



The Spinster's Absolutely Sinful Adventure (The Notorious Briarwoods #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: Lady Winifred has resigned herself to a life as a spinster. But when her family decides that she must now retire to the country and spend the rest of her days as a nursemaid to her great aunt, Winifred knows she needs at least one adventure in her life. There's plenty of time to live quietly without making a fuss. When it comes to a once in her lifetime experience, who better to seek out than the legendary Lord Ajax? However, when she gets to know him, she cannot deny the way her heart yearns for enduring excitement and maybe a romance that lasts for all time.

Lord Ajax Briarwood is surrounded by people getting married. It's quite shocking and seems to be catching! So, Lady Winifred's suggestion to escape for a bit of pleasure seems just the thing. A master at embracing life, he's happy to give her exactly what she desires. Yet, every kiss with Winifred makes him question everything he's ever wanted. And as he sees the woman behind the spinster, Ajax might have other ideas about their future.

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London

1790

“It is time, Winifred. You will go to the country and look after your great aunt, my dear, and you will be a comfort to her.”

Her mother's words cut through the small salon like a knife, straight to Lady Winifred Tuttle's heart.

For years, Lady Winifred had been a good sport about being a spinster.

After all, what other choice did she have? Should she be bitter? No! She refused to succumb to such a thing. Bitterness did not suit Winifred. It was true that many people might not like her or understand her, but choosing bitterness?

What was the point of that? She had no desire to wither like a grape left in the sun. Turning into a sour little thing simply was not an option in her decided opinion.

No, life was too full of possibility. Though her family desperately wished she would suppress it, she could not cease her fascination with books, history, and Shakespeare.

Ah, Shakespeare! He was her greatest love, particularly the plays Henry VI Part I , Henry VI Part II , and Richard III .

She was obsessed with them. How she loved the history of them, though they were not actually history, if she was quite honest. They were quite full of propaganda. But

the poetry, the humanity, oh, how they filled her soul!

Not many people seemed to understand her desire to immerse herself in those plays. But she could not deny how much she found the fight over a kingdom and the failure of a king most interesting.

Thankfully, she would never be like the sadly ineffectual Henry VI, but she now understood what it was like to go from having many hopes to none as she looked at her pitying mother.

Surely, she had not heard her mother correctly.

Her mama arched a brow. "Put that book down, my dear," her mama said.

"Mama, please, I don't need to." Winifred's stomach twisted. Her books and plays were her greatest recourse. "I understood what you said. I am to go—"

"I am not certain you do understand," her mother said with surprising gentleness. "You seem quite lost."

Lost? How else was she to seem? After all, she was being condemned... To a life away.

Her brother, Alfred, sat near the window, his eyes wide at their mother's pronouncement. He was seventeen years old and ready to go to Oxford. But the dear boy had no desire to go. Their mama was determined that he should study for orders. And yet Alfred had very little interest in the church.

No, he was interested in many other things, most of them on the European continent. He was quite political and had a desire to travel to France to see what was transpiring there. To understand the political upheaval of the people in Paris.

Her mother found that to be absolutely abhorrent.

Winifred found the idea of going to the country and becoming a nursemaid abhorrent.

She swallowed and then dared to protest, “Mama, you cannot possibly mean it. You can’t send me into Suffolk to look after Great Aunt Josephine.”

Her mama tilted her head to the side, which caused her dark curls laced with silver to tremble about her face. Her mama had been a beauty in her day. Her mama was still beautiful, but her mama did not care for reading books, history, Shakespeare, or politics. Nor did she particularly like the continent of Europe, though she liked the fashion plates that came out of Paris.

“Of course I mean it, Winifred,” her mother affirmed, pulling out a handkerchief from her sleeve and waving the lace about. “My dear, you are an utter failure here in London, and we must finally admit that the only thing to do with you is to send you into the country where you might find some sort of purpose with your dear great aunt. She, unlike the rest of us, can greatly appreciate all your ramblings...as she is now all but deaf.”

The blow was sharp.

Winifred tried to hide her wince. But suddenly emotion welled up inside her. All her life, she’d desperately tried to win the approval of society, but she’d never been able to successfully hide who she was enough to succeed.

Tears burned her eyes.

The truth was most people could not bear her ramblings, and she did like to ramble. Once she had learned that no one liked to listen to all of her favorite facts and information, she had learned to write them down in a journal or share them with her

brother Alfred.

But this blunt comment from her dear mama did seem particularly unkind. No one really understood her except Alfred. And in years past, her father. But he had died a long time ago, taking all his understanding with him. He had not thought her odd. No, they had rambled together, chatting about all the kings and queens of England and the way Shakespeare had used them in the plays.

When her father had died, she'd been left alone in her thinking and her obsession with such things.

She tried, oh, how she tried to fit in.

She wore a mask like the greatest Venetian maskers who went to balls during Carnival. And like those revelers, she desperately tried to pretend she was someone she was not.

But no matter how hard she tried to pretend that she was something different than she was, the more she seemed to fail. Everyone seemed to understand that she simply could not perform the way a young lady ought. And so she had stood for years as a wallflower and then as a companion. Then she'd become a spinster.

And now it seemed this was her fate.

She pressed her lips together, trying to find some argument that would sway her mother. Was she really, truly so very impossible that she must be sent away?

How she loved London. At least here in London, she could study, and she could see plays, and she could read! Why, almost every day she went to buy books.

There were so many wonderful things that one could do in London. And it wasn't that

the house in Suffolk didn't have a great library, but it would be so very lonely. And whilst she understood that people did not necessarily enjoy her company, she didn't actually like being alone entirely. It was a conundrum—the fact that she needed to be around people, even though people didn't seem to understand her.

“Please, Mama,” she begged. “Papa would not have—”

Her mother's face creased with pain. “Your father is not here, and I must do what is best for us. Now, we shall not have another word about it,” her mother said gently once again but in a tone that brooked no argument. “After a few weeks, you shall go to the country.”

Her father was gone. And her mother had done her best. But the best had still left Winifred feeling terribly alone. Tears stung Winifred's eyes. “Mama—”

Her mother gave a tight shake of her head. “You will take up your place.”

She sucked in a breath, then rushed, “But, Mama, I don't want to.”

Alfred swung his gaze back and forth, watching this exchange with growing horror, but he was silent.

After all, their mother was a woman who was not easily gainsaid.

“My dear,” her mother said, letting out a sigh as if this was a burden she could no longer bear to carry. “This is not about what you want but what is good for you. And our family. You have run your course here. And if I'm quite honest, you are beginning to be a blemish upon the family, and we mustn't have you reminding everyone of your awkwardness when your sister Alison takes to her debut.”

“Mama,” she gasped, tightening her hands on her book until the binding pressed into

her skin, “I would never do anything to hurt Alison’s chances.”

Her mother stared at her for a long time with sorrowful eyes before finally replying, “You wouldn’t do it on purpose, but, my dear, you do say the most awkward things in conversation. And you just look so out of place, no matter how hard you try to fit in. I wish it wasn’t the case. I love you dearly, Winifred, but I have to look out for your little sister. It is settled.”

And with that, her mama turned, her full lavender skirts rustling, and quit the room as if she had not just condemned Winifred to a tragically lonely future.

Winifred could not move. She felt frozen to the spot.

This was terribly difficult. Her mama was perfection. Everyone adored her. And living in her shadow had been no small thing. Alison was just like their mother. Beautiful, interesting, capable.

Alison didn’t really care about books either, but gentlemen did seem to love her even if she had not made her debut yet.

Alison had already had two proposals in the country, but their mother was quite determined she should make a great match.

Winifred turned to Alfred, who still sat rather quietly in the window seat.

“Am I really so very terrible?” she whispered, every word painful.

“Of course not, Winnie,” he returned indignantly. He stood up from the window seat and crossed to her. Without a word, he took one of her hands in his and gazed at her sympathetically. “Mama should never have been so...”

“Honest?” she rasped.

Alfred paled before he tugged her into a quick embrace, not caring that her book was wedged between them.

He really was a soft-hearted young man. A man who seemed to feel the weight of the world upon his shoulders. Like herself, in some ways. Alfred was odd. For he wanted to understand people and why the world could be so very cruel.

She didn’t understand it herself. The truth was people were a bit of a mystery to her, her own family included, except for Alfred. He was the only one out of all her siblings who seemed to understand her, who cared about her and was quite happy to listen to her and her peculiarities.

“Whatever shall I do?” she whispered against his slender shoulder. “I can’t bear Great Aunt Josephine. She doesn’t like Shakespeare. She prefers Johnson. And she has terrible theories about the Tudors. I can’t bear to listen to them. And then there is the fact that she really can’t hear a word I’m saying. It’ll be like talking to the great void.” She let out a sigh. “Not that I don’t feel sorry for her, of course. That must be very difficult, but to be alone like that for the rest of my life. To be put away...”

“You mustn’t do it then, Winnie,” Alfred said softly.

“But what shall I do?” she countered. “How can I go against Mama? I have no fortune of my own. There’s nothing put aside for me. I am completely at the mercy of them. I don’t have any skills. I can’t earn a wage. No one would hire me as a governess.” She wrinkled her nose. “I’m too odd.”

He laughed at that. “You are, Winnie, and it’s why I love you because I am odd too. You and I are quite a matching set. It’s quite inconvenient for the family.” He pulled back and gazed down at her. “It’s a miracle that they haven’t tried to ship me off to

somewhere too.”

“You are being shipped off,” she reminded. “You’re going to Oxford. It will be wonderful.”

He snorted. “No, it won’t, Winnie, because they’re making me study something that I don’t wish to study.”

“But at least you shall have friends,” she offered, feeling his own worry deep in her bones. How she wished she could soothe away his fears too. But both of them were out of step with the world around them.

He scowled. “I’m not so sure about that.” He said, “I don’t really like the other young men of my generation. I’m not one to tear about, drink brandy, and wench. Perhaps I shall find someone to befriend, someone else who is led by curiosity about the strangeness of humanity, but I should much rather go away and see what there is out there and discover what might be beyond England’s shores. Don’t you wish that too?”

She laughed, though it was a bittersweet sound. Oh, how she wished she could take all her brother’s concerns away! He was such a wonderful person. He deserved friends and joy and a chance at pursuing his own dreams. But it seemed dreams were just that, not real and impossible to seize.

“I’m rather obsessed with what is within England’s shores,” she replied as her eyes welled with tears and she realized all that she had ever hoped for was fading away. “All I want to do is travel about the country and visit the spots that inspired Shakespeare’s plays.”

“We both have fruitless wishes then,” he said, his face pained.

She had a great deal of sympathy for her brother and his plight. He wasn't in an easy position either, what with the determination of their mother to have a vicar in the family.

But still, as a young man, he did have far more options than she did. And then it hit her. An idea seemed to slam into her from out of nowhere as if it had come from on high.

Perhaps... Just perhaps, there was something that she could do!

Young men did have options. Not always many, but certainly more than a spinster!

And Winifred thought of the characters Rosalind and Viola from Shakespeare. They had been faced with terrible odds, but they had not let that stop them! No, they had made choices!

"Oh my goodness, Alfred," she gasped as an idea hummed to life in her brain.

"What is amiss?" he asked, his brow furrowing.

Hope sprung inside her, beating back the darkness. "There is something that we can do."

"What?" he asked warily.

She gazed at her brother and grinned, hardly daring to believe her madcap scheme. "We must hatch a plan worthy of any Shakespeare play itself."

"Winnie," he began softly. His eyes narrowed, and then his eyebrows shot upward as if he was quite concerned. "What is going through your head? You're quite impulsive when you want to be. Remember the last time and the trouble it got you in?"

She did used to be impulsive. But it had been years since she'd done anything truly outrageous. She'd learned the consequences of being her bold self. But now? Now...this was her last chance to live a little.

And if she could just live a little for a few weeks, then she could resign herself to a lifetime of caretaking. Truly.

"I know," Winnie agreed. "And I haven't let myself be impulsive in years."

He was so right. She had got into a great deal of trouble the last time she had been herself and followed her instincts.

Of course, Alfred was referring to the event where she had quite accidentally ended up in the middle of a ball dancing by herself.

That had, no doubt, sealed the final nail on the coffin of her spinsterhood. But she had been rather inspired by the music and she had not been able to stop herself. She'd begun to sway back and forth and then dance right to left... And well, it had all gone terribly wrong.

She didn't like the fact that she was ruled, if not by her emotions, then by her inner world, a world which others didn't understand. But she was, and it took everything she had to keep it contained.

It was exhausting, really.

But perhaps now she could let it out. And there was one person who came to her mind who might be able to help her.

Someone whose family loved Shakespeare, someone whose family loved the theater, someone whose family was, well, notorious, and someone whose family loved a bit

of adventure.

“Winnie,” her brother ventured, “whatever are you thinking of?”

“I’m thinking of a who ,” she returned mischievously.

He groaned. “ Who are you thinking of?”

“I’m thinking of Lord Ajax Briarwood,” she said.

His eyes all but bulged. “That sounds very dangerous indeed.”

“Dangerous?” she returned. “He’s not dangerous. He’s sublime.”

“No, he’s not dangerous to the ladies,” Alfred agreed carefully. Alfred was obsessed, as many were, with the Briarwoods. He’d spent hours discussing their various actions, ideas about the world, and general ability to choose their own paths. “His reputation is quite excellent in that respect, but the Briarwoods in general! They don’t follow the rules.”

“Good,” she replied firmly.

Alfred blew out a rough breath. “And why would anybody sublime wish to help us?”

Winnie beamed. “I don’t know, but I shall have to write a letter so intriguing, so fascinating, that he won’t say no, and then I shall have to win him over to our cause.”

“Winnie, he’s one of the most popular men in the ton. Why ever would he help?”

“I don’t know,” she said truthfully. “But something inside me tells me that my plan is what I’ve always been meant to do, and I’m not about to go to the countryside

without at least giving this a try.”

And she thought of Shakespeare’s great heroines who had seized their fates in their hands, who had defied all the odds, and who had done exactly as they wished. She would do the same.

Yes, Winnie would go against what she was told to do and do what she dreamed to do instead.

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Lord Ajax Briarwood was beginning to believe he had gotten the wrong tree.

He looked about St. James's Park, searching for any sign of the person he was supposed to meet.

He was very familiar with this area of London and had had many an assignation here in the dark. He was, after all, a bit of a rogue, and rogues did have a good time in the evening in the park.

The antics that occurred here at night were legend, and it had been going on for, dare he say, centuries.

He looked down at the note, read it again, and then lifted his gaze and scanned the horizon. There were several trees, green grass, and people promenading in the distance.

It had to be the correct tree because whoever had selected it had clearly done a great deal of preparation. From here, he could stand and not really be seen, given the way the boughs of the trees swept about him.

It was the perfect place to meet clandestinely.

Whilst he was accustomed to meeting ladies in such circumstances, this felt different.

The note had been quite different than usual. He was accustomed to getting flowery requests for evenings of pleasure. He loved giving ladies pleasure. At present, it was one of his favorite purposes in life.

He excelled at pleasure, other people's and his own.

In fact, he was committed to his own pleasure, not in some sort of strange, selfish, indulgent way. No, he knew that as long as he himself was sorted out, he could do a wonderful job with anyone who came into his sphere requesting a bit of joy.

It was one of the greatest things about being a Briarwood. They all took excellent care of themselves.

The world was challenging enough without being broken in it. And the world was full of broken people, not through any fault of their own necessarily, but by generations of people raising each other to perpetuate their own mistakes and problems in their children.

It was the most appalling yet common thing that he could see.

And he had had the remarkable good fortune to have inherited a different set of ideas from his mama and papa, ideas for which he was ever grateful.

He lived by loyalty to family, confidence in self, and a joy of life, which was why, of course, he had taken one look at the note and its odd request and found himself compelled to come to said tree.

And as if his thoughts had pulled the person out of the air, a young lady suddenly appeared underneath the boughs. She glanced back and forth as if she was a character in a novel trying to escape notice.

She straightened and smoothed her hands down the front of her simple frock.

He blinked. And as he took in her pert figure, he felt a wave of abject disbelief.

He was used to the wives of lords, sometimes actresses, sometimes ballet dancers, but never young ladies like this one. She was remarkably short. Not quite over five feet tall, he would guess. Her hair was pulled back under a very simple straw bonnet. No curls bounced about her face. And her gown was expensive, a pale blue linen that clung to her frame in a well-cut manner, but she appeared quite nervous.

She marched forward, stuck out her hand, and said, “How do you do? I am Lady Winifred Tuttle.”

He glanced down at that gloved hand, amazed at the gesture, and then took it in his own.

“How do you do, Lady Winifred? I’m Lord Ajax.”

She let out a quick laugh.

“Was that amusing?” he asked.

“Well, it was,” she said, her lips twitching, “in that you might think that I didn’t know exactly who you are. I think everyone knows who you are, Lord Ajax.”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, but it’s rather rude of me to assume so, don’t you think? I try not to be too arrogant.”

Her dark eyebrows rose at that. “Do you? I’m most impressed. One would’ve thought a gentleman of your prowess, good looks, and reputation would be very, very arrogant indeed.”

He cleared his throat. “And yet you requested to meet me. Do you truly wish to associate with a gentleman of such arrogance?”

She straightened. "I've also heard that you're eminently knowledgeable in the area of Shakespeare and that you are a good sort. My brother knows quite a bit about you, actually."

"Your brother told you about me?" he asked, astonished. This was most interesting and quite unlike any other encounter he'd experienced.

"Oh, he talks about you all the time," she assured. "All of the Briarwoods. He thinks you're a remarkable family. And of course, I'm very aware of the goings-on of your family too. I think everyone in London is. And well, I think it very sensible to approach someone like you for the endeavor that I wish to engage in. And when one is in circumstances like mine, there's really only one thing left to do. And that's take a chance."

"Do you always speak like this?" he asked.

She winced. "Generally, yes, I do. When I do speak, that is."

"How marvelous," he replied, and he was quite serious. He had not met with a young lady who spoke with such blatant honesty in years, except, of course, perhaps the few young ladies who had married into his family recently.

He blinked. Oh dear. That word should not have gone through his head. Married . He did not like to think about it. After all, marriage had been popping up far too often amongst his siblings of late.

"You think it marvelous?" she said softly.

"Yes." He cocked his head to the side. "Why ever not?"

"Nobody else does," she replied quickly. And there was an unmistakable but faint

wounded note to her voice as she confessed this.

“I really wouldn’t be very concerned about what everyone else thinks,” he said softly, his heart going out to her quite suddenly and shockingly. “They don’t actually think much or if they do, it’s really a lot of silliness, isn’t it?”

Good heavens. What was happening to him? She was drawing him in apace. Not through sensuality, or any of the usual things, but through her utter transparency of feeling.

She sucked in a shaking breath, clearly amazed by his sentiments. “I agree with you,” she said, “but the truth is a young lady in the ton must give weight to what others think because what they think decides if one is a diamond or a failure. And my position, well, it has come to an end.”

“An end?” he queried. “That sounds dire. Are you dying?” he asked.

She let out a bark of a laugh. “No, my lord, I have not caught the plague. I shall go on lightly until I am an old lady sitting in a corner reading her good book and drinking chocolate if allowed.”

“Your good book, eh?” He arched a brow.

“Oh, I do mean my Shakespeare,” she explained swiftly. “Nothing else.”

It was his turn to laugh. “Your good book is Shakespeare? You and my mother would get on then.”

She looked uncertain for a moment. “Don’t you like Shakespeare too?”

“Of course,” he replied. “All Briarwoods love Shakespeare. It runs in the blood.”

She let out a relieved breath. “That’s what I thought! And that is part of why I have picked you.”

This whole meeting was most interesting, and he found himself being more and more drawn in, for it did not feel like any other assignation.

“Picked me for what exactly?” he asked, hoping she might clarify her hopes. “I confess, I now feel quite confused about my purpose here. You said you wished to go on an adventure.”

“Indeed,” she replied.

“A sensual adventure?” he asked, though now he had his doubts. “For that is what I am usually engaged for.”

“My goodness, you do make yourself sound like a character in a play. But not Shakespeare. More like one of Mr. Congreve’s. Someone who has been engaged , my lord? Is this a business arrangement?”

He cocked his head to the side. “I don’t know. You are the one who invited me here. What is it exactly that you have in mind?” he queried softly, bemused by her.

“Well...” She swallowed and then folded her gloved hands together. Suddenly she looked quite uncertain. Where had all that boldness from just a few moments ago gone?

Her request had to be quite outlandish indeed.

She stared for a long moment as if she was rehearsing what she’d come to say in her head. Or bolstering her courage lest she run without having made the attempt.

“Now, now,” he assured. “I promise you cannot shock me. I have heard it all.”

“I’m sure you have,” she said, pursing her lips, “but I have not said it all, you see? I have only made this declaration to my brother.”

“You discussed this adventure with your brother?” he asked, astonished. His confusion and sense of suspense only grew. And he suddenly looked about. “He’s not going to come out of somewhere and call me out to a duel, is he?”

“Oh, no,” she insisted quickly. “This whole plan is advantageous to both of us.”

“You meeting me here under a tree is advantageous to you and your brother?” he asked, wondering what the devil he’d found himself in. Whatever it was, it was a departure from his usual experience, and he found it oddly welcome.

Each moment grew more and more intriguing, and he found himself more and more fascinated by the young lady in front of him.

There was no hand on her bosom. No fluttering of her lashes. No declarations of unrealized desires.

As a matter of fact, she seemed quite unique and perhaps a touch too honest for her own good.

He favored that characteristic, but most would not.

She was a bit of a wonder. She spoke boldly without any sort of artifice. She was a plucky thing, someone who was clearly nervous and yet determined.

“I want you to take me away,” she rushed, almost tumbling over her words.

“I see,” he murmured. “And where would you like me to take you away to?”

“Well,” she said, clearing her throat and drawing herself up, “I need someone to take me on an adventure before I am thrust into the countryside and left there to rot as a companion to my great aunt.”

“Oh, my dear,” he said kindly, “that does sound difficult. Is there nothing to be done?”

A muscle tightened in her jaw and, for a single moment, a shadow danced across her gaze as though she was in mourning for a whole life that could never be.

“No,” she said. “It is my lot in life, you see? I haven’t any fortune and no one wishes to marry me. I’m a spinster through and through. Have been for years, you see? It is what happens when your train of thought is not at all like the train of thought of others. And I made the mistake several times of allowing other people to know it. But I can’t complain too much. I’ve got more than most could ever hope for. A bit of disappointment is nothing in the end.”

He felt his heart warm towards her, and in that moment, he longed to wrench away all her disappointments. “I see,” he said. “So you don’t quite fit in with the ton. I understand that. Most of my family doesn’t fit either.”

“But your family is singular, and that is also why I picked you.”

He groaned. “You’re not mistaken. I begin to wonder what qualities you were thinking of when you picked me.”

“Oh,” she said, blinking. “Truthfully, you just came into my head, but I wanted someone who loved Shakespeare, someone who loved life, someone who would, well, show me how marvelous it could all be, and who’d likely protect me if I needed

it.”

“My goodness,” he said, “those are all marvelous compliments. You think very highly of me.”

She smiled then, which lit up her entire face, turning it positively pixie-like. “I suppose I do, don’t I? Is it all true?” she asked.

He let out a laugh. “I suppose it is, actually,” he said. “Now, what is this adventure? You wish me to take you to the countryside? Rent a cottage? Teach you all about the pleasures between a man and a—”

“Oh, no,” she said, whipping up her hand in horror. “That’s not at all what I have in mind at all.”

“It’s not?”

She waved a hand, then gestured back and forth between them. “I would like you to be my companion for two weeks at least. We shall go through the countryside and visit all sorts of historical sites. Ones associated with Mr. Shakespeare and his plays. And with you, I shall be free to look at whatever I like without having to be someone else’s companion for a change. You will allow me to be myself, despite the fact that I may bore you.”

Bore him? How in the bloody hell could she ever do that?

“That is all you wish?” he asked, so stunned he could scarce form words. “You simply wish me to escort you about England in search of Shakespeare?”

He was astonished and rather excited. This was not at all the sort of thing he was usually asked to do. No, he was usually asked to bring sensual delight into a woman’s

life. And he couldn't blame those ladies because so many ladies were denied joy, pleasure, happiness, and he felt it was his duty to give it to them.

After all, he had it all within his means to give. But he did usually avoid young, unmarried women because, well, being with him could lead to ruin, and he had no wish to ruin anyone.

"How long have you been a spinster?" he asked suddenly.

"Three years. It was official..." She sighed. "Definitely three years ago. I was a wallflower for some time before I was a spinster. I haven't been asked to dance, well, in five years, but there were still a few hopes, I suppose. But my conversation is so specific and so odd, and I have a tendency to say the strangest things that are apparently quite out of order, though I don't really always understand why because I never say anything that isn't true..." She drew in a breath as if she realized she was going on the sort of tangent society disliked. "And, well, there you have it. I suppose I've been lucky to have as long a run as I have. I am thoroughly a spinster though. So there's no need to fear ruining me. I can see the concern on your face. Which I find admirable, by the way."

Her commentary was swift, and he could follow it. Moreover, he enjoyed it. But it certainly wasn't the sort of commentary most ladies engaged in, given that most ladies were encouraged to speak about the weather. "Do I appear worried?"

"Yes," she said frankly. "But I promise you no one is going to make you marry me if we get caught together. I'm already done with all that. I shall retire to the country, and you shall never have to worry about me again after those few weeks."

Never have to worry about her?

Oh, he had a rather strong feeling that he was going to worry about her no matter

what she said or did. And that was a jolting thought, though one he couldn't deny.

And he knew without a doubt what his answer would be.

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Her heart was pounding so quickly Winifred was almost certain it was going to skip right out of her chest! But logically, she knew that was not possible. Besides, every now and then, her heart did like to beat like a horse's hooves at Newmarket. Usually when she realized that she had said something that was not favored in company.

That was not the case now. Not at all.

For Lord Ajax wasn't staring at her as if she was annoying or boring or something to endure.

Quite the contrary.

Lord Ajax seemed to like her conversation, and she had never been in the company of a man so utterly beautiful and so utterly self-possessed as he was. It was, she assumed, like being near a god. He was so confident, so relaxed, so at ease. She wanted to melt into that presence and take it into herself.

Could she catch it? Was it catching, that confidence? Dear Lord, she hoped that it was because at this moment she suddenly realized that everyone she'd ever met in the ton was pretending.

No one really knew who they were, and they were all just desperately trying to impress each other.

Lord Ajax clearly didn't care if he impressed anyone, and he seemed amused by her. And not in the cruel way that people sometimes were amused by her, as if she was utterly absurd and shouldn't be allowed out in company, or as if she still belonged in

a nursery somewhere even though she was in her twenties.

No. His amusement seemed to be delight.

And his delight was a beautiful thing to behold.

In fact, she had never in her whole life been looked at the way he was looking at her now. And in that moment, she felt her whole body transform as if she was a caterpillar in a chrysalis becoming a butterfly.

For once, oh for glorious once, someone was looking at her with admiration, and she loved it more than she could dare say.

This was not at all what she'd anticipated. She'd expected him to say yes. His character and all his past actions of chivalry and love of the ladies had led her to that conclusion. She and Alfred had discussed it carefully.

But she had never ever expected that he would look at her like this.

And she found that under his intense gaze, breathing was no easy thing. Her entire body was warming, unfurling, basking under his attention.

How was it possible that such a man would look at her thus? After all, Lord Ajax was one of the most beautiful men to ever live, surely.

His golden locks tumbled about his strong face. And his shining eyes gazed upon her with a strange mixture of awe and lack of judgement. His shoulders—his beautiful, glorious shoulders—were so broad underneath his perfectly cut coat that she knew if there was to be a sudden storm, and the world was swept away, she would survive it all if she clung to him.

She wondered if other people wished to cling to him in the hopes of surviving the tumult of life. And if they did, would he allow it? She rather thought he might.

She swallowed. “Do you agree?” she asked.

Suddenly, she needed to know. She needed to know if he would be the one who would make her last foray into the world possible.

He smiled slowly. “Of course,” he said. “I am most certainly intrigued.”

“I’m so glad,” she said, beaming up at him as a wave of sheer joy washed over her. “I really wasn’t certain if you would.”

“How could I possibly say no to you?” he said. “You are a young lady of quite admirable thought, Lady Winifred.”

“Am I?” she asked.

“Indeed. It’s not a Herculean labor, your request. It sounds quite enjoyable.” His gaze roamed over her face, lingering on her mouth. His own lips curled in a slow smile. “And you are certain you’re not selecting me because of my reputation for showing ladies...a lovely time?”

She cleared her throat, tempted to let her mind wander to what those lovely times could be. “Lovely times are all well and good, but I only have a little time. And I think I should focus on what I most wish to accomplish.”

He cocked his head to the side. “And a kiss isn’t something you wish to accomplish?”

She couldn’t draw breath. Kiss him? She’d never imagined that he might wish it. “I think it best I do not give way to sin altogether. How ever would I recover?” she

teased.

His eyes danced. “You think a great deal of my powers for sin.”

“Am I mistaken?” she breathed.

“No,” he said softly.

“But if I did give way, and the moment...”

“Arose?” he queried. “If you wish for your adventure to be sinful, my lady, you need only say the word, and I shall oblige. But I shall wait on you.”

There it was again! Her blasted heart pounding away. Part of her wished him to steal her into his arms this very moment. But if she did allow such a thing, would she not pine for it? Or should she simply allow herself to give way completely?

She’d never given way in her whole life. Going in degrees seemed wise.

As if he sensed her overwhelm, he asked, “What will you tell your parents?”

She was relieved to change the subject from thoughts of kisses, for those thoughts stole her wits away. “Our father died years ago.”

“I am so very sorry,” he said with what appeared to be utter sincerity. His gaze softened as if he could sense her pain.

She nodded, refusing to give way to the memories of a happier past that had been stolen from her.

She sucked in a fortifying breath. “My brother and I have that sorted out. We’re

going to tell our mother that I am going with him to visit a friend in Scotland for a month, and it shall be my last hurrah, so to speak, before I go and live with my great aunt. My brother will have an adventure of his own, and our mother shall be none the wiser.”

He nodded. “Good. I am grateful that you have chosen me to help you,” he said.

She licked her lips. “Truly?”

He smiled down at her, lifted his hand slowly to her cheek, and cupped it. “Yes, Lady Winifred, I am.”

The feel of his gloved hand against her cheek stole through her, whispering the most delicious of temptations. “That is a very interesting thing to do, sir,” she observed.

“Is it?” he asked, his gaze half-lidded.

“You’ve just touched me in a very intimate way.”

“I’m sorry if it displeases you, but I confess I felt compelled to do so,” he replied, leaning down slightly. “You intrigue me in a way that no one else has done.”

She nibbled her lower lip. “Most people don’t—”

“Remember what I said about most people?”

She laughed, tilting her face into his palm despite herself. “That I should not care about what others think. But I care about what you think, Lord Ajax,” she said. She searched his visage. “You’ll be content to go with me?”

“More than content,” he said, letting his gloved hand lower as if the action of

separation pained him. "I shall be honored."

"I understand why ladies adore you," she blurted.

"Oh?"

"You're delectable," she stated. Then she winced. "Forgive me. That was rude."

"Was it?" he asked, his eyes brightening.

"I just insinuated that you were something tasty to eat," she said, "like a cake."

He laughed boldly. "I have never been compared to a cake. It's true. Surely, I'm a bit of venison. Something strong, something fortifying," he teased.

"Well, if I'm quite honest, no. Not venison. I can see how one might compare you to a summer ice. Something which would soothe the heat and yet...entice the soul with its rarity."

"Entice the soul?" he queried. "My, Lady Winifred, you are actually quite romantic."

"I," she said, "am not romantic at all. But I do say things that are odd."

"Good," he replied. "Life is too short to avoid those things."

"If only the rest of the world thought so. We shall go in two days?"

"Two," he said. "That's rather quick."

"I don't want to waste any time," she replied hastily, kicking herself for her utter nonsense about the ice and soul. "You see, if my mother was to get wind of this, then

it could go very badly.”

“So where are we to meet?”

“I have a whole itinerary. I can send it to you this evening.”

“Please do,” he said. “I shall be happy to pore over it and prepare for the trip. But will you be prepared? Have you thought of how we shall travel together? Because—”

“Oh, I have it all planned,” she enthused, suddenly quite proud. “I promise you, Lord Ajax, no one shall think anything is amiss.”

“What?” he drawled. “Are you going to travel as my caretaker? Will you practice for your role with your great aunt?”

She snorted. “Your caretaker? Anyone who looked at you could never think that you were in want of someone to look after your health,” she said.

He smiled slowly at that. “We all need someone to look after us,” he said. “Even a fellow like me.”

She found that hard to believe. Surely, he was the epitome of health, the epitome of strength. Surely, he didn’t need anyone.

He smiled slowly at her. “Lady Winifred,” he said, “we all need someone to see us for exactly who we are. I’m just very fortunate. I’ve grown up in a family where that is an everyday occurrence and you... Well, you’re just beginning to understand that.”

Yes, she supposed she was. As she left him there, standing by the tree she had so carefully picked for this meeting, she felt braver and more capable than she had in her whole life. Moreover, she felt that the adventure of her life was just about to begin.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

“Why are you staring at Lady Winifred Tuttle?”

Ajax shot a shocked look at his beautiful, eccentric mother, the Dowager Duchess of Westleigh. “I am not.”

His mother gave him an amused look, her eyes dancing. That look—he knew it oh so well. The look of a mother who could not be tricked or fooled or lied to. It was most annoying.

And she’d caught him, right there on the edge of the ballroom at Sanderson House, trying to understand how the devil someone as marvelous as Lady Winifred could end up a spinster.

He should have known better than to contemplate Lady Winifred. But he’d been unable to resist once he’d realized she was there.

And, of course, his mother had noticed.

His mother was like a seer who could see beyond the veil or through the glass and know the truth of all things. It made growing up deuced difficult because there were no secrets in the Briarwood family. He supposed, in the end, it was an excellent thing because as far as he could tell, secrets really only led to dark places.

But sometimes a fellow wanted a little bit of privacy, at least from his mama. Still, he supposed, he was grateful that she knew everything about him, and he was fairly certain he knew just about everything about her.

Still, he didn't like being called out on the spot like this.

"You've never looked at her before," she pointed out. Her brow furrowed and she mused, "I don't really think anybody has ever looked much at her before. At least not someone like you."

He scowled. "Why?" he demanded through gritted teeth. "There's nothing wrong with her. I daresay she's superior to most."

As far as he could tell, Lady Winifred was a cut above the ladies of the ton. She was sensible, funny, not unattractive and, well, plucky. He liked plucky. He felt more gentlemen should like plucky. Plucky ladies made plucky children, and who wouldn't want to have a plucky child?

He abruptly frowned. How the devil had he gone from thinking about Lady Winifred to thinking about having a child with her? He hadn't. That's not actually what he had thought. It had all been hypothetical, in any case.

His mother's lips twitched. "Oh dear. Is something transpiring that I should be made aware of?"

"No, Mama. Absolutely not." He huffed out a breath, then ventured, "Why the blazes would you say Lady Winifred isn't noted by people like me?"

His mother tsked before she shrugged. "The ton is full of fools who do not see a person's true worth. Lady Winifred is not even a wallflower anymore. She hasn't been for some time. She usually sits with the old ladies and observes. In silence."

"She's not old," Ajax protested, horrified that this was Winifred's lot in life. His blunt, bold, funny Winifred sat in silence?

“I didn’t say she was old,” his mother returned as she surveyed the crush. “I said she sits with the old ladies. Not the Gorgons, mind you. Just the ones who seem to have given up.”

Ajax scowled. “How very dreary for her.”

“How very dreary for anyone ,” his mother drawled. “I cannot imagine sitting, fading away in the corner somewhere like a gown that has gone out of fashion.”

His mother would never go out of fashion. Oh, no. She was the sort of stuff that would always keep being reborn no matter how bad things got. Perhaps it was being born in poverty in London, then climbing her way up to become one of the greatest actresses of the London stage, and then being selected by his father to be his duchess.

It was impossible to know, but nothing got his mother down. Not for long. She had chosen a long time ago not to despair but to always insist on hope.

Actually, he rather thought there were some unique qualities that Lady Winifred might share with his family, clinging to hope being one of them. Except for the fact that it did seem like Winifred was about to give up.

Because after their adventure concluded, it sounded as if she was planning on retreating to a little life in the country as her family wished.

He didn’t like the idea of someone having one last hurrah with him and then giving in, allowing their light to dim. Perhaps he could convince her to revolt instead.

It was a winning idea.

Yes. He liked it well.

And this whole idea of an adventure without kisses... He wasn't sure he could do that. And not because he was a rogue, but because her lips were the most delicious shade of pink and her eyes had sparked when he had touched her cheek.

"Oh dear," his mama said. "That look is most dangerous. What are you thinking?"

He cleared his throat. He shared quite a lot with his mother, but he wouldn't be sharing thoughts of kissing Lady Winifred.

"Just that Lady Winifred shouldn't be sitting over there in a faded chair with faded ladies, fading away herself."

"Oh my," she said. "How passionate of you, my dear. I didn't even know you knew the lady."

"We've become recently acquainted," he said.

"When?" she asked.

"In St. James's Park."

His mother arched a brow. "Many things happen in St. James's Park that no mother should know about."

"It was in daylight, Mama," he drawled.

"Even so," she trilled. She whipped out her fan, snapped it open, and began to wave it before her face. "In my day, St. James's Park was a place of true ill repute. Still quite fashionable, of course."

In his mother's day, things had been far wilder than they were now. Slowly, very

slowly, the age of wickedness was fading out. King George was not fond of such things. He and his Queen Charlotte had done everything they could to bring a sort of dignity to England, a dignity that had not been there in the past.

He wondered how long it would last because Prinny had very little interest in dignity. The man was more interested in perfumes, cravats, handkerchiefs, and drama.

While Ajax understood his own political party's desire to get rid of the old guard and usher in a new era, he wasn't sure Prinny was the fellow for the job. Still, they didn't live in a republic. They lived in a monarchy, and one could not get rid of him.

Granted, it seemed the French had gone that route, as had the Americans, but according to his brother, Achilles, things in France were going to hell in a handbasket and quickly. His cousin, Jean-Luc, seconded the sentiment. Jean-Luc and his sisters had barely, it seemed, escaped with the clothes on their back, some funds, and, well, their wits.

Things were devolving fast across the channel, and Ajax prayed to God that it would not go the same way here.

It certainly didn't seem so in this ballroom where people acted as if violence wasn't erupting across France.

It amazed him how people could go about their lives as if the world wasn't falling apart just outside their doors. But that was, it seemed to be, how humans coped with chaos—by simply dancing on as if nothing was amiss.

He supposed, in the end, it wasn't a terrible idea. What did wailing and gnashing teeth do? But he did hope his brother the duke and his brother Hector were able to make some good changes in society soon. Otherwise, they would go the way of lost empires.

And he quite liked England, if he was honest. It was a country that was bold and full of rich history. He wouldn't like to see it fall to the wayside like France.

"You've grown very serious," his mother said suddenly.

"Forgive me. I know I am not accustomed to looking thus."

He was not the serious one of his brothers.

As a matter of fact, he generally was the jolly one, the one with muscle, the one who got things done, the one who caroused all over town and made merry.

In truth, all his brothers did that. But he was never the one people thought of when it came to intellect or politics. He simply negotiated his way through life, enjoying it, supporting people, making them happy. And truthfully, he felt that was quite a noble endeavor.

Making people happy was important. The more happy people there were in this world, the less misery there would be. And if there was less misery, well, things wouldn't fall apart. And that's exactly what he was going to be doing with Lady Winifred Tuttle. He was going to ensure her happiness. Yes, he would ensure happiness one person at a time.

"Excuse me, Mama, I must go, and—"

"You be careful, my dear," his mother warned suddenly.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, turning back to her.

"Something is afoot." She whipped her fan shut. "My internal mother warning knows it to be true."

He scowled. “Mama, don’t—”

“Oh, no, no, my dear,” she rushed. “I understand. You have only just met her in St. James’s Park, but—”

“No, Mama,” he said. “Never you fear. All is well.”

“Oh, of course it is, my dear.” She smiled at him and let her gaze travel in the direction of Lady Winifred. “It’s better than well. It is positively marvelous.”

His mother then turned on her delicate heel and sailed off through the company in search of more conversation, knowing that if she said anything else, she would likely only induce further argument, and set him to entrenching his heels, insisting that something wasn’t afoot.

But something was afoot.

Even he could tell his dratted feelings for Lady Winifred were not typical. No, the Briarwood alert that his heart was in danger was beginning to make itself known.

He should run.

Yes, really that’s what he should do. Except, it wouldn’t work. It never would. Briarwoods could not escape their fate. Once they met the one that was for them? There was no arguing or fighting it.

Still, surely she wasn’t...

Ajax shook his head and, without thinking, charged his way across the room, wandering through the beautifully dressed company.

He found himself standing before Lady Winifred.

She stared up at him from her delicate perch upon a rather spindly chair. She had remarkably good posture. Her fingers clasped her cup delicately, and she blinked up at him. Where was the bold young woman he'd met in St. James's Park?

There was a strange sort of mask over her face at present. Not a literal one, but one which seemed to keep her plucky character at bay. She looked quite placid, except there was alarm in her eyes.

"Lord A—" she stopped herself and plunked her cup down on the table beside her. "Forgive me, I don't believe we've had the pleasure of making each other's acquaintance," she rushed.

And then one of the old ladies with withered hands, slightly myopic eyes, and a crooked wig rumbled, "This is Lord Ajax. Whatever are you doing over here, my boy?"

"Well, Lady Sanford, I have come because it looked as if all of you could use a little bit of cheering up."

"Charity, my dear. Charity," Lady Sanford bleated. "None of us like to feel as if—"

"But," he exclaimed, "how could I possibly feel that I was giving out charity when the lot of you have lived such remarkable lives? Can you not regale me with tales of your favorite Seasons?"

And with that, he pulled out a chair, sat down beside the elderly lady, and glanced over at Lady Winifred.

"Dear Lady Winifred," he said, "if Lady Sanford will not divulge her secrets, surely

you can tell me a thing or two.”

She gulped. “I beg your pardon.”

Lady Bartley, sitting to Lady Sanford’s left, pursed her wrinkled lips. “Lady Winifred rarely says anything. She has learned to be quiet. It took some time for her to do so. So please do not encourage her to rattle on. She used to go on and on. Dear goodness, she could put one to sleep with her knowledge and attention to detail.”

He gritted his teeth. How dare these women censure Winifred? “She’s passionate then.”

“Passionate!” The older lady exclaimed. “That is not the word for it.”

And one of the other older ladies leaned forward, her wig teetering. “Eh?” she said. “Passion? No passion for us spinsters and widows here. We have given up such a life. No, it is our life now to hold the torch of life and carry on.”

“To what?” he asked simply.

The elderly lady blinked at him. “I beg your pardon.”

He cocked his head to the side. “What are you carrying on for exactly?”

Lady Winifred pressed her lips together and appeared as if she was choking on a laugh.

The older lady looked at him. “Well, I don’t really know, but I do know that I am quite capable at it.”

“Of course you are,” Lord Ajax said firmly, not wishing to give offense. “I can tell

the lot of you are extremely capable, especially Lady Winifred. Lady Winifred, please regale me with your knowledge.”

“No, my lord,” she said, shaking her head. “I find that unlikely. Gentlemen are not generally interested.”

“In?” he asked.

“Well,” she began, smiling slowly. “If you insist.”

“No,” Lady Sanford cut in, waving her arms like an angry crow. “Up you get, Lord Ajax. Up you get. No gentlemen over here. This is for ladies who have eschewed your sex. We have no need of you here.”

He was being shooed away. Was Lady Sanford a wooly sheepdog, keeping her charge secure?

How he longed to whisk Winifred away. Did he dare? Yes, he did.

“Well, if my conversation with the lady disturbs you, then I must simply ask her to dance.”

And with that, Lady Winifred’s eyes bulged. “Surely not.”

“Do you not know how to dance?” he asked.

“Of course I do,” she returned, though she appeared quite alarmed at the prospect. She leaned towards him and whispered so softly that the older ladies could not hear, “But if you recall, I told you that I have not been asked to dance in years.”

“Then you must indulge me,” he said as he stood. “For I feel the need to do a jig.”

What else could she say to that except to gulp, place her hand in his, look at the ladies around her, and say, “Why, of course, my lord. Whatever you require.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

Winifred felt a frenzy of nerves! She had not danced since that debacle when she had been caught making merry to the tune in her own little world. In public.

Her mother had forbidden it.

If she was asked, she was supposed to say no. And in any case, no one had asked in years. She had no idea what had caused her to suddenly agree to his request because she should not have.

And as she was led to the floor, she caught sight of her dear mama, who did not look pleased that she was on the arm of Lord Ajax. No. As a matter of fact, her mama looked panicked, and Winifred knew why.

Really, it would just take one small action, one gesture, one missed word, some mistake for her to ruin her sister's Season. She would not do that. She couldn't. Surely, she could keep herself together for one jig—a bouncy dance which was meant to be joyful.

She looked at Lord Ajax and gave him a wary smile.

“Are you all right? You are looking a little bit green,” he said.

“Perfectly fine. Thank you,” she assured. “But this is really not our plan. Whatever are you about?”

“I couldn't resist,” he confessed as he wove them through the crowded room and onto the floor. “I saw you sitting across the ballroom, and I couldn't have it.”

“Have what?” she asked, frowning.

“You being so completely ignored,” he stated.

“But I am accustomed to it,” she pointed out, taken aback by his offense on her behalf. “That is why I’m a spinster, and that is why I sought you out for an adventure. I did not mean for said adventure to begin now with this jig.”

“Can you forgive me,” he asked softly, “if I have gone so entirely awry?”

She winced, but then she corrected her face. Wincing in Lord Ajax’s presence wouldn’t do. After all, he was such a revered young man. Surely, she should look as if she would swoon. She attempted to rearrange her features.

“You look as if you are in pain.”

“Do I?” she gasped. “I’m trying to look as if being with you is sheer heaven.”

His lips twitched. “Is it supposed to be heaven?”

“I think most ladies,” she pointed out, “think that being in your arms is meant to be sheer heaven. This is what I understand, mind you.”

“And so you are trying to replicate the emotion?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied as the music began its sprightly tune.

He gazed down upon her and took her hands. “Have you never known sheer heaven?”

“Not of your kind,” she said. “I have known the sheer heaven of books, plays, and, of course, a good debate with my brother, but that’s about it.”

“My dear girl,” he rumbled, “we must increase your capacity for heaven then.”

“So you say, but be careful,” she warned, her pulse increasing at the feel of his hands upon hers.

“Why is that?” he said softly.

“If you show me heaven, and you take it away when you go, then I shall be left knowing that there is something that I can never have.”

“But isn’t that what you are doing?” he queried as he began stepping to the right and then bouncing to the left and then bouncing back.

Lord Ajax bouncing was quite a sight. It should have been ridiculous. It was not.

It seemed whatever he did, he looked marvelous doing it.

She bit back a sigh. “I suppose that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“Should we cancel it then, lest you feel the loss of the adventure once it is done?” he asked, though it was clear he was not serious but rather pointing out the fallacy in her thinking.

She frowned. “No, I am determined. You are the only chance I have, and I cannot go back from that.”

“Good,” he said. “And then perhaps you can feel the same way about heaven.”

She nearly gulped. Did he wish to show her heaven? It was tempting. So very, very tempting to leave this mortal plane and allow him to lead her along more sensual, lofty paths.

“Right now?” she whispered. “This is not heaven. This is next to torture. My mother is watching us, and if I make one misstep, it shall all go terribly wrong, and my adventure shall be seized from my hands because I will likely be sent down to the country immediately.”

“Then we best make certain,” he said, giving her a wink, “that you do not make a mistake.”

And somehow, in his arms, she did not. She wasn’t entirely certain how Lord Ajax managed it, but he guided her in every step, every flick of the wrist, every turn of the foot, every bounce, and every weave.

The next thing she knew, she was smiling.

“Look into my eyes,” he urged. “Don’t look at anyone else. I promise I will be there for you. No matter what happens, I will be there.”

Her heart skipped then, doing a dratted dance. Oh, how she needed it to cease. To be staid. But it refused!

If only he could have been there always, for every misstep she’d ever known, her life would be so very different. She might not be so lonely or so isolated.

But Lord Ajax did not truly know of what he spoke or the promise that he made. He could not understand how great her capacity for blunders was. And as the music at last came to a pause, she curtsied to him, relieved that she had made it through.

He gave her a bow and led her off the floor.

Though it seemed he had no wish to let her go, he slipped his hand from hers. “Until I see you again, I await further instruction.”

She gave him a quick nod and hurried away out into the hall. She needed a breath of fresh air, but before she could go very far, his mother, the dowager duchess, marched up to her side, linked her arm in hers, and pulled her into a side room.

“My dear,” the dowager gushed as if the most delightful thing in all the world had just transpired. “Something is happening between you and my son. I should like to know what it is.”

She had of course seen the dowager duchess. She was a remarkable figure. Everyone knew her, worshiped her, or thought very ill of her. There were really only two camps: those who were in awe and those who were horrified. But all of them recognized her power.

Winifred gasped for air at suddenly being in the presence of such a figure.

Lord Ajax had really stolen her breath away, both with the magnificence of his dancing and with the realization that she was about to spend a great deal of time in his company.

And now this?

Were all Briarwoods so forceful? Almost certainly, she realized.

She blinked at his mother, determined to appear stunned by such a question. “I have no idea what you mean.”

The dowager duchess tilted her head to the side and her silvery-blond curls bounced as she gave a knowing smile. “You cannot fool me, my dear.”

“No, no. Truly.”

The dowager wagged her brows. “If what I saw was nothing, there shall be wedding bells in a fortnight.”

She had never heard reports that the dowager was mad. But wedding bells? Had the lady lost her wits?

In all Winifred’s life, she had never received so much attention, and quite frankly, she found it quite strange. She stared at the dowager duchess.

She should lie. She should tell a very, very good lie, but she’d never actually been very good at lying. Now she was about to try to pull off a large lie with her adventure, but she had planned it for weeks with her brother. She had gone through every step. This was not part of the plan.

None of this was part of the plan.

Lord Ajax was not doing as she had planned, and she supposed it was because he was human, and humans often did not go according to plan.

But still, how was she to have anticipated this?

“Your Grace,” she began, “I only met your son this afternoon. He has been very kind to me, and that is the extent of what I’m willing to share.”

The dowager duchess gave her an interesting look. “I like you,” she said suddenly.

“You do?” Winifred stuttered, quite shocked by the statement. “You don’t know me.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m an excellent judge of character.” The dowager wrapped her hands around one of Winifred’s and gave her a look which seemed to suggest that she had a kindness and wisdom about her that was without end. “You are keeping your

cards very close, my dear. But I do think you should tell me what it is. I'm a tremendous ally."

She swallowed. She had not had an ally. She couldn't remember the last time, except for her brother. "I really can't."

"My dear," the dowager ventured, "whether or not he realizes it, it is clear to me that my son likes you very much."

"He is merely helping me with something," Winifred said firmly, feeling as if she had to be dreaming.

"With what?" the dowager duchess asked.

"You are very determined," Winifred replied.

"And you are very blunt," the dowager duchess said with an approving smile. "How refreshing. Now, tell me."

As if by magic, she was sharing her secrets. "If you must know, your son and I are going on an adventure."

When she said it aloud like that, it sounded absurd. Like a game.

But perhaps life should be more playful, more like a game. Maybe then it wouldn't be so unrelentingly hard.

The dowager duchess's brows drew together. "Oh, my dear," she said, "I know he's quite capable in the arts of seduction, but you must be very careful. He's a good fellow with a good heart. I don't wish him to get hurt. Or you."

“Oh no,” she protested, horrified. “I have no desire to be seduced. That sounds very messy and quite unpleasant if I’m honest.”

While she might like to be kissed by Lord Ajax, if she let her fantasies get the better of her, she had no wish to be embroiled in an affair. From what she could tell, having spent years observing the ton, those were not fun. Not at all.

The dowager duchess blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“He’s going to act as my guide. We’re going on a tour of the country to visit sites having to do with the plays of Mr. Shakespeare.”

The dowager looked at her with wide eyes. “Repeat that please.”

She cleared her throat and began again. “He’s going to take me about the countryside and show me certain sites. I’ve mapped it all out. I’ve picked the inns. I know where we shall stay. I’ve hired a conveyance. All of it is taken care of.”

The dowager duchess gaped for a long moment. “My dear,” she said, “you are a marvel. Most ladies want my son for...”

“Oh, I understand,” Winifred rushed. “He’s loved by the ladies. And the truth is I think that’s part of his charm. I don’t need that particular aspect of him, but he’s very convivial and likable, and that’s what I wanted. A pleasant companion who would smile at me and be kind and who wouldn’t treat me poorly. Everyone seems to like him and so I thought he might be able to tolerate me for a bit.”

“Tolerate you?” the dowager duchess said softly.

“Exactly,” she replied.

The dowager's eyes softened and for a moment it looked as if she wished to say a great deal, but then she sighed and said, "But, my dear, have you considered how you will go about the countryside with him? After all, surely you will be noticed. A young lady going about with my son—"

"I have a disguise planned," she said. "I have had it planned for some time, and I have been practicing with my brother. I wouldn't be able to do it without him."

"Your brother sounds like a very enterprising fellow."

"Oh, he is. My mother really underestimates him."

"Does your mother underestimate you too?" the dowager asked.

Her insides twisted with a surprising dose of melancholy as she defended, "Only because I say the wrong thing and do the wrong thing."

"And so she shoved you over with all those old ladies so you could not make a mistake?" the dowager prompted gently.

"Yes, and now she's shoving me into the country so that I can't ruin things for my sister. I could see it upon Mama's face just a few minutes ago. She almost died with horror when Lord Ajax asked me to dance."

"Truly?" the dowager duchess asked, aghast.

She gave a nod. "Yes," she said. "Please don't think ill of her. Not really. You see, in the past I have made such a muck of things."

"You could not make a muck of anything, my dear. You are positively wonderful."

Her throat tightened and, much to her horror, tears stung her eyes. “Thank you,” she said. “You don’t have to pretend and say such things to me.”

“I? Pretend?” the dowager duchess gasped.

“People don’t generally like me,” she said. “I try very hard, but I simply say the wrong things at the wrong times. And I get very tired in company when I try to be someone that I’m not.”

“Then you must cease,” the dowager duchess said. “Be exactly who you are, my dear.”

“I don’t know if I know how,” she said.

“Well then, I think you should practice with my son.”

“You’re not going to stop us?”

“Of course not,” the dowager replied as if the idea was absurd. “This is exactly what is meant to happen. I like a bit of adventure.” The dowager winked. “And besides, you’ve thought it all out.”

“I promise my disguise is quite good,” she assured, even as her throat tightened with emotion. For she had not had someone treat her like this in years. And it was quite overwhelming.

“Good,” the dowager said, patting Winifred’s hand. “Costumes and disguises have a funny way of bringing out who we truly are. They permit us to be free.”

Free, she thought. Could it be possible? Or was this all a dream? Was she about to wake up? It hardly seemed possible.

“You’re truly not going to stop us?” she asked.

“Stop you?” the dowager duchess said. “I applaud you. And I shall do whatever you need. Whatever help you require, I shall give. I am all for the freeing of young ladies. So you tell me, my dear, if ever you need help. I shall be there for you.”

The dowager duchess gave her hand another squeeze and then, with her head up and jewels winking, she left Winifred standing alone.

But...she wasn’t alone. Not now. She knew it in the deepest part of herself. For tonight, for the first time in a long time, she realized that maybe there was nothing wrong with her. Not when there were people like the dowager duchess in this world.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

A jax stood at the appointed place. Waiting. Again.

He felt Winifred to be a bit of an elusive character, as if she was a fairy creature who would appear out of the mist. Or in this case, the busy hub on the outskirts of the city.

The busy London road teemed with people of every variety. Chimney sweeps passed, coated in dust, their brooms perched on their shoulders. Milk sellers carried their large jugs, going from door to door. Young girls sold posies, thrusting small bouquets at passersby.

The din was an orchestra of humanity. And he loved it. He loved the calls, the cries, the shouts.

Women leaned out their windows and called across the street to their neighbors.

Children dashed back and forth, barefoot, through the crowd.

And he knew he could be pickpocketed at any moment if he didn't keep an eye on his purse, his watch, and his handkerchief.

Carts, coaches, and people on horseback choked the muddy road.

Voices filled the air from every corner of the globe.

The colors filled his vision with delight.

It was a sunny day in London and a rare treat. The weather was fine, his spirits were

high, and yet he felt a moment's trepidation.

He looked about, searching for his pert Lady Winifred.

Where was she?

The coach was waiting. She had hired a private one. He had no idea how she'd done it, but here it was just as she said it would be. It wasn't luxurious but serviceable. In hindsight, he should have offered his own. It would have been more comfortable, and he wanted to relieve her of the burden of the expense. But it struck him that perhaps she was reveling in her independence.

And she certainly was exercising her capability at said independence.

For the meeting at this intersection at this time had just been the start of the lengthy letter she'd sent.

As a matter of fact, she had said a great many things in the itinerary that he'd gone through. It had been quite a read. Details had filled every page, and he wondered how she had managed to put such a thing together. The mind reeled at her attention to each little item. How long had she dreamed about such a chance?

It had done something to his heart and his head, taking in how passionate she was about Shakespeare, how much she must have read about him, his plays, and his life.

He got the sense that she had clung to Shakespeare as a friend in a world that was not kind to her. He'd ached for her pain but also felt deep admiration for her resilience.

He scanned the crowd, then opened and closed his fists. He felt a sort of trepidation. A trepidation he'd never felt at the start of any sort of affair before. Only, he reminded himself, this was not an affair. This was simply an adventure, and yet he

could not deny that a part of him—a large part, really—truly wished that it was...more.

And he wondered if he would be nefarious if he tried to convince her of that more. He would think on it later. He wasn't about to have that sort of debate with himself on a crowded London street corner, especially if she didn't come.

Had she lost her nerve? It was a shocking undertaking, one which might prove too much for a young lady.

And then his gut twisted.

What if her mother had found out her plans? Was she locked away in some tower like a maiden being kept prisoner? If so, would he, like a knight of old, charge forward and rescue her? He rather thought he would, though he had no idea how as of yet, for he hated the idea of Winifred being caught and kept away from the world.

He'd never seen anything so appalling as Winifred in that clutch of old ladies being told to be quiet. He didn't understand how anyone could do that to another human being. How was it that her own mother could not see how wonderful and remarkable she was? Families were very, very odd. He was incredibly fortunate in his.

"Are you ready?" a voice asked.

He whipped around and nearly stumbled into the person speaking to him. He lowered his gaze to the young man, blinked, and then let out a guffaw of laughter. "How do you do? Are we acquainted?" he drawled, even as his admiration grew to a whole new degree.

Lady Winifred stuck out her gloved hand and said, "How do you do, sir? I am Win Tucker."

“Win Tucker?” he replied. “That name sounds as if it is from a novel.”

“Doesn’t it though?” she said with a smile.

And there was a pithy joy to her that was so infectious he could not stop the smile that suddenly parted his lips.

Ajax could barely believe his eyes.

She beamed with pride at her own cleverness. And at his clear surprise.

She was dressed like a young gentleman. Excellently stitched fawn breeches clung to her hips and thighs. Polished black Hessians shone on her feet, covering her no doubt slender calves. A bright green coat was just loose enough to hide any curves she might have. And a jaunty hat, tilted at an angle, sat over what he could only assume was an excellent brown wig.

She looked, well, remarkably boyish. If she’d tried to pass as a man, she would have failed, but he was guessing that she was trying to look like a young student of about sixteen years of age, and she was triumphant.

“Are you ready to depart?” she asked, her voice a low plummy sound.

He blinked, then gave a quick nod. “Indeed I am, Mr. Tucker.”

“Good,” she said. “Then let’s go. Are you ready, driver?”

That voice of hers was a study in a reedy young man’s notes. How long had she practiced to get that just right? His admiration grew again. For this was no lark to her. He could see that. From the way she held herself, to the pitch of her words, she appeared every inch a boy on the cusp of manhood.

The driver lifted his whip and touched his cap. "All ready," he said.

And then, much to Ajax's surprise, she stared at the door for a moment, her lips parting in a slow smile.

He started for the handle, but before he could grab it, she seized it. She turned the handle and opened the door with considerable effort, then hauled herself in.

There was an air of pride and accomplishment to her as she did so. And he realized that she'd likely never opened a coach door before.

As he watched her cross into the coach, he was quite amazed by her determination and also the way her limbs looked under those breeches.

He cleared his throat.

This was going to be a very interesting journey indeed if she was dressed like that. He couldn't get over her ingenuity. He had thought that she might show up in some strange disguise, perhaps as an old lady who wielded judgement upon all those around her. After all, Winifred had spent so much time with such a person.

But no, this was something else altogether, and he found his lips twitching. Yes, she really did belong with a family like his.

Young ladies dressing up as men, play-acting, pretending, daring to want a bit more and loving Shakespeare?

She was perfect. Had she had any idea when she'd sent that note to him, or had that been the universe laughing uproariously as it put the idea in her head to seek out one Ajax Briarwood?

He groaned inwardly.

Was this his fate then? Was it to be inescapable? If so, should he just yield to it? He wanted to. Oh bloody hell. He did. Now that he'd met her. Now that he'd seen her in all her full glory, how could he not wish to give in to the fate of every Briarwood when faced with their mate?

He stood before the open coach door. Oh, how he wanted to give in if this was it. If she was indeed the one. And there was so much about her that veritably screamed that she was; he'd be a fool to ignore it.

He'd seen the happiness of his brothers and sisters as they had found love, and yet he'd begun to believe that perhaps he would never really find that because he wasn't like his brothers or sisters. He wasn't as deep as they were or as interesting, or at least that's what people seemed to think. And so in his most secret fears, he'd thought he might not find a great love as they had. That perhaps he was not as worthy.

And yet as he stood here on the precipice of surrendering to the life of a Briarwood who could not outrun the one, outside the coach on the cacophonous London street, he felt as if he was about to be launched into something. Something great. Something unknowable like a river. And if he was tossed in, he would find himself downstream, coursing towards some great beautiful unknown.

Suddenly, she leaned forward and poked her head back out the door. "Are you getting in?" she asked, her brows drawing together. "Or are you getting cold feet? Please say you're not. I've gone to a considerable amount of trouble to do this and, well, I'm looking forward to getting to know you."

Getting to know him.

His heart leapt at that. How many people had wanted to know him over the years and

not just a Briarwood? Not just someone who was a bit notorious in the ton. His lips began to part in a slow smile. She made him smile. Oh, how she did. Over and over.

Ajax didn't look back. He grabbed the edge of the coach doors and he climbed in.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

Dressing like a man really was emboldening.

Oh, how Winifred loved it, and she was finding herself growing bolder by the moment! She sat on the coach's leather bench, stared over at the absolutely beautiful Lord Ajax, and then did something completely shocking to her.

She allowed herself to slouch just a little bit on the seat and then permitted herself to extend one booted foot out and then the other.

"Oh heaven," she sighed.

Lord Ajax arched a brow. "Heaven?" he queried. "This is heaven?"

"You try wearing stays and a gown and always having to sit perfectly," she returned. She wiggled and marveled at how the only truly restricting bit of clothing on her body was the cravat tied about her neck. That, she granted, was a bit annoying. But the rest? "This is bliss! Look at what I can do with my knees!" she exclaimed.

He glanced down at her knees, which she had allowed to drift apart.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, I can see it's very freeing," he said.

"You look a little bit uncomfortable," she observed. She wagged her brows. "Perhaps you should consider sitting in a more relaxed fashion too."

She marveled at her own limbs, which she'd never allowed to be seen like this in public! "How wonderful to see one's legs."

Well, not exactly all of them, of course. They were covered from her hips to her toes and her boots, but she wasn't swathed in skirts.

And her boots? How glorious were they? She was quite lucky that Alfred had been able to find a pair of worn boots. Otherwise, she had no doubt it would've been agonizing breaking them in. Her brother was responsible for her clothes.

At first, she and Alfred had hoped to dress her from his wardrobe, but that had proved impossible. She was far shorter than he and, in the end, they'd realized that dressing like a member of the ton wasn't in her best interest. No, it would be far wiser to dress as someone from the city or a member of the artist class.

Being a man, her brother had been able to nip down to the used shops and find her a colorful set of clothes. And much to her amazement, she'd found that the clothes helped her create a colorful character. And she was rather glad that her brother had found such unique items.

After all, if she was going to have an adventure, she wanted a good one, and so she had enjoyed her brightly embroidered waistcoat, her jaunty hat, and the coat that had quite a bit of flair to it.

She'd even considered a cane, but she didn't need one and was worried she'd lose it. After all, she was always putting things down and then struggled to find those things. So less was probably more.

Ajax eyed her legs again and then looked to the windows.

"Is something amiss?" she asked. "Aren't my breeches wonderful? I like them," she said, "Do you like them?"

He let out a strange note as he stared out the window with more focus.

“Are you quite all right?” she asked.

“Yes, Winifred,” he said, though his voice sounded strained.

“Perhaps you should simply call me Win,” she pointed out, quite curious as to what was bothering him. Perhaps he was a touch ill. Or perhaps his legs were too long to feel comfortable in the coach.

He turned his eyes slowly toward her and there was a heat to them that shocked her.

“Win,” he echoed. “I like that. Did you come up with it yourself?”

“I did actually,” she said proudly. “I love all the nicknames that gentlemen seem to have. There are so many good ones and, well, I thought I should choose something that reflected this trip. I am winning in the game of life right now. I may not always do so, but this?” She gestured about and then up and down her form, indicating her clothes. “Oh, how this feels as if I’ve won. I’m free, Ajax,” she breathed.

He raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, forgive me,” she rushed, her enthusiasm dimming for a moment. “Is that too familiar to call you by your name?”

“No,” he rumbled. “It sounded perfect. My name upon your lips is...”

“What?” she asked, her insides humming.

“Heaven,” he replied simply. Sincerely.

It did not sound like a line he had rehearsed. It sounded, much to her shock, true.

She found herself strangely pleased at his reply. “I’m glad you think so,” she

whispered.

“There is nothing wrong with your legs,” he added suddenly. “It’s quite the opposite actually. They’re exceptionally...fine.”

She blushed. She’d never heard a man refer to her legs before. And no one, certainly not someone like him, had ever inferred they were fine.

Despite all her boldness and growing excitement, it still surprised her. “I’m glad to hear it,” she said. “Even so, you seem...” She tilted her head to the side, trying to deduce what it was that she observed in his person. “Uncomfortable.”

He drew in a long breath. “I confess I was not prepared to see you dressed thus,” he said.

“Does it bother you?” she asked, suddenly feeling a trifle nervous. She never expected him to disapprove. With his mother being an actress, it had not occurred to her that he might find her mode of dress discomforting or inappropriate.

“Should I have been more conservative?” she asked warily, her spirit sinking.

“Never in a month of Sundays,” he rumbled. “I protest the very idea of more conservative dress for you. Dress as outlandishly as you like. I shouldn’t care if you were to show up dressed in the wildest of costumes, but...” he said, letting his gaze travel up and down the length of her form. As he did, those orbs of his sparked. “This new you is a delight for the eyes, and I can see so much of you... And my imagination is a good one.”

She cleared her throat and sat up a little straighter. “Oh, I see,” she said.

From the look in his gaze, the way his jaw had tensed, and the way his hands were

braced upon his knees, she understood.

She pursed her lips, nodded, and surmised bluntly, “You find me delectable.”

“Oh, Win?” he groaned. “You are absolutely a balm for my soul.”

“In what way?” she asked, surprised.

“The way you just say what you think.”

She groaned. “It is a curse,” she admitted.

“No,” he protested. “It is actually a blessing that you think is a curse.”

She arched a brow, ready to argue.

But he lifted a hand and continued. “And you’ve only been around people who make you feel as if it’s a curse.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think that can be true,” she said. “The vast majority of people do seem to think that my blessing, as you say it, is a great harm.”

“Well,” he said, leaning forward, “let’s see how it goes during our time together?”

“All right,” she breathed.

He held his hand out to her.

She eyed that hand. Uncertain.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Put your hand in mine,” he instructed.

She contemplated his large palm, then slipped her gloved fingers into his.

The strong heat of that hand unfurled something in her. Her breath hitched in her throat.

“Good,” he said as he locked gazes with her. “We are to be friends. And I think that we should break all the barriers right away, don’t you? Since we are to have such a short time together, why ease into things? Why not simply launch ourselves fully?”

Good heaven. He was quite something. First, there was the way his herculean frame took up the coach. Then there was the feel of his firm hand about hers. And the way his gaze held hers? She felt suspended. Suspended in something hot, something powerful, something that was weaving through her body, whispering for her to awaken from slumber.

“I suppose you are right,” she managed, even as she felt as if all the air in the coach was disappearing, compressing somehow, burning out all of the world but the two of them. Her breath came in quick takes before she rasped, “There’s no time to waste, is there?”

Much to her shock, he pulled her across the bench to sit beside him. “There’s never time to waste. Ever.”

She swallowed at how easily he had lifted her and brought her beside him. As if it was where she’d always been meant to be.

“You would’ve thought that I should have learned that when my father died,” she whispered, emotion washing over her in a way that it had not done in years. There was something about him, something which brought out that which she long thought

shoved down deep inside her. She licked her lips, shocked by the waves of emotion traveling through her. “Everyone should learn that when someone they loves dies, but they don’t. Do they?”

“No,” he agreed, his gaze softening in response to her emotion, and then he pulled her closer to him, an act beyond friendship or mere kindness. It was an act of recognition at her words. Of great understanding, sympathy, and solidarity. “They don’t seem to. Most people lose those they love and carry on as if nothing happened.” He flinched. “Forgive me, that sounded brutal. I don’t mean that they don’t suffer their loss, or that they aren’t wounded greatly. But it doesn’t wake them up to how precious this life is. It doesn’t make them value their life more. Sometimes, it might. For a short time. But then it fades, and they go right back to how they always were. Life can be stolen so suddenly and yet so many continue plodding along in their lives doing things they don’t want to, being people they don’t want to be.”

The weight of his words fell over her. And in them, she felt the suffering of her fellow man. Why was it so very hard for people to awaken? Was it simply too frightening? Was the need to stay on the known course so very great?

She supposed it was.

She grimaced. “That’s me,” she said.

“No, it’s not,” he replied swiftly. “Look at you right here, right now. You are changing.”

“It is only a temporary change,” she pointed out.

He stared down at her. And there was a look in his eyes, so warm and admiring that she felt she might melt on the spot under it.

“Really?” he challenged. “Temporary? Do you truly think you won’t be changed forever by this?”

She blinked at that and contemplated the heat of him next to her, the feel of his hard body. And then instead of inching away as she likely should have done, she inched closer.

She did not know why. They were veritable strangers, but he... Well, he made her feel as if they had known each other forever, as if he accepted her exactly as she was. Unlike everyone else, except her brother.

Ajax made her feel as if there wasn’t anything wrong with her and, moreover, that she was exactly as she was supposed to be. And that was worth more than anything in the whole world.

How did she explain what he was doing to her?

He folded his hand about hers again and squeezed it. “Now,” he said, “tell me something. Anything.”

“What?” she said, shaking her head.

He gazed down at her, his blond locks teasing over his temples. “It seems to me that all your life you’ve been bottling up your thoughts and your opinions.”

“I have,” she replied plainly. “People don’t like to listen to everything I have to say. They find it quite annoying.”

“Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, hating the sudden pain those words caused. All her life

she'd been forced to come to the conclusion that there was something wrong with her. "When I speak, I am only excited about things, and I wish to go on about them. But people stare at me, and their faces change, and it's clear they find me...too much."

"That's because people are easily overwhelmed and have little curiosity in them as they age. We force it out of children." Then he shrugged and arched a brow. "Or they're not very interesting themselves. But you know what? I will happily listen to anything that you have to say."

Her lips parted as she realized he meant it.

"All right then," she whispered.

He waited patiently.

She cleared her throat. "Do you think William Shakespeare wrote the plays?"

He gaped down at her for a moment and then he let out a laugh. "Well, you don't start small, do you?"

She grinned, for there was no censure in his tone. "Well, as you said, why should we do anything without launching ourselves in fully?"

His lips—his beautiful, sensual lips—parted into a delicious smile.

"Well done," he replied. "Let us consider ourselves fully launched then. And if you want to know what I truly think?" he asked carefully.

She nodded. "Of course I do.

“I don’t think it matters.”

“What?” she gasped.

“I don’t think it matters if Mr. Shakespeare or Mr. Johnson or some fellow in a garret or an earl in a castle wrote the plays.”

“Don’t you?” she yelped. “Surely, it matters.”

“What if a woman wrote them?” he asked. “Why not, after all? Wouldn’t that be remarkable and not entirely impossible?”

A woman? She’d never even contemplated the possibility. She’d heard all the theories about how it was impossible that a regular person had written the plays. She loved to contemplate it, but she’d never before heard that it could be a woman. Even if it wasn’t true, the possibility was so radical...and strangely hope-inducing for her own little life that her heart leapt.

“No matter who wrote them, and it likely was Mr. Shakespeare from Stratford because the most boring answer is often the best one,” he continued, “the plays are so much larger than the author now that the mortal who penned them is quite small in comparison to their work.”

“How do you mean?” she whispered.

“Oh, I think you know, don’t you?”

She licked her lips and then nodded. “You’re right. They’re bigger than any one person. They’ve outgrown the author, haven’t they?”

“They weren’t even owned by Mr. Shakespeare in his lifetime,” he said. “They

eclipsed him. Moving the minds of Englishmen. And now they're owned by all of us."

She stared at him with utter wonder as she realized that within just a few moments of time with him, she was falling in love with him. Not with his love of Shakespeare. That, of course, was a boon. No, she was falling in love with how he saw people, how he saw the world... And with how he saw her potential in the world.

"They're in our lives," she whispered, allowing herself to speak as he knew she could. "They're in our psyche, and they fill us up with a sort of hope and longing for something more, something bigger, something beautiful."

"Something more, something bigger, something beautiful," he echoed. "Well said, Win. Who wouldn't want to listen to you all day long? Every day. I know I would."

Her throat tightened. All day long. Every day? And for a moment, she dared to wish that it could be every day. Always.

Oh, if she could only have that in her life. She did not know if she could, but this was a beginning, wasn't it? It had to be.

And then she found herself parting her lips and beginning to speak freely to him as he'd urged, and much to her amazement, he did exactly as he said he would.

He looked at her and he listened. He listened with every bit of his soul, with every bit of his heart, with every bit of his attention, and she felt herself bloom.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

A jax had never been so happy to see someone so completely changed in such a short period of time.

Oh, Winifred wasn't transformed into someone she was not. Quite the contrary, she was transforming into someone that she was. He could see it bit by bit. And he loved it. Oh, how he loved it.

Though he had only been allowed to be around her for a short period of time, the Winifred he had met in St. James's Park versus the Winifred he had met at the ball, well, they were already a world apart. This Winifred here at an inn full of people in Stratford-upon-Avon? She was a vivid character.

Shakespeare himself would have been thrilled to write her down.

Oh, how Ajax adored her.

Winifred sat on the long wooden bench, a tankard of ale in hand, grinning.

Now, he had warned her not to smile too prettily, for if she did, everyone would guess that she was a girl and not a boy. But Winifred seemed to have a talent for acting as a lad. Perhaps it was her blunt nature. Perhaps it was her desire to say whatever it was that came into her head—a generally male feature that was not approved of in ladies. She sat, legs splayed and elbows on the table, laughing deeply.

And her eyes? Oh how they shone! She wasn't tipsy, but she appeared drunk on the joy of life. And that was the best sort of drunkenness there was. How could he not share in it? He wanted to share in it always. And he never wanted this feeling to end.

The entire evening could not have been more perfect.

There was a fiddle playing in the background, a marmalade cat sat by the fire, and maids traveled back and forth, carrying large trays of drinks. The whole room smelt of good food, fresh bread, straw, and ale.

The inn had likely been here for as long as the town had boasted travelers. They were staying here and would stay here for, as the itinerary told him, at least two days. He wondered why Winifred had chosen Stratford-upon-Avon. It seemed an odd choice. He leaned forward and asked, “Why this place, Winifred?”

She took a drink of frothing ale, wiped her mouth, and said, “Because I want to see if I can feel it.”

His brow furrowed. “What?” he asked.

She cleared her throat and leaned forward conspiratorially as if she was about to say something quite shocking. “Shakespeare,” she whispered.

He blinked. “I beg your pardon.”

She nodded and said quite earnestly, “I want to see if there’s still some trace of him here. You see, he was such a great man. The feel of his past was so large that, surely, I will feel something here, some connection to him.”

It was tempting to let out a sigh. But how could he? Her heart was so bloody pure. “You’re a dreamer, aren’t you?”

She tsked. “I am not. I’m extremely practical,” she said, lifting the tankard again and taking a drink.

She was practical, but in her heart of hearts, she was a romantic who had been crushed. And she was looking for that crushed spirit...here. And he realized she wasn't aware of that yet.

He lifted his tankard. "To finding the spirit of Shakespeare."

She beamed. "Huzzah," she replied and took a sip.

She was alive and unfettered for the first time in her entire existence. Her cheeks were an apple red, like a proper English lad's, and her eyes danced. The fire crackled across the room, and though it was coming towards summer, there was still a slight chill in the evening air.

"Do you think it is time we should go up then?" he said. "To prepare for the day? I recall that we are getting up quite early."

"Oh, yes," she said. "You did read your itinerary, didn't you?"

He laughed. "Indeed, I did. A walk along the river," he said. "And then we are to explore the town and look for Mr. Shakespeare's place of birth."

She nodded. "Exactly so."

And with that, he started to hold his hand out to her, to be the perfect gentleman. She gave him a terse look and he winced.

"Forgive me," he said.

And with that, he clapped her so hard on the back that she nearly bounced her face off the table. She coughed.

“Forgive me,” he said again in a low whisper, thrusting his hand through his hair. “I find I am waffling back and forth in how I should treat you,” he said under his breath.

“Quite all right,” she assured, tugging at her cravat. “I’m growing accustomed to it myself.”

She stood then, brushed off her hands, and followed him through the large crowd. She walked with a boldness to her step, a bounce even, that he admired. They headed out into the hall and then up the stairs. He watched her walk up those stairs, rather amazed by the way her breeches tightened. They were staying in the same room. There was no reason not to, and it was a crowded night.

It was a room with two beds, so there was no need for him to sleep on the floor in a fit of chivalry. He was grateful for that because he didn’t like sleeping on floors. He was capable of it, of course, but who really liked sleeping on wooden boards?

They entered the room, which was quite a cozy affair with a fire crackling. Wine had been laid out, as had a carafe of water, more bread, fruits, and some cheese.

She threw herself down into a chair before the fire and let out a sigh of contentment.

“Poor ladies,” she lamented.

He turned to her. “Poor ladies?” he checked, eager for her clarification.

“That they should never know this sort of freedom,” she exclaimed. “Do you feel like this all the time?”

He shook his head, crossing to her. As he did so, he shrugged out of his coat and slung it across his bed. “I don’t follow.”

She pursed her lips. “Well, I mean, the ability to take up space, even when one is sitting. Look at all the space I can take up.”

And she did. She moved back and forth in the chair, moving her legs about, adjusting her arms.

He grinned. “If I’m honest, I’ve never really thought about it.”

She scowled. “It’s because you don’t have to think about it. It’s just natural to you.”

He began to roll his shirt sleeves up, and he noticed the way her gaze slipped to his forearms. It pleased him, for he could feel her admiration.

“Yes, likely so,” he replied.

He sat down across from her, gazing at her face as it was bathed by the warmth of the fire. His boots stretched out and touched hers. She gazed down at their shoes touching, and then her eyes came to his face.

“Men are allowed so much more freedom,” she said.

“Freedom in many ways,” he agreed as he began to untie his cravat.

“Freedom to know themselves,” she said as she watched him work the pressed linen. “Freedom to explore, freedom to feel so many things. Freedom to undress without concern... Freedom to touch.”

His heart began to hammer then and he let his cravat fall to the floor. The moment ignited for him. The spark between them transformed to flame. Something had occurred. Some transformation this day. An understanding that what was between them was no small thing.

She held out her hand, lifting it, her palm out, and he lifted his to hers. Touching. Doing what a man was free to do.

He placed his palm against hers and immediately thought of the lines from Romeo and Juliet that spoke of kisses and palms. And in that moment, he wanted to kiss her so badly because he could see her revelations, her awakenings, upon her face, and he wanted to be a part of it. Would she let him? Would she think him a total rogue?

Her lips parted and her eyes bloomed with desire.

“I didn’t set out,” she began, her voice rich with hunger, “to want something more than just your companionship. But I think you knew in the park that I’d want something more, didn’t you?”

“When all the rules get thrown away,” he explained softly, “everything changes, and you discover that you’re allowed to want things.”

She gasped. “Allowed to want things,” she echoed as if his words had unlocked some great force within her. “Oh, Ajax,” she said, “there it is. I’ve never been allowed to want things beyond my lot in life. And my lot is a very good one. I shouldn’t complain about it.”

He interwove their fingers. “It’s all right to say how you feel, Winifred. You’re allowed to want more than what you have. You’re allowed to chafe at your bonds,” he said. “Because no creature should live behind bars and be told to sing with joy about it.”

She seemed terrified but moved by his words. She bit her lower lip, then asked, “But what if being free comes at a cost?”

He searched her face, determined to make her see. See how wonderful she was and

how much awaited her. He lowered his lips to the back of her hand, kissing it in a gentle caress before he returned his gaze to hers. "Everything comes at a cost. Prisoners wither away and die. Free people may get hurt, but at least they live."

In that moment, he felt it. Her chain began to break. The chain which had locked her away. The chain which had forced her to live so small for so long.

She nodded. "Then show me," she urged. "Show me how to live. Show me how to be truly and fully alive, how to break my bonds, and how to live like you do. I want to know. I want to explore. I want to have it all. I thought I wouldn't, but I do. Oh, how I do. I want you." She lifted their twined hands to her cheek. "I never expected to, and it's frightening because by all the rules of propriety, we've only just become acquainted."

"It doesn't matter," he said, in awe of her tender touch. "Acquaintance doesn't change anything. From the moment we met, my spirit remembered yours. And yours remembered mine," he said. "And they always have. And they always will."

"Like the myth claimed... Our halves have been made whole?"

Yes, that was it. There was no denying it. They had both been going about the world searching for a missing part of themselves and now they had found it. Here in a room at an inn right in the center of Stratford-upon-Avon.

And with that, he pulled her toward him and felt his heart expand because this? This was what he had wanted. From the moment he saw her in St. James's Park, with her pert face and practical nature and determination and words that came at a mile a minute, he'd known that this was exactly what he was racing towards.

Her. He'd always been racing towards her.

And he was so grateful that she wasn't going to hold herself back, that she wasn't going to deny herself to him, and that she understood that in her heart of hearts, this is what she had truly wanted all along—to give herself freely.

And now he would give himself.

A mixture of excitement and nerves swirled through Winifred. Was she truly doing this? Yes, she was. She no longer wanted to live half a life. Half a life? She'd not even lived a quarter. Everything had been so narrow, so colorless, and any time she'd been herself and gone beyond the bounds of society, she'd been yanked back, scolded, and shamed.

She was finished with shame.

So she boldly gazed at Ajax and as he pulled her across the short distance, she sat upon his lap without a thought. She was not going to wait passively anymore. No, she was going to seize life with all her might and drink it in.

“No hesitating now, Ajax. I want to throw myself into this.”

His gaze leapt with desire. In fact, his whole body seemed to crackle with hunger now. He lifted her hands and linked them around his neck.

She let out a shuddering breath as her body seemed to spark to life. The feel of him against her was so remarkable that she could scarcely think.

His strong legs pressed into her bottom, and she felt the ridge of his sex against her.

She bit her lower lip. What would happen next?

He reached up and unpinned her wig, eased it off, and then let it fall to the floor.

He uncoiled her hair slowly, and she was shocked by the intimacy of it. He slid his fingers through her locks and then he went to work on her clothes.

He grinned as he slipped each item free. “This is most unusual,” he teased.

“The whole thing is unusual, isn’t it?” she breathed.

“Oh, yes. In the best possible way,” he growled.

And when he had her linen shirt up and over her head, he gazed at the fabric binding her breasts. Slowly, reverently, he unwound the linen, and once her breasts were freed, he let out a low rumble of appreciation.

He skimmed the back of his hand over the swells, then he took one in hand, cupping it. He teased his thumb over her nipple before bending his head and taking it into his mouth.

She let out a gasp and arched against him. He circled his tongue over her nipple, which grew hard with his attention.

She panted for breath as he teased her other breast.

As if he could wait no longer, he lifted his mouth, studied her lips, and then kissed her. Slowly, languorously, as if he could memorize everything about her in that exchange of mouths.

She held tightly to him, surrendering all her reason, all her logic, and that voice in her head which felt fear.

She was done with fear. She had to be if she was going to survive.

She grasped at his shirt and pulled it from his breeches. A low groan of approval passed his lips, and he leaned back so she could whip it over his head.

The feel of his velvety skin against hers was sheer bliss. She savored his heat, his strength, the power of his sinew against her own soft body.

She skimmed her fingertips over every ridge, every valley, every hard line.

And each touch only fanned her desire, making her long for more.

He urged her up, his movements growing more intense as his own desire seemed to build.

He inched her breeches and boots off until she stood naked before him.

“Glorious,” he whispered.

And she felt glorious before him.

He trailed his hands between her breasts, over her ribs, down her stomach, then over her hips. His fingers paused at the juncture between her legs, and then he pulled her back onto his lap and slid his fingers between her thighs.

The jolt of pleasure that shot through her was astonishing as he found her wet heat. Somehow, he knew exactly where to touch her to cause her body to respond in ways she’d never imagined. Those fingers of his worked a primal magic and soon she was straining, holding tight to him, desperate for something that seemed just out of reach.

She gasped for air and wiggled her hips.

“That’s it,” he murmured. “Let yourself have this. Let me give it to you.”

And as if his words were the final stroke, her entire body coiled and released. A pleasure so intense coursed through her and sent her thoughts flying.

He did not stop stroking her until every last bit of pleasure had traveled through her, and then he kissed her softly.

“Now the adventure truly has begun,” he growled against her lips.

She’d been waiting for this, for him, her entire life. “What about you?”

“Me?” he queried, his voice rough with passion.

“Surely, you...”

“This is enough,” he growled.

“Enough? I am done with enough,” she countered. “I want it all.”

“We should wait.”

“No,” she whispered. “I have waited my entire life. Do not make me wait again.”

His eyes widened and he hesitated for a single moment. But then he picked her up in his arms and laid her down before the fire, stretching her out.

He pulled off his breeches and rested beside her.

“Touch me,” he urged. “Touch me as you will.”

She did not need further prompting, for as strange as all this was, she felt a power she’d never known.

Winifred sat up, studying his long form, and just from the touch of her gaze, his body seemed to respond.

His hard sex bobbed against his hip.

She swallowed and then slowly traced her hand over his muscled abdomen. She held his gaze, finding encouragement there and a vulnerability that shocked her.

He was giving her power. He was so comfortable in himself he had no issue with letting her do as she willed.

Mirroring his earlier actions, she leaned down and began to kiss his chest. She traced her mouth over his hot skin, tasting him, teasing him.

He laced his hands into her hair, and she boldly stroked her hand over his hip and then dared to touch his sex.

It pulsed in her grip, and she gasped. The hard length of it filled her hand and she traced her fingers over the head, surprised to find a drop of his desire there.

He lifted his hips off the floor.

“Teach me,” she whispered. “Teach me what it means to be with you.”

His gaze filled with emotion then and he rolled her onto her back.

“If it is too much, you must tell me,” he whispered.

She was ready for too much. She longed for it, but she nodded.

He placed his sex along her opening.

She grabbed hold of him then, for it felt so...odd and yet she wanted it. Instinctively, her body called for his.

Gently, he entered her, taking his time.

She stilled, trying to make sense of the new experience.

His own face was a mask of restrained passion as he braced himself on his hands.

But then he began to rock slowly back and forth.

For a moment, she felt a twinge of pain, and she felt certain this whole endeavor was a ludicrous thing. It lasted but a moment and then? Her body seemed to open to him, and she smiled. This was what her body was meant for. And it was certainly meant to do this with him.

At the transformation of her expression, he leaned down, enfolded her in his arms, and began to thrust, long and slow and deep.

Each thrust sent her mind dancing and her body reaching. It took only a little time and soon she was matching his movements. She did not think. She did not worry. No, she simply surrendered to the ancient call of two bodies moving as one.

It was utter perfection! She held onto him, not out of fear or desperation or need, but because with her body aligned with his, she could forget the world. There was only the two of them.

There was only bliss.

He took her mouth again, their kiss hot and wild. Their breaths entwined, and their hearts beat as one. And suddenly everything vanished as she was cast into pleasure.

He tensed against her and shuddered, crying out her name against her lips. She rippled around his hard sex and let go. Let go entirely.

And the world spun into paradise.

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They stood on Henley Street.

The house loomed across from them.

She stared at it. It was the perfect sort of depiction of a house one expected from the period of Shakespeare's time. Yes, it was a beautiful structure that had withstood centuries.

And yet she felt nothing.

It was alarming. No, she didn't feel nothing. That wasn't accurate. She didn't feel what she'd expected to feel. It was upsetting. And as she gazed at the house, as her heart began to sink, she fisted her gloved hands and gritted her teeth.

"What is it?" Ajax asked softly.

"I don't know," she replied, desperately searching inside herself for an answer. "I was looking for something."

"And you haven't found it?" he queried without judgement.

She tore her gaze from the house on the street and gazed up at him. Henley Street was extremely busy. People were passing back and forth, going about their daily lives, living just as they should. There was nothing particularly magical about the house. Nothing great, so to speak. It was very old. It had clearly been there for centuries, and the people who lived in it were now long distant from William Shakespeare. Though her research had indicated to her that the owners were still connected to him.

She let out a sharp breath and shook her head. “I don’t know what I thought I’d feel. Truly, I came here looking for... I don’t know now.”

“You came here looking for you, Win,” he said gently.

Her insides... Oh, dear God, her heart ached at that.

“Is that true?” she gasped, trying to keep herself from vibrating apart before the house William Shakespeare had grown up in.

He nodded slowly. “It is indeed true. At least, that’s what I think. That’s why you came to Shakespeare’s childhood home, to Stratford. Somehow you thought you’d find yourself here, but, Win,” he said with utter conviction. He looked like he longed to take her hand in his, but he could not in such a public setting, especially as she was dressed as a young man. Young men did not need their hands held. That was one of the harsh realities of society too.

He paused and then declared, “You’ve always been there inside you. You didn’t need to go looking for you. You just needed to let you out. And you’re doing that.”

She stared at the house again as his words washed over her. Her eyes began to fill with tears, and she cursed herself. She wasn’t supposed to cry, not dressed like this. She couldn’t.

Everything had been so wonderful. Everything had been going just right. He had opened doors to her that she hadn’t even known existed. And now here, everything was beginning to unravel.

Except for him. He was a thread that seemed determined to pull her together into something new.

Stratford-upon-Avon was not an unmitigated disaster, of course, because she'd discovered that she was not as trapped as she'd believed. That she was not broken as she'd thought. He was opening pathways to her that she hadn't even known existed.

But as she stood here with him, there was no escaping that Shakespeare's house was not a doorway to some magical understanding of herself. The entire town wasn't. She thought she'd find more than this.

"You know what?" he ventured boldly "I think that we need to continue your adventure but differently. You've seen this house. It is just a house. People are born in it. They live their lives in it. They struggle. They fight just as we know Shakespeare's father did. And then those people die. And the house? Well, the house passes to someone else. The house itself is just a place where people play out their lives. It's like a theater. And inside is the stage. The acts come—tragedies, comedies, all of it. And then the curtain falls until a new play opens."

She blinked. "How did you become so wise?"

"Am I?" He laughed. "I did not think I was the wise one in my family. I think you'll find that my mother and my brothers are far wiser than me."

"Cease," she stated.

"What?" he queried.

"Speaking thus about yourself, Ajax," she said. "You mustn't."

"Was I speaking poorly of myself? I wasn't aware of it."

"Yes, you were," she said, "and despite the din of the street and my own discomfort, I see it."

“What?” he asked, tensing.

She squeezed her hands together, remembering that sometimes telling the truth put her in a horrible spot, but she couldn't stop herself. “You are terribly good at living free, but the truth is you don't think well enough of yourself.”

His shoulders tensed under his fine coat. “I don't know what to say about that.”

“You don't have to say anything,” she replied. “Just think about it. Now, if this is just a stage and the people in it are the actors, what are we to do now?” She winced. “There is no script to tell us.”

His tension dissipated and he winked. “That's right. There's no script and so we don't know what's coming next.”

“But I have that whole itinerary,” she protested.

“Yes, you do,” he agreed. “Shall we stick to it?”

She bit the inside of her lip. “I wanted to see all those places.”

“Then let's,” he said. “But I think there's somewhere I'd like to show you.”

“Oh,” she said, curious now. “Where?”

“How would you like to see the castle of a kingmaker?”

Her eyes widened and she was stunned because she knew exactly who he meant and where he intended to take her. “Very much indeed,” she said.

He gave her an approving nod. “Then let us go.”

And with that, they headed down the street away from all the expectations she'd made and with the understanding that maybe she'd just opened Ajax's eyes to his own set of expectations and how limiting he'd let himself be in them. Because he was far greater than he imagined. She knew that in her core, and she wanted him to see it too.

As they entered the inn, she was all but bursting with questions and Ajax was relieved. He'd hated to see the sorrow on her face, the disappointment as she'd begun to understand that she'd never find herself in external things.

He'd seen it before, over and over again, as people chased their lives away, desperately hoping that some thing or some moment would show them who they were inside. As if a new house, a hand of cards, a bottle of perfume, or a cravat could make a man or a woman, as it were.

It couldn't.

There were no external markers that could suddenly turn one into the person one wished to be. No, it was, dare he say, an inside piece of work, and he'd been at it most of his life. He was certainly more fortunate than most in that he'd been awoken to the idea by his mother that buying things and achieving things would not bring him peace inside.

Now, he was already born having a great deal. It was the good fortune of being a Briarwood. That said, he'd seen young men born to such privilege fall by the wayside, pursuing material goods, pursuing accolades, pursuing horses, pursuing adulation.

None of it ever worked out.

One might have thought that a loftier aim, such as pursuing Shakespeare, would have

worked out for Winifred, but usually such things were simply external and meant to distract one from the turmoil within.

He was grateful that she'd realized it. Because her inner turmoil was now exposed, she was going to have to come to terms with the battle raging inside her, the battle for the real Lady Winifred. And he was going to make certain that she did indeed win. And the old Winifred, the Winifred that her family had made her become, would never gain control again.

"How shall we gain admittance?" she asked as they headed into the busy inn. "Do you even know the family that owns the ruined castle?"

He laughed, loving the feel of being surrounded by jolly good living. "Yes, I do, but that doesn't actually matter. You see, when one is a brother to the Duke of Westleigh, one can go just about anywhere and do just about anything."

She laughed in turn, which turned into a groan. "Of course. I should have thought of that."

He nodded. "All doors open to anyone related to my older brother. So I shall take you there on the morrow. We shall gain admittance, and we shall have a grand tour. We could probably spend the whole day there. It's a vast place. The castle is marvelous. I've been many times."

"You don't need to boast about it so intensely," she teased.

He winced playfully. "Forgive me. You see, Mama is a great fan of Shakespeare like yourself, so I have been dragged all over the countryside seeing many things connected to Shakespeare. Though I confess I've never been to Stratford. Mama was not very interested in the village that he was born in."

Her brows rose upward. “Why?” she asked, surprised.

“Well, do you know anything about my mother’s story?” he queried as they crossed into the common room, weaving their way through crowds of people to find a table. He waved for a barmaid to fetch them their evening drink.

“Not really,” she confessed. “I’ve just heard rumors.”

He grinned slowly. “Rumors? Do tell.”

She hesitated but then, as she was naturally inclined to do, she said honestly, “Well, she was an actress, wasn’t she? She performed upon the stage and, as my mother would say, waved her limbs about.”

A slow rumble of a laugh tumbled out of him. “Oh, Mama would greatly appreciate that! Waved her limbs about, indeed. I suppose one could argue that when she did play the pants roles, just like you are doing now in real life, she did wave her limbs about in stockings and rather elaborate breeches.”

“Ah,” she corrected, her lips twitching. “But I’m not performing.”

He lowered himself to the wooden bench and pounded the table. “Now I agree with you. I think this is the most honest you’ve ever been.”

She gave him a strange look as she sat beside him. “You are right.”

He knew it. He’d already known it, and he was glad she was beginning to see it too.

“Did your mother like those roles?” she asked, her brow furrowing. “Surely, she felt exposed.”

He considered this and all the stories his mother had told them. “Mama loved those parts. She said playing those was liberating. She understood that when Shakespeare wrote those characters, they were played by boys, not women at all. Women weren’t allowed on the stage until the 1660s, but she said it always gave her a feeling of freedom.”

Her eyes danced. “That’s what I feel too,” she breathed. “Being a man is so...entirely different. I have choices. I can do so much.”

He winked at her and whispered, “Best be careful talking about playing a man here.”

She gave a quick nod and composed her face into a suitably stern male look. “Oh, you’re right. Of course.”

Two tankards of frothing ale were put down in front of them, and they both took a quick drink.

She let out a contented sigh.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

She cocked her head to the side, her short dark wig catching the firelight. “With you? With you, I feel like I could weather any difficulty. As if the worst disappointments might come, but we’ll find a way to turn it all about. Or so it seems.”

He leaned towards her and drew in a deep, life-giving breath, one that filled his lungs as hope slipped through him. Hope that he was just the man she needed.

“That’s the point of life. To make anything awful seem hopeful and full of chance. That’s the trick of this existence. To find the possibility in the darkness.”

She frowned, staring down into her ale. "I don't see what possibility there will be up in Suffolk."

"You don't have to do it," he blurted.

She shook her head and said with a resigned tone, "Oh, but I do. What recourse have I but to follow the rules of my mother? To do as she says. Even my brother Alfred is lost."

"Why?" he demanded.

Her frown turned into an irritated scowl.

"Forgive me," he said. "I don't understand. Surely, you could choose differently?"

"Of course I can't. You know I can't," she pointed out bluntly.

He refused to let her see so narrowly, even if it was a challenge.

He straightened and gazed at her up and down. "Look at you now," he stated factually. "Could the Win that you are now have imagined doing this a year ago?"

Her scowl softened and her mouth dropped open. "I suppose not."

"So do not limit your thinking. The world will hand you an opportunity. Look for it," he urged. "Do not resign yourself to a future which makes you miserable. No need to choose hell while one is alive."

He should ask her to marry him. Here and now. It was the fastest solution. The easiest.

But he bit down on the inside of his cheek. Easy was not the best. It would be a rescue, and he had a strong sense that Winifred did not need him to rescue her. She needed to rescue herself, lest she go the rest of her life feeling as if she was a bit of driftwood tossed about in a storm, when she was a power as great as any gale. A bird could not know it could fly unless it spread its wings.

She ground her teeth together. "I'm going to say something rather rude to you."

He felt a wave of delighted anticipation. "Please do."

"On purpose," she clarified.

He plunked his elbow onto the table and turned further towards her. "I never find anything that you say rude, but do go ahead."

She drew in a long, preparatory breath. "It's all tosh what you're saying. Because of who you are and what you are. It's easy for you to say such a thing."

He narrowed his gaze and pulled his chin back. "I don't understand." He coughed at her hard stare. "Well, I mean I do. I'm a duke's brother. I have wealth—"

"No, no," she broke in, "it's more than that." She tilted her head down and gave him a knowing look. "I met your mother."

That last statement came out as if it was a book of information rather than four simple words.

He sputtered on the ale he'd just brought to his lips. "I beg your pardon."

"I met your mother," she reiterated. "The night of the ball when you asked me to dance, she approached me. I suppose I should have told you about it before."

He sucked in a slow breath and closed his eyes. “You met her.”

“She cornered me, if you must know, and dragged me into a small room. She wanted to know what I had planned for you.”

“Of course she did,” he rasped as he slowly opened his eyes. He drove a hand through his hair. His mother, his darling wonderful mother, could not stop herself from meddling in her children’s lives. He was grateful. Of course, she always got the right of things, so he refused to whine about it.

“What did she want?” he asked with long-learned patience when it came to Sylvia, Dowager Duchess of Westleigh.

Her eyes began to sparkle, not with annoyance but with awe. “She wanted to make sure I wasn’t going to hurt you and that I wasn’t going to get hurt, but she thought rather well of my decisions, which surprised me greatly. I was sure that she was going to turn me over to my mama.”

Ajax snorted. “My mother? She would never. Not in a month of Sundays. Any person seeking their freedom, liberation, or a better understanding of themselves? She’ll celebrate.”

Winifred nodded. “She said she’d help me.”

He cocked his head to the side and smiled at her. “Well, there you go. There’s your way out of the darkness of Suffolk. My mother will help you. She’ll find a way.” He banged his hand on the table as an idea hit him. “She’ll find a position for you.”

“A position?” she echoed.

“My mother is a woman of many talents.” His mind began ticking as he considered

the possibilities. “You love Shakespeare. You’re clearly good at disguise. She could find you a job in the theater.”

Winifred’s mouth dropped open and yet he could see the temptation lurking behind the horror. “My mother would die of apoplexy,” she hissed.

“Mothers are always claiming that they’re going to die of apoplexy, but they never do,” he replied simply before taking a long triumphant drink.

She stared at him for a long moment. “But what if—”

“Truly, she’ll recover,” he cut in. “My family has recovered over and over again, and maybe the shock will do her good. She doesn’t seem a very happy sort of person.”

Winifred let out a sigh. “She’s not. I think my father’s death really ruined so much of her happiness.”

“I’m sorry for it,” he said gently, not wishing to be cavalier about such a thing. “My mother was distraught when our father died, but I think she had weathered so much already that she understood that it was part of the natural order of life. And she was simply grateful that she’d been with him. And then she made up her mind to make certain that her children were reflections of her love for him.”

Winifred winced. She looked towards the fire as if trying to decide if she should share her experiences, but then she threw all caution to the wind and said, “That’s not at all what happened with my mother. She clung to us and clutched at us and was determined that there would be no mistakes, that we would not disappoint our departed father, and that we would not let the family down. And I have honestly been nothing but a disappointment. I don’t even know where my older brother is at present. He has the title, but he’s on a mission to find a wife. He doesn’t like being around us, in any case, and I can’t blame him. I’m sure he’ll marry soon. Mama is determined

that he should. It's his duty, after all." Her face creased with sorrow. "I don't even receive letters from him anymore. That's how little we talk. How much we're separated. How...he escaped us."

"I'm sorry," he soothed, hating her pain but knowing it was important she speak it. "I can't imagine not talking to my brothers and sisters. We are so close."

She shrugged. "Alfred and I are close like that. And if I hadn't had him, I don't know what I would've done."

"You're not alone now," he replied, longing to take her in his arms.

Her face transformed at that. "That's what your mother said."

"You must know one thing," he said.

"What's that?" she asked.

"My mother is always right."

And then, suddenly, a voice boomed from across the room. "Ajax!"

He tensed and closed his eyes. It couldn't be. No. No, it couldn't be. He opened his eyes slowly, willing himself to be mistaken.

He spotted Winifred first.

Her eyes were wide. Her mouth was open, and she sat poker straight.

"Don't tell me," he groaned.

“What?” she whispered.

“It’s a rather annoying blond fellow. Looks a bit like me, rather big. And I bet he has company.”

She let out a bleat of alarm. “That’s correct. How did you know?”

He let out a beleaguered sigh. “Because it’s impossible not to know when a Briarwood is in the room.”

And with that, Ajax turned slowly on his bench and spotted his brother, Lord Zephyr.

Zephyr lifted his hand in a merry salute. And then his brother Achilles and his cousin Jean-Luc emerged.

Ajax cursed himself for being a thousand kinds of fool for leaving any evidence behind about this endeavor. Because that was the only explanation for their presence. And he was going to murder them.

One by one.

But then Ajax stood and waited for the banter that he knew was about to begin.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

“D rinks for everyone!” declared one of the young men as he sat down at the table, plunking himself on the bench.

Winfred stared at the lot of them.

What the blazes was happening? Three young men had just descended upon her and Ajax as if they were a whirlwind. The confidence, the arrogance, the good looks? They surrounded her like a veritable entourage of legends.

“Now, Ajax,” said the young man sitting beside her, “do introduce us to your young friend.”

She swung her gaze back and forth between Ajax and this man who did look quite a bit like Ajax, and she realized the fellow looked like Ajax’s mother as well. Brothers! They had to be brothers. She’d seen the Briarwoods at a distance at balls, but from her quiet corner, she was never very close to them. For they were always at the center of everything, and she was as far from the center as one could get.

Ajax appeared as if he was going to grab the man, shake him so hard his teeth would rattle out of his head, and then toss him to the floor. But Ajax did none of those things. Instead, he sat still in the loud room, arched a single blond brow, and replied, “Win, this is my brother Lord Zephyr, my younger brother Lord Achilles, and my cousin Jean-Luc from France.”

“How do you do?” she managed to pipe and then cursed herself because her voice had been shockingly high.

She clapped her hand against her chest and coughed. “Forgive me, I had a touch of the lung last month, and my voice does the strangest things,” she said in a low, exaggerated rumble before she picked up her tankard and took a large slurp of ale.

Her gaze darted between the men, wondering what new devilry was about to arise. This most certainly was not on her itinerary, and she had no idea what to do... or to say. Knowing her, she would blurt out something impossible.

“Ah,” replied Lord Zephyr as he cocked his head to the side. He pursed his lips. “Yes, very difficult things are lung complaints. Those kinds of colds can have one sounding like a girl in a trice. Don’t you agree?”

She bit the inside of her cheek.

Did he know?

She gave Ajax a surreptitious look. Ajax gave a slight shrug as if to say he wasn’t certain what his brothers and cousin knew.

“How?” she mouthed over her ale. Truly, she wished to know how the men had found them. She had been so very careful.

Ajax winced.

She swung her gaze back to Lord Zephyr. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“What a question! No attempt at pleasantries, is it?” His lips curled into a smile. “Is this not a free country? Can a lord not travel about and enjoy the company of society?”

“Of course,” she gritted. “But it does seem rather interesting that you would run into

your brother in such a free country.”

“Well,” Lord Achilles chimed in, leaning forward and propping his arm against the table. “I confess this is not entirely coincidental.”

Lord Zephyr folded his arms over his broad chest, cocked his head to the side, and smiled again before he added, “No, we Briarwoods don’t believe in coincidences. We believe in synchronicity instead.”

Achilles winked, his handsome face full of the devil-may-care attitude of one who had seen a few dark things and hid them with a smile. “And to be fair, we did have a little bit of help.”

“Help?” she echoed. She shifted on the wooden bench, rather grateful that the inn was so crowded that everyone else was busy drinking their ales, eating their dinners, and listening to the jolly fiddle being played by the fire.

Ajax groaned.

“Oh, indeed. We discovered the most fascinating itinerary in our library,” drawled Lord Zephyr merrily. “It was a whole list of places to be visited and adventures to be had, and we couldn’t let our brother have all the fun. Now could we?”

Jean-Luc, who was shockingly handsome too, lifted his hand in salute. “And, of course, I know so little of England. I have only just arrived from France a few months ago, and these fine fellows offered to give me a tour. It seems as if you are exploring the sights of Monsieur Shakespeare.”

She narrowed her gaze, turned to Ajax, and wondered if it was possible for her to kill a man with a single look. All the trouble she’d gone to, all the hard work to maintain the anonymity and discretion of their plan, and he’d left the itinerary lying about?

He winced again. “Forgive me,” he said before narrowing his gaze at the trio of his family members. “I should have realized that I could not leave evidence of our travel about, but I thought my brothers had better sense than this.”

Lord Zephyr laughed. “You know us better than that.”

Ajax gave the fellow a ball-crushing stare. “Indeed, I do,” Ajax growled as a barmaid came to the table, tray in hand.

“What can I get you gents?” she asked with a saucy smile.

“The gents shall have a round of gin,” replied Lord Achilles, who then leaned forward and waggled his brows at Winifred.

She felt her entire body freeze. Was he about to tell the entire company that she was indeed a girl and not a lad?

Achilles lifted his gaze to the barmaid. “The lad will have another ale. Gin’s too rough. We wouldn’t want hair growing on his chest too soon.”

She scowled at him. “A gin will do,” she said tightly.

Zephyr applauded. “Gins for everyone!”

The barmaid whirled around, her green skirts swaying as she went.

“Good man, yourself,” said Achilles, pounding his hand on the table.

“Now whatever are you doing here?” Lord Zephyr asked.

“We are in pursuit of the immortal bard,” Ajax said simply.

“Of course you are. Of course you are,” Achilles said. “Very noble, very bold.”

“Very edifying,” added Lord Zephyr.

“Oui! Very edifying,” Jean-Luc supplied in a rich French accent. He rubbed his fingers together as if thinking of the nectar of the gods. “The pursuit of passion is even more important.”

Her eyebrows shot upward. Passion? She started to lift her hand in protest. “No, no—”

“The passion of words. The passion of literature,” Jean-Luc continued as if he had not alluded that there might be something else.

Her mouth dried.

This was a game she was having difficulty following. Did they know? Did they not know? She tried to think back to the itinerary. Was there anything in it which might suggest that she was a lady? She wondered if they were all clever enough to deduce exactly who she was. None of them knew her. No one in society really knew her well or paid attention to her. She faded into the background wherever she went.

So perhaps they had no clue at all, and she was merely fearful for no reason.

Achilles peered at her. “Now what has got you in the company of my brother when he is such a troublesome sort?”

“I think he’s a marvelous sort. The best,” she retorted before she could think and stop herself. There it was. The thing which made society impossible for her. She just had to speak before considering!

“Do you?” Lord Zephyr asked, something strange lighting eyes. Something akin to approval. “Haven’t learned the art of insult yet, have you?”

Winifred laughed. “I suppose not.”

Achilles blew out a rueful whistle. “Innocent as the day is long, Ajax. Whatever are you up to?”

Ajax’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “None of your bloody business.”

“It’s family business,” Achilles countered, tugging at the elegant cuff of his coat. “Anyone you associate with is family business. We had to come and see what you were up to. This is so out of your usual line.”

Ajax frowned. “Is it?”

Zephyr considered this. “Pursuing Shakespeare around the country? You do love the theater, of course, and Shakespeare too, but the likes of Win here?”

Achilles tsked. “This is not usual. So we thought we needed to come and see what you were about. To see whether we needed to start ringing any bells as a reminder.”

Ajax scowled. “You do know what’s happening here.”

And then she knew. Her stomach sank, and she felt a wave of panic course through her.

They absolutely did know that she was a girl.

Bells? Bells? Could they mean...

Hadn't his mother made some strange suggestion about marriage? Was that what he meant by bells? If so... She felt her panic turn to fury.

"What the devil are you on about?" she gritted. "Such an insinuation is insulting. I do not think that one should make fun of anyone so blatantly."

"Ah, the innocent one has teeth," Achilles replied, banging his hand against the table again. "Good. And forgive me. I never wanted to cause you any real insult. It's just the way of us fellows. We like to make life difficult for each other, but if there's a real scrape, of course, we're there to help."

She blinked, stunned. Had she misunderstood? "Truly?"

"Indeed," Zephyr affirmed.

Achilles leaned his arms on the table and said with a shrug, "It is the only way to get by in this merry war of life. But in reality, we are all the greatest of allies."

"So, anything you want, Win?" Zephyr explained. "If it's what our brother wants? We want it too."

She narrowed her gaze. "Did your brother want you to come here?"

"A point to her!" exclaimed Jean-Luc.

"In regards to that," Achilles began, "we couldn't let this sort of thing just be. Because this is too much fun."

"Is it?" she queried archly.

"Oh, yes," Lord Zephyr returned, stealing Ajax's tankard and taking a drink. "Can't

you see my dearest brother squirming there?”

She turned and looked at Ajax on the bench. “Yes, I suppose he is. And why is that?” she asked.

Zephyr gaped at her.

“Don’t you know?” Achilles asked, astonished.

“No,” she said, shaking her head and feeling lost.

“He’s getting married soon,” Lord Zephyr declared boldly.

The words were loud, but they were swallowed up by the din of the music and the crowd, which was growing merrier as the drinks flowed.

Her insides twisted with a pain she could not have anticipated. “I see,” she managed.

“Cease, you three,” Ajax growled, his tone a low warning. “Win has no idea what you’re saying, and you’re causing difficulty.”

Achilles tsked. “Oh dear. We wouldn’t want that.” But then Achilles’ face lost its saucy teasing. “Quite seriously, you must forgive us. We are a terrible lot until you get to know us better.”

“I’ll take you at your word,” she drawled.

“This one will fit right in,” Zephyr announced.

“Fit in where?” she asked, feeling most confused. And her heart—her dratted heart—ached. He was getting married?

“With us, of course?” Achilles stated. “Don’t you think us—?”

“Magnifique?” cut in Jean-Luc, his eyes dancing brightly.

She let out a laugh at that. “Oh, certainly,” she said. “And certainly intriguing, certainly impossible, but also—”

“Yes?” Lord Zephyr prompted.

“Rather admirable in your zest for life,” she allowed. But she wasn’t truly certain what to make of all of this. This rowdy joy of life. Especially since it seemed it was going to be taken away.

She’d always known it would. Ajax was only her guide for a short time. But she’d never imaged he was promised to someone. It made her whole body ache with sorrow.

“Ah, good. She knows quality when she sees it,” Achilles said.

“He knows quality when he sees it,” Zephyr added, pointing to Ajax. “At last, thank heaven! When will the wedding take place?”

“What wedding?” she rasped, barely able to get the words past her tightening throat. This was beginning to be too much. Too painful.

Achilles blinked at her, confused. “The one with the bells.”

She stared blankly at them.

Ajax sucked in a breath, ready to cut in, but Lord Zephyr added quickly, “The one we were referring to just a few moments ago.”

She drew herself up. She would not cry. She would not act a fool and show her foolish heart to these men. “How should I know if Lord Ajax is getting married? Or when.”

And she found herself quite offended that Ajax had not had the decency to tell her he was betrothed. Truly, he should not have been taking her about if he was going to be married. She swallowed back a tide of sorrow.

Ajax gave her an imploring look, then he leaned forward and whispered in her ear, “They mean my marriage to you. They want to know when we will wed.”

And with that, the gin arrived.

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“W hat?” Winifred gasped.

Her face was a mask of complete shock as she took in his words, and then her visage transformed into one of anger.

As the gin was set down before her in a small clay cup, she eyed it and then, much to his astonishment, she grabbed it and took a long swig.

He wanted to warn her, but before he could, she’d downed half of it.

Her eyes widened even further and she coughed. She slammed the cup down and stood.

“I will not be a subject for humiliation,” she ground out, though it was clear she was deeply hurt. “Or fun.”

And with that, she climbed over the bench quickly and headed out of the room, weaving her way through the crowd with surprising skill, as if she was used to disappearing into large, packed rooms without being noticed.

“What the bloody hell are you thinking?” he demanded, turning to his brothers and his cousin.

The three of them looked shocked at her departure.

“We didn’t mean offense,” Achilles rushed.

“Well, you gave it,” Ajax bit out.

“How?” Zephyr asked, also clearly flummoxed. “Win’s marvelous.”

“Look.” Ajax stood and planted twin fists on the table as he said as quietly as he could, “Win hasn’t had anybody pursue her. Ever. And Win is being sent away because of it. All Win wanted was one last great adventure before it happened and...she came to me to make that happen. The way you were teasing her... She doesn’t think I’d ever ask her to marry me. She thought you were making fun of her.”

Achilles, Zephyr, and Jean-Luc gaped at him.

“Bloody hell,” ground out Achilles.

“Zounds,” rasped Zephyr.

“Merde,” announced Jean-Luc.

And in that moment, it hit him so hard. He hated it. It was like a crushing blow worse than any he’d ever known, and he’d known some heavy blows. He’d fought in the streets, and he was trained by one hell of an Irishman in the art of street battle, but this was far worse than anything he’d ever known because of her pain. Oh God, it went through him in a way his own could not, and the tightening coil of it nearly stole his breath away.

And the fact that she thought so little of herself? It nearly undid him.

His brothers and cousin genuinely had been teasing. They’d been happily alluding to what the three of them assumed was a foregone conclusion apparently—his marriage to Winifred.

It never would've occurred to him that she would think so little of herself that it would seem impossible that he'd ask her to marry him. But her actions proved it true.

The three men exchanged glances.

"We are sorry," whispered Zephyr.

Ajax stood. "Well, you're going to have to explain that to her."

But at present, he needed to sort this out himself. Without his family.

Ajax marched out of the room, leaving his gin untouched. He weaved his way through the crowd and hurried up the stairs. Then he knocked on the door softly and entered.

Winifred stood at the window, gazing out into the dark night, her arms folded over her chest.

"They are a bunch of fools," he said without hesitation.

She shrugged her shoulders. "They're young," she replied, "and I'm sensitive."

"They weren't jesting," he said, even as the world began to spin about him. For in that moment, he realized his whole future was pinned on this moment.

She looked back over her shoulder. "What do you mean?"

He cleared his throat and took a step towards her. "They're not jesting," he repeated.

She snorted. "Of course they are. They're having a merry old time making fun of my situation. After all, I'm an old spinster."

He flinched, and his heart ached for her. For so long, she'd been told the most terrible things, and it was clear she had come to believe them.

"Yes," he said softly. "They're having a merry time because that's how Zephyr, Achilles, and Jean-Luc are. They live life through a series of jokes, but usually those jokes are also masking truth..."

Ajax licked his lips and confessed, "They see it."

She narrowed her gaze. "See what?" she demanded.

"My feelings for you."

She stilled and swallowed. "Ajax—"

"You see," he rushed, refusing to lose his nerve now, "Briarwoods don't mess about. When they find the person they care for, they marry them. I would have asked sooner, but I didn't want to scare you off. I thought you might think me totally mad since we've known each other for such a little time. I was hoping to woo you a bit first, make you see how happy we could be together before I asked. But...I'm glad I don't have to wait."

She blinked. "You're serious?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Very."

Her eyes welled with tears, and she snapped her shoulders back before she bit out, "But I'm not the sort of person..."

"What?" he prompted gently. "The sort of person that I marry? Who is the sort of person that I should marry Winifred?"

He took a step forward, aching to close the distance between them, to make her understand.

For a moment, the only sound that filled the air was the fire crackling, burning the wood in the hearth, and the wind slipping past the windowsill.

She stared at him, her lips parting even as her eyes shimmered.

“Some silly debutante?” he at last suggested dryly. “A young lady of the ton, who will never interest me or challenge me or do as you have done and chosen so boldly?”

Her brow furrowed and she lifted a hand to her face as if she might cover her eyes. As if it was all too much to believe.

“Surely, you will choose someone beautiful. Someone who is a lady, who is desired by everyone,” she insisted.

He sucked in a long breath. It was all he could do not to cross the room and seize her in his arms. But not yet. He had to make her see too. “Why would I want such a thing? I don’t need someone who is desired by everyone, Winifred. I only need someone who is desired by me to be my wife.”

She stilled at that. Her hands lowered to her sides. “You want me for your wife? For more than just this...”

And before she could finish speaking, there was a pounding on the door.

“Bloody hell.” Ajax rolled his eyes, his shoulders tensing as if he had been hanging on her every word. “Do you think if I dug three holes behind the inn, put my brothers and cousin in them swiftly, covered them, and then put horse manure on top, that anyone would notice?”

A laugh tumbled out of her lips at the image and his clear love for his family, even though they frustrated him. “I don’t know. How quickly can you dig?”

“Would you help me?” he asked, waggling his brows.

She let out another laugh, shocked that she could laugh at such a time. She had never laughed so much before or in serious moments. Was this what it was like to be with him? “I might,” she allowed, “but I’m not entirely certain how good I’d be at it.”

He dragged his gaze up and down her form and his lips curled. “Oh, I don’t know. You’re good at a great many things that you didn’t know you’d be good at.”

And with that, he turned to the door. “Should I let them in?”

She bit her lower lip, worrying it, feeling rather overwhelmed by the events unfolding this night. And yet it seemed as if they were unfolding toward a place she never could have dared imagine. “I don’t know. What do you think they want?”

He let out a long sigh, put his hand on the doorknob, and said, “There’s only one way to find out.”

In one quick move, Ajax opened the panel, and the three of them spilled in like sardines falling out of a barrel.

Ajax slammed the door shut behind them, then folded his arms across his chest like a schoolmaster who expected his errant students to repent.

The three young men had the good grace to look ashamed. Achilles was holding his hat in his hands, rotating it. “Can you forgive us?”

Forgive them? She blinked. No one had ever apologized to her before. Not like this.

“I suppose it depends on what you’re asking forgiveness for.”

Achilles, Zephyr, and Jean-Luc exchanged a set of glances.

“We never meant to hurt your feelings,” Zephyr rushed.

“It means we like you,” added Achilles swiftly.

She frowned. “What means you like me?”

“The teasing,” Jean-Luc said as if it was shocking to him that she could think they did not like her.

“We don’t tease people we don’t like,” Achilles explained. “We’re just rude to them.”

She cocked her head to the side, taking their rapid comments in, trying to make sense of them.

In the past, when people had teased her, it had never been out of fondness but to point out how she did not belong.

Zephyr nodded. “Exactly,” he added. “We don’t waste our time with people we don’t like, Lady Winifred. That is your name, isn’t it?”

She nodded slowly as her pulse began to beat wildly. Her entire life seemed to be turning over in a moment. But then again, it had been evolving at a radical rate ever since she’d made the decision to not simply accept her fate meekly.

“We weren’t trying to insinuate anything about you or about our brother...” Achilles shot Ajax a stare. “Except he needs to get the job done quickly. We don’t want to risk him losing you.”

“Losing me?” she gasped. “How do you even know about me? Or that I’m apparently the one he should wed?”

Zephyr cleared his throat. “Our mother, if you must know.”

She blinked. “Your mother?”

Ajax threw up his hands and let out a beleaguered sound. “Did you have some sort of family meeting?”

Achilles grinned. “You know we did.”

“Over tea and biscuits,” added Zephyr.

“And marvelous cakes,” Jean-Luc declared. “The Heron House chef is superb.”

“He really is,” agreed Zephyr.

“We discussed the merits of the wedding, of course,” Achilles continued. “And if you should have it at St. Paul’s—”

“Or,” put in Zephyr, “there was some suggestion that it should be a swift wedding here in the country. Then it would be done.”

Achilles nodded as if this was his favorite option. “You are of age. You don’t need permission from any of your family.”

“Are we right in understanding that to be true?” Zephyr asked.

She blinked, so overborne by their enthusiasm and apparent plans for her that she blurted, “I’m old.”

Jean-Luc let out a laugh, throwing back his head, which caused his thick hair to shine in the firelight. “Old, mademoiselle? You are in your prime.”

She cocked her head to the side and began to smile. The three of them were quite the outside of enough, but she was coming to enjoy their excitement and commitment to bringing her into the family. “I like that idea, but that’s not the general sentiment of the ton.”

“We don’t generally follow the sentiment of the ton,” Zephyr put in.

“I’m beginning to truly understand that.” She’d understood this theoretically. But now? She understood quite practically that the Briarwood family was not like the rest of the ton. Not at all.

She drew in a long breath. “The four of you in one room, talking to me thus, is quite something. A part of me feels certain it must be some great lie. Some trick. I know such tricks do occur and not just in books—”

“It’s not a trick, Winifred,” Ajax assured, his voice low and firm as if he was speaking some sort of vow. “My family is just pushing me towards what I already know. It’s what we do to each other.”

She gazed upon the man who had already given her so much. Who had helped her transform. “And what do you know?” she whispered.

“That without question, you are the one I’m supposed to marry...if you’ll but allow it.”

She gasped. “This feels impossible.”

“I assure you this is very possible,” he whispered, his gaze full of emotion. “I’ve

known where we were headed since we met.” A rueful smile turned his lips. “It drove me absolutely mad when I realized what was happening. I thought I was going to be able to avoid getting married for at least a few more years, but it seems like the Briarwoods are going down like plague victims in the medieval period.”

“One right after the other,” crowed Zephyr.

“It’s definitely a sickness, but it seems to be a nice one,” Achilles pointed out. “Our siblings are incredibly happy.”

She frowned. “This is all happening so fast, and it seems beyond the realm of what I ever could have hoped for—”

“Would marriage to me be better than looking after your great aunt?” Ajax asked.

A note of surprise slipped past her lips. “Is that my choice then? Marrying you or looking after my great aunt?”

He shook his head. “No. Remember, my mother could always help you find work in the theater. But you wish to marry me. Don’t you?”

“Do I?” she breathed. She was terrified to say yes. This was all too good. All too wonderful. If she said yes, would it all vanish?

“It seems like the greatest of adventures, doesn’t it?” Ajax queried.

She licked her lips. The room suddenly felt very warm, the colors of the men’s coats grew brighter, the stick pins in their cravats winked, the crackle of the fire burst in the air, and the glow of the candles was more romantic.

Yes, suddenly, everything seemed more.

“What do you say?” Ajax whispered.

“Come on,” Achilles urged. “Do say yes.”

Zephyr nodded. “Indeed. We love seeing our siblings get married. Half of them did it last year!”

“Bloody hell,” Achilles groaned.

Zephyr looked at his brother. “What?”

“Since so many of us have married recently, does that mean we are next?” Achilles asked.

Zephyr shook his head. “No, we’re too young.”

Jean-Luc just let out a laugh. “There is no knowing. The Fates are mysterious ladies.”

“Fate cannot be denied,” Achilles said with a straight face, and then he turned back to her. “So just say yes. It’s clearly meant to be.”

“Let her respond!” Ajax growled suddenly.

She swung her gaze, trailing her attention to each of them. “You are all positively mad.”

Ajax smiled, even as he waited for her reply. “Of course we are. And you like it, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I do.”

“That’s a yes,” Achilles stated.

“Absolutely,” agreed Zephyr.

“But of course,” finalized Jean-Luc.

“Cease,” countered Ajax as he crossed to her and took her hands in his. He gazed down into her eyes and said, “Let the lady say it. Let’s not waste any time on formalities. Marry me, Winifred Tuttle. You are the best lady that I know. The most interesting and the only one I could imagine spending the rest of my life with. And if you regret saying yes, and find you can’t stand being married to me, I promise to buy you a house, and you can do whatever you want. And I will never get in your way.”

She blinked, her voice hitching in her throat as awe filled her. “You are the oddest person, Ajax.”

“Just like you,” he said softly.

“Yes,” she whispered, holding his hands tightly, savoring their strength. Their warmth. “Just like me. Who would’ve thought we were so alike? I never would have.”

“That’s why we found each other, my darling.”

And in that moment, she felt more at home than she had in her whole life. She had been found.

“Then, yes,” she replied. “Most definitely yes.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

The history of the castle stole through her body, vibrating through her bones. Good God, the things and the people who had lived here—it was beyond words. She stared up at the massive edifice. She and Ajax had been striding around the colossal structure most of the morning. His two brothers and his cousin were off performing antics she could scarce believe. The three of them were absolutely wild.

It had surprised her, but the three men had decided to travel with them, at least as far as this particular destination.

“How does anyone ever contain them?” she asked, turning to Ajax.

“No one does,” he said. “It’s a miracle that they haven’t all been arrested and put in gaol somewhere.”

She laughed. “That bad, are they?”

“Oh, yes, and worse,” he teased. “Frankly, it’s a miracle that I’m standing here before you.”

“Well, as your brother said, it’s meant to be.”

“Yes,” he said with a slow smile, leaning down towards her.

“Don’t forget,” she said, “how I’m dressed.”

He laughed. “How true. Forgive me,” he said. “I want to marry you right now so I can kiss you wherever I please.”

She began to laugh softly at that. Then he leaned back and said, “Why not? I could get a special license. Let’s marry immediately. We can go back to London, get all my family together, and—”

Her face tightened at that. “My family,” she lamented. “Whatever am I going to tell them?”

The wind was picking up, sweeping through her short wig, and playing with her hat. She’d be happy to be rid of the wig for the rest of her days, but she wouldn’t mind keeping the freedom she’d found. She had a sneaking suspicion that as Ajax’s wife, she’d have a great deal of freedom. More freedom than she ever could have hoped for.

“Surely your family will be happy about our union,” he said.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. My mother is quite difficult. My brother, Alfred, of course, will be pleased. He’ll be thrilled that I’m escaping.”

“I like that,” he mused as they walked along. “I am your means of escape.”

He wagged his brows.

“You do that an awful lot,” she teased, feeling light despite her fears about confessing her plans to her mother.

“Why not?” he queried. “One must revel in the good things of life.”

She gazed at the beautiful grounds, trying to truly allow herself to enjoy all of it. “I have reveled so little.”

“Prepare to revel constantly,” he said.

“I shall,” she said. But then she turned to him and asked quite seriously, “Is it not exhausting?”

“No,” he replied. “It is invigorating.”

Invigorating! Her life had never been that. It had been a series of mistakes, and disappointments, and desperately trying not to get it wrong.

But now... Life was opening up before her.

A shiver traveled through her as she thought of all the people who had walked these grounds. “Can you imagine what it would’ve been like?” she asked. “To have so much power that you could call up half the country and overthrow a king.”

“I can’t actually imagine it,” Ajax said honestly, his great coat floating easily behind him. “The Briarwoods are one of the most powerful families in the nation, and my brother has a great deal of influence as a duke, but power like it was back then? That was something altogether different, wasn’t it? I could hardly imagine what it would be like to watch whole armies cross England and destroy each other.”

She nodded. “It must have been brutal,” she whispered. “Family against family, friend against friend, all because of a different set of ideas.”

“All because of a king who was getting it terribly wrong,” Ajax said softly.

For a moment, their own present king, who was unwell and leaving the nation on edge, came to her mind.

She cleared her throat, refusing to believe that England could again be plunged into the chaos of the time of the Kingmaker. “But that king? He didn’t really want to be king, I don’t think.”

“I agree with you,” Ajax said. “And unfortunately, he was forced to do his duty. It would’ve been wonderful if he simply could have stepped down, but he was never going to fill his papa’s shoes.”

She groaned. “What a way to put it. Could anyone have filled Henry V’s shoes?”

“Not likely,” he admitted. “I don’t think that anyone could have lived up to that. Henry V was one of the greatest kings in the entire history of the world, or at least that’s the way we’ve remembered him. His name is legend.”

She smiled. “Yes. Can anyone live in the shadow of a legend and do it well?” she whispered.

He cocked his head to the side. “My family is rather legendary, and we all seem all right.”

“But you don’t have the fate of a nation in your hands,” she pointed out.

He tsked. “My brother would beg to differ. He’s not a prince, and he will never be the king, but that man goes through more struggles than anyone I’ve ever known, trying to make certain that the entire government doesn’t lose sight of its duty and that we don’t have a rebellion like they’re having in France.”

Her insides twisted with a dose of fear at that. “I suppose my imagination is not so very far off. Armies could rove the land again. People could rise up. There could be war.” She folded her arms across her bound chest. “The very idea...is horrifying”

“It won’t happen here, Winifred,” he said softly.

She shook her head. “Are you so very certain?”

“I can’t be absolutely certain.” He drew in a long breath. “Achilles says what’s going on over there is volatile, terrible, and that at any moment it could all go up in flames and fury and anger. It’s already quite bad. My cousin and his sisters barely escaped with their lives. There’s quite a lot of anger against the aristocrats there, and rightly so. The English don’t do a wonderful job with the regular people, but at least we haven’t been as brutal as the French.”

She looked up to the sky and watched the birds wheel overhead, creatures which had no care for the machinations of mankind.

“Why does it take such utter tragedy to change things?” she whispered.

“You don’t need a tragedy to change your life, Winifred,” he pointed out. “You have changed your life. You chose to seek me out, and you’ve chosen to marry me.”

She nodded and pressed her lips together.

“What is wrong?” he pressed.

“I can’t explain it,” she admitted. “Here in this place, where history has happened and great warriors have lived and died, I feel...a sense of foreboding. As if you and I have worked out too easily. You’ve come into my life too easily. It’s going to get taken away, Ajax. Something will happen. I’ve never had so much good fortune in such a short period of time.”

“Don’t say such things,” he rushed. “You wouldn’t wish to make those things happen.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Are you a believer in such magic?”

He laughed, and yet there was a serious note to him now as the wind picked up and

gusted through his golden hair. “No, not exactly, but what my brother said—that we Briarwoods believe in synchronicity—is true. We don’t think things happen by coincidence. There’s a power greater than us at work. Whether you want to call it God or the universe or—”

She blinked at him. “My goodness! You do play with the questions of this world.”

He laughed, though his gaze searched hers as if her opinion mattered greatly. “Do I seem a blasphemer to you?”

“No,” she said honestly. “You’re full of questions, and you see the world differently than anyone else, and that is wonderful to me. I have been forced to live in such a little space, barely taking up any room.”

“And now,” he said, “you will grow wild. And I cannot wait to pull back all the shadows so that the sun can fall upon you, and you can become exactly what you’re meant to be.”

She smiled softly at him. “Truly?”

“I think it’s the purpose of my family,” he replied. “We help ourselves become exactly who we’re meant to be, and then we help others.”

She marveled at him. She didn’t mind if that was his purpose. For it was a noble one indeed. And yet... “You make me sound like a cause rather than a human.”

“You are both,” he said simply. “You are the woman who my heart recognized.”

“That is so...” She paused. “Romantic and without logic.”

“Yes, it is, but logic is often overvalued. Logic is merely trusting the past to dictate

the future. And I'm not going to argue with how I feel. At least, not in regard to this."

"You're one of the first men I've ever known who doesn't argue with how he feels. It's a bit of a shock."

"I like to be a shock," he said. "You're shocking to me."

"Me?" she said. "Shocking?"

"Of course," he said softly. "I was half afraid that you would choose everything you've always known over me. I thought you might choose your great aunt and doing as you are told."

She winced.

"What?" he said softly.

"I need to make them understand us."

"You really don't think they'll be pleased?" he breathed.

"No." Her throat burned as wave after wave of emotion traveled through her. "It's not that a marriage to you wouldn't be a great match for someone like me. It'll simply be such a surprise to them that they may not believe me."

"Would you like my mother to go visit yours?" he offered.

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps. That might be just the thing. After all, my mother might think I've made the whole thing up."

Fury darkened his face, and he ground his teeth at that.

In that moment, she knew, oh dear, she knew! She loved him because he was angry on her behalf, angry at the idea that someone thought she was unworthy of love.

“Oh, Ajax,” she said. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked.

“For showing me that I can be anyone I want, and I can have anything I want, and I am worthy of anything I want.”

“It was always true,” he whispered. “Even without me.”

She shook her head, her heart full. “No, it is because of you.”

Every time he made love to Winifred, his desire for her only increased. How he loved to spend the day with her, but he loved the nights even more. He shared stories with her about his past, his childhood, and the unique life he’d led as a Briarwood.

They spent the hours of moonlight with their bodies entwined, not a hint of clothes between them. The bliss of it, the perfection, transformed him.

He was no longer just Ajax. He was so much more, for with her he felt as if he’d found a part of himself that he had always needed. A part that would make him better, more alive, more at peace.

Ajax kissed her again and again as they lay upon the bed. He could have done nothing but kiss her all night. For with each kiss, he felt drunk. Better than drunk. For there was none of the suffering or pain that came with brandy. No, there was just heaven.

He teased his tongue inside her mouth, then, without thought, he worked his way

down her body. He swirled his tongue around her perfect, pink nipples.

She arched against him as she always did, and he smiled to himself. How he loved that. He loved that he could make her feel such bliss.

He skimmed his lips over her ribs and then down her soft stomach.

He closed his eyes and drank in her scent. If he could have kept her in bed for eternity and left the world out, he would. But as impractical as that was, for he loved witnessing her passion for the world too, he was determined to make her his over and over. He wanted her to long for his touch, his kiss, his body.

“Open to me,” he growled.

She parted her thighs, ready for him... But he wanted to kiss her first.

Kiss her perfect folds. As he lowered his mouth between her thighs, she jolted against him.

“Ajax—”

“If you find it unpleasant, I’ll cease,” he assured.

She relaxed then, and he focused on her pleasure. He stroked his tongue over her petals, finding the spot that always sent her over the edge.

As he licked, and circled, and kissed her, she let out an astonished moan.

“Oh, Ajax,” she sighed, her voice a soft whisper on the night air.

And then he gently stroked two fingers into her core. He thrust them in and out,

finding the other place which caused her such pleasure.

Soon she was tossing her head back and forth on the pillow, racing towards bliss.

And when she reached her peak, he could not stop the sound of satisfaction that rumbled from his throat.

She let out a shuddering sigh and gazed down at him with eyes that were shining with her pleasure.

“Can I do that to you?” she asked.

He groaned and then nodded.

“Show me,” she replied.

And he did. Slowly, Ajax rolled onto his back, offering himself up to her.

She studied his sex the same way she had no doubt studied to make her itinerary. Thoroughly. And then she leaned down and kissed the head of his sex.

He moaned, his hands curling into fists.

Slowly, she explored him, licking his length, teasing her lips along him.

“You can take...me in your mouth,” he managed.

Her brows shot up and then she did exactly as he hoped.

She took his hard sex between her lips and began the rhythm that he used when rocking into her body.

He slid his hands into her hair and watched her, watched as she transported him to that place that was theirs and theirs alone.

“I want you,” he growled.

She lifted her mouth and locked gazes with him. “Then have me,” she whispered.

Without hesitating, Ajax pulled her towards him, placed her legs on either side of his hips, then helped her ride him.

Her eyes flared with shock but then, as she did all things, Winifred embraced the position.

She rode him, placing her hands on his chest, tossing her head back.

Her hair bounced along her beautiful body and the sight of her breasts kissed by moonlight as her core wrapped about him was his undoing.

He grabbed her hips and thrust home, and she too cried out, her body tightening around his again.

And as they both soared on the waves of pleasure, he took her in his arms, knowing the Fates had done their work and that nothing could stop their love now.

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The days passed in absolute bliss.

Winnie had never been so happy in her entire life. They traveled about the country, going from site to site, soaking it all in, and Ajax was the most remarkable companion. His brothers and cousin had gone on their own merry way, leaving them, as Zephyr said, to make starstruck eyes at each other.

For the first time in her entire life, someone not only listened to her as her brother did, but he also gazed upon her with adoration. Not just kindness or tolerance or, as was more typical, frustration and impatience.

No, this time with him was such a wonder that she could scarcely believe it.

He looked at her as if every word she said was fascinating. Surely, it wasn't possible that she had been so entirely misunderstood by the masses all these years, was it?

Had she simply needed to find someone who understood her? Apparently so.

Yes, she was not who had needed to change. She'd needed to change who she was with.

As they continued her adventure, they rode side by side in the coach. She often sat upon his lap. The intimacy that they could now embrace stunned her.

They kept the curtains down when they did that, of course, and many other things ensued. Things which caused her cheeks to burn with excitement and made her body tingle with desire.

Life was so incredibly wonderful in every way! She'd had no idea until she'd found Ajax.

When they were alone, they wound their hands together. They spoke of every single Shakespeare play: the merits and the failures of some of the plays.

Oh, how glorious it was!

They spoke of what it must have been like to have been an author in that time period—the Golden Age. A time when the world was full of dangers and suspicions, when nothing was truly safe and one's beliefs could easily get one killed.

Yes, each day was a glow of castles, and battlefields, and abbeys. Her heart was full, and she felt that nothing could be better than this, but with each day, and each inn, and each beautiful place in his company, she felt herself growing more fearful, if she was honest.

Surely, this could not last.

In her entire life, she'd never been allowed to have such happiness.

No, it had always been seized from her right when she felt she'd been about to grasp any sort of contentment. And then she'd been shoved away and kept quiet, told to sit down and close her mouth and keep her thoughts to herself.

She was coming out of her chrysalis now, like a caterpillar that was finally getting to be a butterfly, but she was terrified that some errant, cruel boy was going to find her and rip off her wings.

Ajax could never do that.

She knew that by looking into his eyes, being with him. His soul, his whole being, his heart was so beautiful that she sometimes wondered how it was that she had found him.

What chance of fate had slipped the idea to search for him into her head? Whatever it was, she was so grateful that Alfred had known so much about him.

Perhaps Ajax and his brothers were correct. Perhaps The Fates were at work. Perhaps this was always meant to happen. Perhaps there was no question that he was the one for her.

As the coach pulled into the inn late that dusky evening, she could still not quite trust that all would work out. Yes, Ajax had proposed marriage to her.

His brothers and his cousin knew.

And it seemed his whole family in London had been cheering on the union.

It would be highly unlikely now that Ajax would rescind such an offer, but she felt uneasy. For all of this seemed to be formed on duplicity—her lie to her mother and, of course, her masquerading as a young man about the countryside.

As they headed across the courtyard to the inn, she drew in a breath. She was being foolish. All would be well; everything would work out. Her life was different now.

The innkeeper spotted them, smiled, wiped his hands on his apron, and gave a quick pull of his forelock to Ajax. “How do you do, my lord? You’re looking for a room this evening, is it?”

“That’s correct,” Ajax replied in his typical pleasant manner.

The innkeeper tsked and looked apologetic. “Well, we did just have another lord arrive. I think we might have a small space for you, but it might not be what you’re accustomed to.”

“That’s quite acceptable,” Ajax assured. “We don’t mind a bit of rough, do we, Win?”

Winifred nodded, making sure that her face did not light up with excitement at the idea of being even closer to him than usual. “Oh, we’ll manage,” Winifred agreed in her best young man’s voice.

“That is a relief because Lord Tuttle is most particular.”

She stiffened. Lord Tuttle?

“He’ll be down in a moment. Perhaps you would all like to dine together,” the innkeeper said helpfully.

She swung her gaze to Ajax, even as fear laced through her. “My brother,” she mouthed.

The innkeeper bounced on his booted feet. “Shall I take you upstairs?”

A muscle in Ajax’s jaw tightened. “Perhaps not. Perhaps we need a moment outside.” But before he could say another word, footsteps echoed down the corridor above and along the stairwell.

Panic clawed her throat. Had she made her brother appear with her worried thoughts? She’d been so certain it was all about to end. And now her brother was here.

She almost wondered if her thoughts had been like a magical spell, summoning

trouble.

How she wished she could go back and eradicate all of those fears and think only good things, but she could not. It was too late.

She stared up at the archway over the stairwell.

She spotted her older brother, the lord—the one who did everything correctly and was looking for a wife just as their mother wished him to—and their eyes locked.

For a moment, Winston, with his dark hair and soft brown eyes, looked uncomprehending.

He stared at her for a very long moment and, for a second, she thought perhaps her disguise was good enough.

After all, she wasn't herself.

She was dressed as a boy. Then his mouth dropped open. He swung his gaze to Lord Ajax and then back to her.

A fire crackled in Winston's gaze, one mixed with horror.

"My lord," the innkeeper called happily. "May I introduce you?"

"Please do," her brother said tightly as he came down the steps, his polished boots shining in the lights flickering on the walls.

"This is Lord Ajax Briarwood and his companion, one Mr. Win Tucker, I believe."

Her brother cocked his head to the side, but his gaze was as sharp as a razor. "Oh,

indeed. A pleasure to meet you both. Shall we share a glass to welcome the evening in?"

"Of course," Lord Ajax said.

She was amazed at his calm demeanor. She was a mass of nerves and longed to flee to the safety of their coach.

The innkeeper gestured towards a doorway to the left. "That room is always kept waiting for esteemed guests. There's claret and Madeira for you."

With that, her brother turned on his booted heel, his back stiff as a coffin board, and she felt as if a funeral was waiting for her. He strode through the door that the innkeeper had gestured to, and she exchanged a look with Ajax.

He smiled down at her and whispered, "Do not worry. Nothing will go amiss, and I shall not leave your side."

She nodded, though her stomach was churning. "All right."

Together, they went in to face her brother.

He was studying the fire. He'd already poured out three glasses of wine, which she did not mistake for a hospitable action. Instead, it felt ominous, as if he was ready to weigh his condemnation upon them but felt the need for them to all have libation first.

They were clearly all going to need it.

"Explain yourselves," Winston ground out coldly, not even bothering to look at them.

Ajax drew in a breath and began, “My lord, it is I—”

“I don’t want to hear from you,” Winston snapped. “At least not yet. I want to know what she’s doing here, unless, of course, you’ve kidnapped her. Have you kidnapped her, Lord Ajax? I’m sure, as the brother of the Duke of Westleigh, you think that you are powerful enough to get away with such a thing.”

Ajax ground his teeth, clearly disgusted by the stain on his character.

Offended on his behalf, she piped up quickly. “Of course not, brother. He’s been ever so kind.”

“Worse and worse,” her brother bit out. “Sister, you have been seduced by a rake. What the bloody hell are you thinking?”

Her brother turned, and his entire face was a mask of disappointment. His eyes sparked with fury, and his hands were curled into tight fists.

“Are you harmed?” he gritted. “Has he hurt you? Has he forced you here?”

She supposed she should be grateful that he was asking those questions and not immediately condemning her. “No. If you must know, I sought him out.”

“You sought him out?” her brother choked. “This is your idea? To be taken about the countryside, to dress as a boy, and to, I assume, be deflowered by him?”

Ajax let out a noise of protest.

“Brother,” she said, rushing, lest Ajax say something he regret, “please. While you are not necessarily incorrect, that is not what I sought him out for. You see, Mama told me that I was to be sent down to the country—”

“And rightly, apparently,” her brother sneered. “I tried to defend you, you know. I suggested to Mother that you should have at least one more year of company and fun before you were sent away, but now I see I should have done it sooner. And perhaps I should have called a doctor in to see if you are in your right mind.”

She sucked in a sharp breath.

“Take it back,” growled Ajax, his voice so low and so cold that it sent a shudder down her spine.

But her brother did not take it back. Instead, Winston’s mouth thinned into a line, making his disgust apparent.

“I have not lost my wits,” she stated, hoping to God she could pacify Winston before this escalated. “If anything, I have gained them. I sought Lord Ajax out because I could not bear the idea of being shut away for the rest of my life to live such a little existence. I wanted to see a bit of the world, to see a bit of the things I loved.”

“And now?” her brother challenged. “Now that you’re completely and totally ruined.”

“I’m not ruined,” she countered. “No one knows that I’m here—”

“It is only a matter of time before the scandal gets out,” her brother hissed. “You know that.”

“And I know that there will be no scandal,” Ajax declared. “She is to be my wife.”

Her brother turned to Ajax and blinked before he let out a dry laugh. “You think there will be no scandal, my lord? That a man like you would want to marry my sister? Everyone will assume the worst and that you have indeed ruined her. They will

assume that she is with child. It is the only possible reason a man like you would marry someone like her.”

“Someone like her,” Ajax echoed, and she could hear the low, building anger in his voice. “Say something like that again,” Ajax gritted, “and I’ll call you out.”

“Ajax,” she said. “He’s my brother.”

“And he’s a scoundrel,” Ajax stated.

“Go ahead and call me out, Lord Ajax, if that’s what you must do. But you are actually the scoundrel here to take a young, unmarried woman into the country to do what you will with her,” Winston said coldly, his voice frighteningly quiet. “You are the educated one here. You are the one with knowledge of the world. You have taken advantage of her, no matter what you say.”

Ajax paused and lifted his chin. “Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps I understand things that she never could, but whose fault is that? I will tell you this, Tuttle. You have underestimated your sister. She’s superior to any lady I know, and she will make a great wife to me.”

“If I allow it,” her brother stated.

“You cannot tell me no,” she rushed, his words piercing her. “I am of age.”

“Oh, perhaps that’s true,” her brother agreed, his lip curling, “but I can make it publicly known that you are a disgrace and that I am cutting you off. That’s just the start. There are other avenues I can take...”

She sucked in a short breath. “You would never do such a thing. It would ruin the family.”

“You’re ruining it already,” he ground out. “Do you not understand that? And for what? For pleasure? For selfishness?”

Winifred drew herself up, even as a war began inside her. A war of the old Winifred and the new. “I have never been selfish in my whole life.”

Her brother snorted. “That’s not true. I’ve tried to be on your side for years, Winnie. You and your strange habits and turns of phrase. I put up with them. But why couldn’t you just be like everyone else?”

Her eyes stung with tears. “I tried,” she rasped. “I tried so hard.”

“You do not need to defend yourself,” Ajax stated, his body radiating with fury. “I’m going to take her to your mother. I shall explain the situation, and we shall get married, and that shall be the end of it.”

A long pause followed, and for a moment, she was certain that Ajax’s declaration would end it all. That the pain would vanish and her fears would dissipate.

“No. No, it won’t,” Winston said. “I shall take her to my mother. We shall discuss this as a family. You will come and call. That is a condition I have in order to allow this marriage to go forward.”

“I could take her to Gretna Green tomorrow, and you couldn’t say a thing.”

“You could try,” her brother said. “But I cannot allow such dishonor to stain my family. Nor ruin my youngest sister’s chances.”

Winifred swung her gaze back and forth between them. “Please, I cannot bear this conversation. I will go with you, brother. Of course I shall. This is ridiculous. We shall work it out among families, as respectable people do. Ajax, you will come and

call on my mother. You may bring your brother, the duke.” She forced a smile. “How could my mother say no to that?”

“I don’t want to let you go,” Ajax gritted.

“You’re not letting me go,” she insisted, afraid the men might threaten a duel or worse if this could not be settled through contracts and negotiations.

Her heart pounded with terror. For though she declared that he wasn’t letting her go, something deep and old and instinctual inside her screamed that they were being ripped apart.

“Please,” she urged, “if this is what my brother demands for us to marry peaceably, without a scandal and without harming my little sister,” she said softly, realizing what her brother was so furious about, “then that is what we must do.”

“Where’s Alfred?” her brother suddenly barked.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“He said that you were with him visiting friends, and that is clearly a lie, so where is he?” Winston demanded.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “He’s having his own adventure. He didn’t want to tell me about it.”

Her brother ground his teeth. “I see,” he said. “Well then, Lord Ajax, I shall take her to London immediately, and you should return as well. Our families shall settle it. That is enough for now.”

With that, her brother crossed to her and started to take her by the arm.

“No,” she said.

“What do you mean no?”

“Clearly, we won’t leave with the sun setting.” She squared her shoulders and declared, “I’m going to stay with him tonight. With my soon-to-be husband.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” her brother spat.

“I have never been ridiculous,” she countered, her spine straightening and her confidence growing. She’d go with him, but she was no longer a sheep to be herded. “It is the world that is ridiculous.”

“Argue with me any more on this and I, as your next of kin, shall make certain that you can never marry anyone.”

Ajax took a step forward. “That is a dangerous threat.”

“But it is also the truth,” Winston said. “And you know that I could do it. We will not stay here this night. I do not care if we risk the road at night. This scandal ends now.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs, and the reality of it all crashed down upon her. The bubble of the beauty of the last days burst, and she feared she might never find it again.

Ajax swallowed and locked gazes with her. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “We shall not be parted long. Nothing can part us for long.”

“Of course not,” she replied. “We are fated,” she said, even though her own heart sank.

Winifred lifted her chin and went with her brother, but she knew this was not the end of it. There was something about the way her brother was acting, but she was no longer the girl she once was, and she wasn't going to take whatever his edict was without a fight.

Heron House

“R ight! Where’s the bride to be?” Achilles called merrily from the back of the foyer.

Ajax entered Heron House like a man who was going to trial the next morning. He felt as if everything had been ripped away from him, and he felt very uneasy, as if he had made a terrible decision.

He couldn’t exactly put his finger on what it was. He had made the return trip alone, and that had certainly been a large part of it. He had grown so accustomed to her sitting beside him, her presence. Where was his other half? The person who he wanted to be with always.

He could not believe that he had been without her before, and it was terrible being without her now.

“Dear God, man, has she died?” Lord Zephyr demanded as he entered from the breakfast room.

Achilles’ merriment vanished and he gaped. “Who’s died?”

Jean-Luc took one look at Ajax and moaned, “No, the girl! What has befallen our Winifred?”

“She’s not dead,” Ajax gritted. “Her brother found us.”

“Merde,” Jean-Luc replied. “Did you fight a duel?”

“Almost,” Ajax said. “I think I should have done.”

“Why did you not?” Jean-Luc demanded, his brow arching in a way that only the French could manage.

“This isn’t France,” Ajax returned.

Jean-Luc tsked. “I know. More’s the pity. There we know how to settle matters of the heart.”

“Tell us what has happened,” Achilles demanded, growing quite serious.

Ajax blew out a breath as if it could somehow cause his concern to dissipate. It did not. “It was most odd. You never would’ve believed it. We met quite randomly—”

“It is not coincidence,” Zephyr stated.

“I don’t want to hear it right now,” Ajax growled. “For this feels like the prelude to a tragedy. He demanded that she go with him to avoid any more scandal, and he said that I should come to their house in London and make proper suit.”

“There you go,” Zephyr said with forced cheer.

“I don’t know,” Ajax said. “Her brother was brutal and he spoke terribly of her, as if she didn’t deserve love and that marriage to me could be a problem.”

Achilles snorted. “How could marriage to you be a problem? Marriage to our family is marvelous.”

“I agree,” Ajax replied. “But perhaps you haven’t quite realized. Not everyone is thrilled that their child is going to marry into the Briarwood fold.”

“How could such a thing be possible?” Jean-Luc demanded. “The family is old, eccentric, and has money. What more could anyone want?”

“Boringness,” Ajax stated.

Jean-Luc made a face that suggested this was the most horrifying thing in the world. “The English are forever a mystery,” his cousin surmised.

“Let us go immediately and see her,” Zephyr said practically for a change.

“I think we should bring Mama,” added Achilles.

Ajax nodded. “I think perhaps you are right. We should all go.”

He wasn’t taking any chances. Not with his and Winifred’s future.

“They won’t be able to say no if we go en masse,” Achilles agreed.

Ajax drove a hand through his hair. “I think I’ve made a terrible tactical error. I should have followed them straight to her house. Something just feels amiss.”

“You should have killed him,” Jean-Luc said.

“Yes,” Ajax said softly. “I think I should have.”

Achilles clapped him on the back. “Don’t worry. There’s still time.”

Ajax nodded his head, trying to draw comfort from his family. “I suppose so.”

“Someone needs killing?” his beautiful mama drawled from the top of the stairs.

Ajax looked up, catching sight of the woman who always seemed to know what to do. “Not yet, Mama, but perhaps soon,” he called.

“Oh, don’t worry, my dear. If necessary, I’m sure we can just take the body down to one of the farms and have done with it.”

He laughed, as he knew she’d hoped he would, but it felt hollow. “Mama, you are growing as bloodthirsty as your sons. Surely, you don’t condone murder.”

She winked. “For my children? Of course.” Her face softened into one of concerned sympathy as she crossed down the stairs, her full skirts skimming the polished floor. “What has happened, my dear? Where is the bride to be? Your brothers and our darling Jean-Luc told me that there would be a wedding. That you might even go up to Gretna Green because the two of you were so enthralled with each other. I would have forgiven you somehow if you did race to Scotland and have it without me there.”

“I wish we had,” he gritted. “I should have immediately taken her north, but we were seeing so many wonderful things and having such a marvelous time. I was a deluded fool, Mama. I didn’t think that anything could go wrong. I even told her thus. Her brother caught us.”

She studied his face, then announced, “You are lucky that you are not dead. If I’m honest, brothers, fathers, husbands? They all like to shoot at fellows like you.”

“This time it’s not entirely deserved. I have asked her to marry me,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but you did take his sister out unchaperoned.”

“But you knew about that,” he reminded.

Her brows shot up and she blinked innocently. “Oh yes, my dear. I still applaud the whole thing, but the ton can be quite brutal about these things when a young, unmarried lady is involved. And the Tuttles... They have never slipped into the murky but delightful waters of scandal before.”

He ground his teeth. “Mama, I think we may need to go and rescue her.”

His mother, his glorious mother, nodded. “Then we will. But first we shall make them an offer that only a fool could say no to.”

“Mama?” he asked.

“First, we shall see what the situation is,” she said firmly and quite serious now. The sort of serious that meant anyone who was in her way needed to get out of it. “It might be nothing, my dear. I’m sure her mama and older brother will be thrilled to have a union between our two families. Then, of course, there will be the marriage settlement. I’m sure your brother, Leander, will be thrilled to arrange a contract that makes certain she’s to have a great situation if you were to suddenly die. She shall have a large allowance, for we are generous, are we not? And there will be money settled on each of your children.”

His mother smiled then, and he knew that the Tuttles didn’t have a chance.

“The usual sort of thing,” she added. “Just like your siblings. All my children shall be taken care of. And my grandchildren, of course.”

He blew out a breath, not realizing how tense he had been.

He could go and steal her away now. He could force the issue. But he didn’t have to because he had his family.

And no one could stop the Briarwoods.

“Thank you, Mama,” he said, grateful to be reminded by the woman who had taught him how to view life that every obstacle was an opportunity.

She cupped his cheek with her bejeweled hand. “Of course, my darling boy. Now, you look terrible. You must get some rest, for you must be on your best tomorrow to win them over.”

“It won’t be easy,” he replied.

“Anything good never is.”

“What the blazes were you thinking?” her mother cried out, slamming her hand down upon the table and causing the porcelain to jump and clatter.

“Mama,” Winifred defended, back in one of her simple gowns, “I was thinking I wanted one single chance at this life before I was put away from it.”

Her mother’s face paled and her shoulders sagged beneath her own magnificent embroidered silk gown. “The selfishness of it. Your sister! Her possible marriage! Her chances could be completely devastated by this.”

Her mother shook her head, lifted her hand to her mouth, and let out a furious cry. Then Winifred’s mother swung a wild-eyed glance at her. “What if he does not come to call? Have you thought about that? What if, in the end, he has no desire to wed you? He’s had you, after all.”

“Mama!”

Her mother’s face tightened with shame. “Am I mistaken?”

“No, Mama,” she confessed without guilt, though she knew her mother expected her to prostrate herself with remorse. “You are not mistaken.”

Her lack of contrition seemed to infuriate her mother further. “Could you be with child?” her mother snapped.

One would have thought that a cold shiver should have traveled through her at that. It did not. In fact, suddenly, the idea that she could be carrying Ajax’s child warmed her. “Yes. I suppose I could be.”

“God in heaven,” her mother rasped, placing her hand to her middle as if she might collapse. “The horror of it all. And your brother nearly called him out. Do you know what it would be like to lose another?” Her mother pressed her lips together and looked away. Her fury dissipated and her shoulders shook. “My darling girl, I already lost your father. And to think that I could have lost your older brother because of your behavior. Must you always act like this?”

Her throat tightened and, for a moment, she was terrified that she would give in and beg her mother’s forgiveness. All it would take was a little relenting on her part and she would be on her knees, beseeching her mother. As she always did when she made mistakes. But she couldn’t. Not anymore.

“Mama,” she dared, “I cannot help who I am.”

“Try harder,” her mother gritted. She sniffed and then dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. “I love you, my darling girl, but this is too much to bear.”

“If you truly loved me, Mama, you would want more for me,” Winifred protested.

Her mother’s eyes flashed. “I want what is good for you. You should have a decent life in the country.”

Even as her palms sweated, Winifred lifted her chin and stated, “I’m not going to the country. I’m marrying Ajax.”

“You are not marrying him,” her mother countered with sudden coldness. “Not for any foreseeable future.”

“Whatever can you mean, Mama?”

“If you married him right now, the entire ton would talk. No, my dear, we’re going to send you away. As was the original plan.”

“You can’t send me away,” Winifred snapped. “I’m a grown woman.”

“You are acting like a little girl,” her mother hissed, shocked at her daughter’s defiance. “You are still a member of this family. And you are a female and belong to us. Of course we can send you away. You are a spinster with no money. You have no say. And frankly, at present, I think you need rest. A great deal of rest. Perhaps the supervision of a doctor. And we can make certain that you are always cared for if you do not cease this brazen behavior. Now, I would never want to do that to a child of mine. So you best do as we say. Do you understand?”

In the eyes of her mother, she had behaved as a mad woman. She’d dared to defy her mother. She’d dressed as a man. She’d lost her morals. She been bold...

Winifred swallowed and yet she would still not bend. Not now that she had found her strength. “I understand, Mama, but Ajax will come, and he will tell you the truth. He wishes me to be his wife.”

Her mother sighed. “Even if it was the greatest proposal ever, my dear, I would not let you marry him for at least a year. I cannot let anyone think that you are marrying just because you’ve been seduced and that a babe might be on the way. No one would

believe that a man like that would want a girl like you.”

The words echoed her brother’s and, again, the blows were harsh. She blinked, trying not to show her pain. Trying not to show that her family could hurt her so.

Her mother folded her hands and looked Winifred up and down. “It isn’t that you are plain. It isn’t even that you are a spinster. It’s the fact that you are so different.”

Winifred swallowed. She would not be beaten. She would not go back. “I know that no one has ever been interested in me before, but Ajax genuinely loves me.”

Her mother threw back her head and laughed. “A man like that? He told you that he loves you? He had his way with you, my dear girl. You have been reading too many novels, but all of the wrong ones. Girls like you end up in the gutter because of men like that. Even if he marries you, he’s a rake. He will leave you alone at home with the babes, and he shall be out on the town. A girl like you could never satisfy someone like him.” Her mother shook her head, then she wiped her hands together as if she was wiping the sordid tale away. “I’m so sorry, my dear. You’re not that interesting. You’re not that clever. You’re not good at conversation. You are—”

“Yes, I am,” she countered ferociously, her own power shocking even herself.

Her mother’s eyes flared, and her face paled at the force of Winifred’s argument. “What did you say?”

“I am good at conversation,” Winifred declared without fear now. “Ajax loves listening to me talk.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” Her mother sniffed. “To have his way with you, my dear, to have his affair with you. But now that he’s had you, let us wait and see what happens.”

“Yes, Mama,” she replied defiantly, “let us wait and see. For he will come and my life will finally be full of joy and away from you.”

Winifred tried to understand how her own mother could deny her so. Could think so little of her. But she no longer had to share her mother’s views. No, she was free from that now. Thanks to Ajax. Thanks to his brothers and his cousin.

And thanks to herself.

She licked her lips and began more calmly but just as strongly, “I wish you could accept me for exactly who I am.”

“I wish, my dear,” her mother returned without a hint of kindness, “that you had not tried to throw everything away just because you wanted a little bit of fun.”

A little bit of fun.

Was that all she had wanted? No. Ajax was right.

All she had wanted was to find herself. To truly be herself. And that was no small thing at all. It was actually the greatest thing. She would not go back now, no matter how hard her mother tried to drag her. Not ever again.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

Winifred could not sleep, but she dared not pace the floor. She had no wish to awaken her mother or let the house know her own personal state of agitation.

Instead, she laid in her bed, staring up at the stuccoed ceiling, counting the petals on the flowers that had been styled there. She'd counted well over one hundred. The town house was beautifully constructed. She'd grown up in a home that most people could only ever dream about, but she was not living in a dream. No, she was living in a veritable nightmare. Her body was not necessarily in jeopardy, but her mind and soul certainly were.

Why? Why was her mama being so cruel? She knew in her heart of hearts what it was, but even so, it did not seem right.

How could anyone be so cruel to their child? It was true that she had not been a child for years, but her mother treated her thus.

Her mother, who had managed passing kindness to her over the years, had, in her desperate fear of losing status, unleashed her most vitriolic threats upon Winifred.

In some ways, she could not blame her mama. For Winifred had acted in a way that was shocking, potentially dangerous, and if she'd been discovered by the wrong person? She could have brought a great deal of shame upon her family and made it impossible for her sister to marry.

She did not argue that her mother had no reason to be furious. But the way she'd gone about it this day, the horrible things she'd said... The way it was clear that her mother found her wanting in almost every possible way had been too much.

And in that moment, as she lay there on her bed in her night rail, staring up at that ceiling in the dark, she vowed that when she had children, she would never do such a thing. She would accept her children for exactly who they were, no matter how difficult. She would support them, walk by them, and show them how beautiful the world could truly be.

Then her children would never feel the need to flee as Winifred had done.

Luckily, she knew how beautiful the world could truly be now. Not because of her own family, but because of Ajax's. And she found herself so entirely grateful to his mother, a woman she barely knew, for raising a son to be so strong, so loving, so able to see the world in a multi-hued light. And the dowager duchess had not done it with just one son. She had done it, it seemed, with all her children, and she had enfolded others in as well.

How she longed to be a Briarwood!

Not just to be married to Ajax, but to be surrounded by the fortress of that family. It did no disservice, she knew, to Ajax to wish it. Ajax would be proud of his family, proud that she wished to be a part of something like that. Proud that she wished to continue that legacy by having his children.

Oh, how she longed to escape to him again. He wanted to be her escape. He had said as much, but how would she manage it? Her own mother and brother were her captors. What would happen when Ajax came? She did not fear that he would not come as her mother had insinuated. No, it was her mother who was the weak one. The fearful one.

Her mother was the one who saw life as a series of misfortunes. Winifred no longer did that. She understood that her heart and soul could find the beauty of life and welcome it in, no matter how treacherous the road.

And Ajax? Ajax would never let her down.

The door to her room snicked open, and Winifred swung her gaze to the white and gold filigreed panel.

A figure silently slipped in, and Winifred was astonished to see her sister, Alison. In her simple pale night rail, her soft brown hair floating about her pale face, she almost appeared like a ghost in the moonlit room.

The girl crept in, closing the door behind her. She then whispered across the room and slipped into the bed beside Winifred.

“What are you doing?” Winifred asked in a voice barely above a breath.

It was not something that Alison had ever done before, this sneaking about and climbing into her bed. They had never been close. They had tried. She’d played with Alison often enough, but her mother had kept a distance between them as if, somehow, Winifred could infect Alison with her behavior.

“I had to come,” Alison said softly.

Alison, like Winifred, was no child now. She was a young woman about to have her first Season. Soon she would be presented at court, and she would no doubt be declared a diamond.

Alison was beautiful and capable, even if she didn’t love Shakespeare or books. She did not have a shallow heart. She hadn’t been hardened like their mother. Still, in many ways, she was like their mother had been before their father died. And that, strangely, caused Winifred’s heart to ache.

For once, their beautiful mother had been all smiles, soft embraces, and outings to the

park.

“Why have you come?” Winifred asked again.

Alison lifted her gaze to her sister’s. “Because I had to tell you something.”

Winifred swallowed and dread pooled in her stomach. “I promise I will not get in the way of your Season. I will find a way—”

“No,” Alison cut in. “That’s not it at all.”

She stilled. Her sister had a strange intensity about her at the moment. There was no accusation, no anger. No, it was as if she was a restless spirit caught in a vessel, and suddenly Winifred recognized herself in Alison.

That was how she felt too! A spirit who longed to be free but could not because she was contained. And so she shoved aside her prejudices and assumptions and tried to look at her sister as Ajax’s family would have done.

“I’m listening,” Winifred said. “Truly listening.”

Alison nodded and took Winifred’s hands in hers as they laid side by side, facing each other as if they were intimate friends.

“I had to come and tell you how much I admire you.”

“What?” Winifred gasped, fairly certain she must have misheard.

But the seriousness of Alison’s face was such that Winifred knew she had heard correctly.

If she had not listened, if she had not forced herself to put aside all her thoughts that Alison was her mother's ally, she would not have heard this.

"I cannot tell you how much your actions have affected me," Alison confessed.

Winifred bit her lower lip as her heart began to pound wildly with apprehension. That's exactly what their mother feared—that she would drag Alison down. But truthfully, she rather thought in this moment that she was lifting Alison up.

"Tell me," she urged her sister.

"You chose something so much more than what was granted to you, more than what has even been granted to me," rushed Alison. "I overheard Mother and Winston discussing what you'd done."

"You are not horrified?" Winifred asked, daring to hope that perhaps another member of the family might not think her so terribly odd.

"Horrified?" her sister echoed. "I am impressed beyond all measure. How did you manage such a feat?"

She smiled slowly, shocked but suddenly hopeful. "Well, if you must know, I sold Grandmama's diamond brooch. I hated doing it, but it was the only way I could get enough funds to support my endeavor. And I know she would have approved because, like Papa, she was a dreamer."

Alison squeezed her hands. "I remember her and her fairy stories. Of course she'd have approved. She never would have liked the idea of you being sent away and all but buried alive in Suffolk with our great aunt."

The grandiosity of Alison's declaration warmed Winifred and made her think they

were far more alike than she'd ever known.

"Go on," Alison urged.

Winifred nodded. "Alfred assisted me in buying everything that I needed to disguise myself as a lad. I kept correspondence with all of the places that I thought important, and then I approached Lord Ajax."

Alison beamed. "You sought out Lord Ajax? A Briarwood? Someone so delicious, someone so adored by the ton, and you found a way to be alone with him and dressed as a boy?" Alison almost exclaimed, but then she kept her voice down to a soft whisper. "Tell me all of it. Every marvelous morsel. Please, I beg of you."

"You wish me to tell you?" Winifred frowned, wondering if she dared. "I don't think Mother would approve."

"I don't care," Alison said with a soft snort. "Mama has been hammering and shaping me for years, trying to fit me into the mold that she wishes. But I have my own mold. I was born to be myself, not her. I cannot bear it any longer."

Tears shone in Alison's eyes then, and she batted her lashes furiously, trying to hold them back. "I have tried. Oh, Winifred, I have tried to be all that she wants, but it is too much."

And in that moment, Winifred wondered if she'd been mistaken most of her life. She'd assumed that she was the problem, the odd one for so long. But Alfred had also longed to escape, to be his own person, to have adventures out in the world and not do exactly as their mother had said. Alison also felt the same.

Was it their mother, then, who was the one who was in need of change, of assistance, of altering her view of the world?

It certainly seemed so, but could she ever change? Winifred did not know. She prayed she could because she had never known a woman as unhappy as her mother. So rigid, so willing to crush her children in the hope of protecting them.

“I do not think Mama means to hurt us,” Winifred suddenly whispered.

Alison drew in a sharp breath. “She thinks she’s doing right. She thinks she’s protecting us from the cruelties of the world. For instance, with you, she tried to force you to cease your wonderful quirks that make you singular. And with me by trying to make me the perfect young lady who would make the perfect marriage, but there is no perfection, Winifred,” Alison said firmly. “Perfection does not exist, and pursuing it only wears one down to the bone. Every smile I smile is false. Every tilt of my head is calculated. The way I move my hands. The way I curtsy. There’s nothing genuine about me. I am a living doll, and I cannot bear it another day. Perhaps I shall run away like you.”

Wonderful quirks? She could not ignore this. For so long, she’d assumed everyone thought of her as her mother did. But now? It seemed that some truly appreciated her.

But she could not ignore her sister’s last comment either.

“You must be careful running away,” Winifred warned. “There are serious consequences to it if you have no money. As my dear Ajax said, there is a solution to your situation. I’m sure we can find one. There’s always an answer to a problem.”

“Do you promise?” Alison said, her gaze growing frantic. “For I fear who Mother shall choose for me to marry. I do not want to have to live a lie my entire life. You are so bold and so brave, Winifred. I had no idea you had it in you. All these years, I’ve longed to be your friend, but Mama has kept us apart. I refuse to be kept apart from you anymore. You and I are actually very similar creatures.”

Winifred stared at her sister and mourned for all the years lost.

“It seems so,” she replied gently. “And I will not let it happen to you anymore either. I was so afraid for so long, Alison,” she confessed. “Afraid of upsetting Mother, of disappointing her over and over again. But I’ve realized now that no matter what I do, she shall be disappointed. She’s bitter about life, and people who are like that? They will never know happiness or contentment. They will always be angry. And you and me? We will find a way to be free.”

Alison held her hands tightly. “Promise me.”

“I promise,” Winifred replied.

Because no matter what, she was leaving this house, and perhaps she could take Alison with her.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

“N o one is getting murdered today, are they, Ajax?” the Duke of Westleigh prompted.

Ajax shot his eldest brother, Leander, a hard stare. “Hopefully not,” he drawled.

“There’s nothing hopeful about it. I have utter certainty,” Leander returned, standing on the doorstep of Lord Tuttle’s townhome, his bright blue coat resplendent in the morning light. “We are going to do this the old-fashioned way.”

“The old-fashioned way,” Ajax pointed out through gritted teeth, “absolutely would be to do murder.”

After all, he’d just come from visiting the Kingmaker’s castle. It was true that the Kingmaker was a master of marriage negotiations, but he was also a brute. And the truth was Ajax did feel like being a brute today, but he at last gave his brother a relenting sigh. “Fine,” he said. “I shall keep myself in check.”

“Good. If you wish to unleash all that murderous intent on someone, call upon Mr. Mulvaney, and he shall do whatever is necessary to get your anger out.”

Leander had introduced him to the Irish fighter, Hartigan Mulvaney, years ago. They all went under his tutelage. But the truth was if anyone was going to end up being the victim of murderous energy, it was not Mulvaney but Ajax. The man was a veritable whirlwind of fisticuffs. Still, it might not be such a terrible idea.

However, he took one look at his brother and stated, “This is going to work out in our favor, and when it does, I won’t need Mulvaney.”

Leander gave him a slow smile. His eyes shone with that devilish, dangerous glint that could lurk there on the right occasions.

“Oh, my strategy is set,” the duke said merrily. “They have no idea what’s about to hit them.”

And it was true, for their mother stood just behind them. They were coming in full force. It was really a miracle the entire Briarwood clan was not coming as well. Only such a thing could cause Winifred’s mother to collapse with apoplexy, and he had no wish to cause accidental death.

The duke pounded upon the door.

It swung open, and the butler took one look at the three of them, said not a word, and stepped back. It was quite common. The Duke of Westleigh, after all, was a known figure. His face was constantly being sketched, as was their mother’s, the dowager duchess. Ajax was in the newssheets all the time, but his likeness was not quite as well-known.

They crossed into the beautifully appointed foyer, and the duke said, “We are here to see Lady Tuttle, and, of course, if her eldest son is in, that would be appropriate too.”

The butler gave a quick nod, turned, and they all followed him. They were not about to risk any sort of deflection.

His mother gave Ajax a cheerful smile. “Never fear, my dear. Briarwoods always end up on top.”

Ajax nodded. It was true, and yet it was difficult to trust in it in this moment. He could not let Winifred down.

The butler quickly escorted them into a mint-green parlor with white accents. Lady Tuttle stood abruptly, her embroidery going to the floor. Her younger daughter was sitting beside her, her ringleted hair perfect, her gown perfect, her face perfect. Everything about the young lady was completely the opposite of Winifred, and the poor thing looked like a bird in a cage. He could feel it from here.

Did the mother have absolutely no idea of the effect she had upon her children? It seemed not.

“How do you do, Lady Tuttle?” his brother said in that slightly dangerous and yet elegant way that the duke had.

She blinked. “Your Grace,” she stated, “I had no idea that you would come to call.”

“Did you not?” the Duke of Westleigh said with a sort of playful surprise. “Has your daughter not told you of her affection for my brother? Did your son not tell you that they intend to wed?”

She stuttered, “T-they did, they did indeed. Only my daughter, Winifred...” She laughed, but it was one that was slightly hysterical. “She is full of such fancies that it’s difficult to know when she’s telling the truth or not.”

“Mama,” the younger sister began, “that is not—”

“Shush,” Lady Tuttle cut in. “Now, go upstairs and make sure Winifred is well rested for her guests. We shall call her if it is warranted.”

The girl looked as if she might revolt, but then she headed for the door. But before she exited, she turned and looked over her shoulder and announced, “My sister is marvelous, and she may be fanciful, but she would never imagine anything absurd and try to pass it off as the truth.”

The girl flounced out of the room, and Ajax was tempted to applaud.

Lady Tuttle looked mortified, and she pressed a hand to her middle.

Leander cocked his head to the side, light falling on his dark hair, giving a blue tint to its waves. “And your eldest son. Is he also prone to lying?”

Lady Tuttle’s eyes bulged. “No, of course not, Your Grace. He is a man of excellent character.”

“Good. I like it when my future family has excellent character.”

“Future family?” Lady Tuttle echoed.

“Indeed. I think the wedding should be at St. Paul’s, don’t you?” The duke shrugged.

“Yes. In a few weeks’ time, we’ll invite everyone, and it will be a grand affair. The party shall be at Heron House. Do you have anything to add?”

Lady Tuttle swung her gaze from the duke to Lord Ajax to the dowager duchess. “I... I...”

“Good,” Leander boomed, clapping his ivory gloved hands together. “It is settled. I shall meet with your son in just a moment. Ajax will come, and we shall make a marriage arrangement. You shall be very pleased. Your daughter will be a very, very wealthy young woman. She shall have her own coach, and her own servants, and she shall have a sizable allowance every year. And if my brother were to die, God forbid, she will have a large amount settled upon her and any children. Does that meet your pleasure?” The duke hesitated and gave a smile. “Though, of course, it is not yours to arrange but your son’s.”

“I... I...” Lady Tuttle appeared overborne as many were by Leander.

“Oh, it is so wonderful to see you speechless in your pleasure, my dear!” Their mother said, striding forward and embracing the lady. “Come. We are to be family, after all.”

Lady Tuttle stood like a statue for a moment, having been enveloped in the dowager duchess’s voluminous presence. Their mama was indeed a force to be reckoned with. Her hat was massive today, bouncing with feathers, and her gown was a gorgeous emerald-green, which swirled about her and whooshed about Lady Tuttle’s legs.

And Mama’s jewels winked like stars in the daylight. Lady Tuttle looked like a pigeon befriended by a peacock.

“Ah,” the duke said, turning at the sound of footsteps outside the door. “The fellow I need to see.”

Lord Tuttle entered the room with surprising dignity, his dark hair swept back from his weary face as if he had been carrying a great deal of suffering these last days. But when he spotted them, some of that worry seemed to lift.

“You’ve come,” Lord Tuttle breathed as if he had doubted they would.

This grated upon Ajax, but he supposed he could understand the man’s unwillingness to believe his sister would be taken care of until this moment.

“Lord Tuttle, shall we adjourn to your study and see the arrangement done?” Leander asked, though it was no question.

Lord Tuttle had clearly never had a duke in his home, and his mouth parted ever so slightly at having someone so powerful in his parlor. “Your Grace,” he said, “it would be an honor.”

Leander examined his signet ring and then said, "I understand you had some most interesting conversation with my brother, Lord Ajax."

Tuttle cleared his throat, looking nervous, as if he feared his passionate words would now cause a duke to be offended.

Leander crossed the room and clapped the man on the shoulder jovially. "Let us go and clarify our positions."

Ajax beamed. This was going so well he could barely countenance it. The duke was overwhelming everyone. Just as Leander had predicted. Of course, one of the qualities of a duke was the ability to overwhelm.

Dukes were only one step down from princes and kings, and anyone in their vicinity understood that if they did not do as a duke wished, well, things could get difficult very quickly. It was, of course, one of the frustrations of being a younger son. No one took Ajax quite as seriously, and other young men might have been upset by this.

Ajax was not. He was happy to be a younger son. He did not wish to have the weight and responsibilities of his older brother. But he was more than happy to trot out his older brother's influence in a matter such as this.

Even so, it was as if they had all forgotten exactly how powerful the Duke of Westleigh was. People had a tendency to bluster when they were not in the company of a duke, thinking they were powerful. But when confronted with the Briarwoods in person, well, it was hard to deny where the real power lies.

"Come on then," Ajax urged. "You and I got off on such terrible footing. Let's change that, shall we? Over brandy?"

Tuttle gaped at him. "Of course, my lord, do come with me."

And with that, they left their mother with Lady Tuttle.

Ajax leaned over and whispered to Leander, “Do you think Lady Tuttle shall recover?”

“Oh, Mama shall see to it. You know it,” Leander whispered back as they followed Lord Tuttle down the hall. “As a matter of fact, Lady Tuttle will likely be improved. Mama has a way of taking the worst sort of person and finding the best in them. It’s tempting to shame Lady Tuttle, no doubt, but Mama will find a way to make our families blend together.”

With that, they turned to the left, following Lord Tuttle into his study. Brandy was poured, and Ajax gave the man a ball-crushing stare.

“You were terrible to your sister,” Ajax ground out.

Leander let out a strangled note. “Ajax.”

Tuttle stared at him, then said tightly, “You have to understand what I saw. I saw a rake with my sister at an inn.”

“Fair point,” the duke said, obviously eager to leave the past in the past if possible. “Fair point. And I too would likely feel the same if I saw my younger sister in the embrace of a man—”

“We were not embracing,” Ajax said.

“Ajax,” the duke ground out, “I am using a touch of theatricality as our family tradition allows. Now, cease.”

Ajax scowled but took the warning. But he was still furious at the way Win had been

treated. Still, Leander was right. He had to focus on the marriage arrangement.

Leander inclined his head. "I no doubt would have wanted to call the rake out too, Lord Tuttle."

That was entirely untrue.

Already, their sisters had engaged in quite interesting behavior. There had been no calling out. The truth was they believed their sisters were equal to them in independence, thought, and decision-making capability. They were not about to act as if their sisters were infants. They were not. They were powerful, capable women. But not all men understood this about women in general.

"All right, Tuttle," Ajax said, "I'll take the fact that you were acting as a man of honor, but some of the other things that you said about your sister were rather unpleasant, weren't they?"

"Yes," Tuttle admitted. "I regret them."

"You do?" Ajax said, taken aback.

Tuttle frowned. "It was the heat of the moment, and I shouldn't have said those things. She can't help who she is."

"Help who she is," Ajax breathed. "There you go still. You think she's something to be fixed."

"I don't," Tuttle countered. "But you have to understand that we have been in a most interesting situation since my father died. If anything, actually, she's the most like Papa, and it has been a thorn in my mother's side for years. She can't seem to face the fact that my sister reminds her of him on an almost daily basis, and the pain of it..."

Ajax gaped. “The pain of it causes her to treat Winifred like that?”

A muscle tightened in Tuttle’s jaw. “Papa never moved about in society. He preferred to keep himself in his library and let Mama do all the work. Mama adored him, and Papa adored her. But he rather left her holding the reins, so to speak, and I think Mama wanted to make certain that Winifred never let anyone down like Papa did.”

“Were you happy with your father?” Ajax asked suddenly.

Tuttle’s eyes narrowed, and then something sad passed across his gaze. “Very,” he said.

“Was your mother happy?” Leander asked gently.

“Very,” he said again, and this time his voice was rougher with emotion. “Except for the fact that she did not know how to understand their difference in temperament. She loved to be out at balls, and Papa preferred to sit by the fire. He just simply couldn’t muster himself up in conversation and in company. It made him deeply uncomfortable.”

“And you couldn’t see that your sister was the same and deserved equal respect?” Ajax asked.

“She’s a girl,” Tuttle replied, frustrated. “She had to get married.”

“And now she is getting married,” Ajax replied.

Tuttle laughed. “Yes, now she is, and she’s marrying into one of the most powerful families in the realm. Who would’ve thought it about our Winifred?”

“Perhaps you’ll realize now that being different is an asset, and you should allow

your other brother and sister, and yourself, to be the same,” Leander said. “I doubt any of you fit the mold your mother has tried to make. She made those molds in grief, after all, not in joy.”

Tuttle’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “It is not an easy lesson, Your Grace, but I shall try to take it. And now that I see your brother means what he said, and you are here, and my sister is being welcomed as a respected member to your family, and not someone to be ashamed of, let us make the arrangements and let us celebrate. Because I, for one, am ready to move on from the mistakes I have made and the pain of the past.”

Ajax marveled at Tuttle. And, for a moment, he didn’t mind at all that the fellow was going to be his brother-in-law.

Perhaps he wasn’t such a terrible sort. Perhaps he was like most of the rest of people, desperately trying to do their best, failing, and was a complete stranger to himself.

But anyone who got in the company of the Briarwoods would soon find that change was a wonderful thing indeed. As was loving oneself entirely.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

“How long have you been trying to do this by yourself?” Sylvia, the Dowager Duchess of Westleigh, asked.

Lady Tuttle, who was a beautiful woman, though her face was strained and lined with wrinkles that had come too soon, stared at her, uncomprehending.

Sylvia sat on the edge of the mint-green chair and cocked her head to the side. The lady was clearly stunned. She knew that she and her children had that effect on those who lived brittle lives.

And she didn’t wish to shove the woman over the edge, and so she smiled and tried again. “Let me rephrase the question, my dear. Has anyone been there for you over the years since your husband died, or have you been alone?”

Much to Lady Tuttle’s clear surprise, tears suddenly filled her eyes.

Sylvia was not at all astonished by the reaction. She had seen it over and over again in women. She did not understand why ladies were forced into such a great deal of isolation, of feeling as though they could not extend their hands and admit their struggles, but the truth was that was often the case. Women were left alone to deal with the carnage left behind by men. Now of course, Lady Tuttle’s husband had simply died, but she had been left behind nonetheless, and it seemed she’d had little recourse or support or emotional help. And so she had done the only thing that a woman could. She had shored herself up and become hard.

“No,” Lady Tuttle said, her voice rasping as if she was trying desperately not to cry. “There has been no one. I considered remarrying at one point, but I could not bear the

idea of being with another man. I loved my husband so much.”

Sylvia smiled gently again. “As I did mine. I have no desire to remarry either, though I know that love could come again if I let it. I hold my husband in my heart. He was not perfect. As a matter of fact, he could be very difficult, but he was a wonder.”

Lady Tuttle gaped at her and a tear slipped down her cheek. “You almost described my relationship. I loved him desperately, but he drove me mad. He left me to do so many things, you know. To organize everything, but he knew how to handle the children. He could make them laugh and they adored him. They went to him with all their problems, you see? He knew how to bounce them on his knee, to tickle them, to make them feel safe and loved. I never knew how to do those things. I knew that I had to make them secure, so I did.”

Sylvia nodded, her heart aching for the woman who had tried and failed with her children. But failure was not permanent, thank heaven. “Of course. Of course, you tried everything you could, but may I ask you something, my dear?”

Lady Tuttle winced. She clearly did not care for this sudden intimacy. Generally, people did not speak like this in England. Sylvia had been born in a gutter. Well not entirely a gutter, that was an exaggeration, but she had been born into poverty and a family of actors. Actors who had struggled, but Sylvia had risen up like her sister and become a star of the London scene. She’d caught the eye of a duke, and she’d never looked back. She was a successful duchess because she did not look back or apologize for who she was. She wished more people could do that, but in her experience, most people were far too caught up in the opinions of others to be themselves, and so they were constantly trying to be whoever the ton wanted them to be.

It was a tragedy. Perhaps the greatest tragedy.

Lady Tuttle inclined her head. "I suppose you may ask."

Sylvia paused, drew in a breath, and infused her voice and face with kindness. "Do you think perhaps you've tried too hard?"

"Can one try too hard with their children?" Lady Tuttle demanded.

"Yes," Sylvia replied easily and without judgement, for the lady did not need more judgement. She needed help. "They can. May I ask you another question?"

Lady Tuttle winced anew. "If you must, and it seems that you must."

"What did you want for your children?"

"I wanted them to be happy," Lady Tuttle bit out, her voice harsh as if a wound was opening inside her.

"Did you?" Sylvia asked, trying to keep any sort of challenging note from her tone.

She'd learned a long time ago that if she judged one, the other person would retreat immediately. And so she tried to approach all things with a certain sense of curiosity.

"Of course," Lady Tuttle said.

"Or did you wish to keep them secure instead of being happy?" Sylvia offered. "You already said it, didn't you? Are your children happy?"

Lady Tuttle paled. "No, not a one of them," she confessed. "And I have tried so hard."

"Yes, you have," Sylvia replied. "And you must be admired for your dedication to

that. But I think that you have been so concerned with doing what you think will make them happy that you have not considered what actually will.”

Lady Tuttle frowned.

Sylvia then dared to reach across the short distance to take one of the other lady’s hands in her own. “And there’s the fact that you have done nothing for yourself in a very long time, and I think that has harmed you.”

“My goodness,” Lady Tuttle replied, her eyes twin shadows of pain, but she did not pull away. “You are bold.”

“I am a duchess,” Sylvia replied with an easy shrug. “Of course I am. And not only am I a duchess,” she said. “I am a duchess who does not care what society has to say about me.”

Lady Tuttle’s eyes widened. “I cannot even imagine such a thing.”

“Yes, you can,” Sylvia affirmed. “You can because I am your friend.”

Lady Tuttle’s jaw dropped. “My friend?” she murmured. “But we are so different.”

“Oh, most certainly,” Sylvia agreed. “I’m sure you think that I am quite a tricky character, having been an actress. But you can go on as you are doing and things will become difficult for you, and even more hard, and you’ll become more alone and more isolated and more angry, and your children shall drift from you.”

Lady Tuttle looked as if she was about to revolt at this, but then her face creased and her shoulders sank. “How do you know my circumstances so well?”

The lady was beginning to tremble, and Lady Tuttle now unknowingly clutched at

Sylvia's hand, like a child who had become lost and longed for their mama.

"For someone like me, it is not hard to see," Sylvia replied gently. "I met your daughter at that ball when you were so displeased that she danced with Ajax. And she'd just found the love of her life and yet...it angered you so."

"You don't understand," Lady Tuttle protested, her voice full of fear. "She was about to destroy the family."

"Did she destroy it or has she made it?" countered Sylvia. "You're about to be related to a duke, after all. One of the most powerful men in the land. It wasn't exactly what you expected from her, was it?"

Lady Tuttle sucked in a shocked breath, and much to Sylvia's relief, for it did not always happen this way, realization hit Lady Tuttle.

"Dear God in heaven. You are right."

Sylvia laughed. "Of course I am. I am almost always right and, my dear, if you but realize that the rigidity with which you have seen the world has limited your life so entirely, you can learn to be right too."

"I thought she was going to destroy our family," Lady Tuttle whispered with horror, "but she is the one who's made the great match, hasn't she?"

Sylvia nodded and squeezed her hand. "Some might say the younger son of a duke is not a great match."

"But it is," Lady Tuttle cut it in, "when it is a Briarwood."

"You realize this," the duchess dowager said, her brows rising. "I am surprised and I

applaud you.”

“How can one not realize that being welcomed into such a powerful, old, and moneyed family is not a good thing?”

“Then you are learning already,” Sylvia said. “Brava. For a moment, I feared you were going to keep her from us.”

Lady Tuttle looked away, her entire body radiating self-revulsion. “I was going to keep her from everyone because I did not know how to handle her.”

Lady Tuttle sucked in a breath and then let out a sob as if she had held in her pain for years. As if she had never let herself express her great grief. “I have made such terrible mistakes and said such terrible things because I thought I was doing the right thing. Because I thought...”

“You thought you were protecting her from more pain, didn’t you?”

“You don’t know what I threatened,” Lady Tuttle said, turning back, her face twisted with pain. “She’ll never forgive me.”

“No,” the dowager replied honestly, her own heart aching for all the pain done. “She might never forgive you. You are correct, especially if you did say terrible things. And you don’t need to tell me what they were, but you can start right now with the realization that it is actually Winifred who is the one who is the diamond.”

Lady Tuttle blinked and let out another sob before she nodded. Tears coursed down her cheeks. “What I have I done?”

“Pain has twisted your reason and your child defied you when, in your mind, you were keeping your children safe. You were cruel. I saw it often when I was a girl in

the East End. Those poor parents loved their children, but they did terrible things to them—out of fear, out of poverty, and out of their own pain. Any of us, if on the wrong path, can go too far and twist our love into a poisonous thing. Shakespeare shows us that in many of his plays.”

Lady Tuttle let the tears flow then, as if her wound had been opened and she would not cover it up again. “I made Alison such a—”

“I’m sure Alison would be a jewel,” Sylvia cut in gently, lest the lady punish herself too harshly, “but diamonds, my dear, are unique. They are special. They are without parallel. And Winifred? There is no one like her. She is the greatest jewel in your crown, and I hope you can see that.”

Lady Tuttle’s face creased with her suffering, and she looked away again as if she could not bear herself. “I never did see it. I thought she was too much like her father. I thought...”

“And your husband. Did he not like society?” Sylvia offered.

“He wasn’t an outcast, but he cut himself off and he was lonely. He liked to be alone, but he was still lonely.”

“And you did not wish that for Winifred,” Sylvia surmised.

“Oh, God in heaven.” Lady Tuttle began to sob. “Oh God, I did not wish her to be lonely like her father. But what was I doing to her? I was going to force her to be alone in Suffolk. So entirely alone.”

“To protect your other children,” Sylvia concluded softly. “So they wouldn’t be alone either. So they would be secure.”

Lady Tuttle nodded, whipped out a handkerchief, and pressed it to her face.

“Then let this be a new beginning if you will allow it,” Sylvia urged. “The beginning of something different, but you have to allow it. If you don’t, it shall go on like this. It shall only grow more poisonous, and your wound will never close. Or you can embrace this life and the fact that you were wrong and let the Briarwoods welcome you into a new home. And a new way of living.”

Lady Tuttle sucked in a breath. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t worry,” Sylvia said, beaming. “You’re already on the right path with that one simple phrase.”

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“I knew you’d come,” Winifred called as she raced down the stairs and leapt into Ajax’s arms. She did not hesitate or hold back. Why would she? The man she loved was here!

He was such a big fellow that he seized her and swirled her around, holding her close as if it was the most natural thing in the world. And it was.

She felt as if she’d found heaven in his embrace. She never wanted to leave it again. Being in his arms, held by him, was like coming home.

He pressed his forehead to hers. “I’m so glad you were so confident,” he growled softly.

“How could I not be?” she teased, closing her eyes, savoring the feel of their heads tilted together and his scent surrounding her. “I know you.”

“And I you, Winifred,” he said, his hands holding to her so tightly his fingertips pressed through her dress and into her skin.

She loved it. Oh, how she loved his passionate hold.

He slowly let her feet trail to the ground and then he held her against him, wrapping his arms about her.

She heard a slight sigh, and she spotted her sister Alison watching from the hall.

Alison’s eyes were alight. Her whole face had transformed into one of hope, and she

looked like a girl who had suddenly witnessed a fairy tale story unfold. And she had.

This fairy tale story was having the most wonderful of happy endings. Except, it wasn't an ending at all, it was only the opening of a grander tale.

Alison gave Winifred an incline of her head, beaming, then backed into the shadows, slipping away.

"Who was that?" Ajax asked softly.

"You noticed?" she asked, leaning into him, reveling in his heat, his strength, his power...and his gentleness.

"Oh, I notice just about everything when it comes to you," he said.

"That was my sister, and I cannot believe it, but she admires me," she declared.

"Of course she admires you, Winifred," he said kindly, gazing down into her eyes with his own adoration. "Everyone should admire you. There should be a line stretching out from this house all the way down to the Thames, out to Greenwich, and beyond. A line of people who should admire my soon-to-be wife."

She beamed up at him. "You, sir, are full of hyperbole."

"How else should one be?" he drawled playfully. "One must revel and celebrate in this life, and I am ready to revel and celebrate with you."

"But what has Mama said? What has my brother said?" she rushed, fear whispering in.

"What could they say in the face of the Duke of Westleigh and our mother?" he

replied easily.

“You don’t understand,” she said, licking her lips. “My mother said things.”

“Yes, I’m sure she did,” he replied.

“If I’m honest with you, she questioned my reasoning.”

He held her tightly then, pulling her even tighter to him, as if he’d never let her go. Gently, he rested her head upon his shoulder. “No one will ever threaten you again. For any reason. Whether it be their own fear, their own anger, or their own bitterness. You shall always be in a position to defend yourself. I promise you that, Winifred. You are no longer a victim of fate, but someone who makes their own life occur. And you will be able to defend it. And I shall be there by your side while you learn your strength.”

She nodded against his shoulder, even as hot tears burned her eyes. “I couldn’t bear it, you know. The possibility of having to go back to that little life, not after what I’ve known with you.”

He pulled her back and tilted her face up with his thumb and forefinger at her chin. “Nor should you have to.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

“And I love you,” he said softly. He traced his thumb along her lower lip. “You are mine. Always mine. You have been mine since before I even knew you,” he whispered. “We have been each other’s through all time. And we will be each other’s when time runs out.”

Her heart. Oh how her heart soared at those words!

“I was seeking you out all those weeks ago,” she said. “And I didn’t even know it.”

“And now the world will open to you,” he assured. “For the world does love a seeker.”

“Ajax,” she replied, “it already has.”

He beamed down at her.

“Now where is my mother and my brother?” she asked with a sigh. “Lest they pop out from somewhere and try to seize me and send me up to Suffolk.”

He laughed at that. “There shall be no popping out and seizing,” he said. “First, your brother is with my brother, the duke, and they are sorting out all the contractual details and your mother is with mine.”

“Do you think your mother can withstand mine?” she groaned.

Ajax threw back his head and laughed. “My mother can withstand anyone. Never you fear. No doubt, at this very moment, your mother is being converted into the way of being a Briarwood.”

Her eyes widened. “I can’t even imagine such a thing.”

“Imagine it,” he said. “My mama will have your mama dancing to an entirely new tune by sundown.”

She frowned, hardly able to believe that her mother could ever be soft again. Or kind. “I don’t know what I will do if she does.”

“Do you not wish her to?” Ajax said softly, his gaze searching hers.

She bit her lip, trying to understand her own feelings. “Of course I do, but she has hurt me so terribly. I don’t know if I could...”

“You never have to see her again,” Ajax said simply.

“What?” she breathed. Surely, that couldn’t be true. Her mother had been the driving force of her life for years. She could scarce imagine her out of it.

“If you don’t want to, you never have to see your mother again. I promise you that.” He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. “We can ban her from the house.”

She blinked as her eyes began to burn and her throat tightened. “That’s not really what I want.”

“Then tell me,” he whispered softly. “What is it you want?”

“I want her to love me,” she rushed. “I want her to be in that line of people that stretches all the way out to the Thames and to Greenwich and beyond. I want her to admire me, not to tolerate me. And I don’t know if she can ever do that.”

He enfolded her in his arms again.

Oh, the wound of it! How it ached. But she couldn’t let the past poison her future. She couldn’t let her relationship with her mother twist her relationship with Ajax. She had to find a way to leave that behind.

“I don’t know if she will ever be in that line,” Ajax said honestly. “But I can tell you this. People are capable of the most immense change, and if she does change, it will be entirely up to you if you allow her in or not. And I will stand by you either way.”

She nodded. Tears slipped down her cheeks as relief swept through her. “I’m so...”

“What?” he asked gently, stroking those tears away with his thumbs.

“I don’t know,” she confessed. “Can one be so many emotions at once?”

“Of course,” he said as if she was quite reasonable. “One can feel as if the world is completely turning inside out, be full of bliss, and then, in the next moment, be terrified.”

She laughed and wiped at her own tears. “You’ve named all three emotions perfectly well.”

“Whatever you feel,” he said, taking one of her tear-stained hands, “I will be holding your hand while you feel it.”

“Kiss me,” she said, her heart full of love and wonder at this man. “Kiss me.”

He lowered his mouth to hers and did as she bid. And as his lips moved over hers in a tender caress, she felt all her cares fall away, replaced by her deep love for him and the passion he always awakened when his mouth took hers.

He lifted his head and gazed down at her with heated eyes. “Now, come with me.”

She shook her head, dazed from the kiss and the passion now sparking within her. She had missed him. Even in these short days. She had missed his body, his soul, and the way he made her feel at one with him when they kissed.

“You never have to stay in this house again,” he said firmly. “You shall come to Heron House where you belong and wait there for the wedding. And every day you can grow and be yourself and become part of my family. They’re all waiting for you.”

He grinned. "It was everything I could do to stop Zephyr, Achilles, and Jean-Luc from coming."

She beamed, her heart leaping at the idea. "I would've liked to have seen that. This house would've been under veritable siege," she said.

"And they would have charged to the rescue if needed," he added. "If they feared that you were taken prisoner, that is."

"I almost was," she said with a grimace, "but I never gave up on you, or myself, and I never will. And I have you to thank for that."

"I told you already," he corrected patiently. "That's not actually true. You have yourself to thank."

"I realized that," she said, her lips curling into a slow, self-satisfied smile, "in my battle with my mother. But Ajax, I don't know if I ever would have realized that I could save myself if I hadn't met you."

He tilted her head back and kissed her again. Kissed her for all he was worth, with every bit of love and fire and passion that he had.

And she met him kiss for kiss.

In that wild, all-consuming love, she realized then that the old Winifred, the one who had been so afraid, the one who had tried to hide, was gone.

When the kiss was done, Winifred took his hand and led him out of the foyer, through the door, onto the street and into the light.

Heron House

Winifred's life had changed so entirely she could scarce recognize it when she compared it to but a year before.

Life was a mysterious set of events that could unfurl in the most splendid ways if one but allowed it. Or it could unfold in tragedy, misery, and certainty of an unhappy future. She saw now the way her mother had lived. The way her mother had trained her children and set them up for the second viewpoint. And the way Sylvia, her mother-in-law, had trained her children and had prepared them for the first.

She knew with all her heart that when she had children, she would choose Sylvia's view of the world.

It wasn't truly her mother's fault. Her mother had been wounded by life and shaped by it.

Now, Winifred had not seen her mother in months, not since the wedding. And the wedding had been a truly grand affair. It had indeed been at St. Paul's. Hundreds of people had been invited. The party had been a crush at Heron House.

Champagne had flowed and food had been abundant. Dancing had been done in merry excess. Laughter had filled the air. Oh, what bliss she now knew on a daily basis since, and her mother seemed to be opening too, like a flower that had finally met the sun.

Still, Winifred did not interact a great deal with her, and yet she could not deny the

fact that her mother was trying. Her mother had gone down to Bath, taken up a house and, at the dowager duchess's instruction, decided to learn how to live. Without fear, without anger, without bitterness, and without trying to control every aspect of her children's lives.

It was no easy thing. But Sylvia was Lady Tuttle's guide, and her mother was giving Winifred space to change, to grow, to be happy until she too could learn how to do those things.

Much to her amazement, Winifred received a letter from her mother every week and a gift. They were not the typical gifts that one would assume a young lady would receive. There were no ribbons, no lace, no fans, no hats—things that, in the past, her mother would have given her to try to make her into the young lady her mother thought she should be.

No, books arrived. Small pieces of parchment with bits of Shakespeare and commentary scribbled upon them. Also volumes on science, treatises on nature, pressed leaves, and beautiful envelopes full of pressed flowers from that part of the country. It was clear that her mother was trying to see her as she was, and Winifred appreciated it. One day, perhaps she and her mother would be able to be, if not good friends, able to at least show each other love.

Alison was not in Bath.

In fact, Alison had made great friends with Ajax's younger sister, Perdita. The two of them were forever looking at animals and climbing to the top of the house with Perdita's cat and crow always with them.

For Alison had been taken in hand by the dowager duchess. Sylvia had gotten the approval of the queen for the dowager duchess to guide the young lady in her first Season. It was remarkable. It was also shocking that Winifred's mother had been able to step back and realize that it might be the best thing for all of her children if she did

so.

If Lady Tuttle took time for herself after years and years of worrying herself to the very bone, until she had nothing soft left to give, perhaps they all could find love for each other.

Alison was thriving and happy and had already received three proposals of marriage. One from an earl, one from a marquess, and one from a baron. No doubt she would make a very fortuitous marriage but, more importantly, a happy one.

Winifred had received many letters from her brother Alfred. He had set out to find himself, just as Winifred had done, and had discovered that he had no desire to come back to England. He had gotten on a ship and set sail and was going from port to port, exploring the world.

Each letter was full of wonder and joy and gratitude that they had both made a decision to defy society, the odds, and their mother. It was the greatest thing that either of them could have done, strangely enough, not just for themselves, but for their whole family.

Even her older brother, Winston, was transforming. He was no longer doggedly looking for a wife in a rigid sort of way, but he was daring to imagine that he could have love just as his parents had once done.

The door to the chamber jostled open, and Ajax strode through, his hands behind his back. She beamed at him and put her quill down from her journal. Now that she was past the first few months with child, her body no longer ached so much and she could keep down her breakfast. In fact, she felt ready to explore the world again and have a bit of fun! After all, once the child was born, she was going to be consumed by the newborn.

Unlike the rest of the ton, she would not pass her baby off to an army of servants. Oh,

she'd take help, but she was going to keep her baby with her.

Ajax had been most attendant and full of joy. If he'd adored her before, he now treated her as if she was a goddess who walked the ground.

She gazed down at the words about Margaret of Anjou on the page and stretched her neck. She wrote every day now. She was even considering working with the duke's wife, Mercy, and writing a book about Shakespeare. Maybe she wouldn't write it for anyone but herself. But whatever she decided, the world was full of opportunities.

Ajax smiled at her. "You look beautiful," he said.

"Of course I do," she said. "I'm with you. You make me feel beautiful."

"You are beautiful," he returned.

And she loved the fact that he said that to her every day, multiple times a day, because she had heard the opposite for so long. And she knew that he meant it. He complimented her from the moment they got up to the moment they went to bed, as if he could make up for a lifetime of criticism. Some people might not have liked it. She adored it. She adored her darling husband, who had always seen her as so much more than anyone else had.

She closed her journal and stood, crossing to him in her dressing gown. "Have you already been up and conquering the world?"

"Of course I have," he said. "I had to make sure that my brothers weren't in too much trouble, you know."

"And where are Achilles, Zephyr, and your dear cousin?"

He winked. "You don't want to know, my dear. You don't want to know. It is a

miracle—”

“That they are still living?” She could not stop the laugh tumbling past her lips.

“Indeed,” he agreed. “But since they’re part of our family, they’re extremely lucky. And they will likely outlive everyone they know in the ton.”

“You look as if you are up to something yourself,” she said, linking her arms about his neck. “What is it?”

“I had an idea,” he admitted.

“Oh?” she queried, realizing his hands were still behind him.

And with that, he pulled the hat out from behind his back. It was the jaunty cap she’d worn which had made her feel so confident as a boy.

“What do you have to say, my love, to a little bit of an adventure?”

“With you, my love?” she queried, her heart warming, for he knew her so well. He knew she longed to go out again and explore. “How could I possibly say no?”

The End