



The Ruin of Miss Amelia Burrowes (The Matchmaker's Ball #4)

Author: Jenna Jaxon

Category: Historical

Description: Can a woman with a past have a future?

Miss Amelia Burrowes was the scandal of the ton in her first Season, when her fiancée died, rumors flew, and she was declared a ruined woman by Society. Ten years later, she's back in London to make an arranged marriage that will hopefully allow her sisters to be received by the ton. But when Nathan, Lord Ainsley, the man she'd really had a tendre for all those years ago, renews their acquaintance, the flame between them rekindles and Amelia begins to believe that maybe a second chance for love is possible.

Ten years ago Nathan Locke made a terrible mistake in letting himself be hustled off on his Grand Tour when what he really wanted was to marry the delightful Miss Burrowes. Now he's just learning that the lovely lady isn't married after all—but instead is a pariah of Society. Nathan's not about to let that get in the way of his suit but as new rumors swirl around them, can he ignore the ton's renewed whispers about Amelia's reputation?

Together Nathan and Amelia must get to the bottom of the scandals—new and old—or face a devastating choice: a life together being shunned by Society or a life without each other forever.

Total Pages (Source): 17

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

London

May 1810

“Would you care for some fresh air, Miss Burrowes?” Nathan Locke offered his arm to the ravishing young lady he had just partnered in a spirited reel. “I believe we need reviving after all that setting to and heying.” The dance had been strenuous; however, his partner had matched him pace for pace, with only pinkened cheeks to show for it. “The veranda is just this way.”

“That is an excellent suggestion, Mr. Locke.” Miss Burrowes’s blue eyes sparkled, although that may have been due to the rigors of the dance. “Although we must be careful to keep close to the torches.” They both understood how quickly scandal could spread about even the most innocent of actions. But the slight pucker of her sensual lips made him believe she might agree to leave the light for a little while anyway.

They’d been introduced at Lady Somerville’s ball only the week before, where Nathan had been immediately struck by Miss Burrowes’s grace and beauty. Her witty conversation had been an unexpected boon when he’d asked for and been granted the privilege of the supper dance that evening. Ever since that first night, he’d jumped at every chance to be with her—carriage rides, social calls, theater excursions, and a magical evening at the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. In one amazingly short week, he’d come to have very affectionate feelings for Miss Burrowes. A *tendre*, they called it, and he couldn’t deny that his thoughts strayed more and more often to the lady, whether he was in her presence or not.

“Shall we go into the garden?” Nathan asked as soon as the French window closed behind them and the heady smell of cherry blossoms assailed them. He’d had no time to talk to her unchaperoned. Even during their carriage rides, they hadn’t been alone in his curricule but in her family’s barouche. Still, he’d managed to discover her sharp wit, her gentle nature, her grace and charm in everything she did. The perfect woman with whom to build his life.

So he held his breath. This might be his only chance to speak to her privately.

To his utter joy, after a furtive look around, she nodded and followed him down the short flight of steps and out onto the shadowy lawn. A soft breeze made her pale gold ballgown billow out over the new grass as they sped along the white shell path then struck out over the expanse of green, illuminated only by the sliver of moon and a thousand stars until they stood behind the trunk of the largest cherry tree, hopefully hidden from sight. They couldn’t be too careful. There was Miss Burrowes’s reputation to consider.

She gazed up at him expectantly, although whether she was waiting for words or a gesture, he had no idea. That she wished something from him, however, was abundantly apparent. Her eyes sparkled, catching the faint starlight, making them look like sapphires. The moonlight touching her hair made it glow paler than its normal chestnut color when she tossed her head. And she twitched from one foot to the other, as though she was still dancing.

Gently, he stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers, her smooth skin inciting a riot of desire throughout him. She tipped her head back, her eyelids half closed, her lips poised in a perfect bow. Passion raged in him, and he couldn’t help himself as he sank his mouth onto hers. Her lips were warm and welcoming as he pressed himself to her and sought to deepen the kiss. To his surprise, she opened like the petals of a flower, and he plunged in, delirious with the taste and feel of her. A madness descended upon him so that all he could think was that he wanted more. So much

more.

At last, reluctantly, he broke the kiss. “Miss Burrowes—”

“Amelia, Mr. Locke.” She laughed up at him. “After that kiss, I think you should call me by my first name.”

Nathan’s stomach dropped. “I...I meant to say...” Dash it, why was he tongue-tied all of a sudden?

Because he wanted nothing more than to sink his mouth back onto hers, sweep her up into his arms, and find a bower where they could continue this tryst to its glorious conclusion. From the eager look on Miss Burrowes’s—no, on Amelia’s—face, he’d find no opposition to that suggestion.

A door slammed, and the breeze brought the sound of voices from the verandah.

With a gut-wrenching sigh, Nathan stepped back, although he kept hold of her hands.

They stood together in the glorious night air, beneath the fragrant cherry tree, a whole new world within his grasp. “Amelia, I will speak to your father tomorrow. Ask permission to court you formally.” He gazed down at her beautiful face. “Ask for your hand in marriage, if that would be agreeable to you?”

The smile that lit up her face could’ve outshone the sun. Against the dull moon there was no contest. “Oh, yes, Mr. Locke. That would be very agreeable to me.”

Nathan thought his heart might burst with happiness. To have the world handed to him at the age of one and twenty surely made him the luckiest chap he knew. He couldn’t wait to tell Marcus. His best friend would be giddy with happiness for him. But it must remain a secret until he’d received Mr. Burrowes’s approval, which he

undoubtedly would. What father would not wish his daughter to marry the heir to a viscounty?

He was roused from his reverie when Amelia took his arm. “Shall we return to the ballroom now?” She smiled up at him, and his body twisted with the repressed desire to claim her as his own, this very minute.

“Yes, my dear. I think we must.” He moved them out from behind the safety of the cherry tree. Whatever it took, he’d curb his desires as best he could. He’d wait until he and Amelia were properly married—or at least properly betrothed—before continuing this heavenly interlude. Thankfully, it wouldn’t be very long now.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

London

May 5, 1820

The warm, walnut-paneled library of Lady Hamilton's townhouse should've been comforting. Flickering candles illuminated the chamber just enough to see, while still allowing a lady to conceal herself if necessary—and it was absolutely necessary at this particular moment for Miss Amelia Burrowes. Soft leather cushions on the chairs and chaise invited one to sit and relax, while the red and tan Turkey carpet added a richness that soothed the senses. Altogether, the room exuded a calmness and security Amelia dearly needed in her life. Unfortunately, it couldn't dispel her growing dread.

Outside the closed door, people laughed loudly, making her jump. Heart racing, she listened keenly for one distinctive voice, her fingernails sinking into the arms of the chair until the expensive upholstery creaked, in danger of permanent harm. She tried to relax her grip but couldn't stop herself. Without a doubt, Mr. Burke would find her no matter where she hid.

When Mama had first hinted that the family was once again attempting to find a husband for her, Amelia had smiled and tried to look hopeful. Her pretended interest and cooperation had pleased her mother every time the subject had sporadically come up over the past ten years. Each attempt had, however, come to nothing. Amelia's reputation had sustained irreparable damage in her come-out Season when the gentleman she'd reluctantly agreed to marry, Jonathan, Lord Carrington, had died. Over the years, she'd come to accept her fate as a spinster. Embrace it, even. If she couldn't have the gentleman she'd truly loved, what was the point of marriage, after all? That had always been her stance.

Until now.

Next year, her two younger sisters, Caroline and Margaret, were supposed to make their come out. They could only do that if someone sponsored them, and Mama was determined that someone would. After all, Amelia's reputation could likely still be repaired enough by a good marriage that her sisters would at least be received by some of the ton. Once Amelia was respectably married, the girls would hopefully be invited to fashionable events and, God willing, catch husbands of their own.

To make certain that happened, Mama had begun a campaign, carried out with military precision, to find a husband for her. It counted little what the man was like, and not at all how Amelia felt about him. Only his willingness to ally himself with a woman who'd acted scandalously mattered in the least.

At last, through a variety of friends and acquaintances, Papa had discovered just such a man—a Mr. Lawrence Burke of Chesterfield in Derbyshire—who was amenable to the idea of marrying her. They would meet in London at the beginning of the Season and, if they thought they might suit, proceed with the settlement of her very large dowry.

From the moment Mama had explained the plan, Amelia had had grave doubts about her re-introduction to Society, especially when told where it would take place. Lady Hamilton, the aunt after whom she'd been named, had agreed, albeit reluctantly, for Amelia to attend her ball, which opened the Season each year. Amelia hadn't been out in Society for almost ten years. She'd been to several local affairs in Benington during that time—well after the scandal had died down, of course—but hadn't set foot in London since her betrothed's death.

To do so now seemed to be tempting fate, but Mama was adamant. Amelia must repair her reputation as much as possible. She must be seen, but only with Mr. Burke, and must under no circumstances dance or flaunt herself. She was not to ride alone

with Mr. Burke in any kind of conveyance but could walk beside him in the park for half an hour only. Circumspection was paramount, Mama had said, until after the wedding, when she and Mr. Burke would retire to his home in Derbyshire, never to be heard from again, most likely. Her marriage might make her suitable enough by country standards, but she greatly feared London Society would not forgive her supposed transgressions so quickly. And since there was no guarantee her sacrifice would gain her sisters entrée into Society, Amelia would end up married to a man she did not love—and might actively loathe before long—all for nothing.

Oh, but she did hate being infamous. It had taken almost a decade for her to be able to walk down the street at home without having people point and whisper. Why must they tempt Fate now? But of course, she knew the answer to that—her sisters' come out next year. And because she was the one who'd put the family beyond the pale, she was the one who must act the martyr and marry the man from whom she was now actively hiding. The man who was supposed to be her salvation.

Earlier in the evening, after dinner, Papa had introduced her to Mr. Burke, who'd seemed rather nice on first acquaintance. A gentleman of one and thirty, not overly tall, with curly brown hair and eyes a shade darker, a full-lipped mouth, and a not-so-prominent chin, Mr. Burke could not be called unhandsome. He'd greeted her pleasantly, talked of generally approved topics—like the weather and boating, of which he seemed extraordinarily fond—then asked to escort her around the room. Their conversation had continued in that general vein until they reached the far end of the room, where no one could hear their lowered remarks.

“I must say, Miss Burrowes, your father's letter putting forward his desire for our nuptials took me by surprise, but not nearly as much as the amount he's proposed for your dowry.” He'd smiled, revealing white, predatory teeth. “Much more than my uncle had given me to believe. I understand it is imperative for you to marry.” His eyes darkened, and Amelia repressed a shudder at the hunger in them. “I believe I shall very much enjoy making the match.”

A sickening drop in her stomach made her steps falter. Every gentleman who'd been interested in marrying her over the years had expressed similar sentiments. Luckily, none of the other attempts had borne fruit, for the thought of actually marrying those suitors had, by and large, given her the jim-jams. They would have had no affection for her whatsoever, simply lust for her body and her father's bank account. Of course, those would be the only reasons a gentleman would choose to marry a fallen woman, but it hurt to think her husband must be one so mercenary.

This time, however, something in Mr. Burke's demeanor had so incensed her that she'd made some slight excuse to be taken back to her mother. Mama had not been pleased, but Amelia didn't care. If not for the dire consequences for her sisters, she would've refused Mr. Burke out of hand and requested to be taken home to Benington immediately. Instead, she'd resorted to hiding. The idea of being seen with the rapacious Burke turned her stomach, although she'd have to do so at least once tonight or face Mama's wrath.

She gazed about the quiet room. Without doubt, Mama would soon send Papa, or one of her brothers who'd turned out tonight, to find her. If it was her youngest brother, Tim, she could possibly wheedle him into remaining with her instead of doing his duty and dragging her back to the ballroom.

Her reverie was broken by the sudden opening of the library door.

"There you are, my dear."

Discovered, drat it. Again, Amelia tightened her grip on the arms of the chair.

"I've been looking for you everywhere." Mr. Burke smiled at her as he entered the library and shut the door. The hollow thud sounded like a death knell. "What are you doing in here? This is hardly the time to try to improve your mind." He started toward her, his smile turning into a leer. "We might, however, take this opportunity alone to

become...better acquainted.”

Amelia bounded out of the chair as though shot from a cannon and somehow managed to land on her feet. Instinctively, she backed toward the fireplace. “I don’t think that is wise, Mr. Burke. Our betrothal is supposed to help repair my reputation. If we are to become better acquainted, it must be done properly, in full view of my parents and Lady Hamilton’s guests.” She must get them out of this place before he did something that would make it impossible for her to refuse his suit, which she now desperately wished to do.

“Come, come, Miss Burrowes. Or should I say Amelia? Being alone with your intended cannot matter so much in the eyes of the ton .” Pacing slowly toward her, Mr. Burke held out his hand. “In your case, they may well assume we’ve been intimately acquainted as soon as the betrothal is announced.” He leered at her. “Why not make their suspicions correct?”

Completely outraged, Amelia stopped backing away. How dare he assume she would do such a thing? Even if her reputation was soiled, to think she would simply submit to his crude suggestion—and in her hostess’s library of all places—could not be borne. The devil flew into Amelia, and she stalked toward him. “I will not stand here and be so insulted, Mr. Burke. I may not have the sterling reputation of the other young ladies of the ton , but common decency demands that you treat me with some respect.”

To her dismay, her outburst, rather than acting as a deterrent, seemed to inflame his ardor. His eyes widened, and he grinned as he continued toward her. “Ah, you do have spirit. I suspected as much. One does not come by a reputation such as yours without some spark of passion.” He licked his lips. “This arrangement may prove to be a better bargain than I could have hoped for.”

Dear Lord, she needed to get out of this room before he ruined her for once and all.

Dodging around the chair, she made a break for the door, but he grabbed her wrist and swung her around to face him.

“What’s your hurry, my dear?” He showed his teeth again, making him look just like the wolf in the Grimm brothers’ story.

“Let me go, sir.” Amelia twisted her wrist, trying to break his hold, but he was strong. She’d likely have a bruise there tomorrow.

“Not without some token of your affection, surely? We must learn to get along amiably, mustn’t we?” Sliding his arm around her shoulders, he pulled her against him until it seemed every inch of her touched his body. “Much better, don’t you think?”

“I do not, Mr. Burke.” Well, this would teach him. She raised her foot and stamped hard on his. “Ouch.” Her soft kid slippers were no match for his leather dancing pumps. Now the arch of her foot ached.

“A veritable spitfire, aren’t you?” His grin widened. “Let’s see if all that passion can be redirected.” He darted his head down toward her, seeking her lips.

“No.” Twisting her head from side to side, she tried desperately to avoid his mouth. “Mr. Burke, please. Stop.” She got her hands up between them and gave a mighty push, but the effort had no effect on him whatsoever.

It did, however, distract her from evading his determined efforts to kiss her, and he dropped his mouth onto hers with a triumphant cry.

Amelia’s heart sank. What could she do now? Maybe if she held herself aloof, did not respond at all, he’d think her unfeeling. God knew she didn’t want his kisses, though he was remarkably gentle once he settled into it. Ceasing to struggle, she forced

herself to relax, go limp in his arms, show that the kiss meant nothing to her whatsoever.

Unfortunately, that only seemed to encourage him. He pushed his tongue insistently against her stubbornly closed lips, trying to gain entry.

Oh, absolutely not. Once again, she shoved against his chest, digging her palms into his jacket and trying frantically to back away.

The click of the library door opening froze Amelia, posed, unfortunately, like a reluctant nymph being ravished by some errant god.

“Kate? Are you in here?”

The man’s voice spurred her to desperate measures. Of one thing she was certain: she couldn’t afford to be compromised by Mr. Burke. Then she’d be forced to marry him or become even more of an outcast in Society. Praying for strength, she hauled back her hand and thumped him on his ear.

He grunted and released her.

Amelia sprang backward, her hands covering her mouth, scrubbing at her lips. Turning her gaze toward the door, she looked into the startled, gray-eyed gaze of a very tall, very handsome stranger.

The man’s eyebrows had shot straight up but now returned to normal. His lips drew into a disapproving pucker. “Well, you are certainly not Kate.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

Nathan Locke, Viscount Ainsley, stared at the couple in dismay and cursed beneath his breath. He'd come in search of his sister, Katherine, who'd managed to avoid him for most of the evening. He'd collected the wager he'd won with her, forcing her to dance with his friend, Lord Haversham, whom she disliked severely. Now, instead of finding his recalcitrant charge, he'd stumbled onto some ill-conceived tryst.

The gentleman looked intolerably smug, a veritable cat who'd eaten a very tasty canary. Nathan could see why with one look at his fetching partner. An unusually tall woman in a becoming gown of deep violet, with prettily curled chestnut hair that gleamed in the candles' glow. A handsome face, round with a generous mouth that the gentleman appeared to have been taking advantage of, to judge by the deepening pink of the lady's cheeks.

Common sense told him he'd interrupted a sweet interlude between an affectionate couple, though something in the back of his mind niggled at him. Still, it truly was none of his affair.

"If you will pardon us, my lord." The gentleman stepped toward the lady and tried to take her arm, though she shrugged him off. "You've interrupted us at a tender moment. The lady has just consented to be my wife."

Definitely bad timing on Nathan's part. "Your pardon then, Mr...?"

"Burke, my lord. Mr. Lawrence Burke of Derbyshire."

"Mr. Burke." Nathan bowed solemnly. "My felicitations to you and Miss—"

The sight of the lady's wide eyes and a slight shake of her head gave him a new meaning for the scene. In Nathan's experience, young ladies sometimes sought to entrap a gentleman into marriage by being discovered in a compromising position with the man in question. From the lady's subtle hints, he might be persuaded that, in this case, the gentleman was compromising her for the same reason.

"Miss Burrowes, my lord." Mr. Burke smiled broadly while the lady in question glanced about as though searching for a hole to drop into.

The name brought Nathan up short, and he peered more closely at the woman. "Miss Amelia Burrowes?"

Her head came up and their gazes met. She swallowed hard. "Lord Ainsley?"

"Yes. I wonder you remember me. It has been ten years, hasn't it?" A shadow from his past rippled over Ainsley's soul, calling to mind a moonlit garden and a lingering kiss long ago.

"Eleven, my lord. We met at Lady Somerville's my first Season out." She'd taken her hands from in front of her face and now twisted them before her.

"Just so." He remembered that introduction to the most beautiful woman of the Season distinctly. Then he frowned. "Is it not Lady Carrington? I had heard—"

"No, my lord. I never married him." She shook her head, her face stark white.

Nathan blinked. She'd never married?

"Miss Burrowes and I were about to announce—" Burke reached for the lady's arm, but she stepped quickly toward Nathan instead.

“May I beg an old acquaintance to return me to my mother?” Her blue eyes pled eloquently for him to agree to the request. “With so much excitement, being here at a ball after all these years, I seem to have a sudden headache.”

Burke jumped toward her. “I will be happy to escort you, Am—”

“Of course, my dear.” Nathan smoothly slid her arm into the crook of his, cutting Burke off before he could call the woman by her first name, thus imposing a claim of intimacy with her. The idea that Miss Burrowes hadn’t yet bestowed that privilege on Mr. Burke surfaced rather quickly. “I would be delighted.” Glaring directly at Burke, whose pop eyes made him seem ready to have a fit of apoplexy, Nathan steered her toward the door. “I am completely at your service.”

Paying the other gentleman no mind, Nathan escorted Miss Burrowes from the library, her arm trembling beneath his hand.

Burke followed them, glowering.

“Do you indeed wish to go to your mother?” he asked her in hushed tones.

“No, I do not,” she whispered back. “But neither do I wish to continue in Mr. Burke’s company.”

That was an easy request to manage. “Mr. Burke.” Nathan put on his most concerned face, brows lowered, jaw set. “Miss Burrowes feels a bit faint. I will take her outside for a breath of air. Please find a footman and get a glass of lemonade brought to wherever Mrs. Burrowes is currently. We will meet you there.”

Before the man could make a protest, Nathan steered his charge down the corridor toward a veranda that overlooked the rear garden. “I believe that will give us a few moments at least before he returns to search for us.” He opened the French windows,

and the lady shot outside, breathing deeply, as though she'd been holding her breath. Indeed, she looked incredibly pale in the moonlight. "Miss Burrowes, are you quite well?"

She paused then composed herself. "Yes, I am well. It's only that I haven't been out in Society for such a long time, I am quite overwhelmed by it all." Another long pause in which she seemed to be contemplating the wisdom of saying more. "Especially by Mr. Burke's attentions."

"Are you indeed betrothed to him?" Something in Nathan froze, hanging on her next words as if nothing else in the world mattered.

"Not exactly, no."

The flicker of something deep within him burst back into life. "Not exactly?"

"My parents are arranging the marriage. I've only just met Mr. Burke this evening at dinner. We're supposed to take the opportunity of the ball to become better acquainted." Even the faintness of the moonlight couldn't disguise her distaste at the idea.

"And I interrupted his attempt to do so?" Not as bad as he'd feared, but still not behavior becoming a gentleman. "I'm sorry if I've impeded his suit in any way."

"Do not be, my lord." Her hand on his wrist startled him, both in its presence there and the warmth it generated within him. "As I've said, the match was brought about by my parents." The liquid blue of her eyes flashed like quicksilver. "I'm submitting to it because, as you well know, no one else has been willing to have me. Not one in ten years."

"Why not?"

She jerked her head back as though he'd slapped her. "What do you mean? You must know the story. Everyone in the ton does."

"Except, apparently, me. My father wrote to me in Italy that you'd become betrothed to Lord Carrington. I assumed you married him. I didn't find out until just now that you did not." That piece of information still hadn't registered. "Can you tell me why you didn't marry him?"

"He died."

Nathan flinched at the unfeeling tone of her voice. But of course, her grief must be long in the past.

Her gaze on his face didn't falter.

"May I extend my very belated condolences on his loss?"

"Thank you." With a choked sigh, she hurried down the veranda steps out into the garden, to a bench where she sat, her back almost to him.

He followed—though not too closely, to give her time to compose herself. "You must have loved him very much."

"So all the gossips in Society say, at least."

He cocked his head. "I beg your pardon?"

Shaking her head, she straightened, the slight movement giving her a regal stance. "Never mind, my lord. It's old news, in any case. And I do thank you for your concern." She took a breath then hesitantly stole a glance at him. "I confess I did wonder what had happened to you. After our last encounter in the garden."

“Here in this garden, as I recall.” Nathan glanced over at the cherry tree just coming into bud. “Under that very tree, if I remember correctly.”

“You do.”

The admission sent a thrill through him, though he couldn’t fathom the reason. “As to what happened to me, almost the next day I was sent off on my Grand Tour, although with the war raging with France at that time, the tour was not quite as grand as it had been in times past. Still, I was gone for two years, mostly in Italy, although I spent some time in Switzerland, Prussia, and Greece.”

“It must’ve been a marvelous experience.” Her voice, carefully neutral, made him suddenly aware how his disappearance might have seemed to her.

“I would’ve written to you, but I truly had no time before I left for Portsmouth. Then I was on a ship bound for Italy.” Why did he feel the need to explain? He hadn’t thought of that encounter with Miss Burrowes for years, although he had thought about her quite a lot on board the ship. His animosity toward his father for sending him off so quickly—he’d not been allowed to tell her goodbye, even though he’d begged to do so—had lasted for some time as well.

“I understand. I did not pine over it, although I did wonder why you’d sent no word.” She shrugged. “Not too long after you left, I was introduced to Lord Carrington, and we came to an understanding quite quickly.”

A flicker of jealousy ignited in Nathan’s chest. He squelched it almost as soon as it appeared. What good to be envious of a dead man? And why, for God’s sake, be jealous at all of a woman he’d not seen for over a decade? Still, the thought of Carrington with her was distasteful, to say the least. He rose. “Perhaps we’ve stayed away too long. I would not wish to ruin your reputation, Miss Burrowes, when I was trying to save it.”

At that, she laughed until she wept, sitting on the bench with her eyes streaming.

Without a word, he handed her his handkerchief, and she mopped the tears that continued to flood her face. “I am pleased I could lighten your mood, Miss Burrowes.”

She hiccupped and sniggered then, slowly, the tide turned, and she sobered. “I do beg your pardon, my lord, for that display. But what you said...” She sputtered off again then composed herself. “I am afraid I couldn’t help myself.” Lifting the sodden handkerchief, she waved it at him. “I will have this laundered and returned to you on the morrow.”

“Why not return it to me in person?” Nathan didn’t know where that question had come from. He’d had no intention of suggesting they meet again. Except that, now that he thought about it, he did wish to see her. Perhaps the memory of Miss Burrowes and their encounter under the cherry tree had not been as deeply buried as he’d believed. “Allow me to take you for a carriage ride tomorrow afternoon.”

That seemed to stun her, for she sat for several moments, pulling at the soaked handkerchief so hard he feared it would tear. “I am sorry, Lord Ainsley, but I cannot. My parents are in negotiations with Mr. Burke. I doubt they would approve such an outing.” She rose and sighed. “Please escort me to my mother, my lord. I am certain she wonders where I am.”

“Of course, Miss Burrowes.” He offered his arm, almost fearing she wouldn’t take it.

After hesitating, she finally rested her hand lightly on it, and they made their way back inside Lady Hamilton’s townhouse. The heat was suffocating after the cool outdoors and seemed to get worse as they silently wound their way toward the ballroom amidst the din of a ball in full swing. Miss Burrowes seemed to shrink toward him, now gripping his arm as though it were a lifeline. Did she fear crowds so

much? She'd said she'd not been in company much these ten years, though he still wasn't certain why. When they arrived at the ballroom, awash in light, the dancers swirling around the floor like huge, colorful flowers, he paused, unsure for whom he was looking. "Where is your mother, Miss Burrowes? I cannot recall—"

"There." She indicated a plump woman with a determined face in a gown of green silk all the way across the room.

"Fortunately, Mr. Burke seems to have dawdled in procuring your lemonade." Nathan started toward the woman then glanced down at his charge.

Head down, shrinking against him as though to hide herself, Miss Burrowes trembled as she followed him blindly. Was she truly so terrified of being out in company? He did not remember her so. Had isolation in the country brought about such a change? Perhaps he could help remedy that. Carefully, they wound their way around the dance floor until they reached Mrs. Burrowes, who gazed at him in utter shock.

"Lord Ainsley." After a stunned moment, she curtsied, never taking her gaze from him.

"Mrs. Burrowes. I am honored to meet you again." Nathan bowed and relinquished Miss Burrowes to her mother.

"How nice to see you, my lord, after all these years." The lady shifted her gaze from him to her daughter. "Amelia? What has happened? Mr. Burke said you were overcome and would be here directly, but when you did not appear, he went in search of you. I feared you..." She glanced again at Nathan. "I feared you had become indisposed."

"My fault entirely, Mrs. Burrowes." Nathan spoke up before Miss Burrowes could put forth any excuse. He wanted his version of the events to be the one she heard

first. “I came upon your daughter and Mr. Burke unawares. The shock of both being surprised and seeing me after so many years caused Miss Burrowes to become lightheaded. I suggested Mr. Burke procure her some refreshment and we would meet him here. Unfortunately, your daughter took several more minutes than expected to be restored. But here she is now, and much improved, I believe.”

“Are you quite all right, my dear?” Mrs. Burrowes peered at her daughter, who nodded.

“I am fine, Mama.” Miss Burrowes shot him a look, not quite gratitude but not anger either. “Seeing Lord Ainsley after so many years did give me a bit of a start. But we have been reacquainting ourselves.”

“Thank you, my lord, for looking after her.” The woman’s tone was doubtful but sincere.

“My pleasure entirely, ma’am. I only hope my appearance didn’t cause Miss Burrowes any undue distress.” He raised his eyebrows at the lady in question, who had the grace to blush.

“No, of course it didn’t, my lord.” Mrs. Burrowes looked sharply at her daughter then back at him with a perturbed countenance.

And now for the coup de grace . “Miss Burrowes told me that she is unused to crowded dance floors and ballrooms. So I have suggested she take a ride with me in my curricule early tomorrow afternoon, before the fashionable hour. I am certain the air will do her good. And then she need not worry about too many people being about.”

A furious frown appeared on Miss Burrowes’s face, while her mother became thoughtful.

“I do not think it a good idea, Mama.” With a firm step, Miss Burrowes left his side and flounced over to her mother. “I told Lord Ainsley that earlier when he suggested the outing.”

“I see nothing wrong with a carriage ride with the viscount, Amelia.” The calculating look in the lady’s eyes told Nathan the woman understood well the advantages of her daughter having a titled suitor over an untitled one.

“But Mr. Burke—”

“Mr. Burke must understand that you are not betrothed to him yet, and therefore may accept any invitation your father and I deem appropriate.” Mrs. Burrowes beamed at him. “Lord Ainsley’s suggestion is quite unobjectionable and will likely result in your continued good health as well. I insist that you accept, my dear.”

Opening her mouth, likely to object once more to the invitation, Miss Burrowes caught her mother’s pointed glare and closed it again. She struggled to turn her lips up in a smile as she said, “Thank you, Lord Ainsley. I would be delighted to ride with you tomorrow.”

“Splendid.” Nathan bit back a chuckle as the lady almost gnashed her teeth in frustration. Likely, she was still embarrassed by the scene he’d interrupted with Burke. That mattered little to him. Despite the long gap since they last met, he wanted to renew his acquaintance with Miss Burrowes. If he thought she wouldn’t flee the premises, he’d have asked for the supper dance, although Burke had likely taken that already. Never mind. Tomorrow was his. “I shall look forward to seeing you again most eagerly, Miss Burrowes. We have so much to talk about.”

The lady’s strained look bothered him not at all. Naturally, after such a long time, their sudden reacquaintance might give her pause. But as long as she agreed to accompany him, he had no objection to wooing her affections once more.

“Until then, ladies.” He bowed just as Mr. Burke appeared at the entryway behind them, a glass of lemonade in hand and a scowl on his lips as he glanced about the room.

With a smile, Nathan turned and left. Timing was, as always, everything in a courtship.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

“What have you done, Mama?” Dismayed, Amelia glared at the broad back and wide shoulders of Lord Ainsley as he disappeared into the crowd. “I thought you wished me to marry Mr. Burke.”

“I wish you to marry as well as possible, my dear.” Her mother, too, watched Lord Ainsley’s progress, a new light in her eyes. “Why settle for plain Mrs. Burke when you could perhaps be Lady Ainsley?”

“I assure you that will not happen. He doesn’t...” Amelia hated to speak the words. “He doesn’t know about me, Mama. About the scandal. He was out of the country when it happened and only knew that I was betrothed. Only just now did he learn that Carrington died. He’s thought me married all these years.”

“So much the better.” The delighted tone of voice assured Amelia that her mother would not set aside the notion of a proposal by Lord Ainsley any time soon. “If I read the signs right, I daresay he will be calling on Papa to ask permission for a formal courtship.”

“He will discover the truth, Mama. He has only to mention my name to anyone and the whole sordid mess will rear its head again. Do you want that?” It was the last thing Amelia wanted. Lord Ainsley seemed to remember her with fondness. She would like that to continue, but feared the next time she saw him, he would look at her with disdain, believing her a ruined woman.

“Of course not.” Mama sniffed but also smiled. “However, if his lordship is taken with you, he might choose to ignore or disregard the scandal. I seem to remember you were quite fond of him your first Season.” She suddenly peered closely at Amelia.

“And he of you. That spark may well be kindling once again.”

The one thing for which Amelia scarcely dared to hope. She could not bear Lord Ainsley, for whom she'd developed a tendre those many years ago, to think ill of her now. Better to leave the past in the past where it could remain golden in her memory, rather than tarnish it with the scandal that had plagued her for ages. Her safest course, though certainly not the one she wanted, would be to marry Mr. Burke and settle for respectability while she still could. Put all thoughts of Lord Ainsley firmly away. Of course, having become reacquainted with him would make that a more difficult task. A more handsome and intelligent gentleman she had never met, with a wit that had drawn her to him long ago. If only he had not gone away...

“Miss Burrowes, at last.” Mr. Burke had finally come upon them, his frowning face dark as a rain cloud. He handed her a glass of lemonade. “I was beginning to fear Lord Ainsley had absconded with you for some nefarious purpose.”

Amelia had to bite her lip to keep from giving him a sharp retort. The pot calling the kettle black, indeed. “No, Lord Ainsley was a perfect gentleman. He took me outside for a breath of fresh air, which did restore me remarkably well. We may have lingered a moment or two as I particularly enjoyed the cool air after the heat inside.” She gave him a pointed look and was mollified when he dropped his gaze from hers. “Then he returned me to Mama as promised.”

“Well, I am glad to hear he behaved himself.” Mr. Burke's bluster returned as he spoke to Mama. “I would not wish my future wife to be put upon by a rogue with a title.”

“Prospective future wife, Mr. Burke.” Her mother rapped his arm sharply with her folded fan. “There have been no settlements signed yet, if you recall. My daughter is still free to accept the suit of any man who presents himself.”

“Mrs. Burrowes, you cannot mean that!” Burke’s voice rose above the din of the ballroom, and a hush fell over the area where they stood. All eyes turned toward them, curious and suspicious.

Hoping no one would register who she was, Amelia fled toward the ladies’ retiring room, her violet slippers drumming a tattoo on the hardwood floors in her haste. Along the way, she thrust the untasted glass of lemonade into the hands of a startled footman, scarcely caring if it slopped onto her dress or not. If only she could spend the balance of the evening hiding there, perhaps this ill-omened re-entry to society would not be deemed a total disaster.

* * * *

“May I ask you something, Haversham?” Nathan had just finished a fine afternoon’s work deviling his best friend, the Earl of Haversham, by arranging for him to court his sister Kate, who was in her third Season with no prospects for a husband. He had a sneaking suspicion that the animosity between the two masked kindred spirits who would ignite a blazing passion if given the right circumstances.

“By God, I think you’ve asked enough of me for one day.” The earl eased back into his chair, sipping his third whiskey.

“This has nothing to do with Kate, so smooth your feathers.” He set his own glass on the table. “It has to do with a lady I met last night.” After he’d escorted his sister home last evening, he’d not been able to get Miss Burrowes out of his head. The hints she’d given him spoke tantalizingly of some tragedy in her life, although he couldn’t for the life of him conclude what it might be. Perhaps his friend might be able to shed some light on the situation.

“Ah, the truth comes out. You wish me to be leg-shackled to your sister in order to keep you company.” Haversham grinned, likely enjoying turning the tables on him.

“I have no idea of marrying the woman.” The dubious veracity of that statement Nathan chose to ignore for the moment. “I renewed our acquaintance briefly last evening, although we met initially over ten years ago, just before I took my Grand Tour.”

“She’s a widow?”

“No, although she was once betrothed, it seems. A Miss Amelia Burrowes.”

Haversham sat bolt upright, spewing whisky over himself and Nathan’s best Italian leather chair. “Miss Burrowes?”

“What the devil’s the matter with you?” Nathan grabbed his handkerchief from his pocket and attempted to save his favorite seat.

Haversham mopped his face and clothing with his own linen. “You did say Miss Burrowes, didn’t you?”

“I did. You say her name as though the lady was an ogre of some sort. I can assure you she is not.”

“Ogre, no. Outcast, yes.” The earl tossed the sopping handkerchief onto the table and set his glass next to it. “I am amazed she’s back in Society, even after all this time.”

“We cannot be talking about the same lady.” Nathan finished scrubbing the leather cushion and stood. “This is Miss Amelia Burrowes. A sweet but rather spirited lady even when I first met her.”

“I was also acquainted with her when she first came out. You’d made such startling remarks about her beauty I wanted to see her for myself and scraped an introduction.” He peered down at his cravat, baptized with dark stains. “Gads, Ainsley. I shall have

to hurry home and change my linen. I'm not fit to be seen."

"Tidy yourself later. What about Miss Burrowes?"

"Well, you were, of course, right about her beauty. So it's no surprise that, not long after you left, she was snapped up by Lord Carrington." Settling back in the chair once more, Haversham took up his drink again. "The most fashionable couple of the Season. They seemed very happy together...and very affectionate. Until Carrington suddenly fell gravely ill."

"Deucedly bad luck." Miss Burrowes must've been mad with worry. He remembered her being very tenderhearted.

"In more ways than one." A pinched expression came over Haversham's face. "Lord Carrington lingered for some weeks so that eventually Miss Burrowes and her family requested that the marriage go forward despite the gentleman's infirmity. To ensure, they said, that the lady would be provided for. And had they married, she would, even now, be the wealthy widow of an earl. But Carrington died before the nuptials could be arranged, and so she remained Miss Burrowes."

Frowning, Nathan poured another tot of spirits into his glass. "I do not see the point, Haversham. She was betrothed and the man died. If she was not suspected of poisoning him, I do not see how scandal comes into it."

Swirling his libation slowly, Haversham kept his gaze on his glass. "That came afterward, Ainsley. Miss Burrowes was prostrate with grief at Carrington's death. She and her family retired to their estate in Dorset where she fell ill herself for a time."

"I still see no hint of scandal here, Haversham. A woman's grief is no reason for her to be disgraced." Was this a storm in a cream pot, after all?

Casting a look of disbelief at Nathan, his friend sat forward in his chair. “Perhaps none of your family or friends has become betrothed in the last ten or so years?”

Nathan shook his head. What was Haversham getting at?

“Are you not aware then that from almost the moment couples agree to marry, they feel it is permitted to anticipate the wedding night?”

“Well, yes, of course I know that.” Then with dawning realization... “So the ton believed that Miss Burrowes and Lord Carrington...?”

“Exactly. It would explain her family’s frantic desire to have them marry before he died. And her illness afterward.”

“Her illness?”

Haversham paused. “The on-dit at the time put it about that she had either birthed or lost a child.”

“Good God.” As though a rug had been pulled from beneath his feet, Nathan’s world shifted. The Miss Burrowes he had known would never have done such a thing.

Although...

He was back under the cherry tree, in Lady Hamilton’s garden, moonlight streaming around him and the lady with a thousand stars shining down on them and their passionate kiss...

“Ainsley? Ainsley.”

Haversham’s insistent voice brought him out of his reverie. “What?” He blinked

several times to clear the vision of that night from his head.

“You seem stunned. You’d never heard this rumor before? About Miss Burrowes?” His friend looked at him askance.

“No, never. When I left for Italy, she’d just come out. My father wrote to me that she’d become betrothed to Lord Carrington shortly after I left, and I inquired about her no more.” And some time later, finally made peace with his heart. “When I returned a little over two years later, I had no cause to ask after her, assuming that she’d married. Only last night did I discover that the gentleman had died before they could do so.”

“I suppose the scandal had died down by the time you returned, but it was on everyone’s tongues for months.” Haversham stared frankly at him. “And now she has returned to Society. I wonder why?”

“She is to be married to a Mr. Burke from Derbyshire, it seems.”

“Then perhaps they are testing the waters of respectability.” Haversham nodded. “Such a marriage might help repair her reputation.”

“That seems likely.” And would explain much about last night. The embrace he’d interrupted, Burke’s overly affectionate treatment of Miss Burrowes, and her lack of affection for him. An arranged marriage to help bring her back into Society. “Though why now, after all these years, is a mystery.”

“And one we will simply have to ponder until the gossips inform us, as they most assuredly will.” His friend laughed, drained his glass, and rose. “I’ll wager—or rather would wager had I the funds—that there is already an on-dit in some news sheet about her presence at Lady Hamilton’s last night. I wonder the lady would even invite her.”

“That I can shed some light on.” Nathan rose as well. “Lady Hamilton is her aunt. I remember Miss Burrowes telling me that all those years ago. Perhaps she’s trying to assist the woman on her way back to respectability.”

“Better she than you or I. Nothing good can come of such a scheme. Getting embroiled in such unpleasantness would be disastrous to one’s own reputation, I’m certain.” Haversham looked at Nathan and stopped dead. “You haven’t... Ainsley, tell me you didn’t get ensnared in this business somehow?”

“I’m taking Miss Burrowes for a ride in my curicle this afternoon.” He tried to mitigate the defiance in his voice, but not much. It had occurred to Nathan that he might be, in part, responsible for Miss Burrowes’s downfall.

“Are you mad, Ainsley?” The anguish on the earl’s face spoke of genuine concern for him. “For God’s sake, cry off. Plead illness or business that cannot wait. Do not allow your name to be linked to this woman’s. Mark my words, you will either be pulled down with her or quash her hopes for a chance at respectability.”

“Do you think she did it, Haversham?” The question had been eating a hole in his heart ever since the revelation. “Do you think she allowed herself to be ruined because she was in love with the man?”

His question brought his friend up short. Haversham’s lips drew in, his brows down in a scowl. “As I do not know the lady well, I cannot hazard a guess. She and Carrington were, as I said earlier, very affectionate in their address in public. How that resolved itself in private, only she knows. But it matters not what I think, or what you think, or, God help us, what the truth of the matter actually is. Society has decreed her guilty, and unless that opinion can be changed, she may as well be.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

After a night spent tossing and turning and a morning filled with growing dread, Amelia had regretfully dressed in her best blue carriage gown, trimmed with rosettes of the same color, and a matching bonnet and taken up her station in one of the chairs in the downstairs receiving room of the townhouse her father had taken for the Season. She hoped the small amount of Pear's Almond Bloom she'd applied to her face helped hide her haggard look. It would not do for Lord Ainsley to believe her drooping appearance was due to sleeplessness caused by him. Even if it was true.

There'd been so much upheaval last evening that she'd lain awake going over every moment until the wee hours. First there'd been Mr. Burke's introduction and subsequent kiss in the library. Then Lord Ainsley's startling appearance. Who would've thought he would materialize after such a long time, at the very worst moment, then offer to take her driving as though his absence during the last ten years had never occurred? But the worst had been Mr. Burke's reaction to the outing with Lord Ainsley. Mama had calmed him, apparently, but he'd protested loudly on the way home, until Amelia was left at her doorstep with a terrible headache.

So today she was determined to tell Lord Ainsley, in no uncertain terms, that she would not jeopardize her possible future with Mr. Burke just to satisfy his curiosity about her. That was all it must be. That she remembered their budding romance all those years ago did not mean he did, certainly not when he'd left without a word to her. She'd been devastated, waiting day after day for him to arrive at the townhouse to speak to her father about a formal courtship. Night after night, she'd searched each entertainment for him, until finally she'd overheard two gentlemen talking about Lord Ainsley and learned that he'd left for Italy the previous week.

Somehow, she'd gotten through that horrible evening, although once she'd returned

home, she'd cried until dawn.

Never again would she cry over this man. She'd send him off with a large flea in his ear this very afternoon, marry Mr. Burke, and be content with her lot. Hopefully, her life would be better than it had been so far, if she worked at pleasing her husband. Not the marriage she'd imagined having all those years ago, but at least she'd be a wife and respectable again.

The front door opening brought her up out of the chair, her stomach quivering. A murmur of voices in the corridor, and her mouth went as dry as if she'd swallowed cotton. She clutched the strings of her reticule, steeling herself.

Their butler appeared in the doorway. "Lord Ainsley, miss."

Suddenly the butler was gone, and he was there, tall and handsome as ever. Dressed impeccably in pale trousers and an excellently cut walnut brown coat, wide at the shoulders and impossibly narrow at the waist, his lordship could've just stepped out of a bandbox.

"Miss Burrowes, good afternoon." He smiled and bowed, his gaze taking her in from top to toe.

"Good afternoon, my lord." Hoping he couldn't see her trembling, she curtsied and nodded toward the door. "Shall we go? I am certain you have more pressing things to attend to this afternoon than an outing with me."

"None that I can think of." His gray eyes twinkled as he offered his arm. "But I will take the hint. Let us be off."

After handing her into his curricule, a sleek black and yellow vehicle, pulled by a matched pair of grays, he jumped aboard and took the ribbons with very sure hands.

“Are they always this tiny?” The vehicle seemed too small to carry them both. Perched on the seat with the top back and no sides to hold her in, Amelia expected to be ejected from the carriage as soon as they hit a rut or bump in the road. She clutched what little of the side there was in a death grip.

“This is the standard size for a curricule, Miss Burrowes.” The wretch smiled as he started the team. “I believe I detect a lack of confidence in my ability to drive this rig.”

“Oh, dear.” Amelia gritted her teeth as they turned the corner at a trot. She clung to the side as best she could, but even the slight speed made her dizzy. “It is not my lack of confidence in your driving, my lord, but my lack of faith in my ability to stay in my seat.”

“You have never ridden in a curricule before?” He chuckled and adjusted the reins.

Wretched man.

“Never.” And never would again once they returned home.

“Then I am delighted to be the one to introduce you to the pleasures of a brisk ride.” He grinned at her as they sped through the gates of Hyde Park. As soon as they rolled onto the dirt bridle path, he did something with the ribbons and the horses picked up their pace.

The grass, trees, and flowers along the path became a colorful blur as Amelia held onto her bonnet with one hand and the curricule with the other. The wind rushed over her face, which actually felt exquisite. Still, she feared they would come to mischief any second.

After an interminable time, he slowed the horses again, this time to a sedate walk, and

turned to her. “Did you enjoy your first curricule ride, Miss Burrowes?”

On the tip of her tongue to tell him it had been horrible, thank you very much, she glanced at him and stopped, arrested by the hopeful look on his face. He really wished to have pleased her. Something inside her shifted, and she smiled back at him. “It was like nothing I’ve ever experienced before, my lord.”

“I wanted to come here before the fashionable hour just so we could take the path at a good clip. One cannot do that when so many people are about.”

Amelia glanced around and, true enough, only a handful of walkers and one gentleman on horseback were in evidence. Fewer people to recognize her as well. Had that also been on Lord Ainsley’s mind?

“There is an offshoot of the path up ahead. I thought we might stop a moment.” He steered the willing horses toward a smaller opening in the trees and suddenly they were inside a bower of greenery, quite secluded, where he slowed the horses until they stopped.

Her pulse raced. Why had he brought her here? Had he finally heard the stories the ton whispered about her and thought he could take advantage of her lack of reputation? The memory of their kiss beneath the cherry tree surfaced, and her resolve suddenly faltered. Would she indeed allow him the liberty again?

“Miss Burrowes, first, I would like to apologize most abjectly for the way I treated you, going away without a word all those years ago.”

Of all the things she’d imagined he’d say today while tossing and turning last night, that had not even remotely crossed her mind. She blinked, not knowing how to respond. “Thank you, my lord. I do appreciate that, even though it was quite a long time ago.” She sighed. “A lifetime ago, it seems.”

“Indeed, it does seem that way.” He gazed ahead, pointedly not looking at her. “I want to tell you what happened.” Suddenly, his piercing gaze was trained on her, the sorrow there almost a palpable thing.

She drew back, unsure if she wanted to listen to an explanation that brought so much pain to him. Still, if he needed atonement, she would hear him.

“You said you remember that evening underneath the cherry tree?”

Nodding, she looked away. Although time had dimmed the pain of his defection, that kiss still lingered bright in her memory.

“I promised you I would speak to your father about a formal courtship, and I had every intention of doing so the next day. That night when I arrived home, I sought out my father to apprise him of my intentions toward you.” Lord Ainsley’s cheerful countenance had grown grim, his mouth drawn, the skin under his eyes suddenly darkened. “Unfortunately, he was not particularly enthusiastic about the news. His reasons had nothing to do with you, my dear, but with me. My age, specifically. I was only twenty-one that summer, an age, he told me, when I should be off seeing the world, experiencing new places, new ideas, steeping myself in the ancient cultures of foreign lands. Not leg-shackled to a lady I’d only just met.”

Teeth clenched to hold her tongue, Amelia sat with her hands clasped in her lap, fuming. His father had been the one to sunder their budding affection for one another. Had he not done so, what might her life have been like these past ten years?

Lord Ainsley closed his eyes and clenched his fists. “I should’ve argued more stringently for the courtship, but again, I was young and in the habit of taking my father’s advice.” He opened stormy gray eyes to gaze on her. “I wish to God I had not, but I did. We set off the very next morning for Portsmouth to arrange passage on a ship to Italy, to commence the Grand Tour I’d always wished to take. I wanted to

send you a letter, explaining what had happened and asking you to wait for me, but Father wouldn't hear of it. He said a clean break would be best, that I couldn't expect you to wait years for me to return."

"In that, I believe he was correct, my lord." Much as she'd have liked to refute it, she could not. While she would've been content to wait two or more years for Lord Ainsley to return, her parents certainly would not have. They'd expected her to make a good match that first Season.

He shook his head sadly. "I set sail with the image of your face in my mind, determined to write to you when I first made port. However, the ship was delayed, becalmed off the Canary Islands, so when I arrived in Rome, I was met with a letter from my father that had come more swiftly overland. In it, he mentioned your betrothal to Lord Carrington." Lord Ainsley sat straighter on the seat, shifting the ribbons from one hand to the other. "I sent up a prayer for your happiness and turned my thoughts to enjoying the Tour, although for the first month, at least, I was miserable company for the group of fellows I joined."

"I see." Tears pricked her eyes, and she blinked them back. He had truly cared for her that long-ago summer. If not for his father's misplaced meddling, this man might've been her husband all this time.

"Last night, I learned you did not marry after all, and today," he paused, his lips going quite white, "I heard about the circumstances that followed your betrothed's death."

Oh, God, he did know. Somehow, his solicitous behavior toward her today had suggested he hadn't learned of her shame. She raised her head and looked him in the eyes. "And having learned about the gossip that ruined my reputation, I suppose you wish to revile me as well?"

“No, Miss Burrowes.” The hard planes of his face made him seem distant and unapproachable. “I wish to hear your side of the story.”

* * * *

From the way her eyes widened, that request had been unexpected. Nathan clenched his jaw. Had no one ever asked for her explanation of the events surrounding her betrothal and the aftermath of Carrington’s death? Gossip and rumors were often no more than that, but just as capable of ruining a lady or gentleman’s reputation. He wanted to hear it from the lady herself. He owed her that. If he’d stayed in England and married her, none of that unpleasantness would’ve occurred. And he found he wanted to retain the untarnished memory of their brief time together. He’d believed her a true lady then; he wanted to believe it now as well. “Please tell me if the rumors are true.”

“You are bold, my lord.” A steely blue-eyed gaze pierced him. “Why should I tell you anything, as it does not concern you in the least?”

“I think it does concern me, Miss Burrowes.” Grasping her hand, he clasped it between both of his, the sudden warmth assailing his senses. “It concerns me that you may have been reviled all these years unjustly, due, in part, to my folly. I beg you, tell me what happened.”

Her shoulders slumped, and she shook her head. “The truth matters very little. The ton will believe what it will.”

“But I will judge for myself what I believe is true, if you will tell me.” He wanted the rumors to be false. Wanted it badly. So he could believe in her still.

For a long moment, he doubted she would. The bleak look on her face spoke of her distress then she dragged her gaze away from him.

“When you did not appear again that Season, I was angry and hurt. I had believed you honorable and even fancied myself a little in love with you. So when I found you were gone, with no word as to why, I was determined to forget you, to get on with my Season and finding a man who would care for me. Lord Carrington and I were introduced a week or so after you disappeared. He was tall and handsome, had some wit in his conversation, and was very attentive to me from the beginning of our acquaintance. It took almost no time for me to believe myself in love with him, so when he proposed, I accepted him.” A ghost of a smile played across her lips. “He was a good man, and we seemed to suit tolerably well. The wedding date was set, and we continued to appear together at entertainments, for all the world like a happy couple.”

The story so far was as Nathan had expected. Her last words, however, pricked his interest. “You seemed like a happy couple, yet you were not?”

“You know the prevailing thoughts on how a proper young lady should act, do you not, my lord?” She arched an eyebrow. “I’m certain you also are aware that many betrothed couples consider themselves married from the time the proposal is accepted.” Pink deepened the roses already on her cheeks. “Lord Carrington was one of those proponents. He begged me to...surrender myself to him before the nuptials were spoken, but I refused. We were to be married in a matter of weeks, as soon as the banns could be read. I told him we could surely wait that long.”

“But...?” Nathan’s heart hurt as though it had been caught in the teeth of a vise.

Her fierce frown took him aback. “There is no ‘but,’ my lord. I did not acquiesce to his demand, no matter what people may have said. We quarreled over it almost every time we met, until I wished for my wedding day just to make the arguments stop.”

“No gentleman should’ve put you through such anguish.” Nathan’s opinion of Carrington, not good to begin with, plummeted. “One ‘no’ from you should’ve been

sufficient.”

Her sad little smile tore at his heart. “I am not surprised to hear you say that, my lord. I daresay things would’ve been quite different if the gentleman in question had been you.”

By God, but that was true. From the depths of his heart, he wished for the thousandth time he’d never listened to his father, had instead married this beautiful woman and lived a contented life all these years. Wishes, however, would never make that come true.

“When Jonathan...Lord Carrington fell ill, we assumed it was a trifling sickness. But the nagging cough became pneumonia, the doctor said. I journeyed with my mother to Bedfordshire, to his home seat where he’d gone when the sickness worsened.” Unable to hide her agitation, Miss Burrowes fell to pulling at the strings of her purse. “We kept praying he would recover, and for a while, he did rally. That is when Mama suggested we have the wedding go forward, by special license. Lord Carrington agreed, for he believed he would recover but wanted me to be provided for in the event of his death.”

At least the man had attempted decency in the end. “But he did not recover?”

“No, he succumbed.” Her matter-of-fact tone seemed odd, but perhaps she’d come to terms with her grief.

“And you were grief-stricken for a time, I was told.”

She paused before answering, again unusual. “Yes, I secluded myself for a time, out of respect for Lord Carrington’s passing.”

“And then the gossip began.”

Bowing her head, she nodded.

“Was there anything that might have precipitated it? Other than simply your betrothal?” There must’ve been some reason for the gossip to start, although the ton’s tongues might wag if a dog died.

With a deep sigh, the lady raised her head, her mouth set in stern lines. “About a month after his lordship died, I became...ill. A slight indisposition only, and one that had occurred before.” Now she avoided his eyes, and her cheeks grew rosy red. “I remained in bed for several days. We believe one of the maids told this to a neighbor’s servant and that is how the tale of a child began. A story that is far, far from the truth, but has nevertheless been believed from that day to this.”

“I see.” Nathan did see how such an indisposition, coming at that particular time, could be construed as a miscarriage. And there would be no way to refute it, save denials. Which would not be believed. The prevailing lax climate that unofficially condoned couples acting married when they were not would be cited as the norm, and the guilt of the lady would be automatically assumed. “Was there anything else?”

She paused then nodded. “I was not with Lord Carrington at his death bed, but people who were there said that he continually asked about...a child. His child.”

Nathan closed his eyes briefly then asked in what he hoped was a normal tone of voice, “What do you make of that, Miss Burrowes?”

“All I can think is that the illness caused him to speak wildly.” Defiantly, she met his gaze. “I can only tell you that I bore him none.”

A disturbing development to say the least. No wonder the lady’s reputation had remained in ruins.

“So now that you know the truth , my lord, what do you intend to do?” Her tone affirmed that she believed he could do nothing.

Likely, she was correct. He’d sought her version of the facts simply to corroborate what Haversham had told him, and to hear it from her own lips, in the hope that he would discover her innocent. But did he believe her tale?

“Thank you so much for your candid words, Miss Burrowes. I know it was not easy for you to relive this episode in your life.”

“On the contrary, Lord Ainsley, I have relived it almost every day of my life since the gossip began. It no longer upsets me as it used to.” She set her jaw, giving her a fierce countenance. “I hope my story has illuminated the situation, although if you are like most people, you must make up your own mind as to my guilt or innocence.”

With a swift nod, he raised the ribbons to start the team. She was absolutely correct. He would need to consider her words, play them against Haversham’s account, and decide which version seemed more likely. And then act upon that decision.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

Mulling over Miss Burrowes's story, trying to reach a decision as to her innocence or guilt occupied Nathan much more than he would've thought over the next several days. He'd been certain when he'd asked for her explanation that he would be able to instantly ascertain the truth of the matter, but the facts as they'd been presented by both Lord Haversham and the lady herself seemed extraordinarily plausible. The crux of the matter seemed to come down to that passionate kiss they'd shared under the cherry tree. Would a woman who had welcomed such a moment with him—before even an official courtship had been established—be more likely to have allowed similar kisses and more with a man to whom she was betrothed and expected to marry?

He needed to make up his mind and quickly, for time was of the essence. Mr. Burrowes would surely complete his arrangements for the marriage of his daughter to Mr. Burke soon if Nathan did not speak to him. And the more he thought of that eventuality, the less he liked it. Much to his surprise, his reacquaintance with Miss Burrowes had brought back the feelings of their brief but intense association those years ago.

To say he was still attracted to the lady minced words indeed. In fact, he'd thought about nothing but Miss Burrowes ever since they'd met at Lady Hamilton's earlier in the week. The sight of her, the knowledge that she was not married, and that her reputation had been ruined had actually kept him up these past nights. Damned inconvenient when he had business that needed attending to, but he'd been totally unable to help himself. If not for the uncertainty about her character that ate at him constantly, he'd have already met with her father and likely come to an accord with the lady herself.

So this evening he was on his way to dine with Haversham and hash out every objection to putting forward his suit for her. His friend would likely have very loud, very strenuous protests, but he cared not a jot for that. Deep down in his soul, he wanted her, believed he belonged with her. If his friend could talk him out of that belief then so be it. The ensuing discussion would likely be lively, to say the least.

Upon being announced, Nathan entered the drawing room in Haversham's townhouse to find he was not the only dinner guest this evening. Lady Letitia, Haversham's sister, was in attendance, of course, but so were Marcus's aunt, Lady George Pye, and his own aunt and uncle, Lord and Lady Ivor and their daughter Celinda. Both Celinda and Letitia were out this Season, which must be the reason for the small dinner party. Perhaps a session in strategy for the young ladies had been planned. Still, he could speak to Marcus while they were having their after-dinner port.

"Ainsley, well met." Marcus greeted him with a smile.

"Haversham. Good of you to invite me. How goes the courtship?" Nathan couldn't help deviling his friend a bit. He'd begun his courtship of Nathan's sister Kate a few days prior after losing a large wager. Nathan had been so consumed with thoughts of Miss Burrowes he'd neglected to monitor his friend's progress.

Haversham rolled his eyes. "So far so good, although your sister could try the patience of a plaster saint sometimes." He glanced around and lowered his voice. "She's actually been quite good company, although I'd not have believed it. We went for Gunter's ices today and discovered we both particularly like the lemon ones."

"A match made in heaven, then." Nathan chuckled. "By way of the gaming tables. I am very glad to hear it, Marcus. Carry on." As his friend was about to step away, he grasped his arm. "We need to speak later, alone. About Miss Burrowes."

"Lord God, Nathan." His friend's sudden menacing scowl almost made Nathan

chuckle. “What the hell do you mean?”

“After dinner.”

Haversham groaned softly but nodded and turned back to his duties as host. “Shall we go in?”

The seating arrangements were not strictly conventional, and Nathan again assumed they were for the purpose of the parents and guardians of the girls needing to discuss the prospects of their charges. Marcus and his sister sat at head and foot of the table, Lord and Lady Ivor together on Marcus’s right, Lady George, Nathan, and Lady Celinda on his left. As the first course began, Lady Ivor leaned her head toward Haversham, and Nathan turned to Lady Celinda. His cousin was a particular friend of his sister. Perhaps she could shed some light on Kate’s perspective of Marcus’s courtship.

“Kate tells me you’re being particularly wicked this Season.”

Nathan froze. Dear God, had Kate found out about his wager with Marcus?

Celinda laid her napkin primly in her lap, as though she’d just remarked on the weather rather than that volatile opening volley. “I do hope it’s true. We’ve never had a true scandal in our family. I cannot help but think it will be most exciting. Of course, the most exciting thing will be my marriage to Lord Finley, but that will not be a scandal. At least I don’t think it will.” She paused to consider, her soup spoon poised above her bowl.

“Has Lord Finley declared his intentions toward you already?” The Season had just begun. He’d not even scraped an acquaintance with the man yet, although Marcus had.

“Oh, not in so many words, no. But we’ve gotten along famously since we met at Lady Hamilton’s ball the other night, where he danced the supper dance with me.” She smiled gaily. “It’s only a matter of time before he approaches Papa. Oh, I know what I was about to say. About the scandal. I haven’t planned for Lord Finley and me to be the object of gossip, save the good-natured kind—remarks on how handsome a couple we are, or how happy we look together. But one never knows.” She took a bit of soup then nodded toward him. “Just look at Miss Burrowes. I’m certain she never dreamed of becoming an example of a ruined woman when she first came out.”

Nathan’s soup got caught halfway down his throat. He had to calm himself, risk embarrassing himself by spewing the white soup everywhere, or drown in it. The rock-hard discipline he’d learned at Jackson’s salon, to push through pain or surprise, came to his aid. Slowly, he relaxed and managed to get it down, though he went into a fit of coughing afterward.

Good-naturedly, Celinda pounded him on the back while every eye in the dining room turned on him.

“Are you quite all right, Ainsley?” Haversham called from his end of the table.

“Never better, thank you,” he croaked. Clearing his throat helped, followed by a long sip of the good Bordeaux Marcus always served. He smiled at everyone around the table and when they resumed their animated chatter, turned back to Lady Celinda. “What are you up to, imp? Has Kate put you up to killing me? And how do you even know anything about Miss Burrowes?”

Waving her hand, Celinda laughed merrily. “Kate is much too taken up with Lord Haversham at the moment to think about you, Nathan. I believe they will make a match of it, and sooner rather than later.” She leaned over toward him and lowered her voice. “I have known of Miss Burrowes ever since Mama began preparing me for my come out. Her story was the example used to frighten me into behaving as

decorously as possible where gentlemen were concerned. Never be alone with a gentleman, even one to whom you are affianced, or people will assume the worst and ruin your reputation the first chance they get.” The light-hearted Celinda actually shuddered. “I’ve known what happened to her for years as a caution against folly.” She arched her eyebrows at him. “And I daresay the poor lady would just as soon hide as go riding in your curricule, cousin, for all the ton to see.”

Blast. Who had seen them in the park? He’d been so careful. “I wished to speak with the lady privately and thought a ride might be a pleasant outing for both of us.”

“And, of course, you had a tendre for her once as well.”

Thankfully, he’d not taken another sip of his wine yet, though now he wished for something a lot stronger. “What are you talking about, Celinda?”

“Your father told my mother about it, apparently just after you went on your Grand Tour. She told me of it when she warned me about Miss Burrowes and her plight.”

His cousin knew damn well too much for her own good. “I knew the lady that summer, yes. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a tendre.” Although, truth to tell, his feelings had run much deeper than that. That was the problem now. He wanted desperately to believe her, but how could he?

“You didn’t ruin her, did you, Nathan?”

“Celinda!” The child was impossible. Heads had turned toward them again. “Your sense of the dramatic will land you in trouble one of these days, mark my words.”

“It has stood me in good stead until now.” Smiling sweetly, she lifted her wine glass. “And you neglected to answer my question, cousin.”

“Of course I did no such thing. I wanted to marry her. If only I’d been allowed to stay in London, I would have.”

“Do you wish to do so now?” His cousin stared at him frankly, much too knowing for one of nineteen.

“The situation is more complicated, as you must know. I have no way to know if she’s trying to deceive me about the matter.” And likely never would unless they did marry. By which time, it would be too late if the worst turned out to be the truth.

“Does it truly matter so much after all these years, Nathan?” All teasing aside, Celinda looked earnestly into his face. “If she did make the mistake of which she is accused, can the behavior not be excused? I had this same conversation with Mama, who was totally unsympathetic. But really, the whole ton knows such behavior goes on and little is done to discourage it. I daresay when Lord Finley proposes we, too, shall anticipate our wedding night. I shall be disappointed if we do not. It seems almost the fashionable thing to do.”

“Celinda, your parents must be considering locking you up and having all your courtships handled expressly by post.” His cousin was totally out of control to be proposing such wild behavior. Not that she wasn’t correct in her estimation that the ton turned a blind eye to the behavior of betrothed couples. Nor in her observation that such behavior, while officially condemned, was nevertheless unexceptional.

“They may try, but I doubt they will succeed. There is a tall tree just outside my bedroom window, and I have been good at climbing ever since I was in leading strings. But, Nathan,” she sobered again, “can you honestly tell me that had you been engaged to Miss Burrowes, you would not have pressed her before the wedding night?”

Nathan sat back, his plate still untouched. He didn’t even recall it being placed before

him, so the footman had likely gotten an earful of their conversation. But Celinda's words struck very close to the bone. As he remembered that night under the cherry tree—and he remembered it very well indeed—the idea had flitted through his mind to persuade Miss Burrowes to come away with him to a nearby bower and seal their accord with the joining of their bodies. If only he had done so, much would've been different.

“You should also take this into consideration, cousin.” Having gotten no response, Celinda had decided to forge on with her plea. “Whether or not Miss Burrowes and Lord Carrington anticipated their wedding night would have mattered not a jot had he lived long enough to marry her. Another week, and she would've been his widow, and absolutely none of this would've mattered. She would've been pitied then and now rather than reviled for so long. Is the lack of that single action worth throwing away your happiness again?”

Stunned, Nathan stared at his full plate. Celinda's arguments were persuasive, the most convincing being the last. Had Miss Burrowes been married to Carrington, no matter how briefly, she would've been fussed over and prayed for, would've been given the status of grieving widow, and no one would've given a second thought to what they'd done before the vows were spoken. Given all Miss Burrowes had gone through, it seemed about time she was accorded the status she should've been given years ago. By him if by no one else in the ton .

A footman moved in to take away his plate, but Nathan stood up, making the man dance backward.

“My abject apologies, Haversham, Lady George, Aunt, Uncle, Lady Letitia, Lady Celinda.” He smiled down at his dinner companion. Hopefully, he'd soon be able to dance at her wedding. She deserved her happiness if she'd set him on the straight path to his own. “I find I have most urgent business to attend to that will not wait.”

“What has happened, Ainsley?” Marcus rose and made as if to accompany him out.

“A revelation, Haversham. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, the scales have fallen from my eyes. Wish me luck, old chap.” He bowed to the company, who all looked at him with amazement.

“Don’t tell me it has to do with—”

“It does.” Nathan started for the doorway.

“But you can’t—”

“Oh, yes, I can, and I do, and I will.” With that somewhat cryptic statement, which Marcus likely understood perfectly, he hurried from the room in search of his hat and stick. After consulting his pocket watch, he was inclined to believe he might just interrupt Mr. Burrowes’s dinner, but he cared for that not at all. He had a message to deliver, and the devil himself wouldn’t be able to stop him tonight.

* * * *

Dinner had wound down, thank goodness, and Amelia looked forward to her mother rising to retire to the drawing room without the gentlemen. Her father and Mr. Burke had talked incessantly about fox hunting, which seemed to be a most popular sport in Derbyshire. Amelia rode tolerably well, of course, but she could not hunt, and so the topic held little interest for her. Her time at dinner had been spent listening to the sighings of her mother because Lord Ainsley had not put in an appearance since he’d escorted her home after their ride two days ago.

She’d tried to tell Mama that they would be seeing no more of the viscount, but the woman was obsessed with the belief that he wished to renew his attentions to Amelia. Perhaps once she and Mr. Burke had signed the register, Mama would accept that she

was not going to marry Lord Ainsley. From the looks of things, that would be in a little over two weeks. She'd not formally accepted Mr. Burke yet, but that would likely occur in the next day or so, in enough time for the banns to begin this Sunday. Mama had insisted that she be married after the banns and not by special license. Under no circumstances should it look like they were rushing to the altar.

The door opened, and the butler entered. "Mr. Burrowes, there is a gentleman to see you. I tried to tell him the family was at dinner, but he was most insistent. I have put him in the front receiving room."

"Who the devil would call at this time of night?" Annoyance filled her father's face, his scowl sweeping around the table as if looking to them for the answer.

"Lord Ainsley, sir." Meyers's straight-faced answer left everyone's jaws agape.

The chair on which Amelia sat seemed to waver, or perhaps the room itself dimmed for a moment. She blinked rapidly several times then turned to her mother to find the woman clasping her hands to her chest, cheeks red, eyes two wide blue pools of joy. "Come, Amelia. Let us retire this instant with Mr. Burke. We will await your father's report in the drawing room."

Amelia shot to her feet, her ears roaring so she had to grab the back of her mother's chair to steady herself as she left the room. What did this mean? Why had Lord Ainsley come? There was truly only one explanation, though she refused to believe it. Not until she heard the words from his lordship himself. Speeding behind her mother down the corridor toward the back of the townhouse, Amelia prayed as she had not for many years. Not since Lord Ainsley had gone away so long ago.

She and her mother entered the room, in silence still, and Mama dropped into her favorite high-backed chair. "Ring for tea, please, Amelia."

In the process of going back to the bell pull beside the doorway, Amelia was brought up short when Mr. Burke arrived. They came face to face, his grim visage thinly veiling his outrage. Apparently, he also thought he understood what Lord Ainsley's presence at this time of night meant. Lord, but the evening had turned into quite an explosive affair.

After giving the bell a sharp pull, Amelia skittered away from him, seating herself on the chaise next to her mother's chair, imploring the Almighty to direct Mr. Burke to the chair opposite them and not beside her. Either God had heard her or her face had warned the gentleman to stay away, for he paced instead, muttering to himself.

"Beastly inconsiderate of the man to interrupt a family dinner at this hour of the night. Gentlemen with a title believe themselves free to do whatever they please, without thinking of the inconvenience to anyone else. Ought to speak a word to him about common decency." As his agitation increased, his strides became faster, more erratic, until Amelia's head spun with the whirlwind motion.

She dropped her head into her hands to steady herself. The door creaked open. Thank goodness. Nothing would soothe her better at this moment than a cup of hot tea. Raising her head, she stared into Lord Ainsley's gray-eyed gaze, trained directly on her. Amelia gave a squeak and sat up straight on the chaise, transfixed as a mouse caught in the steely stare of a hungry cat.

"Good evening, Mrs. Burrowes, Mr. Burke." Lord Ainsley nodded to the others but came forward and bowed to her. "Miss Burrowes, I know it is late, but at long last, I have come to speak to your father."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

The next afternoon, Amelia waited at the window in the downstairs reception room for Lord Ainsley, even more nervous this time, if that were possible. Last night's startling meeting, followed by loud protestations from Mr. Burke, had once more rendered her sleepless, so that the Pears had been used liberally this morning as she washed and dressed.

Indeed, the whole affair had the quality of a dream. Less than a week ago, she hadn't thought of Lord Ainsley in at least eight or nine years. Now he was coming to formally pay court to her. The fact that he'd insisted on driving her in Hyde Park, during the fashionable hour this time, led her to believe that his intentions were completely serious. No one would run that gauntlet and risk censure by the ton unless they meant to make an offer for her.

The thought made her shiver, although the day was quite warm. She remembered in great detail her feelings for Lord Ainsley when they first met. Feelings that had been strictly suppressed after his defection and her subsequent courtship and betrothal to Jonathan. They were still there, simmering deep within her. Could she allow them to rise to the surface once more? And if she could not, and he asked her to marry him, did she really have any more of a choice than with Mr. Burke?

Of course, she would much prefer to marry Lord Ainsley. A kinder, more handsome, and intelligent gentleman could not be found in the ton, by her estimation. Memories of their dances together, his charming laugh, his gallantry during those few brief weeks an age ago swirled up, making her heart beat faster. Oh, dear. Her feelings for him were apparently in a shallower grave than she'd suspected. Well, then, perhaps his regard for her had resurfaced as well. It would be truly wonderful if he offered for her from affection rather than monetary gain. Although... A sudden remembrance

from last night drew her up short. Did he have another reason entirely? The phrase he'd used about speaking to her father echoed his last words to her under the cherry tree. Might his sense of honor and duty be playing into his courtship rather than regard?

The black and yellow curricule pulled up to the curb in front of the townhouse, and Lord Ainsley hopped down, a huge smile on his face. Turning away from the window, Amelia took a firm grip on her reticule. With her own heart in turmoil over the viscount, she needed to ascertain not only what she felt for him, but what he might feel for her. Was he calling out of a misplaced sense of duty or did he still harbor a true affection for her? This carriage ride might very well be the most momentous one of her life.

The door to the foyer opened, and there was a murmur of voices.

Amelia straightened her shoulders, so her new rose gown and matching Spencer fell gracefully to the floor. She smiled her brightest just as Lord Ainsley was announced. "Good afternoon, my lord."

"Good afternoon, Miss Burrowes. You are looking extremely well, despite last night's excitements. You must thrive on such challenges." His return smile was charming, but the gleam in his eyes set her heart to racing.

"There seem to be so many of them, now I am back in London. One can do nothing but attempt to rise to the occasion." Babbling on, she tried to counteract his overpowering presence. How had she not remembered that the man was so very tall? He practically loomed over her. She gazed up into the bright gray eyes and smiled, though her lips trembled.

"Shall we go?" He offered his arm. "I promise not to bite."

Drat. She must keep her countenance better schooled. “Thank you, my lord.” She took the proffered arm, his warmth immediately stealing through her. “I will hold you to that.”

He chuckled, and she smiled to herself. They had bantered thus when they first met. One of the qualities that had drawn her to him in the first place. She could not abide a dullard, and Ainsley had been sharp as an assassin’s blade. He settled her securely in the curricule, and she grasped the side again, although now she knew what to expect, she’d likely not be as frightened. Of the ride itself, at least.

“The weather is cooperating with my plans. That’s a good sign.” He started the team. “Perhaps the gods are smiling down on our venture.”

“What venture, my lord?”

“Your reintroduction to Society, my dear.”

Amelia’s mouth dried and her hands shook until she had to squeeze them together to stop them. It hadn’t truly dawned on her until now that this would not be the quiet easing back into Society she would’ve had on the arm of Mr. Burke. Oh, no. Lord Ainsley apparently intended a full cavalry charge straight into the jaws of the ton . After years of living with her head down, he was pulling her face up to the sun. She didn’t know whether to thank or curse him.

“Do not be alarmed.” He patted her clenched fists, and somehow his touch did indeed calm her. “We will take it in slow stages. Today you will be introduced to an old acquaintance of yours, Lord Haversham, and both his sister and mine. The more people who are seen accepting an introduction to you, the better. Ah, and here they are, right on time.”

They’d turned into the park, the horses trotting sedately, and come up beside an

elegant red and black barouche, occupied by two women and one gentleman. The gentleman and the fair lady shared a strong resemblance. The dark lady, in an exquisite blue gown, who stared quite unabashedly at her, had Lord Ainsley's features in a feminine face.

"Well met, Haversham. Ladies." Her escort bowed as best he could while sitting. "I see you're taking advantage of the splendid sunshine this afternoon."

"As ordered by you, dear brother." The dark lady's mouth puckered, perhaps in amusement. Perhaps not.

"It's good for you no matter why you're out in it, Kate." Lord Ainsley sent his sister a scathing look, and the lady laughed outright. "You see how I'm treated, Haversham? Have a care your sister is not so insubordinate." He nodded at the blond lady, whose pale cheeks colored a becoming dark pink. "Ladies, I would like to make known to you Miss Burrowes. She's an old acquaintance of mine, and we have been renewing that connection. Miss Burrowes, allow me to present my sister, Miss Katherine Locke," he gestured to the dark-haired lady, "Lady Letitia Stowe, and you may remember her brother, Lord Haversham."

They all nodded pleasantly from their carriage, and Amelia sighed quietly to have that first introduction over.

"Will you be at Mrs. Doyle's card party this evening, Miss Burrowes?" Miss Locke asked politely. "I adore playing cards, especially with my brother. I fare so much better wagering at the gaming tables than I do on horseraces."

"Humph." Lord Haversham cleared his throat and shot a speaking glance at Lord Ainsley that Miss Locke appeared not to see. What little contretemps was going on there?

Amelia glanced at Lord Ainsley with a raised brow. “I don’t believe I have—”

“Yes, Kate, we will be in attendance.” He smiled down at Amelia. “I hadn’t had a chance to tell you, Miss Burrowes, but I’ve secured invitations for both of us and your parents to Mrs. Doyle’s tonight. If you have no other engagement, may I escort you there? I would very much like to sit down with you over a hand of cards.” He whispered, “It will be fine. Another very simple way for you to ease back into Society.”

Such a whirlwind of activity after so long keeping to her home. Amelia nodded, although she scarcely deemed herself prepared for such an outing. Of course, she played cards, and played well, but only against her parents and lately her sisters. Out in public, wagering on the outcome, was something completely different.

Screw your courage to the sticking place, Amelia. “Yes, of course, that would be lovely.”

“Perhaps you will join my cousin Lady Celinda Graham, Lady Letitia, and me for a game as well, Miss Burrowes,” Miss Locke spoke up, sending a saucy look toward Lord Haversham. “We ladies can hold our own at a card table as well as the gentlemen, don’t you agree, Lord Haversham? Unless, of course, Lady Letitia is forbidden to play cards as well as waltz?”

“No, she is not forbidden the tables, Miss Locke, although her losses are her own to pay.” He looked fondly at his sister, who was blushing at all the attention. “But Letitia does not play to excess. Do you, my dear? Moderation is her aim in all things.”

“We will see about that,” Miss Locke muttered just loud enough for Amelia to hear her.

She glanced up at Lord Ainsley, who simply shook his head. “We will see you this evening, then.”

“So nice to make your acquaintance.” Amelia nodded to the occupants of the barouche as Lord Ainsley started his team again.

“There is one hurdle passed.” He touched the ribbons, and the horses picked up their pace. “Now we shall drive around the park to be seen together. That will elicit talk, of course, but do not worry. There will be more tonight. We must expect it. But Mrs. Doyle is a woman above reproach so if she allows you entry to her card party, that will speak for your character.”

“Why go to all this trouble, my lord?” The question popped out before she could stop it.

“Because I intend to marry you, Miss Burrowes, and I cannot stand idly by while my wife is given the cut direct when we come to Town.” Again that matter-of-fact tone that spoke of a man who usually got his way.

Amelia’s mouth dropped open and her heart leaped in her chest. He intended to marry her. Why would the words shock her so when she’d presumed as much already? Yet shock her they did. Her whole body buzzed frantically at the thought. So much so she didn’t realize they were slowing again until they’d all but stopped.

“Well, well, the very gentleman I’d expected to find in the park this afternoon.” Lord Ainsley pointed to a man on horseback halted beside a luxurious carriage with a crest on it. He seemed deep in conversation with the occupants.

“Is that...?” Things were about to get rather ugly. Again.

“Mr. Burke. Yes.” Lord Ainsley smiled, and Amelia cringed. “Let the games begin.”

* * * *

While Nathan had not wished to find Mr. Burke in the park, he had indeed expected him to be there. After the scene at the Burrowes's townhouse, the man would undoubtedly try to make trouble for them by any means possible.

Even before he'd at last spoken to Mr. Burrowes, briefly explaining his absence ten years before, and asking for formal permission to court his daughter, he'd suspected Mr. Burke would not bow out gracefully. But when Mr. Burrowes's surprise at his request had given way to immediate agreement, followed by a statement of the settlement he was prepared to make for his daughter's dowry, Nathan had known for certain Burke would cause problems. One could not expect a man to lose five thousand pounds and not put up a fight for it. And indeed, Burke had done that, trying to browbeat Mr. Burrowes into saying the settlements had already been reached and that Miss Burrowes had already accepted him.

Fortunately, Burrowes was made of sterner stuff. Quite likely the prospect of a daughter becoming the wife of a peer with a title had made him stand his ground and tell Burke that no such contract existed and that his daughter had not agreed to marry him. Issuing dire threats about the truth he'd be putting about to the ton, Burke had left with the aid of two footmen.

Now the toad-like little man seemed to be making good on his threat to keep Miss Burrowes's reputation stained and her unmarried. Of course, he'd not tangled with Viscount Ainsley yet; however, that was about to change. As his curricledrew closer, he recognized Lady Chalgrove, alone in Lady Hamilton's conveyance. Not the most pleasant of women, the lady had not been on the list of close acquaintances to whom he wished to introduce Miss Burrowes. But likely a good ally for Burke's gossipmongering. Once more into the breach.

"Good afternoon, Lady Chalgrove. How do you do? I see you are taking advantage of

the abundant sunshine.” He offered her his most charming smile, although his cheeks seemed ready to cave in. Turning what he hoped was his sourest gaze on Burke, he gave the man a curt nod. “Burke.”

“Ainsley.” The man had the audacity to stare at Miss Burrowes with a hunger Nathan did not like at all.

“Many are doing so this afternoon, my lord.” Lady Chalgrove gave him a nod and a stiff smile. “Those who are accustomed to being here must be enjoying the pleasant day. Although others will try to insert themselves into a Society not meant for them.” She glared at his companion, making it extremely difficult for Nathan not to plant the woman a facer. Not that he’d ever strike a woman, but this one seemed to deserve it most heartily.

“Well, Society has never been very discerning regarding its members.” Nathan raised his quizzing glass to Mr. Burke, peering at him as though he were some new species of insect. “Else many would have been dropped from its ranks long ago.”

“Indeed, my lord. I believe you have one such in your curricle this moment,” Burke piped up, his florid face turning beet red.

“An unfortunate misunderstanding occurred many years ago, as you have been given to understand, Burke. When the truth about that time comes out,” he glared into the carriage to emphasize the point to the lady, “Miss Burrowes will be completely vindicated.”

“Well, I see the lady has a determined champion in you, Lord Ainsley. She will need such to defend her immoral ways.” Lady Chalgrove pursed her lips and settled back into the seat primly.

“As I said, a misunderstanding on the part of the ton long ago that we intend to

remedy.” He dared not look at Miss Burrowes. A single indication of distress might cause him to act more rashly than would be wise.

“But what of her more current behavior, my lord?” Burke gave him a knowing smirk.

“Miss Burrowes’s behavior this Season has been exemplary, sir, as I have reason to know.” Warning bells jangled in Nathan’s mind as he attempted to hang onto his civility with both hands.

“Surely the tryst you witnessed in Lady Hamilton’s library could not be deemed moral behavior by a pure young woman?” The man’s evil smile widened. “I was just remarking to Lady Chalgrove that I had no idea how depraved Miss Burrowes actually was until the moment she threw herself at me, thinking we were alone.”

Miss Burrowes gasped behind him, the soft, pain-filled sound snapping his last vestige of self-control. He thrust the ribbons into her hands. “Hold these.”

The startled swoop of her upraised brows was almost comical. “But—”

“You’ll be fine. Trust me.” He jumped down from the curricule and walked to the nose of Burke’s horse. “I will ask you to dismount, sir.”

“Dismount?” The confidence on Burke’s face slipped a notch. “Why would I dismount?”

“Because I would challenge you face to face, sir. It is the correct procedure when initiating a duel.” He stared unblinking into Burke’s eyes as the blood drained from the man’s face. Ignoring gasps from the ladies in both carriages, Nathan stood as still and immovable as a rock. “Now get down.”

Burke pulled back on the reins and the horse jibbed. “Move away, my lord. You’ve

spooked him.”

“Apparently, you can control your horse as little as you can your tongue. Will you accept my challenge, Mr. Burke? Or will you retract your statement about Miss Burrowes? You must choose one or the other, else I will brand you a liar and a coward to all the ton .” Nathan grabbed the bridle, and the horse calmed. “You have besmirched a lady’s name, and I will have satisfaction of you one way or the other.”

Mouth working, but no sound emerging, Mr. Burke cut a sharp glance toward Lady Chalgrove, whose eyes seemed ready to pop out of her head. “I...I believe I may have misspoken about the lady, my lord. She... I...I was the one who initiated the embrace you walked in on.” His voice turned from apologetic to peevish. “Because I believed us about to become betrothed.”

“And now that you are no longer her suitor, you believe you are entitled to spread false rumors about her, perhaps to discourage my suit? Have a care, Mr. Burke.” If Nathan could’ve reached the man to throttle him, he would have done it without any more compunction than squashing a gnat. “I do not discourage so easily, and the next time I hear you spreading lies and filth about Miss Burrowes, I will seek you out and we will meet over pistols at dawn. And make no mistake.” His eyes bored into Burke’s. “I am an excellent shot, and I will aim to kill.”

Burke’s face went from red to deathly white, and he gasped in breaths as though he’d just made a run for his life.

Nathan released the horse’s bridle, turned on his heel, and climbed back into the curricule. Miss Burrowes’s visage had also paled considerably. Well, it was best she learn the resolve of the man she was going to marry. True, she’d not consented to the match...yet.

But by the end of the night, he’d make sure there was absolutely no doubt in anyone’s

mind they would marry, especially not in Miss Amelia Burrowes's.

“And that is the game, I believe, ladies and gentleman.”

Amelia could not help smiling as Lord Ainsley laid down his last card, the jack of hearts, thus taking the final trick and winning ten of the thirteen tricks in the hand for them. Their partnership had been most agreeable—and profitable, as the wagering on each trick had been fierce, especially between Lord Ainsley and his sister. With this last trick, she and his lordship had gained at least two pounds. Nothing to put any one of them in the workhouse, but still an exciting and pleasurable way to pass the evening.

And the evening had been most pleasant. After the scene in Hyde Park this afternoon, she'd had grave doubts about attending Mrs. Doyle's party. All she'd wanted to do was hide herself at home and dread the gossip sure to begin again. She'd thought herself so inured to the mean and disrespectful things people said about her that she no longer felt the sting of their unkind words. But this afternoon she'd discovered that it was not true. Both Lady Chalgrove and Mr. Burke's cutting remarks had hurt abominably, but because Lord Ainsley had been there to hear them, rather than from their estimation of her. That she valued his lordship's opinion of her so much had also greatly alarmed her. He'd hurt her deeply once before. Dare she now allow herself to embrace those feelings again?

For that reason, along with others, she'd been in two minds about attending tonight. Her mother, however, had insisted, and Amelia was now glad she'd come. As soon as they arrived, she'd been met by Miss Locke and led to a table where Lady Letitia and Lady Celinda Graham, whom she'd not met before, had been seated. After that introduction, the four of them had played a spirited game of Vingt-Et-Un with much betting and laughter. Afterward, Lord Ainsley had come to escort her to his table and

the game of whist they'd just finished.

No one had been unkind. Mrs. Doyle and her charge, a Miss Amanda Sharpe, had welcomed her and her parents along with Lord Ainsley. She'd heard no whisperings around the room, no one nodding at her or suspicious looks. Either no one knew who she was, which she doubted, or Lord Ainsley's presence and obvious protection had quashed the gossips for the evening. If only this friendly atmosphere could become her life's norm, she'd have nothing left to wish for. Except, perhaps, one thing.

From lowered eyelids, she surreptitiously watched Lord Ainsley gather the cards, chatting with his friend and sister, his quick laughter ringing out often. He'd said he wanted to marry her, yet she could scarce believe the words. Her heartbeat quickened each time she thought of them. Were they true? Did he actually wish to marry her? All his actions seemed to indicate that he did. After so many years of longing for a normal life, and enduring all the hurt, would she indeed reach her happy ending?

"Miss Burrowes, would you like a breath of fresh air?" With a bright smile, Lord Ainsley focused his attention directly on her. "I believe we've generated too much heat with our brilliant play. We must allow Haversham and my sister to recover their senses before they attempt a rematch."

Fresh air meant a stroll on the veranda, out in the darkness where they might do more than simply cool their cheeks. The thought sent a thrill all through her. "I'd love some fresh air, my lord."

After placing the cards back in their cunning little box, Lord Ainsley offered her his arm and they sauntered through Mrs. Doyle's packed rooms to the back of the house and out onto the veranda, dimly lit by the quarter moon.

The tiny terrace faced a very narrow garden, awash with sweet-smelling, night-blooming jasmine and bound on both sides by tall fences. A small flight of stairs led

to a pathway that headed out into the yard. Lord Ainsley steered them down the stairs and into the garden, stopping once they were secluded underneath the garden's centerpiece, a large weeping willow.

The huge tree, whose branches fell in thin, gently swaying arcs, created a curtain around them, effectively shielding them from anyone looking into the garden. A magic circle where anything might happen. He loosed her arm but kept her hand, turning so he faced her. "I apologize that there is no cherry tree. This is the best I could manage."

A frenzied trembling overtook Amelia, from her fingers captured in his strong grasp to her stomach, where a thousand butterflies beat their frantic wings. The darkness revealed little about his face, save the intensity of his stare, trained on her mouth. Was he truly going to—

He pulled her to him, until she pressed against the rock-hard body she'd remembered in her dreams. Cradling her head in his hands, he lifted it and guided her lips to his. The touch of their velvety softness broke loose something deep inside Amelia. Something she'd thought had died long ago on a pillow sodden with tears. Now it raised its head and flooded her heart with the love and passion born that night in May so many years ago, fiercer now for having lain dormant.

She seized his head in both hands, pulling him to her, refusing to let go.

He sought entry to her lips with a subtle nudge of his tongue, and she opened immediately, reveling in the joy of having him in her once more. Their tongues tangled then she slid past his and into his mouth, greedy for him, and wanting more, just as she had before. She'd never believed she'd feel this for him again, not after the disappointment and shame he'd put her through. But what person could refuse a glass of water if they were dying of thirst? Much as she would've liked to deny it, no man had ever made her feel such passion, or desire, or love. Not Jonathan, and certainly

not Mr. Burke. If Ainsley did not marry her this time, she would as soon die as live.

Slowly and carefully, he withdrew from her. Unwilling to give him up after such a short time, she nevertheless fought the urge to cling to him. If he was a man of his word, they would have the rest of their lives to dally thus. At last, she raised her gaze to him, fear and longing warring in her heart.

He cleared his throat and took both her hands. “Miss Burrowes, I know we have not been reacquainted long, and I fear I may be someone to whom you will not wish to give your trust so soon. However, I have at last fulfilled my promise and asked your father leave to court you.” Gazing down at their joined hands, he traced the backs of her knuckles with his thumbs. “I regret I was not allowed to make this declaration ten years ago, but I will make it now with the same ardent desire that you will consent to become my wife.”

Although her trembling had stopped, her bones seemed suddenly unwilling to support her. He had proposed. He still wanted to marry her, even after all this time and in spite of all the vicious lies spread about her. She swayed a little toward him, and he clutched her arms.

“Here, sit on this bench. No one will see.”

A small wrought iron bench sat on the grass outside the circle of willow branches. Still, miraculously, the magic continued, for he was there, holding her hands, looking down at her with a tenderness that brought tears to her eyes.

“Please do not cry, my dear.” He passed her a linen handkerchief that smelled of sandalwood and his own subtle scent.

When she’d wiped her eyes, he knelt and grasped her hands again. “Miss Burrowes, will you do me the very great honor of becoming my wife?”

Gathering her courage, Amelia squeezed his hands. "I am truly honored that you have asked me this, my lord, but I fear there is a question I must put to you first."

"Demand of me what you will, my dear." His smile encouraged her. "I will have no secrets from you."

Heart in her throat, she forced herself to ask, "Are you proposing to me from a duty you believe you owe me, or do you truly wish to wed me, ruined reputation and all?"

He paused then cocked his head, a strange gleam in his eyes. "Will you refuse me if I say it is from duty alone?"

Now it was her turn to hesitate. She'd been almost certain of his regard for her, especially after the persuasion of his kiss. A wave of despair washed over her, and she worried her bottom lip. How foolish to hope he still cared for her that way, but could she marry him knowing he did not return her affection? Amelia knew the answer before she could even frame the question.

"No, my lord, I will not refuse you. You know I must marry and why, and that my feelings have never been considered in the matter. And although I might wish for a different answer from you, mine will remain the same." She swallowed hard. "For if you wish to marry me for duty's sake, then I cannot fault your honor and would not refuse an honorable man." Perhaps, in time, duty might grow into the affection of old.

"But you did not wait for my answer to your question, Miss Burrowes, before giving your consent."

Frowning, she peered at him. "You gave me your answer."

"I asked a question. I did not say it was my answer." He kissed her hands, sending tingles up and down her arms. Between that sensual riot on her skin and his enigmatic

words, her head spun.

“So what...is your answer?”

He turned her hand over and kissed her palm.

Her whole body went up in flames, heat licking through her veins until she was panting with desire.

“I have wanted you, Miss Burrowes, and you alone for ten long years.” He kissed the other palm, his tongue searing her flesh, and she whimpered, unable to help herself. “I will confess that after I assumed you had married, I allowed you to slip from my mind.” His kisses now strayed up to the sensitive skin over her wrist. “But I never moved on. Never looked for another woman to marry, even when I knew it was time that I should do so.”

Those sensual lips found their way to the crook of her elbow and lingered there, sending Amelia’s senses into a frenzy. If he didn’t stop, they might end up making all the gossip true. Still, she didn’t want him to stop.

“Then when I saw you at Lady Hamilton’s, I knew, deep down. I wanted you and only you for my wife.” He rose, bringing her to her feet as well. “Now I have a question...no, two, for you, Miss Burrowes.” Capturing her head once more, he kissed her temple at her hairline, sending shivers down her spine. “When you said yes, was it really because of the safety my title and position will bring you, or do you wish to wed me for me?”

There was only one way to answer that question. She grasped his neck and pulled his head down to hers, seeking his mouth with an abandon that surprised even her. Moaning until her lips found his, she pressed them together, desperate to show him how much she wanted him, had always wanted him.

Eagerly, he enfolded her in his arms, drawing her so close she seemed to touch every inch of him. An insistent bulge below his waist strained against her stomach, and desire flared to life within her. Oh, if only they were married now. Why must they wait even longer than they already had? There was the risk, of course. She of all people understood that. But if she would chance further ruin for any man, it would be for him. “My lord?”

“Yes, Miss Burrowes?” Gravelly and low, his voice rumbled in her ear, his hot breath sending chills through her.

“I don’t know how to...” Completely at a loss for what to expect, Amelia whispered, “What do we do now?”

A shudder rippled down his body, as though he’d been doused with cold water, and he stepped away from her, holding her at arm’s length.

Not at all what she’d expected, or indeed wanted.

Gasping, Lord Ainsley held up his hand. After a moment, he sighed, and his breathing returned to normal. “To answer your question, Miss Burrowes, now we return to Mrs. Doyle’s party and continue to play as though nothing has happened, however difficult that may be. On the way home, however, we will inform your parents we have come to an accord and tomorrow we will announce our betrothal.”

“Oh.” She’d not expected quite so prosaic a response.

Even in the darkness, she could see his smile. “Did you think I would have a different plan of action?”

Heat stung her cheeks. “After that...interlude, I thought you might wish to...”

“Out here in the garden, Miss Burrowes?” The amusement in his voice was almost palpable. “Neither the time nor the place for an amorous tryst, believe me. You are, however, correct regarding my personal wishes.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks must be the color of cherries.

He took her arm and twined it through his. “Let us walk a bit and hope the cool air aids us in our deception. It is not a very long path, but we will keep a very slow pace.” He steered them toward the back of the garden. “May I suggest we wed the day after the last of the banns are read? I know we could procure a special license, but in our case, I think we should continue to woo the ton with very circumspect behavior. They have extraordinarily suspicious minds, and if we are married by special license, every lady in town would begin to count to see when our first child should be born.”

Amelia sighed. “It seems a shame to wait after we have already waited so long.”

“The correct response to that is, I believe, that having waited this long already, a little longer should not be an undue hardship.” His chuckle had a hollow ring to it. “I suppose that depends on who must do the waiting. But I shall endeavor to make the time go fast. We shall continue our outings in Hyde Park in the afternoons and various entertainments at night. We have scarcely begun to be reacquainted yet. This time will give us the opportunity to do so. You must also go shopping for a new trousseau and be introduced to the servants at Ainsley Place.”

“Goodness, will three weeks be enough time to have everything accomplished?” Her mock horror was not lost on her betrothed, who chuckled.

“Not three weeks, my love, but a mere two weeks and a day. If we begin the banns this Sunday, we can be married in little more than a fortnight.” He leaned over and growled in her ear, “And not a minute too soon.”

By the time they reached the willow again, her face no longer pulsed with fire, though she was still atwitter to think of the news to tell. Her parents would be so pleased with this alliance to a noble family. Her marriage should assure that next year her sisters would be received warmly. Perhaps she could be the one to bring them out. Unless by that time she was increasing. Still, it could be managed. With Lord Ainsley by her side, nothing seemed insurmountable.

“Are you ready to partner me at the card table once again, Miss Burrowes? We played well together last time.” They had reached the few steps to the veranda when something occurred to Amelia.

“My lord, earlier you said you had two questions to ask me, but I believe you only asked the one.”

“Yes, I believe I was kept too busy with your answer to the first to even think of asking the other.” He chuckled and patted her hand, secure in the crook of his elbow.

“But what was the second question, my lord?”

“Will you please call me by my given name now?”

“Oh, yes, of course.” She looked up at him expectantly.

“Nathan.”

“Nathan, I do remember now.” Such a strong name. It rolled off her tongue delightfully. “So, Nathan, what was your second question?”

His laughter filled the night. “My love, that was the question. As we are now betrothed, I thought we could be more familiar with one another without fear of censure.”

“I am such a goose. My head is in a whirl.”

He waited before opening the door, though she had no idea what for. “May I be so bold as to ask to call you by your first name, Miss Burrowes?”

Her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, Nathan, I am so sorry. Of course, please call me Amelia.”

Nodding, he lifted her hand for a brief kiss. “With the greatest pleasure in the world, Amelia. And the most profound joy.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

The next afternoon, Amelia found herself in the small front reception room decked out in her best walking gown—the one of celestial blue with too many ruffles that Mama had insisted she have made up—nervously fidgeting with the strings of her reticule, awaiting the butler’s announcement of Lord Ainsley...Nathan’s arrival. They had agreed last evening, after that whirlwind proposal, that they would meet in the early part of the afternoon to begin their formal courtship, spend some time visiting an art gallery in Old Bond Street Nathan was keen for her to see then end up at Hyde Park for the Strut.

Amelia was skeptical, fearing the outing would become a fiasco. The other night at Lady Hamilton’s had been her first time out in public in years, and she’d managed to avoid the notice of most people—save Lord Ainsley, of course. And even though the evening at Mrs. Doyle’s had gone amazingly well, she’d been holding her breath, waiting for something dreadful to happen the entire time. She’d as soon keep their courtship as private as possible, however Nathan had insisted she continue to be seen in Society, which, admittedly, made sense. So what else could she do but try?

A strident knock sounded at the door, making Amelia jump, and pull the strings of the reticule as tight as they would go. She put on what she hoped was a pleasant smile and tried to relax her shoulders as Lord Ainsley strode in, looking quite dashing in buff and blue with black Hessians.

“Good afternoon, Amelia.” He smiled broadly, and her stomach flipped. The man was simply too handsome for words.

“Good afternoon, Nathan.” She curtsied, more from habit than anything else, and her cheeks heated when his grin grew wider.

“We have fine weather for an outing, which I’m hoping will entice an exceptional number of people to take the air later today.” His gaze pinned her where she stood. “You must become accustomed to being seen with me, my dear, and the ton needs to acknowledge you will soon be Lady Ainsley and accord you the respect of that position.”

“And what better way than by being thrust into the thick of things after being hidden for so long?” Amelia truly wasn’t angry at the situation, but she would’ve preferred to have been courted by Nathan in a less public manner.

“Exactly.” He offered his arm, and she took it with a sigh. “And as you look particularly pretty today, I am more than proud to show you off to the ton.” He patted her hand as they stepped into the brilliant sunshine. “You will enjoy this outing, I assure you, my dear. Just allow yourself to relax and revel in the beauty of the artworks.”

That she certainly could do. She’d had little opportunity to see fine paintings over the past years, so she’d been particularly happy when Nathan had suggested they attend the Old Bond Street exhibition. If only it could’ve been a private viewing, she would’ve enjoyed it more, but she plastered a smile on her face as they set off. “I am looking forward to seeing them, I assure you.”

A brisk quarter-of-an-hour walk brought them to the door of the gallery, and Amelia was awestruck the moment they set foot inside. The walls of the establishment were covered, floor to ceiling, with gorgeous watercolors of all manner of subject. Floral landscapes, still lifes, seascapes in all sizes and shapes mesmerized Amelia’s senses. Never had she seen so many paintings all at once. The sheer magnitude of it made her giddy, and she latched onto Nathan’s arm even tighter. “It’s amazing.”

“I thought you might enjoy seeing some new artwork.” He grinned down at her. “Please let me know if you take a fancy to any of them—perhaps something to hang

in the viscountess's apartments? We can make our first art purchase as a couple."

Amelia gazed up at him, so stunned her mouth fell open. She could purchase these magnificent paintings?

Nathan chuckled, put a finger under her chin, and gently pushed it upward. "Don't look so shocked. This is a gallery, not a museum. Anyone can purchase them."

Shaking her head, trying to wrap her mind around what he'd just said, Amelia had the sudden urge to rise up on her toes and kiss Nathan. Of course, she resisted the impulse. She wasn't about to behave scandalously in public. Once they were in private again, however, she intended to act on that desire. Thoroughly. "That is a wonderful thought, my lord. I will let you know if any of the paintings strike a chord."

After perusing all the works in the room, commenting now and then, they moved on to another, similarly hung room. Here, the watercolors appeared to be on smaller canvases, which appealed to Amelia because they seemed more...intimate. Nathan had taken her and her parents on a tour of his London townhouse yesterday, and she'd noted empty spaces on either side of the fireplace in the apartments that were to be hers. Perhaps she could find some companion pieces to hang there? Suddenly buoyed by the prospect, she studied the different pictures closely, hoping to spot something that took her fancy. As they moved around the room, she craned her neck to see a pair of paintings near the ceiling.

She nodded to Nathan and pointed upward. "What do you think of those, my lord?"

He peered up as well. "The roses in the white and blue vases?"

She nodded. Something about the composition of the pink and red flowers, very cunningly arranged so the blooms seemed to nod at her, made her smile. "I think they

would do well beside the fire in the viscountess's sitting room."

"I think you are correct, my dear." Nathan squeezed her hand. "Would you like me to arrange for their purchase?"

"Oh, yes, please." Absolutely thrilled, Amelia nodded enthusiastically. If not for the need to maintain decorum, she'd have clapped her hands with glee. "I will continue to look at all the other lovely artwork, but I can see these two already hanging on your walls."

"Our walls, you mean." He patted her hand then loosed it from his elbow. "Continue shopping. I will speak to the manager and return shortly." Nathan moved away then came back. "You might also look at that section of portraiture," he gestured to the wall to their right, "to see what kind of pose you will like painted of you."

"What?" Amelia caught her breath.

"All Ainsley viscountesses have their portraits painted during their first year of marriage and placed in the gallery back at Ainsley Manor in Somerset. A family custom I will be happy to continue." He chuckled. "Although I intend to have your picture hung in my chambers where I can gaze at you whenever you are not by my side."

"Oh, Ainsley." Amelia's throat threatened to close as tears of joy gathered there. His words spoke of his deep affection for her, of the splendid life he expected them to have together. It was almost more than she could have dared to hope for.

"I will return shortly, my dear." He placed a quick kiss on her hand then strode away in search of the gallery's manager.

Collecting herself, trying to keep her emotions in check, Amelia dutifully turned

toward the section of wall that held portraits of men, women, children, and family groups. Never had she imagined she'd be sitting for a portrait herself. She stepped back, intending to start with the pictures high above her and bumped into someone she'd not noticed standing behind her.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," Amelia spoke automatically to the middle-aged lady in a dark blue gown, wisps of her graying hair escaping from under a non-descript bonnet of the same material. "I'm so sorry..." Amelia was in the midst of her apology when she realized she actually knew the woman, an old acquaintance of her mother's. "Oh, Mrs. Sheldon. I didn't see you there behind me." Amelia bobbed a curtsy. "How do you do?"

The woman smiled, opened her mouth to speak, then froze, her eyes taking Amelia's face in then turning as hard as granite. She snapped her mouth shut, sharply tugged her skirts away from Amelia, even though they'd been nowhere near her then turned on her heel and stormed off.

Stunned, Amelia stared after the retreating figure who'd joined a little knot of people also viewing the paintings. Mrs. Sheldon's head bobbed animatedly as she spoke to the group. Occasionally, she glared at Amelia and pointed toward her, and the people turned to look at her as well.

Amelia turned away, only to be stopped by the gawking stares of others in the gallery. Immediately, she wished she'd worn a shawl rather than a Spencer so she could draw it around her as a type of protection, inadequate though it might be. She felt so exposed now, with all eyes trained on her. Panic made her heart beat like the wings of a frantic bird against a windowpane. Blood pounded in her ears. If she swooned in so public a place, she hoped she would simply die right here and now rather than suffer the lingering death her shame would bring her.

"Amelia?" The soothing sound of Nathan's voice brought her back from the brink of

disaster. “What is wrong, my dear?”

She turned agonized eyes toward him. “Can we please leave, Nathan?”

“Of course, sweetheart.” Without any further inquiry, he immediately tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and led her back through the galleries, outside onto the busy sidewalk. “Is that better?”

She nodded, still somewhat overcome.

“Then let us stroll toward Gunter’s. An ice will be soothing to you, I daresay.” Nathan kept glancing at her but said nothing else. Bless the man for giving her time to recover before having to tell him the shameful truth of what had happened.

As they walked, her heart stopped its racetrack rhythm and her breathing slowed to normal. “Thank you for understanding that I needed to leave the gallery without asking me to explain.”

“I will never press you, Amelia, if you do not wish to tell me something.” He kept them to their leisurely pace. “It’s the only way I know to deal with a woman, having learned it the hard way with my sister. Woe be to Haversham if he ever tries to force her to tell him anything before she’s good and ready.”

Amelia chuckled at that and suddenly felt immeasurably better. Nathan could raise her spirits like no one else she knew.

“Are you now ready to tell me what happened?”

She nodded. “I received the cut direct from my mother’s acquaintance, Mrs. Sheldon.”

“I see.” His eyes were focused straight forward, but his whole body tensed. “And you have not met this Mrs. Sheldon before now?”

“I have been in the country for ten years, Nathan.” Amelia sighed. If not for the wonderful man whose arm she held onto for dear life, she would’ve wished herself back at their home, The Burrow, this moment. “I’ve not met anyone outside our village and market town since the summer of my come out.”

“Forgive me, my dear. I keep forgetting you have not been in London for such a while.” He turned them into Berkely Square. “So Mrs. Sheldon has not seen you since that summer, but she obviously knows of the scandal.” Nathan knitted his brows. “I’d hoped the ton would have mostly forgotten about it, but I fear now that is not the case. And not having forgotten, they are not ready to forgive it either, if we take your mother’s acquaintance as the Society weathercock.” He patted her hand. “But we will take action to remedy this, my dear. Trust me. And look there.” Nathan pointed to a smart black curricule across the street from the entrance to Gunter’s. “Allies.”

Amelia couldn’t see who was in the conveyance, but Nathan turned them toward it, so he obviously knew the owner.

“Well met, Haversham.” They came alongside the curricule just as Lord Haversham put a large mouthful of some purple ice into his mouth. The distraught gentleman made several hilarious faces as he struggled to down the ice without freezing his mouth.

His companion, Miss Locke, was laughing outright at his antics, her lemon-looking ice held in her hand. “You are well caught out, Haversham. Take care your whole head doesn’t freeze.” She beamed at her brother. “That was excellently timed, Nathan. I told him not to eat such big bites, but does the man listen to me?”

“Perhaps he’ll take heed from this incident and succumb to the inevitable in the future.” Nathan chuckled as he waited for his friend to be able to speak.

“What is inevitable, my lord?” Amelia was diverted enough to be able to ask.

“That Haversham listens to my sister and does as she bids him.” He shrugged. “It took me long enough to learn. I’d hoped he’d be smarter than I was, but now I think not.”

“You are all insufferable wretches, save for you, Miss Burrowes.” Lord Haversham wiped his lips and breathed through his mouth, gulping in the warm afternoon air as though it was a lifeline. “This elderflower ice is exquisite. Am I to be faulted and frozen simply because I wished to eat more than a spoonful at a time?”

“Apparently you are.” Miss Locke took a dainty bite of her ice, shooting her companion a speaking glance.

“What flavor of ice may I get you, Miss Burrowes?” Nathan turned to her, his mouth puckered as he tried not to smile at the banter between his sister and friend.

Suddenly, Amelia was hungry for her favorite. “Chocolate, please.”

Nathan’s brows shot up. “I would never have pegged you for a traditionalist, my dear. I’d have thought bergamot or perhaps even brown bread would be to your taste. Where is your sense of adventure?”

“Not in iced confectionery, I assure you.” Amelia made a face. “Brown bread sounds truly hideous for an ice.”

“Then I shall have to put myself forward for the experiment.” Nathan squared his shoulders then sighed. “I will say I prefer parmesan, but today, brown bread it is.”

“Oh, no, my lord.” Amelia giggled and hung onto his arm. “You needn’t sacrifice yourself. Choose whatever flavor you prefer. We need not be adventurers today.”

“I hear and obey, my lady.” Nathan bowed and hurried across the street, dodging nimbly between a landau and an ox cart.

“You have made the greatest change in my brother, Miss Burrowes.” Miss Locke turned her intense blue eyes on Amelia, causing her to quake in her shoes. She wasn’t entirely certain she wasn’t afraid of Nathan’s sister.

“Have I, Miss Locke?” She tried to make her voice light, but it turned out rather shrill instead.

“Yes, indeed.” The lady spooned up more of her ice and nodded. “I’ve never seen him this...happy. Have you, Haversham?”

Lord Haversham shook his head gravely. “No, I confess I have not. And I’ve known Ainsley almost my whole life.” He turned kind eyes on Amelia. “You bring out the best in him, Miss Burrowes. He is content at last.”

“Thank you, my lord. Miss Locke.” Amelia didn’t quite know what to say. She’d never thought of Nathan as other than loving and kind, but she’d never known him when not in her presence. If she truly helped him to be happy... “I know Lord Ainsley has given me a joy I had long despaired of. And if I have done the same for him, I can only thank God for it.”

“He’s much easier in his manner. Much less dictatorial toward me.” Miss Locke cut her eyes toward Lord Haversham, who returned her gaze with an innocence that would fool no one. “If for nothing else, Miss Burrowes, I thank you wholeheartedly for that.”

“Here we are.” Nathan appeared as if out of thin air and handed her a glass dish filled to overflowing with the sweet, chocolatey confection she loved.

“Thank you, my lord.” She managed to restrain herself from taking a large spoonful, remembering Lord Haversham’s recent difficulties. Still, she popped the spoon into her mouth quickly, reveling in the sweet taste she so seldom got to enjoy. “Umm. This is delicious. How is yours?”

“Delicious as well, although it’s as savory as it is sweet.” He spooned up a rather large bite then, with a glance at his friend, wolfed it down.

Amelia held her breath, waiting to see if there were to be ill effects, but Nathan continued to scoop the ice into his mouth in larger and larger spoonfuls, seemingly completely unconcerned about the possibility of a frozen mouth. When he’d finished, he smiled at them all before his countenance grew serious.

“I’m glad we came across you here, Kate, Haversham, as I am going to ask your help with a matter of grave importance to me and Miss Burrowes.”

The joy of the outing dimmed for Amelia. He was going to tell them about the incident in the gallery. Well, they had a right to know what kind of woman Lord Ainsley was marrying—one who might be snubbed publicly at any time, any place. They should be prepared for that possibility.

“Has something happened, Nathan?” Miss Locke’s voice turned serious, her demeanor suddenly alert.

“Yes, an unfortunate unpleasantness at the Old Bond Street Gallery just now.” Nathan’s face grew grim. “A woman known to Mrs. Burrowes gave Miss Burrowes the cut direct.”

“Good Lord.” Miss Locke glanced at Amelia, an uncharacteristic softness coming over her. “Are you quite all right, Miss Burrowes?”

“I am, Miss Locke.” She sighed, this confession coming hard. “It is not the first time such a thing has happened, although it is the first time in years.”

“And the fact that it has happened, and likely will continue to happen, has made me realize we must all work together to uncover the true circumstances from all those years ago to convince the ton that Miss Burrowes had acted in a scandalous manner when she actually had not.” Nathan’s gaze traveled from one to the other of the little circle.

“What do you think we can do to help, Ainsley?” Lord Haversham spoke up, his face drawn into sober lines.

“I’m requesting that we all meet tomorrow morning, at my house, to discuss what course of action we can take to remedy the situation.” His voice grew harsh. “I will not have the ton refusing to accept my wife in Society. So Miss Burrowes will tell us all exactly what transpired ten years ago with Lord Carrington, and we must figure out how that led to the misconception that she acted in a wanton manner.”

“So you want us to go sleuthing around town, brother?” Miss Locke perked up, as if this was a challenge she would love to undertake.

“Not around town, most likely, but if it takes a sleuth to get to the bottom of this, I’ll put my money on you, Kate.” Nathan turned to Amelia. “Are you ready to take this on, my dear? It may be painful to recall what happened all those years ago.”

Amelia shook her head. “I’ve lived with the shame of a ruined reputation this whole time because my family couldn’t convince the ton of my innocence.” It made her humble that Nathan had such rock steady faith in her virtue. If they could prove it

beyond a shadow of a doubt before the wedding, she would relate everything to them.
“But if you all are willing to try again, I will tell you everything I know.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

The next afternoon, Amelia sat in the drawing room at Ainsley House, more than a little self-conscious about this very odd meeting, specifically having to do with her disgraced state. She had arrived to find not only Lord Haversham and Nathan's sister in attendance, but that they'd invited Lady Celinda, Miss Locke having deemed her a "secret weapon." Amelia joined in the conversation with the other two ladies while Nathan had his head together with his friend at the sideboard. By the time the tea arrived, they were all on a first-name basis at Kate's insistence.

"Sugar and milk, Amelia?"

"Yes, thank you." She accepted the cup and thankfully sipped the hot beverage. Fortification for the conversation to come.

"Kate told me about your unfortunate experience with Mrs. Sheldon," Celinda began rather abruptly.

"Oh, dear." Amelia had slopped the tea over into the saucer. Nathan's younger cousin did not beat about the bush.

"Do not worry, I beg of you." Celinda had taken the teapot from her hostess and was pouring her own tea. "Between the five of us, we will come up with a scheme that will bring the ton around to the conclusion that you're not the wanton they believe you are." Celinda stopped, apparently realizing the import of her words. "I beg your pardon, Amelia, but I am certain you know what I mean."

"Nathan and I discussed that as he walked me home yesterday afternoon." The closeness of her betrothed as they strolled along the London streets and the

resounding kiss he'd given her just before he left had soothed her spirits immeasurably.

Celinda leaned closer. "Did you come up with some solution? I daresay you had a similar discussion with your parents when the rumors first surfaced ten years ago."

"Yes, I told Nathan as much." She gulped and continued. "My parents tried every way they knew of to refute the gossip, but nothing worked. After the maid told another servant that she'd found blood on my sheets when I'd been ill, the gossip intensified. I tried to explain it was my courses, but they didn't want to listen." She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. "Especially when it became known that on his deathbed, Lord Carrington kept asking about his child."

There was an audible gasp from the ladies, who exchanged startled looks.

Without giving them time to comment, Amelia forged ahead. "After that, people came forward and falsely said I'd confided in them about my plight." The anger at those who'd unabashedly lied about her had never quite left her. "I never confided anything to anyone. There was nothing to confide."

"Nothing?" Stirring her tea, Kate leaned toward her. "Surely you spoke to someone other than your mother about your relationship with Lord Carrington?"

Sadly, Amelia shook her head. "I was still distraught over the defection of your brother. That was why I accepted Lord Carrington so quickly, to soothe myself that someone wanted me, loved me enough to marry me. I didn't talk to anyone about Lord Carrington because there was really nothing to tell. I was going to marry him so I could be married and perhaps forget about Nathan."

Celinda cocked her head. "I was wondering, after all this fuss about you anticipating your wedding vows, did Lord Carrington ever actually ask you to do such a thing?"

“He certainly did.” Amelia rolled her eyes, making the others giggle. “Almost from the moment I accepted him. He had not struck me before as a man with that voracious an appetite, but I assume once he thought I belonged to him, even on the strength of the settlements, he believed I should act like we were married.”

“Did Lord Carrington ever correspond with anyone about your marriage?” Bouncing excitedly on the edge of her chair, Celinda held her teacup out so it wouldn’t splash onto her green and gold gown. “A friend he may have confided in that you were not behaving toward him as you should, or some such nonsense?”

“What nonsense are you coming up with now, cousin?” Nathan had sauntered up, followed by Lord Haversham.

“We are trying to ascertain whether or not either Amelia or Lord Carrington ever corresponded with someone to whom they may have poured their hearts out.” Dropping two goodish lumps of sugar into her cup, Celinda stirred vigorously as she gazed thoughtfully at Amelia.

“Did you, my dear?” Nathan settled into the chair next to Amelia’s. “Write to anyone?”

After racking her brain to remember, she finally shook her head. “I do not recall writing to anyone during that time, save Jonathan himself.”

All their gazes turned to Amelia. She shrank back in her chair. What had she said?

“Amelia, you wrote to your betrothed?” Kate looked dazed at the news.

“My love, why did you not tell me this before? This may be our salvation.” Nathan grabbed her hands. “Do you have the correspondence at your parents’ home? If he wrote to you about his demands...”

“He did.” Amelia puckered her lips. “Nearly every one of his letters had some kind of insinuation or outright suggestion that we become intimate before the ceremony. By the time we ceased the correspondence, I dreaded receiving the letters at all.”

“Then there is the proof!” Nathan grabbed her up out of the chair and hugged her. “These letters show without a doubt that you did not succumb to his persuasions.” He tilted his head back and forth, his puzzled expression deepening. “Why did you not show the correspondence when you were accused before?”

“Because I do not have it, my lord.” Amelia hung her head. She’d gone through this with her parents all those years ago.

“You burned the letters?” Celinda had clasped her hands in an almost prayerful attitude.

“No, I never possessed them.”

“What?” Nathan spoke, but all her friends looked the question as well.

“I’ve begun this badly. It is a little involved, as many requests of Jonathan’s tended to be. Please, my dear, sit down.” She seated herself and picked up her now-cold tea. She sipped it and made a face.

“Let me ring for more.” Kate made to get up, but Lord Haversham waved her back.

“I’ll ring for the tea.” He strode to the bell pull and gave it an impatient tug. “Begin your tale, my lady. I am all ears to find out what the devil went on.”

“Very well.” Amelia sat with her hands primly folded in her lap. “Our correspondence began almost as soon as the ink had dried on the settlement papers. I was surprised and pleased to receive the first one, which was most flattering, as I

recall. But soon after, they became much more amorous, and he began to suggest assignations where we might meet to become more...intimate." It had been difficult enough to confess all this to her parents; however, to be stating it all so baldly before Nathan and his family... She closed her eyes against tears. It had been her own folly not to inform her mother about the content of the letters when she'd first received them. She must pay the piper yet again, it seemed.

"Please continue, my dear." Nathan gathered her hand in his and threaded their fingers together.

Nodding, she summoned her courage once more. "To discourage him, I told him I was afraid my mother might intercept the letters and intimated that she would read my correspondence from time to time. I hoped this would curb his epistolary efforts, but instead he came up with a plan to circumvent my scheme. He arranged with a former housemaid of his, who now lived in London, to receive our letters. The idea was for her to hold my letters from him until I called for them. I would read them and leave them with the maid, Mary Adams. I would also leave any letters for Jonathan with Miss Adams to pass on."

"So where is this Mary Adams now? How may we locate her?" Nathan leaped to his feet, so animated she believed he might try to fly around the room.

"My parents tried, but after Jonathan's death, everything was in disarray for a month at the least. Then when the rumors began, they questioned me, and I told them about Mary Adams." She looked from Nathan's hopeful face to Celinda's more cautious one. "I gave Father her address, but by then, she'd left London. No one there knew where she'd moved. Father even questioned Lord Carrington's other servants, but the maid had been gone for some time, and they could not hazard a guess where she might be." Amelia shrugged. "So you see, the letters are well and truly lost—either thrown away, which I think is most likely, or still with the missing Mary Adams."

The silence around the room would deafen her in a moment.

“Well, this seems discouraging and particularly futile,” Celinda spoke up, the only one of them not looking like grim Death had come to visit. “Still, I think we may as well do some sleuthing rather than staying home feeling helpless.”

“Celinda is correct, brother.” Kate set her tea down with a determined clatter. “We can still do something, even if there’s not much evidence left. We must make a start.”

“Then we are agreed we shall try to locate Mary Adams?” Nathan rose, and the others followed suit. “Marcus and I will approach Carrington’s family. See if they or their servants remember anything of Mary. Also, if they have any other correspondence belonging to Carrington. It’s long odds, but it won’t hurt to ask.” He gazed at Amelia. “What will the three of you do?”

Amelia looked from one lady to the other, uncertain if she was in a position to put forward suggestions.

Kate cocked her head, as if running through different scenarios they might attempt. “Well, we could—”

“What do you think, Amelia?” Celinda turned to her pointedly and nodded. “You are most familiar with the woman. What should we do?”

Taking her courage in hand, Amelia grasped the reins. “We could return to the lodgings where Mary lived ten years ago. Perhaps neighbors will remember her still or have some idea where she may have gone.” The other women nodded, but Amelia sighed. “These are not odds I would wager very much on, my dear.” She gazed up at Nathan, her growing affection for him warring with the dismay of fighting the same losing battle once more.

“Do not fret, love.” He laced their fingers together, and she reveled in the closeness she’d not felt with a gentleman before. “We will find a way to vindicate you and restore you to Society where you deserve to be.”

“And if we cannot?”

He sighed and squeezed her hand. “We will cross that stream when we come to it.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

Nearly a week later, Nathan sat in the taproom at an inn near Luton, only a mile from the Carrington ancestral estate. He'd been knocking around the area for several days, gathering as much information about the estate and its inhabitants as possible and had finally had a piece of luck last evening. Answering his question about the estate servants, the barmaid had told him he should speak with Giles Saunders, who used to be the coachman for the young Lord Carrington who'd died. Nathan had managed to send a message, via the lass, and now sat drinking a pint, waiting for the man to appear.

Weary with the search, but determined to see it through, Nathan prayed Mr. Saunders had real information. He'd heard from Amelia that she and the ladies had found nothing in Mary's lodgings in London. The nearby tenants had all changed from ten years before and even the landlord didn't remember a Mary Adams after so long. Marcus had remained in London to continue his chaperonage of his sister but had made inquiries about Carrington to several of his friends at his club who remembered the man. This, unfortunately, had turned up nothing useful. Mr. Saunders looked more and more like their last hope.

An older man, tall and a little stooped, entered the taproom, peering about the dim interior as if looking for someone.

"That's him, your lordship." Molly, the barmaid, had come up behind him. "Mr. Saunders," she called to the man, who smiled at her when she beckoned him over. "Lord Ainsley, this is Mr. Saunders who worked for the Carringtons. This here's Lord Ainsley, Mr. Saunders." She smiled encouragingly at the man, whose gaze shifted nervously from her to him.

“How do you do, Mr. Saunders. May I buy you a drink?” Nathan nodded to Molly, who hurried away.

“Why do you wish to speak to me, your lordship? I’ve not worked at the Carrington estate for more than ten years. Not since the young master died.”

“And before that, how long had you been with the family?”

“All my life, my lord. I started there as a stable lad.”

“But you left? Why?” Nathan had sized the man up as a decent chap but would’ve assumed he’d remain in a good post with the family he’d served so long.

“New master brought his own coachman and grooms. Turned the whole lot of us off.”

“Ah.” Nathan nodded. That did happen from time to time. “I am sorry to hear that. You found another position, I trust.”

The man shrugged. “I’ve made do the last few years.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Molly set a pint of ale on the table, and Nathan nodded to Mr. Saunders, who took a cautious sip.

“Mr. Saunders, I’ve come to ask you if you remember a housemaid who worked for Lord Carrington, a Mary Adams? Molly here seemed to think you might know something about her.”

“Why’re you asking, my lord? She’s not in trouble, is she?” A keen concern appeared on Saunders’s face.

“No, no trouble. I simply need to talk to her about a service she may have done for my betrothed some years ago. She was Miss Burrowes who was to marry Lord Carrington.”

“Ah, Miss Burrowes.” Saunders smiled and nodded, suddenly more at ease. “She was a sweet lady, my lord. My master was very fond of her indeed. Shame he died before they could wed.”

“Yes, it was unfortunate.” Nathan pressed on: “Do you remember Mary Adams, Mr. Saunders? It would be particularly helpful to Miss Burrowes and me if we could locate her.”

“Oh, aye, my lord. I remember Mary well. I was sweet on her until she left the family’s service.”

Praise God, perhaps their luck had changed. “And you wouldn’t happen to know where she went when she left?”

“Aye, my lord. Mary told me she was going to London. Said she’d have better opportunity for work there.” Saunders’s eyes shifted away from him. “Said she’d got a better prospect than marriage to a coachman.”

Closing his eyes, Nathan sighed. All roads led to London as far as Mary Adams was concerned, and there they all stopped. “We’ve inquired at her lodgings in London, Mr. Saunders. Unfortunately, she’s not been there for almost ten years. No one remembers her.”

Frowning, Saunders lifted his glass. “She didn’t stay in London then?”

“Apparently not.”

“You might look for her at Toot Hill, in Essex.” Mr. Saunders tipped the glass up, taking a long pull.

Nathan caught his breath. “Toot Hill?”

“That’s the village she came from. Her aunt was in service with the Carrington family. She got Mary her place here. If Mary’s scheme in London didn’t work out, she might’ve gone back home.”

Hope raised its head.

“I am much obliged to you, Mr. Saunders.” Rising, Nathan put half a crown on the table. “For your trouble, sir. I am off to tell Miss Burrowes we may find Mary yet.”

“Good luck, my lord.” Mr. Saunders raised his glass to Nathan before downing it.

With a real measure of confidence finally in his heart, Nathan hurried out of the taproom. He’d be packed up and on his way in half an hour. Although his first instinct was to go straight to Essex, he’d be in trouble if he didn’t return to London to inform Amelia and the others. Besides, Amelia would need to go with him to persuade Mary, if indeed they found her, to part with the letters. If she still had them. They were still in a hobble, but perhaps, with just a bit more luck, they could find a way out.

As he tossed clothing into his valise, Nathan’s spirits rose. He’d be home by this evening and in Amelia’s company again tomorrow. His body stirred, showing its ever-present desire. Not long to wait now, with the wedding just days away. And the possibility of Amelia’s vindication at last within their grasp. Yes, today had been a good day, and with God’s good grace, there would be a lifetime’s more.

* * * *

Two days later, Amelia stood with Nathan before a pretty little cottage on the edge of the village of Toot Hill. They'd arrived an hour ago and had just made an inquiry at the only public house there. The innkeeper himself had given them the direction to Mary Carr's cottage.

"Do you think it's the same woman?" Amelia straightened her shoulders, trying not to fidget. The fate of her reputation might lie with a woman who didn't even remember her.

"I think the name is a bit too much of a coincidence for it not to be." Taking her arm, Nathan gently urged her toward the door.

Out of nowhere, two shrieking little boys appeared, pelting down the dirt road toward the cottage.

Nathan pulled her back as the imps chased one another around the yard.

The door to the cottage opened, and a woman in her late twenties stepped out the door. "Johnny! Willie! Stop that caterwaulin' or Willie goes back to his Da's."

The two lads slid to a halt right in front of them. The larger of the two boys, the one with dark hair, turned, and Amelia gasped.

"Yes, Mam," he called to the woman. "C'mon, Willie. I'll race ya to the big oak tree."

"Ah, you'll not beat me again." The two took off back up the lane.

"What is it, Amelia? You're trembling." Nathan took her arm once more.

It couldn't be, and yet, somehow, it was. She shook her head, still unwilling to

believe what she'd seen then turned to gaze at the woman standing in the doorway. "That's her. That's Mary Adams."

The woman, who'd put a hand up to shield her eyes from the late morning sun, apparently recognized Amelia as well, for she clapped her hands over her mouth, spun around, and disappeared into the cottage.

"Come on." Amelia stalked to the door, raised her hand to knock, then dropped it to the latch and stepped inside, Nathan right behind her.

Mary Carr stood in front of the fireplace, her hand over her face, shoulders shaking.

"Hello, Mary."

Straightening and wiping her eyes, Mary came toward her. "Hello, Miss Burrowes."

"This is my betrothed, Lord Ainsley."

The woman's eyes rounded, and she curtsied quickly. "Beg pardon, miss. M'lord."

"Do you know why we've come, Mary?"

Slowly, the woman shook her head. She looked near tears again.

"I need the correspondence you kept between me and Lord Carrington. The letters, Mary. Do you still have them?" Fighting the urge to shake the woman, Amelia held her breath.

"Some. I still have some of 'em." She glanced toward a small desk in the corner.

"Thank God." In his enthusiasm, Nathan spoke a little loudly, causing Mary to jump.

Amelia sighed in relief. "May I see them, please?"

"What for?"

For the first time, Amelia became aware of the real fear in Mary's voice. "I need them to clear my name, Mary. People have said very bad things about me and Lord Carrington. I want to prove they are not true. The letters will do that." She looked beseechingly at the frightened woman. "Will you please help me, Mary?"

Wringing her hands, Mary looked away from her, her distress mounting. "If I give you those letters, she'll know I told someone. She'll stop the money she sends each year."

"Money to pay for your son's upkeep?"

Mary nodded. "She's sent it like clockwork each year on Johnny's birthday."

"I saw him in the yard. Your son's very like him, isn't he?"

Nathan frowned. "Like who?"

"Jonathan...Lord Carrington." Sighing, Amelia wound her arm through Nathan's. "That was the child he was asking after before he died."

"Good Lord." Nathan stared at her then at Mary then turned to look at the cottage door, as if he could see the boys through it. "Which one?"

"The dark-haired boy." Amelia sighed, not knowing quite how to feel. The child had existed. Only it hadn't been hers. "I knew the moment I saw him."

Frowning furiously, Nathan swung back around. "So who's been paying you, Mary,

to be quiet about your son all these years?”

The frightened woman hung her head.

“Lady Carrington, I suspect,” Amelia answered for her. “She was always a high stickler, and I suppose she believed that if she paid Mary to be quiet, no one would ever hear about her son’s indiscretion. Everyone assumed I’d had the child of whom he spoke, which put the blame squarely on me.” The bitter taste in her mouth made her ill. “Jonathan was never censured, even though he was believed to be the father.”

“The ton would think it bad form to revile the dead.” Nathan put his arm around her. “Mary, may we have the letters please?”

“But I’ll be in a bad way if she stops the money, my lord.” Tears were again trickling down the woman’s face. “I’ve no way to support us here.”

“Do not fret, Mary. I believe I can ensure that Lady Carrington does not miss a single payment for the rest of your life.” Her betrothed’s calm voice drew Amelia’s attention.

“What scheme do you have in mind, my dear?”

“A little friendly persuasion that may kill two birds with one stone. Mary, the letters, if you please.” At his sharp command, the woman hurried toward the desk.

“I only saved his letters, miss.” She drew out a sheaf of papers, dark yellow with faded writing. “They were something of his, you know? I couldn’t read ‘em, but I could hold ‘em and know that once he’d held ‘em too.” She handed the bundle of letters to Amelia. “I was carryin’ his child when I came to London. He said we could see each other more if I was in town.” She ducked her head. “He said even after he got married, we could be together if I was discreet. But then he died.” The heartbreak

in her voice was pitiful. “I didn’t know what to do, so I had my aunt tell Lady Carrington. She came to visit me the once, after Johnny was born. She told me to come back here, to Toot Hill, to say nothing to anyone about the baby, and she would take care of us.”

“And I promise you, Mary, she will continue to do so. Let me have those, my dear.” Nathan plucked the letters out of her hands. “I also promise that when we have no further use for these, they will be returned to you, Mrs. Carr.”

“Thank you, m’lord.” Mary wiped her eyes again.

“Goodbye, Mary.” Her last illusions about Jonathan now crumbling about her, Amelia wanted nothing more than to flee the cottage and wash her hands of him forever.

“Good day, madam.” Nathan doffed his hat and led Amelia out of the cottage into the sun-filled afternoon.

Once they had gone a way down the lane, Nathan dropped the letters to the ground, swooped her up in his arms and twirled them around until Amelia’s head spun.

“Nathan, stop. What are you doing?”

“I am celebrating our victory, my love.” Laughing, he continued to spin around.

“Well, you had best put me down or I will cast up my accounts all down your backside.” With a final chuckle, he set her on the ground, where she wobbled until the earth stopped moving. “So you believe these letters will allow us to regain my reputation?”

“I do.” He grinned and recovered the letters.

She frowned. "But you haven't even read them yet."

"I don't need to."

"Nathan, what are you planning to do with them?"

"Meet with an old acquaintance of yours who, I guarantee you, will help us recover your reputation."

"Lady Carrington?"

"Lady Carrington." He put his arm around her. "Come, my love." He kissed her with so much passion her legs went wobbly again. "Your life in Society is about to begin again."

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

“How do you know she’ll be here, Nathan?” Decked out in her newest and most fashionable evening gown of silver silk satin, Amelia deemed herself too conspicuous, although Nathan had insisted she wear something to make Lady Tenby’s guests notice her. She truly didn’t think she could take one more cut direct, especially in such a noble household. Only Nathan’s comforting presence had given her the courage to appear here tonight.

“Because she’s helping bring out her granddaughter Lady Agatha Kidwelly this Season, and Lady Tenby’s balls are de rigueur these days, ever since her husband was elevated to the marquissate. You said yourself Lady Carrington is a high stickler. If so, she’ll be here.”

Amelia frowned. “The granddaughter must be Marianne’s daughter. Jonathan’s oldest sister. He had two, but only one was married at the time we were engaged.” She glanced about the ballroom, looking for a familiar face, then stopped. Did she really wish for Lady Carrington or her daughter to see her looking for them? She drew back, not letting go of Nathan’s arm. “Do you know what Lady Carrington looks like?”

“Yes, quite accidentally.” Nathan chuckled. “I accompanied Kate to a private entertainment given by Mrs. Maria Scop on the night before I met you at Lady Hamilton’s and was quickly pressed into service to dance with Lady Agatha. And thus was introduced not only to the young lady, but to her mother and grandmother as well.” He smiled ruefully at her. “Never would I have thought such an imposition on my time would stand us in such good stead now.”

“I suppose the Fates have been having quite a laugh at our expense,” Amelia murmured as Nathan moved them nearer to the dance floor.

“They brought us together at just the right moment, my love. For that I will allow them all the amusement they can stand for the rest of my life.” Nathan stopped and nodded. “There she is.”

Drawing in a large breath to steel herself, Amelia turned her gaze in the direction he’d indicated, and there she was: Lady Carrington, looking much the same as when she’d last seen her, at the family’s primary estate. A short, thin woman, Lady Carrington nevertheless commanded any room she chose to set foot in. Her bright blue turban, adorned by two sweeping peacock feathers harmonized nicely with her dark blue taffeta gown, trimmed at neck and hem with swirls of fabric made to look like peacock feathers as well. Ironical that such a finely feathered bird had robbed Amelia of her future and relegated her to the nondescript life of a common wren. Armed with the knowledge of what Lady Carrington had concealed all these years, Amelia arched her neck, threw her shoulders back and marched straight toward the lady in question.

Nathan let out a startled “Awp” and hurried to keep up with her.

Lady Carrington stood speaking to her daughter, a superior smirk on her face. “And Lady Clavern’s son has asked Agatha for a second dance already, so I think we may put him firmly on the list now.”

“Good evening, Lady Carrington, Lady Dereham. I do hope you remember me.” Amelia smiled brightly at the ladies while Nathan stood by her side, beaming idiotically.

Lady Dereham looked puzzled for a moment, but her mother’s eyes widened immediately then narrowed into two suspicious slits. “Why, of course we remember you, Miss Burrowes.” The lady sounded as though she wished her in purgatory. “You remember Amelia, don’t you, Marianne? Jonathan’s betrothed before he,” she paused a moment then continued resolutely, “died.”

“Oh, yes, of course, Amelia.” The smile on Marianne’s face was surely meant to be pleasant, however it fell somewhat short of that mark. “We have not seen you in an age.” Her gaze strayed to Nathan. “And this must be your husband?”

“Not for another week, my lady, but I am counting the minutes until that happy occurrence takes place.” Nathan kept his tone respectful, although his eyes had deepened to the color of storm clouds before a bad blow. “Lord Ainsley at your service, ladies. We met several weeks ago at Mrs. Scop’s entertainment, if you recall. I had the distinct pleasure of dancing with your daughter, Lady Agatha.”

Lady Dereham preened as all good mother birds did. “I do remember, my lord. You were particularly gallant to dear Agatha.”

“A charming young lady, if I may say so.” Nathan turned slightly until he caught Lady Carrington’s sour countenance. “I remarked to Miss Burrowes that Lady Agatha was fortunate to have two ladies see her through the dangerous waters of her come out. So many young ladies seem to come to grief during their first Season, when something unforeseen may dash their hopes for happiness and they end up with their reputations irrevocably ruined.” He turned back to stare directly into Lady Dereham’s panicked eyes. “One cannot be too careful when a lady’s reputation can be lost in a blink.”

He snapped his fingers, and Lady Dereham jumped.

“I do take your meaning, my lord.” She gazed frantically around the room until she spied her daughter, and her shoulders slumped with relief. “If you will excuse me, I must go speak to dear Agatha.” She snapped open her silk fan, fluttered it in a frenzy then all but ran toward Lady Agatha, who seemed to be having a delightful time flirting with Lord Somersby.

“You have a wonderful way of issuing a threat with a pleasing countenance, Lord

Ainsley.” Lady Carrington clenched her jaw until her skin turned pale. “May I ask what business my granddaughter is of yours?”

Shrugging, Nathan shook his head. “I only wished to point out to your daughter that even the most innocent of ladies can be ruined by those unscrupulous members of the ton who might, of course, have prevented such a thing from happening.”

“I assume you are speaking of Miss Burrowes’s scandalous behavior with my son almost a decade ago.” The woman sniffed, as though Amelia and Nathan were wasting her time.

“I am, my lady.” A smile puckered Nathan’s mouth. “Some new information has arisen regarding a correspondence between your son and his betrothed. Information I believe you may not be aware of that will clear Miss Burrowes of any wrongdoing.”

A look of suspicion stole over Lady Carrington’s face. “What could a mere correspondence do at this late date, my lord? If you are satisfied with the lady’s character to the point you are willing to marry her, I do not see why you are consulting me on this at all.”

“Oh, but I believe you will, my lady.” Nathan sidled up closer to her and lowered his voice. “I believe you can help Miss Burrowes regain her reputation in the ton . Once you read what your son wrote to her , I daresay you will eagerly offer your assistance.”

Lady Carrington stumbled back a step then regained her dignity and her footing. With a sniff, she nodded. “Very well.” She shot a glance toward her daughter, returning with the exquisite Lady Agatha in tow. “Call upon me tomorrow morning at half-past nine. The household will scarcely be stirring at that time. We will discuss this further then.”

“You may depend upon us to be there, my lady.” Nathan bowed and offered his arm to Amelia, who dropped her curtsy and clung to her betrothed’s elbow for dear life. “Good evening.”

“Good evening, my lady.” Amelia’s heart was pounding in her chest as they made their way toward her mother, who looked at them curiously.

“Was that Lady Carrington?” Mrs. Burrowes peered toward the lady, her fan swishing so wildly her hair began to straggle untidily.

“It was, ma’am.” Nathan turned to Amelia, his eyes bright with suppressed mirth. “So far, so good, my love.” He squeezed her hand. “We have an appointment to see her tomorrow morning.”

“That seems rather odd.” Mama frowned, following them as they turned to go. “She never seemed to approve of Amelia even when she was betrothed to her son. Why would she wish to renew the connection after all this time?”

“Because she is going to help restore Amelia’s reputation.” Nathan handed them into his landau.

Mama’s eyes grew so wide Amelia could see them even in the darkness of the carriage. “She is? How extraordinary.”

“But what are you going to do, my dear?” Amelia addressed her betrothed, still not sure what he had in mind. “How are you going to make her tell the truth? And to whom?” Lady Carrington knew everyone in the ton ; however, Amelia doubted she would, at a moment’s notice, send word to every person in London supporting Amelia’s side of the story.

“Just trust me, love.” Nathan’s white teeth gleamed in the moonlight as he smiled

broadly. “I have a plan.”

The next morning, Nathan and Amelia were ushered into a small reception room, tucked away in the front of Lady Carrington’s family townhouse. Austerely furnished, with one chair and only two pictures on the walls, its obvious purpose was to make unwanted callers ill at ease, but Nathan cared not a jot for the room’s purpose. Lady Carrington would be the uncomfortable one before this interview was over. He looked at Amelia, sitting pale and nervous, her restless hands pulling at the strings of her reticule, a sure sign of her distress.

“Do not be afraid, my love.” He stood beside her and rested what he hoped was a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “We have the proof.” He lifted the letter case in his hand, the precious letters tucked safely inside.

“But what if she refuses to help us, Nathan?” Amelia looked more miserable than he’d ever seen her. “Mama was right. Lady Carrington was never very friendly toward me. And she did nothing all those years ago to support my claims of innocence.”

“She will not refuse.” He pursed his lips, disgusted by the lady’s harmful actions toward Amelia. “Trust me.”

She gazed up at him and sighed. “I do, my dear. More than—”

Lady Carrington sailed into the room, a less than welcoming look on her pinched face. “Good morning, my lord. Miss Burrowes.”

Amelia shot to her feet and wobbled, so that Nathan had to steady her. He then turned his full attention to the matter at hand. “Good morning, my lady. We have come to

ask you for your assistance in an urgent matter.”

“So you intimated last evening, Lord Ainsley.” The lady looked as though butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. “But I do not see how I can be of help to you.”

“Please allow me to explain.” Nathan clenched his teeth as he withdrew the sheaf of faded letters from the letter case. “Your son corresponded with Miss Burrowes while they were betrothed. The contents of these letters were of a rather intimate nature, in which he suggests and, in some cases, almost demands that she give herself to him before their marriage is solemnized.”

“I have no knowledge of my son’s personal relationship with Miss Burrowes.” Lady Carrington raised her chin and tried to stare Nathan down. “If she succumbed to his advances—”

He wagged the papers before the lady’s face. “In none of these letters does he admit that the lady did so. Yet Miss Burrowes has been castigated and made an outcast by Polite Society because they believe she did, in fact, give into your son’s demands.”

“I have no doubt there are other letters in which she admits to her fall.”

“No, there are not, my lady,” Amelia spoke up, incensed at the woman’s audacity. “Because I never gave in to him, no matter what he may have said.”

“That is not the opinion of the public, my dear.” Lady Carrington stared witheringly at Amelia. “And where there is smoke, there is always fire.”

“Except in this case, Lady Carrington, the fire was actually hidden far away from the smoke.” Nathan bit back the words he would’ve much preferred to use. “All the way up in Toot Hill, Essex.”

Lady Carrington's face paled, although she raised her head and tried to play the matter off. "I'm sure I don't have any idea what you mean, my lord."

"I'm sure you do, my lady. Because I am speaking of Miss Mary Adams, also known as Mrs. Carr of Toot Hill."

Lady Carrington's blue eyes stood out like two China blue saucers. "I have no earthly idea of whom you are speaking."

"Oh, I believe you do, Lady Carrington, as you have been supporting Mary and her son for the past ten years." Nathan cocked his head. "I was wondering if you would prefer for Mary and her child's identities to remain hidden from the ton, at least until your granddaughter makes her brilliant match this Season." He really did enjoy the look of horror that flitted across the woman's face. "Or if you think, as I myself do, that the whole scandal needs to be revealed." He held his hands up as if pointing to a masthead in *The Morning Post*. "Dead earl's love child with maid exposed to the ton."

Narrowing her eyes, Lady Carrington glanced from him to Amelia and back again. "What is it you want me to do, Ainsley?"

"I want you to set the record straight with the ton before our nuptials are solemnized next week." He spoke lightly, but Nathan's gaze was so sharp it might've pierced the woman's breast. "I want you to talk to every person with whom you have an acquaintance in the whole of London and tell them you have it on the best authority, your son's own writings, that he and Miss Burrowes never overstepped the boundaries of good deportment during their betrothal, and therefore Miss Burrowes is completely innocent of all she has been accused of."

"And you think this declaration will be believed after so long?" The lady looked at them with something akin to pity. "What do you think I can say that will turn the tide

of public opinion when it has been so set against her for ten years?”

“I am certain you can be persuasive when you wish to be, my lady. And you will certainly have the motivation to do so.” Nathan stared into her eyes with a cold hatred in his heart. “Because if you are not successful in reversing the ton ’s opinion of Miss Burrowes, I will personally bring Mary Adams to London and parade her and her son around Hyde Park at the fashionable hour and see who notices that little Johnny looks the very image of his father.”

For a moment, Nathan believed the lady would swoon. She swayed toward one side until he was certain she would topple onto the floor, but she caught herself, shaking her head and clenching her jaw. “Very well, Lord Ainsley. I will do as much as I can before your wedding on...?”

“Monday next.”

The lady looked perturbed but finally nodded. “I will come up with a plausible story that takes the salient points into account.” Eyes flashing, she drew herself up until she seemed much taller than her short stature would suggest. “However, I cannot be held accountable for what the ton does and does not believe. I will make as convincing a tale as possible. Whether or not Society accepts it is anyone’s guess.”

“I will be listening for the next round of on-dits and will judge for myself whether you have been vigorous with your story or not.” He took Amelia’s arm and looped it through his. “One last thing, my lady. If you cease your yearly payments to Mary and her son, I will be forced to take over their upkeep. To do that, I will bring them to London as my charges and the story of why they were transferred to my care will become well-known in all the best circles.” Nathan grinned at the woman. “Good morning, my lady. I look forward to seeing you at our wedding breakfast amidst all the other guests.”

With that last rejoinder, Nathan led Amelia out of the room and out the door before Lady Carrington could have them escorted out by one of her towering footmen.

“The cat has quite gotten my tongue, Nathan.” Amelia laughed as he helped her into the carriage. “I could scarcely keep my countenance stern as you made your demands.” Once she was settled in the seat, Nathan rapped on the trap. “Do you think she will actually attempt to help us?”

“I am sure of it, my love.” He took her hand in his and threaded their fingers together. “She will do anything to keep her family from feeling the taint of the scandal you have endured all this time.”

Amelia gazed up at him, love and hope in her eyes. “So you think by the time we are wed this wretched business will all be over with?”

“I do, my love.” He raised their hands and kissed hers. “And then the only thing you will need to concern yourself with is being married to me.”

“That sounds like a formidable task indeed.” She dropped her gaze to her lap but smiled nonetheless. “Almost as daunting as your task.”

“And what might that be?”

“Being married to a formerly scandalous woman.”

He grinned and leaned down for a kiss. “A duty to which I will dedicate my entire life, my love.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

“Such a spate of weddings we’re having this Season.” Lady Celinda Graham had stopped to chat with her as she headed down the receiving line at Amelia’s wedding breakfast. “I do hope Lord Finley and I will be one of them eventually. Papa is being difficult. He’s taken the gentleman in dislike and nothing I say—or how I say it—seems to make a jot of difference.”

“I truly hope your father will come around to your way of thinking, Celinda.” Amelia glanced down the line, but her guest need not be in a hurry. “I would wish for you the same happiness I have with Lord Ainsley.”

“Oh, you can call him Nathan to me, Amelia. We are cousins. Kate and I grew up together, practically, so no need to be formal. Both of you are married now.” Celinda pulled a woebegone face. “I certainly hope that trend continues in the family.”

There had been a flurry of weddings, to be sure. Last week Lord Haversham had married Kate via special license. Nathan had protested, but his friend had told him he must strike while the iron was hot but before he got burned with it. He and Kate were ever squabbling, but Nathan assured her that was their particular way of courtship.

Thank goodness she and Nathan had no such peculiarities. The worst of theirs had been the interminable wait to see if Lady Carrington would make good on her promise. Amelia had shuddered to think what Nathan would do if she did not. The scandal of bringing Mary Adams and her son to Town and revealing Jonathan Carrington’s true indiscretion might be more than she could take, even if it did vindicate her. She had prayed the matter would end today, and they could begin their life together without worry. Today, she’d wanted nothing more than to be married and tonight take her place in Nathan’s bed at last.

However, now her wedding day was finally here, and a glance about the almost-empty room where the breakfast had been set filled Amelia with dismay. She glanced up at Nathan, by her side, a trickle of dread beginning to form.

Their wedding had been a small affair at St. Georges this morning, with only her parents and sisters, Kate, and Marcus, and his sister in attendance. An air of unreality had washed over her as she'd said her vows to Nathan. And the first time he'd called her Lady Ainsley, she'd ignored him, not realizing he was addressing her.

Happiness had slowly seeped into her, bringing with it all the fulfillment she'd dreamed of since she'd first met him. At present, however, as she stood in the receiving line, with only a handful of people other than those who'd attended the wedding making their way toward them, wishing them happy, the joy began to pall.

Nathan had insisted on inviting half the ton to the breakfast, to assure himself that Lady Carrington's efforts had been successful, that she would be accepted by the people who would decree whether or not their children would be outcasts because of the rumors and lies told about their mother. When she glanced up at him, his mouth was drawn into a pucker she'd come to learn meant he was dangerously displeased and likely to take immediate action about something—in this case, most likely, Lady Carrington. The lady's labors on their behalf seemed not to have borne fruit, to judge from the turnout. Still, something must be done or her sisters' outlooks for next Season were as bleak as they'd ever been.

"Shall we mingle with our guests, my love?" Amelia smoothed her new blue-striped silk gown, one of the extraordinary number of gowns she'd acquired recently. There was much she would need to get used to in her new life.

"I would prefer to meet with a single guest," Nathan grumbled, but took her hand good-naturedly, "but she does not seem to be in attendance."

“Will you truly bring Mary and her son here to force her hand?” The more Amelia thought about that, the less she liked it, even if it cleared her own name.

“I am prepared to do so.” He put his arm around her. “Although I know you dislike the idea. I suppose we could come up with another plan for wooing the ton . Perhaps our friends can help devise a way to convince Society that your reputation was ruined in error, although people usually need very strong proof to change their minds. Which leads us right back to Mary.”

“True. As I doubt any other proof exists.” They headed toward Amelia’s parents, who were speaking with Lord and Lady Haversham.

“Well, I suspect it does, but only I will ever know of its existence and only after it no longer exists.”

Still pondering that enigmatic statement, Amelia greeted her guests, making small talk about the feast spread out in the room around them, but all the while highly aware of Nathan beside her. In just a little bit, he’d promised they could slip away to their apartments and finally be alone. Despite the disappointment of the many missing guests, she would always remember their wedding day as the most wonderful of her life. Because she and Nathan would be together forever.

“And now if you will excuse us, Mr. and Mrs. Burrowes, Lord and Lady Haversham,” he bowed and grasped Amelia’s arm, “I must finish showing Lady Ainsley the rest of the house. We’ve been so busy settling her things in here and preparing for the wedding that I haven’t had the chance to acquaint her with everything that is now her domain.”

Her parents bowed and moved off to speak with Lord and Lady Ivor, but a strangled sound from Lord Haversham drew Amelia’s attention to him and his new wife. His face had that pinched look about it, as if he were trying not to laugh. Kate seemed to

be biting the inside of her mouth and studiously avoiding her husband's gaze.

"Perhaps you could show us as well, Nathan?" His sister grinned up at him, mischief snapping in her eyes. "I daresay there are things about the house I have never seen."

"And will have to continue to be ignorant of, my love." Her husband took her hand. "I believe they are about to play a waltz." A peculiar light blazed in his eyes. "You would not disappoint me, would you?"

"Of course not, Haversham. You know how much I love a waltz, especially as it is a dance for married couples." Kate gazed into his face, oblivious to the rest of them. "Another time, brother?"

"Of course, my dear." Nathan exchanged a look with his friend. "Best of luck to you, Marcus."

"And to you as well." Grinning, Lord Haversham took his wife's arm and led her to the area where a few couples were about to commence the dance.

Nathan seized her arm. "Let us make our escape before Kate decides she'd rather devil us than dance with her husband." Swiftly, he led her out of the ballroom, down a corridor and up the stairs, finally arriving at the viscountess's suite of rooms. Her rooms now.

"Your maid is here, ready to assist you in any way." He dipped his head and kissed her, waves of that lovely heat his touch always brought coursing through her. "I will see you shortly."

He slipped further down the corridor to his suite, and Amelia smiled as she sped inside her chamber. At last, the waiting was over.

* * * *

Despite the summer's day outside, a fire blazed in Amelia's bedroom, taking the slight chill from the room, though it did nothing to allay the sudden nervousness that assailed her as soon as her maid left. She'd been wishing for this moment longer than most brides, and now that it was upon her, she might fly to pieces. No longer a lady in the bloom of her youth, but a mature woman with plump curves, she'd neglected to consider that her body would soon be on display as never before. What if he didn't like what he saw? The week before last they'd celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday, a time when some women were almost past their childbearing years. What if she was too old to bear Nathan's children? If she could not give him an heir, what would they do? Why had they not discussed any of these things before they married?

She lay back in the bed, her hair fanning out over the pillow, resisting the urge to pull the covers over her face and hide. This was her long-awaited wedding night, and she was determined to enjoy it, no matter what. She would think of all those things another time.

The door that connected her suite to the viscount's rooms opened, and Nathan entered, dressed in a blue silk banyan with a gold leaf print, carrying two glasses of champagne.

Her mouth dried instantly as she took in his superb form, for the robe divulged as much as it concealed. The soft silk draped elegantly over his wide shoulders, revealing their true shape rather than the usual square cut of his jacket. Although tied at the waist, the garment moved seductively as he walked across the floor, giving her tantalizing glimpses of what lay beneath—a flash of his strong calves, a show of muscular thighs, and a shadowy glimpse of something above them both...and suddenly the room had become much too warm.

“Here, my love.” He handed her a cool glass, and she seized it with shaking fingers.

“Let us toast our marriage.” Gazing deeply into her eyes, he raised his glass. “May we live long, love well, and enjoy true happiness always.” They touched their glasses together but then, instead of drinking, he seized her head and brought her lips to his.

As ever when they kissed, Amelia’s pulse pounded, her lips warmed, and her body tingled. This time, however, with all of him so very close, and only a thin piece of fabric between her skin and his, a terrible ache formed deep within her, at her very core. Like a giant spring being wound tighter and tighter every time he thrust his tongue into her mouth. She moaned and twisted, wishing she could get rid of the champagne and wrap her arms around the body so temptingly close.

Either Nathan had the same idea or had somehow read her thoughts, for he pulled his lips away from hers—ever so reluctantly—then grasped her glass and plucked it from her fingers. “Drink a bit of this, sweetheart. You’ll be glad of it.”

She nodded, and he put the glass to her lips, letting her take tiny sips, careful not to spill it on her. The tart, refreshing wine seemed to clear her head, making her sit up straighter, shake her hair until it rippled down her back, and lower the sheet until her shoulders were bare.

He’d turned to put the glasses on a table, and when he turned back, he stopped, his gaze fastened on her naked skin. “Amelia, dear Lord, but you are beautiful.” Slowly, he slid his hands down her neck, over her shoulders, until he pushed the sheet away, and she allowed it to drop to her waist. His ragged breath sounded loudly in the still room. “I see I misspoke, my love. You are exquisite.”

Catching his excitement, Amelia pulled the belt of his robe until it slithered to the floor then boldly reached up to push it off his shoulders, as strong and broad as she’d suspected. They gave way to a lean, well-muscled chest that tapered to a small waist. The smooth skin invited her touch, and she ran her hand, first cautiously then more boldly, from shoulder to waist. Lower than that was still hidden by the bed, but not

for long.

“You do know what we will do here, don’t you, Amelia?” His quiet voice broke the silence. “If you do not, I can explain it.”

“Oh, no. I do.” Unwavering, she met his hot gaze. “I have known for some time.” That knowledge had been burning inside her for much too long without being put to use.

His eyes widened for an instant, and he paused.

Lord, what must he think of that answer? She hurried on. “My mother explained it to me when I was betrothed to Lord Carrington.”

His brows rose then he nodded. “Then can you find room in that bed for me?”

Smiling, she scooted over and pulled back the covers. “Gladly, my lord.”

He slid in next to her and turned on his side to face her. With a firm hand, he gripped her waist, pulling her to him until their bodies truly touched at every point, and she ached for more. “Then by all means, let us begin at last.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

Amelia didn't know if all brides were this eager for their husband's touch—surely some were afraid or dismayed at the thought of the intimacies of the marriage bed. Had this been Mr. Burke, God knew she would've had little to be happy about at this moment. But pressed against Nathan as she now was, her body warm and tingly at every point he touched, she could not remember a moment of her life when she'd been happier. She ran her hand down the smooth skin of his arm, and he draped it over her, reaching down to stroke her bottom in return.

Gasping, Amelia stared into his eyes, which had turned from cool gray to deepest black as his mouth descended once more onto hers. Lord, but she loved his kisses. Without hesitation, she opened her lips, welcoming his tongue with unabashed joy. His ministrations set her pulse to racing, her blood heating, her need for this man soaring as never before.

She moaned as he continued to stroke her derriere, pressing her against the hard part of him that prodded her stomach insistently, exciting her to be even more bold. With abandon, Amelia slid her arm over his waist, and down to his round buttocks to mimic his actions.

“Ummm.” Nathan's reaction was swift and surprising. He rolled them so she was suddenly underneath him, his considerable weight pressing her into the mattress in a very pleasing and unexpectedly erotic manner. Her other arm suddenly freed, she swept it up his back, reveling in the smooth play of muscles. “You are a very wicked woman, Amelia,” he broke the kiss to say, before nuzzling her neck just beneath her ear.

“I am?” The brush of his tongue on her flesh just there set her to trembling all over.

“Yes, for your every touch inflames me to the point I can scarcely restrain myself.” His lips continued to stray down her neck, each flick of his tongue bringing forth goose flesh all over her body.

“Why restrain yourself, my love?” she whispered in his ear. “I freely give you my body that we may become as one.”

Nathan growled, stopping his descent at the little notch at the top of her chest. “I know, sweetheart, but this is your first time. I must have some self-control if I am to make this as pleasurable for you as I possibly can.”

“But it’s already pleasurable.” Much more of these delightful feelings and she might die.

“My love, we’ve only just begun.” He lowered his head, but instead of returning to her neck, his lips fastened on the tip of her breast.

Amelia sucked in a breath, a streak of fire shooting from the place his mouth had claimed all the way to her nether regions. She shuddered as he laved her flesh then moaned deeply when he wrapped his lips around her nipple, furling it into a tight nub. Her body throbbed each time he sucked, her legs moving restlessly. Her head lolled back on the pillow. “Oh, Nathan.”

Her breathy voice must have spurred him on, for he slid his lips down her stomach, dipping his tongue into the crevice of her navel, making her shiver, then down lower. And lower still. Amelia’s head came up when he reached the thatch of curls that covered her most intimate place. Never had she, in all her most private musings about this night, imagined this happening.

Her body tensed, and Nathan raised his face to her, his eyes large and dark. “Do you trust me, Amelia?”

Wordlessly, she nodded.

“Then lie back down. This will not hurt.”

Trembling, Amelia did as he asked, every inch of her on edge.

Scattering kisses everywhere, Nathan’s lips brushed through her curls, each caress drawing forth a moan from her. At last, he settled on a particular spot, more sensitive than any other. His tongue swirled around it, and Amelia’s cries deepened even as her hips rose.

“Easy, love.” He lowered his head once more, tenderly massaging her aching flesh, as his hand slipped between her thighs.

Past embarrassment, Amelia lay back, willing herself to simply relax and revel in every moment of this most exquisite sensation. When his finger slipped just inside her, however, Amelia gasped anew, not only in surprise but pain. “Ow.”

“Did that hurt?” Nathan stared at her, his gaze not leaving her face.

“Just a little.”

“And this?” He dipped his finger in again, and once more, the twinge of pain caught her unexpectedly.

“Yes. But you said it wouldn’t hurt.”

“Now I know your body better, it won’t.” He withdrew his hand and lowered his mouth to her once more, stroking the sensitive spot, tickling it, kneading it delicately until Amelia thought her whole body would go up in flames. A strange sensation began to grow deep inside her, spiraling as his tongue danced across her until she

spun upward, out of control, her body exploding from within with wave after wave of the most incredible pleasure she'd ever felt.

After what seemed an eternity of this bliss, Amelia slumped against the mattress, her eyes staring at the underside of the blue silk canopy, heart racing, trying to understand what had just happened.

Nathan threw himself down next to her, his body still tense. At least some parts of it were. "Did you enjoy that, sweetheart?"

"Yeeessss." Amelia closed her eyes, wanting to purr with contentment. She'd never have dreamed how wonderful Nathan could make her feel. "Oh, Nathan." She snuggled up to him. "I have never felt such an extraordinary thing in my life."

"And there is more to come as well, love." He rolled her onto her back and, without pause, moved over top of her so his hips straddled hers, his member long and hot against her.

Amelia's eyes flew open, that hard presence reminding her that, much as she'd enjoyed the encounter just past, the next one would likely not be so agreeable. She tried to smile bravely at him, steeling herself.

"Open your legs, love." He shifted his weight, and she complied, tensing as he positioned himself against her most intimate place. "I'll be quick about it, I promise. And the hurt doesn't last long, I'm told."

She nodded, hoping that was true. Then his mouth was on hers once more, filling her senses with his vital presence, focusing her attention on him alone. Sliding her arms around his broad shoulders, she pulled him to her as he suddenly thrust forward.

Amelia tensed as the flash of pain—no worse than if she'd cut herself with a paring

knife out in the garden—gave way to a peculiar burning sensation, followed by the even stranger feeling of Nathan filling her up. He broke the kiss, gasping for breath, and groaned as though he'd been the one hurt instead of her. She looked at him with some concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he ground out between clenched teeth. "I need...a moment." His labored breathing continued until Amelia began to fear something was truly wrong. Then his furrowed brow cleared as his face relaxed. "I am fine now, my dear. I feared I would not be able to control myself. I've been longing for this moment for weeks now." He peered down at her, his expression full of tenderness. "In truth, for years. I wish to make it the most memorable of both our lives, but some urges are so primal I feared my baser instincts would overwhelm my true intentions." He kissed her again, a fleeting kiss that was sweeter than before. "But I have calmed myself sufficiently that we can proceed."

"What do we do now?" Amelia's mother had given her a basic understanding of the marriage act, so she'd known this much at least. Mama had, however, been much vaguer about what happened after the initial pain was over. And it had subsided, thank goodness, perhaps because her concern for Nathan had proved a distraction. At least she was glad that part was past them.

He smiled down at her and kissed her lips. "Now we love one another, Amelia. Stay just as you are."

That was easy enough. Melded together as they were, she didn't think she could go anywhere else.

After another lingering kiss, he moved his hips, pulling backward until she believed he would leave her then plunging inward again, leaving her gasping.

"Does that feel good?" He peered down at her. "Or are you still hurting, my love?"

Amelia shook her head. “No, not hurt, just surprised.”

“Let’s see if I can make you feel good again.” Gently, he withdrew and thrust forward, over and over, until Amelia caught a rhythm to his actions. Now there was no trace of pain, the wonder of his nearness, the utter joy of knowing they would be together for the rest of their lives, made Amelia bold. The next time he thrust into her, she lifted her hips, meeting him again and again until that peculiar feeling began to grow inside her once more. That spiraling sensation that had overwhelmed her when Nathan had touched her there before.

Suddenly, Nathan grunted and quickened his pace. His hand strayed to the nub he’d caressed before, stroking it around and around...

“Nathan? Oh, Nathan!” With a suddenness that shocked her, Amelia shattered around him, waves of the most intense pleasure hurtling her higher than before. Moaning at the top of her voice, she clutched him to her even as he thrust once more and bellowed her name. The moment froze in time for her, the incredible pleasure entwined with the look of awe on Nathan’s face as he strained into her one last time, sending a flood of warmth throughout her nether regions.

He slumped on top of her, panting, his weight seemingly heavier than before but no less pleasant. Then he rolled off her, disconnecting them, and her sense of loss was unexpectedly profound. But he pulled her to his chest, wrapping his strong arms around her, cradling her as their breathing slowed.

“You are the most incredible woman, Amelia,” Nathan murmured in her ear. “An innocent one moment, and a wanton vixen the next.” He nuzzled her neck, and more tingles shot through her body. “I do hope you were pleased with your first taste of married life.”

“More pleased than I could have imagined, my love.” She snuggled against him,

feeling more beloved and cherished than ever before in her life.

“That is what I hoped you’d say, sweetheart.” His hand strayed down her breast, his touch hardening her nipples in an instant. “Because I wondered if I could interest you in a second taste?”

Candlelight glowed all about Amelia’s chamber, giving the very air a softness and beauty she’d never noticed before. Perhaps everything would seem different now. The man lying next to her—stretched out on his back, one arm flung over his head—had changed her life in so many ways, nothing would ever be the same. She rolled onto her side once more, eager just to watch him sleep. His face in repose gave no indication of the strength, the tenderness, the passion he had given her, and brought out of her in return.

They’d made love three times, each somewhat different yet gloriously the same. And it had left her so exhausted she should’ve been sleeping right alongside him, yet she’d never been so wide awake in her life, so aware of every part of her body, for he seemed to have touched every inch. Would it be wrong of her to wake him up so he could touch her again? If she was shameless, she didn’t care. She was making up for lost time.

“Didn’t you get any sleep?” Nathan’s eyes were open, his gaze sleepily trained on her. A lazy smile touched his lips, so slight he might indeed be returning to his slumber.

“A little. I couldn’t seem to stay asleep.” Afraid she’d wake up in her bed at home from a dream too good to be true. “I hope I didn’t awaken you.”

Nathan rolled up on his side to face her, his hand straying out to tug at her disheveled

hair. “Not at all. I’ve only dozed a bit myself.” His smile broadened. “Too pleasantly engaged to want to sleep.”

Her cheeks heated as she remembered the intimacies they’d shared, although they’d done nothing to be ashamed about.

“I assume you are a little sore?”

She nodded, her face aflame now.

“I am sorry for it.” His gentle voice soothed her embarrassment. “Although I’m grateful I was the one to introduce you to these particular pleasures.” He kissed her fingers, sending warmth straight to her soul. “I promise you, the soreness will fade shortly. It’s only the first time that hurts so.” He smiled and pulled her over to him. “Although repetition may indeed play a part in that as well. If you wish, we can say you are indisposed and choose to remain here in your chamber today.”

That might be very nice. A day in which to simply stay in bed and... Do what they, in fact, had been doing. “But wouldn’t people assume then that we were...”

“I believe they would indeed suspect how we are passing the time.”

“Oh, dear.” Amelia sat up. “That will never do. They cannot think that we are here, in this bed—”

“My love.” Nathan’s grin spanned his face as he drew her back down into the bed. “They know what we are doing. We are married and,” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “this is what married people do.”

“I know. But I don’t want people to know it.” That still seemed wicked, somehow.

“You will become used to being a married lady, with all the privileges thereof. Like breakfast in bed...and other things in bed.” He nuzzled her neck, making her groan with pleasure.

“Like you in my bed. Could you stay with me, Nathan?” If people already knew what they did behind their chamber door, it shouldn’t matter, after all.

“Not the entire day, my love.” He kissed his way down her neck to her chest. “I will need to visit Lady Carrington to ask why she so flagrantly ignored my instructions.” He stared at her, his brow suddenly puckering. “It struck me as extremely odd that so very few people deigned to come to our breakfast. More people than those who appeared have spoken to you at Mrs. Doyle’s and at the other entertainments we’ve attended these past weeks.” He shook his head. “I want to know why they’re still staying away.” Raising his head, he gazed into her eyes, the tenderness there so incredibly sweet. “Especially now that I know the truth for certain.”

Yes, at last one person in the world knew her innocence without doubt. “I suppose gentlemen cannot talk about such things, not even to other gentlemen.”

“Oh, we could, but it would do no good.” Nathan nuzzled his lips between her breasts then nibbled his way down to her stomach. “Even if I told every man in Christendom that you were a virgin until we married, they would simply think I was lying in order to save my honor and your reputation.”

“How terrible! I know you would never do such a thing, Nathan. You are too honorable to lie, even about something like that.” How could the ton disparage his reputation thus? Wasn’t it bad enough that they still assumed her guilt?

“My love.” He rested his cheek against her, his night beard prickly on her soft skin. “If your honor were concerned, I wouldn’t care what they said about me. No gentleman would. And all the other gentlemen know that, ergo, even though I know

the truth, and can speak it all day long, I will not be believed. Therefore, I must convince Lady Carrington. If I get no satisfaction from her, later perhaps, I must meet with Marcus. He can help me plot a strategy to bring Mary Adam's story to light in a way that will not create another scandal as we continue our bid for the return of your reputation."

"We must meet with Lord Haversham."

"We?" Nathan gazed up at her, making him look funny, with his chin upside down.

"I should be with you to devise the strategy. I know Mary better than either of you two. I could suggest something you wouldn't even think of, ..."

Rolling over so that he now lay sprawled over top of her, he kissed her navel, making her gasp. "Yes, I do. Not to mention, I do not wish to let you out of my sight." He wiggled his eyebrows, and she burst out laughing.

"But surely we cannot do such things as this at Lord Haversham's house."

His stare turned hot once more. "I will only say, Amelia, that you have been married less than a day. You still have a lot to learn."

Her breath caught as he lowered his mouth to her flesh once more then stopped and raised his head. "One question did cross my mind at some point during our lovemaking last night."

"What was that?"

"Why did you not anticipate your wedding with Lord Carrington?" He sat up a little, his hand cupping her face. "Not that I'm not grateful you didn't, but you were betrothed. Almost every betrothed couple I've known for the past five years has

apparently begun their marriage before their vows were spoken.”

She drew him back down to her, until he pressed her again with his full weight. “I did not anticipate my wedding with Lord Carrington, nor would I have done so with any other man, because he was not you.”

“Not me?” Nathan had gone so still she could hear his heartbeat.

“No. No one else, even the man I agreed to marry, was you.” She’d thought about this on the day she’d accepted Jonathan. Had they married, she’d have done her duty by him, but her heart had been lost forever to Lord Ainsley. “I told you during our first carriage ride that things would have been quite different if the gentleman in question had been you. For you alone would I have given myself without my vows. A silly thing, perhaps, but since I had no choice but to marry and consummate my marriage, my only way of being faithful to you, in my mind, was to give myself to no one until I legally belonged to another man.”

“Amelia.” Nathan dropped his head back onto her stomach and kissed her. “You have given me the most precious gift, my love. Nothing I can give you will ever compare to it.”

“You are gift enough for me.” She wrapped her arms around him. “I do so love you.”

“And I you.”

Amelia pulled him up until his face hovered close to hers. “Then love me again, please, Nathan.”

“With pleasure, sweetheart.”

Nathan swiftly covered her, pressing his delicious body all over hers. The warmth he

generated brought a purr from her that swiftly turned into a moan of delight as his lips skimmed down her neck. Amelia tried to draw him closer, even though every part of them was already touching.

Still, she wanted more. The more they'd been denied for so many years.

Emboldened by her wanton desires, she wrapped her legs around his hips, overjoyed when he promptly slid into her, and she sighed in bliss.

Married life with Nathan was going to be so much better than anything she'd dreamed of. It might actually ruin her for anything else. And that was just fine by her.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

Much later that morning, Nathan hurried his pace, eager now to confront Lady Carrington and her blatant disregard for his ultimatum. If she believed he'd made idle threats about exposing Lord Carrington's paramour and child to London Society, she would be disabused about that in short order. He'd have Mary Adams and her son on display in the most heavily frequented part of Hyde Park before the week was out. He'd no idea what Carrington had looked like, but Amelia had assured him the child was the spit and image of the man. If that was not enough, he could have Mary make a sworn statement that the child was hers. Or even better, find the midwife who'd attended Mary and have her attest to the identity of the child's mother. That should carry enough weight even for the most ardent gossip. Still, he wouldn't rest until the ton saw just how wrong they'd been in their censure of his wife.

Nathan had left Amelia in bed, pink and glowing from their last love making. He had every intention of rejoining her there as soon as Lady Carrington disclosed her excuse for reneging on her promise and gave him further assurances that she would do his bidding or face the dire consequences. A third chance was out of the question, especially in this situation.

He arrived at Lady Carrington's door and plied the bronze knocker sharply. Her butler showed him to the same reception room he and Amelia had been relegated to, and Nathan stood looking at the same two insipid paintings, hoping to God the woman did not take forever to appear. Surprisingly, she stepped briskly through the door within minutes of Nathan's arrival. Almost as though she'd been expecting him.

"Good morning, Lord Ainsley. May I offer you congratulations this morning? You and Miss Burrowes were indeed married yesterday?" She smiled brightly at him, like a bird about to impale a worm on its beak.

“Yes, my lady. We were.” Somewhat put off by her cheerful manner, Nathan nevertheless kept his stern countenance. “And we were particularly displeased when neither you nor three-quarters of our invited guests appeared.” He glared directly into the lady’s seemingly innocent face. “Did you not believe me when I told you I would bring Mary Adams and her son to London to show the Town Lord Carrington’s indiscretion? If you did not, I fear you will change your mind shortly.”

“Leave Mary and her son alone, Lord Ainsley.” Lady Carrington spoke matter-of-factly. “I fear you have worse things to concern yourself with than the scandal of ten years ago.”

“I know of nothing worse than an innocent woman being condemned for something she never did.” Nathan shook his head, puzzled in the extreme by the lady’s calm demeanor. “My wife did not break the rules of decency with your son, and you know it.”

“But what about her most recent transgression?” The lady arched an eyebrow, patently enjoying the conversation.

“Her recent transgression?” What in the name of all that was holy was the woman talking about?

“Oh, come, my lord. Do not tell me you didn’t read *The Morning Post* three days ago?” The archness now extended to Lady Carrington’s voice.

“I was in the midst of preparing for my wedding three days ago, my lady. I haven’t read a blessed word all week.” A sudden chill raced down Nathan’s spine. “Are you telling me there was an article in the *Post* about my wife?”

With a twinkle in her eyes, Lady Carrington called for the butler. “Simms, fetch me the copy of *The Morning Post* that’s on my desk in the morning room.” Then she

turned to Nathan, false concern in her voice. “I had begun to write to my friends and acquaintances, telling them it had been brought to my attention that Miss Burrowes was still being reviled for her past indiscretion with my son and letting them know that there was no truth to that old chestnut whatsoever. That I hadn’t been made aware all those years ago that the rumor had been allowed to continue unchallenged. Of course, I’d been so prostrate with grief at my son’s passing that it was some time before I took notice of anything Society had been doing, Jonathan’s death and the coming of the new Lord Carrington taking all my time and attention.”

The butler entered and handed her a folded newspaper. She paused until the servant had gone then offered him the paper, already folded to the second page. “Then this past Tuesday, I opened the Post to the Fashionable Faux Pas column, as is my wont every day.” She chuckled. “I admit, I do like to keep up with the newest scandal. It is my only entertainment these days.”

Heart sinking to his knees, Nathan snatched the broadsheet from her hand. His vision blurred with fear, he blinked several times as his gaze raced down the column until his eye fell on the words “Miss A. Bur—wes” and his heart stopped then commenced to beat like a bat winging its way out of hell. Biting his cheek to ward off the darkness that suddenly invaded his vision, Nathan forced himself to breathe, to calm. Dying of an apoplexy in Lady Carrington’s receiving room would do none of them any good. His heart slowed its frantic beating, and he focused on the words that made his blood run cold.

Mr. L. B—ke was overheard yesterday boasting to Lord F—n that Miss A. Bur—wes, lately betrothed to Lord A—ly, had, when there was an understanding of marriage between him and the lady, agreed and engaged in anticipating not the wedding night, but the betrothal itself. Mr. B—ke assured Lord F—n that although he was usually the soul of discretion, it should be noted that the rumors about the lady’s previous anticipation were sadly true.

The vile words now seared into his brain, Nathan looked up to find Lady Carrington gazing at him expectantly, a slight smile on her lips. “So you see, my lord, when I read that, I concluded that I need not continue to attempt the repair of Miss Burrowes’s reputation. Had I done so, I’d have been deemed a laughingstock.”

Crushing the paper in a violent grip, Nathan leveled a gaze at the woman so terrifying the smile wiped itself from her lips and she took several steps backward, glancing at the door as though she might actually flee. “Burke will answer for these lies, my lady. Mark my words carefully.” He stalked toward her, forcing her to retreat until she pressed herself against the wall. “I alone am in possession of the truth of the matter, and I will attest and affirm to you and to any who choose to slander my wife that she was an innocent until after she spoke her wedding vows to me.”

The defiance in Lady Carrington’s wide eyes dimmed at his declaration, and he halted, although he truly wished to throttle the harpy. Best save his murderous outrage for the one who so richly deserved it. He backed away, and the lady breathed easier, although she still glanced toward the doorway. “Continue your efforts, my lady.”

“I beg your pardon?” She jerked her head back to him.

“Continue your efforts to exonerate my wife. That scandal has nothing to do with the current one, which I will deal with myself, as you will see.” He leaned forward, and she cringed back against the wall. “My promise to you still stands. If you do not do your utmost to bring the truth to light about your son and my wife, I will bring Mary Adams to London to do it for you.”

To his surprise, the woman nodded silently, and Nathan turned for the door.

“What will you do now, my lord?” she called to him.

“The only thing I can do, madam.” Nathan swung around to meet her with a piercing gaze. “Go find my second.”

“Can I do nothing to dissuade you from this course of action, Nathan?” Marcus handed him a stiff cognac even though it was scarcely noon. Still, he welcomed the brandy, the fiery spirits burning their way into his stomach and settling it. Upon his arrival, mad as hell and likely looking like a lunatic, Marcus had brought him directly to his study for the express purpose of giving him a drink and keeping him from frightening the servants.

“Nothing whatsoever,” Nathan almost barked out the words. “Had someone written such filth about your wife, wouldn’t you call them out?” He glared at his friend. “If not, I would certainly do so and then, if I survived the first duel, issue a challenge to you for not defending my sister’s honor.”

“Peace, Nathan.” Marcus held up a hand in submission. “I agree, in such circumstances I would be out for blood just as much as you are now.” He shook his head, his countenance grave. “I simply do not wish to see you killed, either by the duel itself or by charges if it should come to the ears of the magistrate.”

“I hope it would be the latter, as the law, while explicitly forbidding dueling, does take into consideration the circumstances if it is a point of honor.” Nathan shook the Post, which he’d taken from Lady Carrington’s house quite by accident, in Marcus’s face, then slammed it onto his friend’s desk. “No magistrate nor any jury of my peers could read that unmitigated slander and not agree this is a point of honor.” Outrage still coursing through him, Nathan paced the room, needing some outlet for his anger.

“Of course not. However, there can be miscarriages of justice in some of these cases. That of Major Campbell in Ireland comes most readily to mind.” Sipping his brandy,

Marcus quietly watched him. “Do you recall it?”

“Ten or twelve years ago.” Nathan nodded. “I remember.” The major had called out a fellow officer, a Captain Byrd, though the reason for the challenge hadn’t been generally disclosed. The duel had commenced, and Campbell had shot and killed the captain. The jury had found him guilty of murder, despite the point of honor defense, and the major had been hanged. “But it was in the papers that Byrd accused the major of hurrying him to the dueling field, rather than waiting for Byrd to secure friends to advise him. And this seemed to be the reason they convicted him.”

“That does go against the letter of the law.” Marcus stared at him, waiting.

“Oh, do not fear, my friend.” Nathan forced a smile. “I will make certain I follow the law to the last degree. Mr. Burke will find I am a fair dealer in that, even if he is not.”

“Does your wife know of this yet?”

Nathan set the glass down and shook his head. “I came here first, to secure you as my second. I will then go to challenge Mr. Burke and set a day that is agreeable to him. Then I will speak with Amelia.” Something he was loath to do for several reasons.

“She will not be in favor of your actions.” His friend’s voice was carefully neutral, even though Nathan understood that Marcus shared that reluctance.

“Which is why I shall present it to her as a fait accompli .” Not the most honorable thing to do, but he would worry about that later. “I have no choice in the matter, and when she reads the Post , I believe she will agree.” Every time he thought of those words being read by all the ton , his resolve hardened even more. At the moment it was akin to granite.

“Why do you think he said such a thing?” Making himself comfortable in a dark

burgundy leather chair, Marcus sipped the cognac, a thoughtful look on his face. “He had to know you would not let such an insult to Amelia go unchallenged—although, of course, the remark was overheard, and the hearer is the one responsible for it coming to public ears.” Marcus sat up, suddenly alert. “You do realize Burke’s words would’ve remained merely that, words spoken and forgotten in an instant had not that anonymous someone given them perpetual life in the Post?”

“I take your point, but the ultimate fault lies with Burke, you must admit. Without his lie, there would’ve been nothing to overhear. And that brings us back to ponder his possible motive for saying such a thing.”

“The man’s an absolute lunatic, is all I can think.” Nathan stopped pacing, the question diverting his attention. He too sat in one of the soft chairs and immediately felt calmer. “I warned him, in no uncertain terms, the day I first took Amelia driving during the Grand Strut. He was insinuating something similar to Lady Chalgrove, and I all but challenged him then.” Calmness evaporated as Nathan recalled that encounter. “He cried off, saying he misspoke, but there is no way he can do so this time. Not with the evidence there in black and white.”

“Does the man have a death wish, do you think?”

Nathan shrugged. “If he does not, he has made a grave error in judgment. I was crystal clear in my desire to put a ball in his heart then.”

“I wish you luck then, my friend.” Marcus saluted him with his glass then drained it.

“I would ask you to accompany me to make the challenge if you have nothing else pressing today.”

His friend cocked his head. “Why would you need your second with you? You don’t suppose Burke will try something dishonorable, do you?”

Nathan raised an eyebrow at him. “Unlikely, although I know little about the man. No, I need you present to make sure I don’t throttle the blighter before I can challenge him.”

“Point taken.” Marcus made a formal bow. “I am at your service.” He straightened and grinned. “I believe I may enjoy this exchange as much as you do.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

After a long bath to ease her soreness below, Amelia settled herself to dressing for the day. With the assistance of Woods, her maid, she endured the continuous primping, from the application of creams to her whole body, to the donning of her stays, petticoats, and gown—a luscious deep yellow confection that showed off her bosom magnificently—and finally the dressing of her hair. And this for a day in which she wasn't preparing to leave the house. There was much about the life of a viscountess that she had to learn.

Of course, she wished fervently to appear as ravishing as she could for Nathan. But she'd been used to much simpler toilettes at home. Apparently, that time had passed, and she'd have to be on her toes to keep up with the everyday dress for Polite Society.

Amelia's shoulders slumped. If she was even to be accepted by the ton. They'd been certain Lady Carrington would take Nathan's threats seriously and do her part to repair Amelia's reputation, although deep down, she wasn't all that surprised. Lady Carrington had never believed Amelia good enough for her son and had treated her accordingly, though Jonathan had never seen it. Or had pretended not to see it, most likely. Still, she wondered what the lady's excuse would be. Lord, but she'd love to be a fly on the wall when Nathan paid his call on her this morning.

Smiling at that thought, she gazed into the mirror as Woods settled a brilliant teardrop-shaped sapphire around her neck. A gift from Nathan yesterday for their wedding. It was absolutely stunning and although not exactly meant for day wear, Amelia wanted her husband to know she treasured the present. And what better way than by wearing it?

She touched her neck with the glass stopper of her favorite perfume flacon and at last rose to face the first day of marriage. She'd breakfasted in bed for the first time, lazily eating a bite at a time, luxuriating in the knowledge she wasn't needed anywhere until much later. Now, though, it was time to take the reins and step into the role of lady of the house, the dream that, in recent years, had begun to fade.

With a light step, she hurried down the stairs to find Mrs. Ashworth, the housekeeper, and give directions about the day. After that mostly successful interview, Amelia continued down to the kitchen to confer about dinner. As Mrs. Campbell knew Nathan's tastes much better than she did, she let the woman suggest several dishes that would be appetizing to his lordship. As they were also foods she herself enjoyed, Amelia was very amenable to the menu for this evening. She'd need to ask Nathan and come up with several days' worth of menus to present to the cook tomorrow. "And would you send up some tea and cakes to the drawing room, Mrs. Campbell? Lord Ainsley will be returning shortly, and I'd like to offer him some refreshment."

"Of course, my lady." The cook looked at her inquiringly. "Do you have your own blend of tea, my lady? Or shall I use his lordship's?"

"Lord Ainsley's blend will do for today. I will have some of my blend sent over from my parents' house for tomorrow." Amelia had always been fond of a particular combination of black and Assam teas that she'd been blending for years. Funny she'd forgotten to have it sent over, though with so much going on she really shouldn't be surprised. What else had she left at her parents' that she'd have to send for?

Chuckling, Amelia climbed the stairs to the first floor and headed hopefully for the drawing room. She'd only been there a time or two, but she must learn the layout of the house sometime. After only one false move, when she'd surprised two maids cleaning the library, Amelia discovered the large green and gold drawing room, splendid in the early afternoon light that poured in from the back garden. Amelia could've stood and gazed at the pleasant vista for hours, but just then the tea arrived,

and she sat in an elegant Queen Anne chair, covered in a green toile pattern, and helped herself to the tea and cakes. She'd just begun on a chicken and cress sandwich when Nathan opened the door, striding purposefully across the floor toward her, followed closely by Lord Haversham.

“Good afternoon, my dear. Good afternoon, Lord Haversham. You are come at the opportune moment, just in time for tea.” She pulled an empty cup toward her and began to pour then her gaze took in Nathan's frantic pace and Lord Haversham's drawn visage. “Is something the matter?”

Her husband halted before her and dropped to one knee, startling her. “I must confess something to you, my love. Two things, in fact. And neither of them would I wish to burden you with, but I am bound by the vows we took only yesterday to be true to you, which means I must tell you everything, whether or not the news will be...discomfiting to you.”

Heart pounding in her chest, Amelia grasped his hands and squeezed them. “Then tell me quickly, love.” She had no idea what had caused this change in Nathan, but a cold dread seeped into her body.

“I have issued a challenge to Mr. Burke to meet me in three days' time at dawn in Hyde Park or else be branded a coward and a liar.”

As though a hand had suddenly gripped her throat, Amelia could not breathe. She stared at Nathan, not wanting to comprehend his words, but doing so all too well. Her husband had challenged another man to a duel. A duel where the consequences could be maiming or...death. A sudden trembling made the chair she sat on quake. “But, Nathan...why?” She cocked her head, a thousand things running through her mind. “Does it have to do somehow with Lady Carrington?”

A smile played briefly around Nathan's mouth, but he controlled it. “Only indirectly.

I have dealt with Lady Carrington. She will renew her campaign to exonerate you, my dear. Do not fear. We, however, have a more urgent business to attend to.”

“You mean dueling with Mr. Burke?” The blood which had seemed to drain from her entire body came racing back, making Amelia terribly warm.

“Yes.” Nathan avoided her gaze, which increased her sense of dread.

“What could he have done that was so egregious, Nathan?” She didn’t know Mr. Burke well enough for him to have done anything that would call for Nathan to kill him.

Looking as though he were eating ground glass, Nathan thrust a tattered copy of The Morning Post into her hands. He gazed at her, his face as miserable as she had ever seen it.

Frowning, Amelia unfolded the newspaper. “There is something in today’s paper? I have not had a chance to peruse—”

“It’s from three days before our wedding.” Nathan rose and sat in the chair beside Amelia’s, still holding one of her hands, which he seemed loath to give up.

Tears appeared from nowhere, but Amelia tried to blink them back and focus on the broadsheet. Her gaze caught the words “ Miss A. Bur—wes, lately betrothed to Lord A—ly” causing her to stop and read the entire passage. As she read, her mouth dropped open and her hand gripped the paper, crumpling it until she could scarcely make out the words. Her other hand squeezed Nathan’s so she feared his bones might crack.

Finished, she let the Post fall from her fingers. “But it’s lies, Nathan. All lies.”

“I know it is, my love.”

Of course he knew, thank heavens. But all the rest of Society did not. Now they would revile her even worse than before. Never accept her as a member of the ton, nor her sisters, nor her children with Nathan. She turned stricken eyes to her husband. “But why? Why would he lie so egregiously about this?” Her mind hit on the only possible reason. “Was this to retaliate because I would not marry him?”

“Not quite, my dear, although it stems from that fact.” Nathan sighed and rubbed her hand. “After I challenged him, I pressed him to discover what depravity could’ve made him do such a thing.” He shook his head, as though he couldn’t believe what he’d heard. “After I spirited you away from Burke, the man became most desperate. He’d spent rather heavily while negotiations were going on with your father, based on his belief he’d soon be in possession of your dowry. When that did not come to pass, and his creditors began to hound him, he came up with a scheme he believed would keep our marriage from taking place.”

“The...the...” Amelia couldn’t think of anything bad enough to call the odious Mr. Burke. “The...worm!”

Nathan’s eyes flashed approval, and he chuckled. “A fitting description, my dear.” Then he sobered and continued. “He came up with this horrendous lie and chose to tell it to Lord Fanon because he knew I knew the gentleman from White’s. He assumed Fanon would immediately inform me, I would be so incensed I would call off the wedding, and he could then step in and marry you instead, your reputation being so ruined no one else would have you.”

“He thought you’d just dismiss me out of hand? Without even hearing my side of the story?” Amelia shuddered to think she’d been on the brink of marrying such a man.

“He doesn’t know me or my nature, my love.”

“And likely judges all other men by his own proclivities.” Lord Haversham came forward, having retired to the window seat while Nathan broke the horrible news to her. “But now he has been hoisted by his own petard.”

Amelia frowned and cocked her head at her husband’s friend. “I beg pardon, my lord?”

“A phrase from Shakespeare, my lady.” He grinned at her. “It means to be caught or harmed by a plan you’ve made to hurt someone else. In this case, Burke was trying to hurt you and Nathan but had no way of knowing his conversation with Fanon had been overheard by someone—he swears up and down he didn’t intend for that to happen—and subsequently published in the paper.”

“Burke’s face became pasty white when he opened the door on us. I suspect he’d expected me to appear the day after he spoke to Fanon, but he chose his vehicle badly. Fanon’s not a gossip, by any means. He either believed the lie to be just that or supposed if I was fool enough to have taken up with a woman with a reputation, I got what I deserved.” He kissed Amelia’s hand, and the familiar warmth his touch always brought finally resurfaced. “And in that, he would be totally correct.”

“And did Mr. Burke accept your challenge?”

“He was...reluctant, my lady.” Haversham chuckled. “But in the end, he couldn’t quite stomach the idea of being branded a coward and did indeed agree to the duel.”

“I will say I am surprised he did.” Amelia set her lips in a thin line. She’d had her fill of Mr. Lawrence Burke, especially now he was threatening the life of the man she loved so deeply. But much as she understood and feared the possibility of a truly horrific outcome—one she could scarcely allow herself to contemplate without going to pieces—she must let her husband know, with an unequivocal certainty, that she trusted and supported him in this decision. “Although I cannot say I’m sorry.”

Her husband jerked his head toward her, as did Lord Haversham, astonishment on both their faces. “Amelia, I thought you’d be more distressed at the prospect of my fighting in this duel.”

“Oh, but I am, my dear.” She clutched his arm, the fear she’d experienced the moment he’d announced the challenge returning full tilt. “I would be devastated if anything untoward happened to you.” Especially at the hands of that worm, Burke. “But knowing the circumstances, I have to say that I agree with you,” she swallowed hard, “wholeheartedly.”

Nathan and Lord Haversham exchanged puzzled glances. “Agree with what, Amelia?”

“That you must meet Lawrence Burke on the field of honor.”

She appreciated the shocked look on their faces—she was shocked to hear herself say it. But she also knew Nathan well enough now to understand he would consider himself a coward if he did not challenge the man. And Mr. Burke certainly deserved his fate at her husband’s hands for what he had done to her and her family. If this scandal was not laid to rest quickly, not only her own reputation, but those of her sisters, Nathan, and any children they might have would be in jeopardy.

“I love you, Nathan.” That was a difficult admission to make in front of Lord Haversham, but she must make her husband understand. “More than I have ever loved any other person. Were the stakes in this not so high, I would never wish to put your life in danger. But as you are the most honorable of men, I know you are making the right decision for us and our family.” She reached over and squeezed his hand. “You fight on the side of right, my love, so I believe with all my heart you will prevail.”

With reluctance, Amelia let him go. She gave herself a little shake, then, in need of a

distraction, she felt the teapot and rang the bell for the footman. “Some more tea, George. This has grown cold.”

But not as cold as the current state of her heart.

The dawn sky had just turned a warmer shade of pink when Nathan and Marcus arrived in Marcus’s carriage at the secluded area near the duck pond in Hyde Park where most duels were fought. His friend had insisted they use his conveyance in the event they were discovered by the constabulary, as it might make it a tad more difficult to ascertain who the combatants were if his coat of arms wasn’t emblazoned on the black lacquer door. Nathan had not put up a fight. He’d been too focused on the one about to commence.

He’d never been one to dwell on the unpleasant thought of death—until now. Not that he had any premonition about the upcoming duel nor any doubts about the necessity of it. However, now that he literally had everything to live for, in the back of his mind was the very real worry that he was about to lose it all for the folly of a weak man who should actually be horsewhipped rather than accorded the dignity of a clean and honorable death.

What had made the past three days bearable—the interminable waiting had threatened to drive him mad—had been Amelia’s steadfast belief that he was doing the correct thing. She never expressed a single doubt, never begged him to turn from the challenge, never gave him cause to doubt that his decision to call out Mr. Burke was anything but just and right. Her presence in his bed had, as well, soothed and assured him that should the worst come to pass and Burke’s aim prevailed, there was every hope he’d be leaving an heir to carry on in his place. They had seemed to spend every waking moment in each other’s embrace and if his delightful wife wasn’t currently increasing, it was certainly not for the lack of trying.

Nathan sighed at the memory of their last joining, just before midnight, when his very spirited wife had managed to roll them so he was suddenly underneath her, gazing up at her beautiful face as she proceeded to pleasure him in ways he could scarcely describe. The image of her sitting atop him, her long hair shimmering around her shoulders, her magnificent breasts bouncing every time he thrust into her made him hard this instant. He shook his head, trying to get that erotic picture out of his head. If he didn't focus on the coming battle, that exquisitely fulfilling encounter would be his last.

"Burke's arrived." Marcus nodded to a non-descript hack that had pulled over onto the grass not far from them. "Shall we?"

With a curt nod, Nathan rose and exited the vehicle, breathing in the fresh morning air and setting his countenance into stern lines. Never give your opponent the slightest idea that you had doubts. Confidence was your ally.

Marcus stepped down beside him, the rosewood box that held Nathan's matched set of dueling pistols in his hands. He'd never had cause to use them until now, although he'd practiced with them regularly for years. One never knew when the skill would be needed, and that instinct to be prepared for just this eventuality might be the advantage that tipped the whole thing in his favor. "Go do your duty as second."

He nodded to a gentleman accompanying Burke, who looked around, wide eyed as an owl.

"Ah, that is Mr. Franklin. We met day before yesterday when I gave him your demands for satisfaction." Marcus chuckled. "I'm not certain whether he was more appalled by your list or his position as second. I rather believe he may flee the scene before we can commence."

"Burke doesn't seem much better." The gentleman who'd caused so much grief to

Amelia stood there, pale as pastry, staring at him as though Nathan were the devil himself. Well, there was nothing wrong with that. “Good morning, Burke. Mr. Franklin.”

Nathan’s voice, loud in the calm morning air, made Burke start.

“Good morning, my lord.” The challenged man bowed to him then turned toward Marcus, growing more nervous by the moment. “My lord.”

“Good morning, Burke.” Marcus sounded as loud as the last trumpet. “Mr. Franklin, a word, sir, if you please.”

He marched over to Franklin, who did look as though he would bolt, but Marcus grasped his arm, pulled him to the side, and began to talk in earnest. He then opened the box of pistols and spoke to Franklin. Reluctantly, the man reached into the box and withdrew a pistol, looking as though it were a deadly viper. Marcus spun on his heel and returned.

“Well, the second may swoon at any moment, though he protests that Burke will not meet your list of demands.” Marcus stared at the man, thoughtfully. “I wonder if Burke is made of sterner stuff.”

Mr. Franklin, pale as milk, handed the pistol to Burke, who stared at it as though he’d never seen a weapon before. After a moment, he straightened his shoulders and looked at Nathan. “Shall we get on with it, then?”

“Not just yet, Mr. Burke.” Marcus strode a step or two toward him. “We’re waiting for Mr. Harris to arrive.”

“Who is Harris?” Burke looked at Nathan askance.

“A doctor.” Marcus shrugged. “Not a requirement, perhaps, but it is common practice...for obvious reasons.”

Burke blanched but nodded and turned his back to confer with Franklin.

Nathan drew Marcus aside as well. “You know what to do, if the worst happens?”

“I do.” His friend’s face had been wiped clean of any trace of humor. “I promise to look after both Amelia and Kate to the best of my ability.”

“And if by the grace of God, I have left a son behind...”

“You need not worry. I will see to his raising as you would.”

The sound of a carriage coming at a brisk clip drew their attention to the road.

“And there is Harris.” Marcus fetched the pistol out of the box and handed it to Nathan. “Bon chance, my friend.” He clapped Nathan on the shoulder. “Aim straight for his heart.”

“I intend to.” Drawing a deep breath, Nathan sent up a prayer for a steady hand, and another for God’s protection for Amelia. Then he sauntered over to where Burke, Franklin, and now the doctor waited. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Harris. You may turn your back now.”

Another common practice so the man could say he saw nothing and thus avoid incriminating himself.

“Mr. Franklin, will you stand here, sir.” Marcus handed him a handkerchief and began to orchestrate the mechanics of the process. They had agreed, when Nathan challenged Burke, to a distance of twenty paces with Burke’s second dropping the

handkerchief as the signal to fire. Marcus then paced off the requisite distance for both men and went to stand behind Franklin. “Gentlemen, take your marks.”

Nathan gave Burke a final cold stare, meeting his eyes with a fury that warned the man he would give no quarter. Then he cocked his pistol and turned to walk to the mark in the grass his friend had just made.

“My lord!”

Whirling around, Nathan found himself face to face with Mr. Burke, looking as white as new cheese. A glimmer of hope burst in Nathan’s chest, though he maintained his taciturn countenance. “Yes?”

Wheezing with fear, Burke sounded as though he had the croup. “My lord, I have...I have reconsidered your demands that I admit my folly and apologize for my deceitful and dishonest actions.”

“Yes?” Those were not the only demands Nathan had set to satisfy the debt. “And what of the other stipulations?”

Burke glanced at Franklin, who seemed ready to faint at the least provocation. “Do it,” he mouthed to Burke emphatically.

Nathan waited while Burke dithered a minute more then hung his head and whispered, “I will fulfill all the stipulations you have put forth to satisfy your honor.”

“For the lady’s honor you so callously besmirched.”

Burke nodded once more. “Yes.”

Nathan smiled and uncocked his pistol. “Very well, Mr. Burke. I will apprise you of

exactly what you must do and when you will fulfill those demands.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am

Dancing a waltz with her husband, the handsomest man in the room, should've been the most thrilling experience in Amelia's life. She and Nathan twirled and spun, surrounded by a dozen other couples, lost in each other's eyes. Her first ball as hostess had been an immense undertaking, with a startling amount of work, but gazing around the room, she had to admit it was a tremendous success. Half the ton had been invited, and from the looks of the full ballroom, almost all had attended. Considering it was the Little Season, with many of the aristocracy still in the country, tonight should be considered a triumph. Yet something was missing.

The music ended, and she and Nathan sauntered off the dance floor, stopped several times by acquaintances eager to wish them happy, albeit belatedly. That mattered not at all to her. The ton's newfound approbation of her, and their marriage, was the only thing that counted. That, and one thing more.

Nathan led them to a somewhat secluded spot behind a potted fern and pounced, first kissing the slope of her neck then sliding down toward the more dangerous territory of her breasts, which threatened to overflow her bodice. "Nathan, stop. I have just recovered from one scandal. I do not mean to be at the center of another should we be found out."

He groaned but complied, lifting his head and staring at her with miserable stormy-gray eyes. "Amelia, I've scarcely seen you these past weeks while you were preparing for the ball. I miss you in my bed."

"I miss you as well, my love. But this is neither the time nor place to make up for missed opportunities." She'd been so exhausted from the endless lists of things to be arranged for this ball, she'd only been able to fall into her bed at night, asleep before

her head hit the pillow. Out of concern for her welfare, Nathan had not disturbed her, with the result that they both desired one another with an intensity that crackled whenever they actually met. She would've liked nothing more than to slip away and let passion reign. But not until much later tonight. After the ball.

Her husband continued to kiss her neck, making her, as always, hot and oh so ready for him. She closed her eyes, savoring his attentions. Perhaps they could steal off to her chamber for just a few minutes. In their state of need, a few minutes would likely be all it would take to satisfy them. Temporarily. And there was the other thing she needed to take care of as well—

“Lady Ainsley.”

The unexpected voice startled Amelia, and she jumped, pushing Nathan away.

He stumbled but recovered, shaking his head. Glancing up at the woman who'd interrupted them, he smiled broadly. “Ah, Lady Carrington. You are not leaving so soon, I hope?”

“I'm afraid I must, Ainsley.” The woman's mouth was pinched now but had been only smiles an hour ago when they'd received her publicly. “I'm not as young as I used to be.”

“None of us is, my lady.” Amelia smiled carefully.

She would never forgive the woman for allowing her reputation to be called into question when she could've proven the truth of the matter. However, she'd finally made good on her promise to restore Amelia's reputation on the old score regarding Lord Carrington. They'd had to constantly remind her of the consequences of crossing either Lord or Lady Ainsley. At least until she discovered the severe penalty they'd imposed on Mr. Burke to refute the lies he'd told. Once she'd learned they would not be gainsaid, Lady Carrington had been more than willing to comply.

“So I will bid you a good evening.”

“I, as well, my lady.” Nathan executed a precise bow. “We thank you for all your assistance.”

With the briefest of curtsies, Lady Carrington shot one parting glare at them before turning on her heel and leaving.

“Well, I will shed no tears to think she’s gone.” Amelia grabbed Nathan’s arm and pulled him back behind the fern. “I would not want her to put a damper on tonight’s festivities.”

“I cannot see how she has done that, love. In the end, she worked hard to make amends and assure you of a glorious turnout for your ball.” He kissed her fingers, always a precursor to the most exciting lovemaking.

“I wasn’t actually thinking of the ball, but of a more private celebration.”

His brows went up, and he grinned. “Have I managed to persuade you to accompany me to our apartments for a quick tryst?”

“Are you still making trysts with one another?” Celinda poked her head through the fern, appearing as if out of thin air. “You are married now, silly. You don’t have to make trysts to see one another.”

“You’d be surprised, Celinda.” Amelia sent her husband a rueful glance. “Husbands and wives can’t always find the time to be together. As you will find out in due time, I’m sure.”

“Not if Papa has anything to do with it.” Frowning, Celinda came around the fern and stood fretting. “He simply refuses to allow Lord Finley to court me. No matter how many times I’ve tried to reason with him this past Season, he still maintains a dislike

for the gentleman I love.” She looked defiantly at Amelia and Nathan. “I believe we may have to do something desperately scandalous in order to be able to marry.”

“No, Celinda, you will not do anything that endangers your reputation.” Amelia shuddered. “Have I not been proof enough that it takes almost nothing to ruin a lady, even when she’s done nothing wrong?” She turned to Nathan. “Would you please find us some refreshments, my dear? I am very partial to the lemonade. Would you like one also, Celinda?”

“Yes, please. The tartness will help disguise the bitterness in my soul.” Her friend’s face drooped charmingly—as Celinda herself must know it did.

“I will return shortly, ladies.” With a rueful glance at Amelia, Nathan took himself off, leaving them alone as Amelia had intended.

“Now tell me you have not done anything untoward with Lord Finley, Celinda. I know you suppose yourself in love with him, but you simply must not put yourself in a position where you could end up as ruined as I was.”

“No, we haven’t done anything yet ...” Celinda lingered over that last word. “But I make no promises that we will not, Amelia. It’s fine for you to speak so. You are married to the gentleman you love most passionately and have had your reputation restored in spectacular fashion.” She cocked her head and gazed at Amelia through half-lowered eyelids. “Mama would not tell me precisely how this was accomplished. Only that Lady Carrington told all her friends that everyone had been mistaken all those years ago. That she’d known all along that you and Jonathan had never done anything improper. And that rumor about him asking after a child turned out to be a horse he’d bought named Fancy’s Child.”

“Yes, I was very grateful Lady Carrington heard about our nuptials and made it her mission to set the record straight about Lord Carrington and me.” She’d thought the part about the horse had been particularly clever on the lady’s part. In ton society no

one would think it odd for Jonathan to ask about his horse on his deathbed.

“And Mama would tell me absolutely nothing about Mr. Burke’s part in all of this.” Celinda leaned toward Amelia. “Although Kate did let slip that he paid his penance in good form, although it cost him his reputation.”

“That it did.” Lawrence Burke would likely never show his face in London again.

“So wouldn’t you want me to know how your reputation is now as good as new when just after your wedding you were deemed a pariah?”

“A pariah?” Amelia caught her breath. She’d never known just how badly the ton thought of her after that dreadful Morning Post had been circulated. Only days later, Mr. Burke had fallen on his sword, and she’d suddenly been the most sympathetic figure in Society.

Celinda nodded sagely. “Mama told me I could not visit you or Nathan, even though we are cousins. And two days later, she was all smiles and said we should have the two of you over for dinner.” She fluttered her lashes at Amelia. “Don’t you want to tell me what actually went on?”

“Well...” She couldn’t tell Celinda the whole story, at least not what had been printed in the Post. “Mr. Burke was so upset that I was going to marry Nathan and not him that he started a rumor about me—a very bad rumor indeed.”

“A scandal?” Celinda sounded hopeful.

“A grave scandal. That is why the ton believed me a pariah.” Lord, but she’d been so close to being completely shunned by the whole of Society. “But then Nathan challenged Mr. Burke to a duel—”

“A duel?” Celinda’s voice rose so high heads turned toward them.

“Hush! No one can know.” Amelia looked around, but everyone had gone back to chatting or dancing. “Anyway, they didn’t fight because Mr. Burke gave in and apologized to Nathan and to me, and then he went about letting the whole ton know that he’d lied about me.”

“Did he write letters?” Celinda sounded doubtful. “Because that would be a lot of letters for one man to write. And gentlemen don’t write as well as ladies do, so he might’ve gotten it wrong, you know, and then you’d have been in an even bigger pickle.”

“No, he did not write letters, but he did put one in the newspapers.” That had been her idea. “Telling everyone that he’d lied about me and that I was innocent of the things he’d said about me.”

“Which newspaper?”

“All of them.”

Celinda’s jaw dropped. “All the newspapers in London?”

Amelia nodded. “That was the only way we could be sure everyone saw it.”

A frown came over Celinda’s face. “But what if people didn’t read the papers? Some don’t, you know.”

“We thought of that.” Amelia grinned. This part had been Nathan’s idea, and a more diabolical one she could not have imagined. Not only did it save her reputation, but it assured them that Mr. Burke would avoid all contact with members of the ton forever. “So we persuaded Mr. Burke to stand on a crate in Hyde Park during the fashionable hour every day for two weeks, with a big placard about his neck proclaiming him a liar.”

“Amelia, no!” Celinda’s eyes grew wide and round. “He stood there with everyone looking on? How embarrassing for him.”

“It served him right to lose his reputation when he almost lost me mine for good.” Amelia had gone to the park quite often those two weeks to watch the man’s humiliation. “I’m actually surprised you didn’t see him there.”

“Dear Lord.” Celinda made a moue. “That is why Mama and I had to visit my Aunt Mimi in Bath for two weeks in July. She obviously didn’t want me to see Mr. Burke and start asking questions.”

“I daresay that is the reason.” And likely a good one. Once the crowds got wind of what Burke had done, they’d taken to tormenting him, calling him names, throwing things at him, jeering until members of the watch had come and moved the hecklers along.

But Burke had borne it steadfastly. Of course, he likely knew that Nathan had assigned two footmen to keep watch, to make certain he stayed the entire time each day of the two weeks, moving his crate from one corner of the park to another to make certain as many people as possible saw him. And if anyone asked him a question regarding his lies, he was bound to answer it. Those exchanges had occasionally become rather heated, according to George and Peter, the footmen assigned the task. Things no lady, young or old, should hear, they said.

“So you see, Celinda, you do not wish to do anything that will put you in a position where you can lose your good standing in Society. It took me years to reclaim my reputation.” She could not impress that enough on Celinda who, Amelia feared, had too much a mind of her own.

“Well, I promise not to do anything too drastic, but that means that Papa must make some concessions where Lord Finley is concerned.” Celinda’s attention was caught by something, or someone, across the ballroom floor. “And there he is. Oh, thank you

for inviting him, Amelia. I knew I could count on your support.”

“Who is—”

“Lord Finley, of course! I must secure him for the supper dance and at least one more.” She danced up on her toes, trying to see the tall, handsome lord, who seemed to be looking for someone himself.

“Then by all means, go secure your dances.” She pulled her friend in for an embrace.

“But only dances, Celinda. No breaths of fresh air out on the darkened veranda.”

Celinda gave her a sly look. “I will remember that, Amelia. About the darkened veranda, that is.” And before Amelia could protest, the lady had gone, rushing toward her soon-to-be partner.

Amelia shook her head. Celinda was a force to be reckoned with. She did not envy Lord and Lady Ivor one iota.

“I thought she’d never leave.”

Amelia jumped as Nathan pushed past the now-bedraggled fern to stand beside her, lemonade in hand. “You should not scare me so, Nathan. I have just had to dissuade your cousin from becoming a scandal herself. And I cannot tell if I have helped or made the situation worse.”

He shrugged, set the lemonade on a nearby table, and slipped his arms around her. “Celinda is like a cat. She always lands on her feet. Or if she doesn’t, she picks herself up, looks around as if to say, “I planned to do that all along,” and walks off as nonchalantly as a queen.” He nuzzled her neck, and Amelia longed to moan aloud. She had so missed their time together.

“Do not worry about my cousin.” He turned her around to face him. “You should

worry about your husband.”

“Why should I worry about you, my love?”

“Because our tryst was interrupted, and now I fear I will never persuade you to come away with me for that celebration you mentioned.”

She cupped his face and brought him down for a swift kiss. “Yes, our private celebration.” She looked around. “But you are impatient, my love, and I must confess, so am I. I truly wanted to tell you later when we were alone, but I simply cannot wait.”

“What is it, love?”

“This.” She took his hand and pressed it to the slight swelling of her abdomen. “I am carrying your child. I suppose nine and twenty is not too old, after all.”

“Amelia.” He lowered his head and stared at the spot where their hands overlapped. The completely dumbfounded look on his face made her laugh. “But when?”

“If my calculations, and those of the midwife, are correct, most likely on our wedding night.” She gave him a rueful smile. “Although I suppose it could’ve been during those days leading up to the duel. We were very determined to make this happen, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes, you do.” He gathered her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. “And I can still be determined.” Grabbing her hand, he tugged her toward the doorway to the rest of the house.

“Where are we going?” Amelia let him pull her along with only token resistance. It had been too many days since she’d been alone with her husband.

“Your bedchamber.”

“But, Nathan—”

“You promised me a private celebration.” His eyes darkened, love and desire forming black pools where gray had been moments before. “And I know the perfect place.”

THE END