at the fairer sex.

“You are already much too thin,” he added. “You cannot afford to miss meals. I could venture inside and find?—”

“I did not ask for your opinion on my appearance,” Anna interrupted sharply. “Nor would I, even if you were the very last man in existence, every mirror had shattered, and every body of water had lost its ability to reflect.”

She stalked off without another word, fearful that if she lingered too much longer, she might do something that would cause a scandal. In her position, slapping a gentleman

that society deemed ‘respectable’ was neither in her nature nor of any benefit to the matter of her spinsterhood.

It had never been Percy’s intention to be at constant odds with Anna. He knew when it had begun and why, and supposed he was too deep into the pattern of behavior to bother trying to change it now. Indeed, he did not know how he would even attempt to be friendly with her.

Or why I allow her to be so... uncouth in my presence. He supposed it was similar to why gentlemen enjoyed fencing: light entertainment, excellent practice for real quarrels with ladies who interested him, and most of the time, he left feeling a sense of triumph. That, and they had known one another forever. The precedent had, unfortunately, already been set.

“Is that you, Sinclair?” Max’s voice called out from the terrace.

The golden early evening had dimmed to a starry, moonlit night, still carrying some of the warmth of the day, though Percy had settled himself beside a brazier to keep away the incoming chill. The garden party had dispersed, with some guests leaving for home and some others taking to their guest chambers to sleep off the wine and the sun, but, for the most part, he had been enjoying having the gardens to himself.

“It is! Come and join me!” Percy called back.

His heart sank as Anna stepped down from the terrace with her two brothers, and seated herself decisively in the lawn chair opposite him. She had been absent from the rest of the party, allowing him to enjoy himself at his leisure, but he had evidently forgotten that she would be residing at Harewood Court for the foreseeable. At least until Dickie took possession of his earldom and returned to their family home.

Max glanced between his sister and his dearest friend. “Have the two of you been

quarreling again?"

"I do not know what you mean." Anna smiled sweetly. "Percival and I are perfectly civil."

Max laughed. "I believe England and France like one another more than the two of you do."

"I did think it turned rather chilly when you arrived, Anna," Dickie teased, throwing down a blanket and laying upon it. "But it soon thawed, and now we must enjoy this beautiful night together. It might be the last I spend with you all as a bachelor."

It perplexed Percy that Anna did not mind being teased by her brothers, but when he attempted to do so, he was met with simmering fury and barbed words. Other ladies welcomed his attention and light teasing, too. Although, he supposed it made a difference to previous years, when Anna had refused to speak to him at all, beyond a cursory greeting.

"You have found a wife already?" Anna smiled. "That was rather swift. You only just announced that you were in pursuit of one."

Dickie grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. "There is a reason my charm is so famous."

"Infamous," Anna corrected, her laughter rippling above the crackle of the fire.

Percy watched her, surprised to find she was quite pretty in the bronzed glow of the firelight. She had always been a strange creature—small in stature, rake thin, with blue eyes that seemed too big for her petite face, light blonde hair that washed any color from her skin, and a few moles dotted across that too pale skin.

He used to say—when she was in earshot—that he thought she had been found beside a fairy mound when she was a baby, cast out by some unnatural, elfin beings, but in that moment, her strangeness was more of an otherworldly beauty, albeit fleeting.

“Alas, I am not that gifted.” Dickie sighed and flopped onto his back. “My search begins at Westyork, I think. There is bound to be a fine young lady there who will make an excellent countess—do you not think so, Max?”

Max rolled his eyes. “The petition is already with the Royal Court, and I see no reason why it might be denied, so you can cease mentioning it every two minutes.”

“Ah, but I must mention it constantly. Not for a title, but for inspiration. Otherwise, how will you ever follow my lead and find a bride for yourself?” Dickie replied, wearing a smug expression. “You are two-and-thirty soon, Brother, and I noticed a few silver hairs poking through that great mane of yours. Best be quick about it before your bones begin to ache and you lack the vigor to be a good husband and father. Perhaps, the Matchmaker will take pity on you and find you a bride.”

Percy doubted that a well-positioned gentleman such as Max would need a matchmaker to help him, though it seemed that everyone had been discussing matchmakers of late. He did not know why, for that was usually a private matter.

Max fixed his attention on Percy. “What of you, Sinclair? It is high time there was a Duchess of Granville, no?”

“A weak diversion, Brother,” Dickie remarked, laughing.

Max smiled. “Not a diversion, merely a transition to a more interesting subject.”

“Well, the moment any woman sees Percy’s estate, they would sever their engagement,” Dickie said, tilting his head back to look at Percy. “I mean no offense,

but you should know that ladies can be fickle about such things.”

Anna frowned, pulling a blanket tighter around herself. “Why, what is the matter with Percival’s estate?”

“He did not tell you?” Max replied.

“Evidently not.” The temperature did drop slightly at the sound of Anna’s grim tone.

But Percy reminded himself that she was a tiny woman who could be felled by a strong breeze, not someone to find remotely intimidating. She had already decided that she could not abide him, even when he did not say something to antagonize her, so no matter what came out of his mouth, she was not going to like it.

“My estate is in disrepair,” he replied stiffly. “I had not visited in a while, and when I returned, with the hopes of residing there, I found it...”

Something lodged in his throat, robbing him of the ability to continue. He simply did not have the words for what seeing his childhood home and rightful seat had done to him.

“Disrepair, my good man?” Dickie turned over onto his stomach. “If your estate is in disrepair, then I have misinterpreted the meaning of the word ‘ruin’ for the entirety of my life.”

A bristle of hurt skittered across Percy’s chest and up into his clogged throat. He swallowed it down quickly, cursing the brazier under his breath for sending ash and smoke in his direction, drying out his throat. It licked higher in protest, resenting the false accusation.

Max clicked his tongue. “It is not that bad, Dickie. I thought you had made a promise

to improve your behavior—that begins with tact and empathy.” He offered a smile to Percy. “I apologize for my brother. Why, by this time next season, it will be restored to its former grandeur. Until then, my home is yours, and do not let any of Dickie’s silly remarks make you think otherwise.”

But it was not Dickie they should have been worrying about.

“I beg your pardon?” Anna said breathlessly, sitting rigid in her chair. “He is to reside here until next season.”

Even in the warming glow of the firelight, and with a complexion already as milk-pale as hers, she had drained of any remaining color. Her big blue eyes seemed impossibly large as they widened in horror, to the point where Percy could neither look away nor keep looking at her.

“It should be no more than a few months. In the meantime, it shall be like one long—very long—summer, Catchweed,” he said, somewhat curious as to just how far those huge blue pools could widen.

Anna’s eyes quickly narrowed, turning black as the firelight shadows danced across her, making her seem like she might be the offspring of a breed of menacing fairies after all. “I would rather spend my life in perpetual winter, Barnacle. At least in the bitter cold, there is the promise of sanctuary by the fireplace. In the summer, there is no escape.”

He heard the words she did not say—“from you”—loud and clear. Rather than make him feel awkward and unwelcome, however, it brought acid to his tongue and that overpowering impulse to tease her some more.

Meanwhile, Max seemed oblivious to the rising tension, while Dickie watched the exchange with a gleeful grin upon his face, kicking his legs up and down, no doubt

wondering who would explode first. If there had been a betting table, he would assuredly have placed a wager.

“How would you know anything about summer?” Percy said slyly, putting on his most jovial tone. “All I have ever seen you do is shy away from the sun, locking yourself away with your books and your imaginary gentlemen. Tell me, do they pay you more attention than real gentlemen? If only the church could be persuaded to permit a union between a woman and a fiction, I suspect it would resolve a good portion of the wallflower and spinster dilemma.”

Anna’s hands gripped the armrests of her chair. “Better to be a wallflower and a spinster with dreams than shackled to a life of misery with an unworthy gentleman for a husband.”

“Unworthy?” She could not have pierced him more viciously if she had driven a blade through his heart and twisted, for he knew she was not speaking generally.

Perhaps it was the change in tone, switching from reasonably playful—at least from Percy—to ice cold, or perhaps he had finally noticed the unbridled rage in his sister’s eyes, but Max took that moment to swoop in before any blood could be shed.

“It is a pity that you do not know of anyone suitable for my dear friend,” he lamented to Anna, leaning forward to bring his palms closer to the heat of the brazier. “Maybe, you could ask them to gently nudge some pleasant ladies into Sinclair’s path when we venture to the ball at Westyork. Caroline is debuting this season, is she not? Perhaps, you could introduce them.”

Anna got up slowly and, for a moment, Percy had visions of another summer evening when she was but a child, charging at him like a wild beast. He still bore one tiny scar on his neck where she had clawed at him like a feral cat, simply because he had picked some orchids.

“I would rather shove dear Caro into the path of a runaway horse, Max,” she replied in a saccharine voice that sent a shiver up Percy’s spine. She flashed him a biting smile and announced that she was tired before heading up to the terrace.

Percy watched her go, every step away from him acting like liquor for his soul, relaxing all the muscles he had tightened in her presence. But as his gaze lingered on the blanket-shrouded shape of her, she twisted around at the last moment and shot him a glare so ferocious that he could have sworn it made the fire grow hotter.

“I am sorry to say,” Dickie whispered, smirking, “that if I were asked to bet on your survival until your estate is repaired, I would not wager a single coin.”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:41 am

“Here we are, together again!” Matilda Winter, formerly Elkins, cheered, passing out drinks to The Spinsters’ Club, so they could toast to the momentous occasion.

Anna took her drink and forced a bright smile. “Four out of five is better than our previous attempts.”

It was a heartache worse than any that could be inflicted by a man, scrambling to try and get her friends together in the same room more than once a year. Between children and running estates and other obligations, they still had not managed it that year, though it was already summer. It hurt even more when everyone promised they would be there, only for one of the five to be waylaid by something or other, for though they all denied it, she could see it for what it was: she was being left behind, excluded from a party that they had all been cordially invited to.

“Leah offered her sincerest apologies,” Phoebe Barnet said, putting a gentle arm around Anna’s shoulders. “All three of the boys are unwell at the same time, which must be truly awful, but I suspect she is despairing more over not being here with us. She was dearly looking forward to it when I last spoke to her.”

Anna kept her smile fixed upon her face. “Are your sisters here, Phoebe?”

“I am afraid not.” A furrow appeared between Phoebe’s eyebrows. “Ellen is in the midst of one of her paintings and said she could not possibly be drawn away from her work at such a pivotal moment. And Joanna’s husband has not been well.”

Anna’s smile vanished. “Oh goodness, that is terrible. Is she tending to him, or is she unwell too?”

“Joanna is in Bath,” Phoebe replied grimly. “Her husband is at their estate.”

“Ah...” Anna nodded slowly, for though Joanna had delighted in the prospect of being the Viscountess Broxbridge when she had first married a few years ago, the novelty had worn off within a matter of months. For the Viscount too, if the scandal sheets were to be believed.

Olivia Thorne raised her glass. “Let us not speak of worrisome things. Let us celebrate that four of us are here, for it has been an age since I have seen you all at once! Of course, I see Phoebe often enough, but it is not quite the same as most of the Club being back together.”

Indeed, Olivia and Phoebe lived just half an hour’s walk down a beautiful forest path away from each other, while Anna felt as if she were being moved further and further away from those she loved most. It had not been as difficult when she resided at Greenfield House, but Harewood Court was a considerable distance from anyone.

Then again, she would not allow herself to complain about the lengthy journey when Matilda practically lived on the opposite side of the country, at her husband’s coastal estate.

“May I join?” a shy voice asked, as a slender figure slotted between Anna and Matilda.

Dressed in a delicate gown of lavender muslin, Caroline Barnet was already making something of a name for herself as one of the most beautiful debutantes of the season. The younger sister of Phoebe’s husband, Daniel, and cousin of Olivia’s husband, Evan, the Spinsters’ Club had grown very fond of their honorary member. Protective, too.

“Now, there are five of us,” Matilda said with a reassuring wink in Anna’s direction.

Anna smiled. "Indeed, there are." She turned to Caroline. "How are you enjoying the evening, dear Caro?"

"I am... overwhelmed, in truth." Caroline laughed stiffly, adjusting the exquisite amethyst necklace at her throat. "Mama said that this would be good for me, but I cannot say it feels good just yet. There are so many people, and they are all staring! Why must they stare so?"

Matilda pulled a face. "It is what they do. They stare and they gossip. Pay them no mind, for it is driven by jealousy."

"You must write a book about it," Caroline said, lowering her voice. "A guide for debutantes to help them navigate society."

Indeed, though only that close circle of friends knew it, they were standing with one of the most celebrated writers of recent years, who went by the pseudonym 'Miss Terry.' Her book about marriage, particularly marriages of convenience, had become a staple in every household's library, handed discreetly from mothers to their daughters, or purchased outright by worried betrothed. Her second book about common herbs and flowers, and their many medicinal uses, had also been well received. She was in the midst of writing her third book though, as of yet, she had not revealed the subject.

Matilda chuckled. "I am certain I am not qualified in such a matter. I was a hopeless, reluctant, defiant debutante. I never danced, never entertained the idea of finding a husband until one found me, never behaved as a debutante should."

"Well, I would still read it," Caroline smiled. "Indeed, I am still hoping that you will write about The Spinsters' Club one day."

Matilda sipped her drink, her eyes alight with mischief. "Perhaps I shall, but not yet. Until I know how it ends, I could not possibly write about it."

I think we all know how it ends. Anna held her tongue, dreading the idea of being the cautionary appendix in the tale. Her friends might not have thought of her that way, but society certainly would.

Just then, the circle went silent, Olivia and Phoebe looking at something over Anna's shoulder. A prickle ran up Anna's spine, as she sensed the presence, and noted the shadow falling across her. Judging by the narrowing of her friends' eyes, it was not someone she wanted to see.

Before she could turn, a deep voice rumbled, "Lady Caroline, if your card is not yet full, I was hoping you might do me the great honor of dancing the next set with me."

Caroline was already staring at the man, her eyes wide as she was forced to tilt her head back to look up at him. A sweet smile that Anna did not like one bit spread across Caroline's face, her cheeks flushing pink.

Anna knew that voice. She would have known it anywhere.

"Your Grace, this is a surprise." Caroline pulled away from Anna and dipped into an elegant curtsy.

Percival bowed his head in response. "Not an unpleasant one, I hope."

"Not at all," Caroline replied, a note too eagerly. "But I do not know where my mother is, to grant permission, and my brother is not here."

Percival offered his arm. "I saw your mother not a moment ago. Please, allow me to escort you to her."

"Caro, I do not think that is wise," Anna intervened. "You should not take his arm if you have not been properly introduced."

Caroline frowned in confusion. "But I know of him."

"Maybe so, but you do not know him." Anna did her best to keep her anger off her face, certain that Percival would only delight in it. Just as she was certain that he was doing this just to annoy her, after saying last week that she would rather shove Caroline into the path of a runaway horse than have him court her.

Her friends knew, to some extent, that there was a frostiness between Anna and Percival, but being the sort of person who kept many things to herself, she had never fully described the reasons behind the hostility. Now, she wished she had.

Olivia took Caroline's arm. "I will take you to your mother. As for you, Your Grace, please do accompany us."

As Olivia led Caroline in search of Amelia Barnet, the Dowager Countess of Westyork, Anna watched in crushing dismay. She blamed herself, wishing she had said something different, wishing she had come up with a more viable excuse to keep Caroline and Percival apart, but it was too late for that now.

Her blood boiled as Percival glanced back over his shoulder and flashed her a wry smile. No one saw what she saw, no one knew that he was a wretch beneath that fine facade that made other ladies' hearts flutter.

"He is woefully unsuitable for her," she muttered.

Matilda patted her gently on the back. "All will be well, Anna. They will dance, they will part, she will be distracted by someone younger and more handsome, and she will forget she ever danced at all with the Duke of Granville."

Phoebe nodded. "Amelia is an excellent judge of character. She will not allow Caro to dance with anyone unsuitable." She paused, chewing her lower lip. "That reminds me, I must inform Daniel of the gentlemen that cannot be deemed suitable for her

when he returns from Ireland.”

“I trust you will put Percival at the very top of the list,” Anna said, digging her fingernails into her palms.

“If you think I should, certainly,” Phoebe promised, though it was not long before they all had to watch as Caroline and Percival took to the dance floor.

Percival danced with the same inelegance he showed whenever he was in Anna’s presence. At least, that was her opinion, though there were plenty of young ladies swooning and fanning themselves as they observed his stiff quadrille and his frankly pedestrian country dance.

“She is dancing well, is she not?” Phoebe said with clasped hands, as if she were Caroline’s mother.

Anna nodded, struggling to concentrate on Caroline when Percival’s tall stature and broad shoulders kept blocking her from view. She realized he was more muscular than he had been the previous year, his arms punishing the dark burgundy fabric of his tailcoat whenever he swept his arms through the air, the buttons of his waistcoat straining against his chest as he turned this way and that, and she would not permit herself to mention the unseemly tightness of his Brummel-style trousers, revealing every fiber of his thigh muscles.

Perhaps, he was handsome, but that did nothing to compensate for what he lacked in character.

The orchestra could not fade to a close soon enough, and as it did, Anna counted the seconds as Caroline and Percival curtsied and bowed respectively, marking every step they took back toward the slightly reduced Spinsters’ Club. For Caroline’s sake, she would not say anything about Percival’s dull dancing, allowing the sweet young lady to enjoy herself.

“Thank you kindly, Lady Caroline.” Percival dipped his head and released her hand, passing her back into the care of her friends. “You dance with as much grace and beauty as you possess.”

Anna stifled a snort. Is that what he deems to be charm?

But poor Caroline lapped it up, her face flushed, her eyes bright with happiness. “It was my pleasure, Your Grace. I have not yet had such an exemplary partner.”

“Then, I hope we shall dance again one day soon.” Percival smiled. “Indeed, it is a pity we are only permitted two this evening.”

Matilda stepped in. “A pity, yes, but even the most asinine rules must be obeyed. Off you go, Your Grace. I am sure there are countless other ladies waiting to faint at your feet, with open spots on their cards where you may put your name.”

Percival ignored her, his attention fixed on his dancing partner. “Until we meet again, Lady Caroline.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Caroline curtsied once more. “Until then.”

With that, Percival walked away, and Caroline began to chatter animatedly about the delight of the dance. She looked so excited, so giddy, so utterly enchanted that Anna could not bear it a moment longer. Of course, she wanted more than anything for Caroline to be happy and to find a husband worthy of her, but she would not permit her to fall into Percival’s trap of believing him to be something he was not.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Anna said. “I think I saw my brothers. I must make sure that Dickie is behaving himself.”

She hurried off, keeping Percival within her line of sight as she bobbed and weaved around the throngs of guests who crowded the ballroom. As she followed him, she

reminded herself not to cause any sort of scene, for this was her friend's home, and this ball was being hosted by two of her friends—three, if she included Amelia.

I will simply warn him not to toy with her. I will be courteous, but I will say my piece, for if he breaks dear Caro's heart, I shall never forgive myself. She slipped out through the garden doors and onto the terrace, pursuing Percival stealthily down wide, shallow steps that led to a small piazza. There, seated on a low wall, enjoying the warm night air, were her brothers.

She muttered something rude under her breath and dove behind a bush, praying they had not seen her trailing after Percival. More for the sake of her pride than anything else, for Percival would surely tease her mercilessly if he thought she had been following him. Then again, there was not much pride to be retrieved when one was hiding in a bush.

"You seem pleased," Max said cheerily, as Percival approached.

Anna gingerly pulled down on some of the prickly fronds of her hiding place, until she had a clear view of her brothers and the interloper.

"I have good reason to be," Percival replied, sitting down on the low wall. "Gentlemen, I believe I have found my bride tonight."

Anna's blood ran cold, resisting every impulse to launch herself out of the bush and march toward the group to tell Percival that under no circumstances would he be marrying Caroline.

However, Dickie's laugh held her in her place. "Come now, Percy, you cannot be serious. You have barely begun to explore the possibilities."

"Why explore when I have already found what I am looking for?" Percival replied.

“Who?” Max asked, tilting his head.

Percival reached over to borrow Max’s drink, taking a sip before passing it back. “I intend to pursue Lady Caroline.”

“You and every other gentleman under the age of five-and-thirty,” Dickie teased. Anna was grateful for that. “I am sorry, Percy, but you would have a greater chance of convincing Anna to marry you.”

She was less grateful for that, appalled by the very idea.

“I am the first gentleman to have asked her to dance. Her mother seemed encouraging. She seemed encouraging,” Percival replied with a shrug. “I mean no offense, Dickie, but you will not dissuade me. She would be a very useful match for me, considering the influential nature of her brother and his excellent business acumen. All of my estate difficulties could be solved with one simple marriage. I would be an idiot not to make it happen.”

A shiver of shock vibrated through Anna and down to her fingertips, trembling the spiny branch she was holding down to keep watch over the trio. There were many who thought her silly for holding romantic ideals in such high regard, accusing her of living in a realm of fiction, but her friends were living proof that the stories she adored could exist in real life too. She would not watch Caroline sacrifice the possibility of her own life-altering romance just so Percival could solve his financial woes.

Dickie sighed. “This is the trouble with society. When it comes to matters of the heart, one should not be so practical and unfeeling. Call me a fool, but I will not settle for less than a love match.”

Precisely. Anna thanked him in her head, even though he was not exactly the best example of a romantic hero. Indeed, he had broken numerous hearts himself.

“Ah, but therein lies the rub.” Max flashed his younger brother a pointed look. “You fall in love on a whim and fall out of it just as quickly. Perhaps, this time, you ought to follow Sinclair’s lead and consider practicality instead.”

“Never.” Dickie raised his glass and looked upward. “A marriage without love is like the night sky without stars. Dark and endless. You do as you please, Percy, but I shall not be taking your advice.”

Percival smiled the smile that never failed to irritate Anna: a thin, smug sort of smirk that did not reach his eyes. “When I have Lady Caroline as my bride, we shall see.”

“You ought to pray that this matchmaker everyone is talking about feels the same way,” Dickie said, and a tingle ran up Anna’s spine. “Whoever they are, they seem to be Lord or Lady of Romance. One word from them and you are either doomed or destined.”

Percival scoffed. “Nonsense. I do not need a matchmaker to interfere.”

He did not understand, and his ignorance was so delicious that Anna had to resist clapping her hands together as inspiration dawned. Of course, that was how she could help Caroline avoid a union with that oaf.

The perfect plan formed in mind, for Caroline’s brother was not the only one with influence. Anna knew of just the person to fix this, before Percival could even think of mentioning the word “courtship” to the honorary member of the Spinsters’ Club.

Herself. Or, rather, her secret identity.

Most delightful of all, Percival would have no idea that she was the one pulling the strings, to ensure he did not get what he wanted.