



The Spinster's Stolen Heart (Willenshires #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: A viscount with a broken heart. A violinist with a daring spirit. One love that defies the rules.

Pippa Randall's violin sings with passion, but her future is stifled by her mother's relentless push to secure a wealthy husband. When a chance encounter introduces her to Lord Nathan Whitmore a reserved viscount burdened by duty and loss sparks fly.

Drawn to Pippa's spirit, Nathan begins to question the life he's built. But as family expectations, painful secrets, and social pressures threaten to pull them apart, they must decide if love is worth risking everything.

In a world bound by rules, can two hearts break free to create their own perfect melody?

"The Spinster's Stolen Heart" is a heartfelt story about love, duty, and finding your own path. With memorable characters and a romance that keeps you turning pages, this around 60,000 word novel is sure to sweep you away until the very last chapter.

Total Pages (Source): 30

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Two Years Previously

The man's rasping coughs echoed through the too-small room.

"More water, Papa?" Pippa asked, keeping her voice soft and calm. The physician had already told them that the end was near, and that loud voices and sharp words would only distress him.

Phillip Randall nodded eagerly at the prospect of water, and Pippa carefully allowed him to take small sips from the glass beside his bed. As she did so, she noticed a film of dust on the bedside table. The chores weren't being done. Their last remaining housemaid had reluctantly given her notice only a few weeks ago, and now only a maid-of-all-work remained. And that poor maid was also owed back wages.

Back wages which they couldn't afford to pay. The last of their savings had gone to pay the physician.

The poor girl worked harder than ever now. Before Mr. Randall's sudden illness, Pippa had helped the maid with the cleaning and cooking, but now she was required to act as a nurse, and poor Joan had all the work to do herself.

Turning pointedly away from the dust, Pippa glanced over at her father.

Phillip had never been a strong man. Tall, thin, dark-haired and blue-eyed like his daughter, he had always been content to live a quiet life in his little country estate. The three of them had led a pleasant and simple little life for as long as Pippa could remember. She couldn't quite pinpoint the moment that things had begun to change,

when the scrimping and saving had begun to start.

Now, of course, they were used to it – turning up cuffs, carefully hemming and darning and patching, doing their own dusting and eating simple, one-course meals. Even then, Pippa hadn't minded. Why would she need a London Season or new gowns? All she needed were her books, her peace, and her family.

My family is fractured, my peace is gone. How long will the rest of it last?

She put these selfish thoughts from her mind and concentrated on her father.

“How about some food, Papa? Some porridge, perhaps?”

Phillip shook his head dizzily. “Need... I need to talk to you. To you both.”

Pippa glanced over her shoulder at where her mother paced up and down the room. A fire was blazing in the grate, heaped high. It was too hot for the warm spring day, but Phillip felt the cold so keenly now.

Lady Bridget Randall, Viscountess, had her face set in its habitual expression of mulishness. There was something else in her face now, something Pippa was trying her best not to think about.

Grief.

Pippa was no fool. She knew that her parents had had their grievances over the years, and plenty of arguments into the bargain. And yet they loved each other, which was rare enough in the world. Bridget had not spoken of how she felt about losing her husband, and Pippa didn't dare bring up the subject because of the question which would invariably follow.

What will we do next?

Phillip pushed himself up onto his elbows, clammy sweat standing out on his forehead.

“When I die, my title will pass from me and our family,” he said insistently. “As will the estate. You’ll get a widow’s settlement, Bridget, but it’s not much. And there’s nothing for you, Pippa. No dowry.”

“Pippa is barely twenty-one,” Bridget spoke up. It was the first time she’d spoken aloud since the physician left, taking any hope with him. “She can marry well.”

Pippa said nothing. She’d been doing that a great deal lately. Keeping the peace was harder and harder with each passing day and mostly involved keeping her mouth shut and her opinions to herself.

Phillip winced in pain, closing his eyes and lowering himself back onto the pillows.

“But if she doesn’t...”

“She will,” Bridget snapped, shooting a sharp glance at her only daughter. “You have spoiled her terribly, Phillip, but now it’s time for her to grow up and make some sensible decisions. I’ll see to that.”

Pippa bit into her lower lip until it hurt.

Don’t start an argument. Don’t make Papa’s last hours full of strife and anger. You can argue with Mama later.

“If she doesn’t,” Phillip persisted, “then something else must be done. Bridget, you must go to your brother.”

Bridget stiffened, and the air seemed to rush out of the room. “My brother? The illustrious Duke of Dunleigh? I’m not a Willenshire anymore, Phillip. My brother turned his back on me when I married you. He said I’d demeaned myself. I daresay he and his whey-faced wife will laugh about it when they find out I’m widowed. Them and their pack of sons.”

“And their daughter,” Pippa found herself saying. “Katherine. Her name is Katherine.”

Bridget shot an annoyed look at her daughter. “What does it matter, Pippa?”

Phillip reached out a trembling hand and laid it on his daughter’s. “Don’t be cruel to Pip once I’m gone, Bridget.”

She folded her arms. “I’m never cruel to her, only realistic . It’s not my fault your daughter has her head in the clouds all the time.”

“ Our daughter,” Phillip corrected. “Pip, darling, could you stoke up the fire? I’m a little chilly.”

Wordlessly, Pippa got up and moved over to the fire. The heat gushed out from it, washing over her skin as she approached. Even so, she dutifully squatted before it and piled on more of their precious firewood. Behind her, she heard the rustle of skirts as her mother approached the bed. She glanced briefly over her shoulder and saw that Bridget had sat down on the stool which Pippa had just vacated. She was leaning forward, resting her cheek on Phillip’s hand, which lay on the top of the eiderdown.

“You can’t do this to me, Phillip,” Bridget said, her voice barely louder than a whisper. “You can’t leave me. You promised. It was going to be you and I together, right until the end. I threw away everything for you – friends, family, fortune – and I never regretted it, not for an instant. But once you’re gone, what will I have?”

“I’m sorry, love,” Phillip responded, sounding anguished. “Truly, I am. But I mean what I say about reaching out to your brother. Things are going to be difficult for you and Pip once I’m gone, and I don’t believe you understand just how difficult.”

“I’m no fool,” Bridget answered, voice crisp. “I know my life will change.”

“But so will hers, Bridget. You have to protect her. You have to care for Pippa.”

Over by the fire, Pippa hunched over, staring into the flames. The heat made her face flush and itch, but she couldn’t bring herself to move away. She knew that she wasn’t meant to be hearing this.

A fit of coughing suddenly wracked Phillip’s frail body, fluid rattling in his lungs. Bridget gave a cry, backing away from the bed, hands pressed over her mouth.

“Phillip, no! No ! I can’t, not without you! I just can’t !”

Abandoning the fire, Pippa threw herself across the room, onto her knees by her father’s bed, and grabbed at his hands. His face was waxy, pale as bone. Pale as death. There was a brightness in his eyes which hadn’t been there before, like the sheen on a fevered brow. His breathing was laboured, rattling horribly.

“I love you, Papa,” Pippa whispered, realising for the first time that she was crying, tears streaking hotly down her cheeks.

“I know, my darling girl,” Phillip wheezed. “Promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“You won’t stop playing your violin, will you? Even after I’m dead, and you have to leave this house and go somewhere smaller. Even when the hard times come, as I

know they will. You have such a talent, and I've always had such pleasure in listening to your music."

"I won't, Papa, I swear it. I'll play for you now, right now."

"No, no, darling, it's too late," he lifted a trembling hand, patting her cheek. "I know your mother thinks that her brother – your uncle – won't help you once I'm gone, but I wish you would try. More than that, Pip, I want you to be happy. I want you to find love. It's not easy to find, I can testify to that, but it is worth it. I swear to you, it's worth it."

Pippa was sobbing now, and she could hear her mother's stifled sobs behind her.

"I promise, Papa," she managed. "I swear it."

"That's my girl. And, Bridget?" Phillip's cloudy gaze drifted over Pippa's head, fixing on his wife.

"I'll never forgive you for leaving me," Bridget wept.

"Perhaps not," he conceded, "but I want you to know, Bridget, that you are the best thing that ever happened to me. A blessing that I never looked for. You are the love of my life, and I do not regret a single instant that we spent together. Even the bad times were good times, because they were spent with you. And I want you to help our girl find that kind of love."

Bridget didn't answer. She was crying too hard.

At the end of this speech, Phillip gave a long, ragged sigh, and his hand slipped back down to the eiderdown, and lay there limply. In between one heartbeat and the next, the light faded out of his eyes.

And just like that, Lord Phillip Randall died, leaving behind a grieving widow and a penniless daughter.

Pippa knew, even as she wailed and grieved for her parent, that her life would never be the same again.

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Present Day

Pippa spotted a small hole in the sleeve of her gown, about halfway up the forearm. She bit back a sigh of resignation.

There was a travelling sewing kit in her bag, of course, but the ramshackle old carriage was jolting around too much to allow her to try and fix it as they travelled. She would arrive at their destination, then, with a hole in her gown.

In case they didn't already believe that we were poor, miserable relations, we will make it clearer still, Pippa thought miserably.

The carriage was a hired one, and Bridget had haggled down the price until it was something they could afford. They had walked a good deal of the way, and taken a stagecoach another part of the way, but Bridget was insistent that they could not turn up at their destination looking like peasants. At least this way they could stretch out, just the two of them in the carriage, instead of jostling elbows against shouting fishwives and stinking butchers.

Frankly, Pippa thought it would be better for their case if they did. They were coming for charity, after all.

"Sit up straight, Pippa," Bridget snapped. "And don't look so miserable. You could be a pretty girl, if you only used your advantages better. I won't have them thinking we're gawping countryfolk."

But we are gawping countryfolk.

Pippa kept her mouth closed and straightened up.

“Do you think they’ll be happy to see us?” she said at last, after a few more minutes of uncomfortable silence. Her backside was horribly sore from being jolted about on the hard carriage seat, and she was desperate to have something to take her mind off it. “My cousins, I mean.”

There was a long pause before her mother responded.

“I don’t know,” Bridget answered simply. “William, the oldest, is the Duke of Dunleigh now. He was always such a serious boy and reminded me so much of his father. If he’s a copy of the old duke, my brother, then we’re in a great deal of trouble, my girl.”

Pippa didn’t need to ask what sort of trouble they would be in.

The months after Phillip’s death had passed in a daze of grief and privations. The next Viscount and his wife had come to take their dues and had reluctantly turned Pippa and Bridget out of the house. It was no longer their house, after all. It belonged to the Viscount Randall, whoever he was. Bridget’s widow’s jointure was thin, and the new viscount did not offer to supplement it. A distant cousin, it wasn’t really his responsibility to care for them, even though he did let them stay for a few weeks in the house. He brought a fortune of his own, it turned out, so the new Viscount Randall would not have to scrimp and save. He kept on Joan, the maid-of-all-work, and took on new servants.

Bridget and Pippa had taken a cottage a little way away from the Randall estate, and then a smaller cottage, and then finally a set of rooms above a shop in the town. Their income barely covered the rent and their food.

After six or eight months of this, Bridget had swallowed her pride and written to her

brother, the Duke of Dunleigh, explaining the situation and asking for help.

She received a terse, negative letter in response. No help was forthcoming, and their last hope was gone.

And then news trickled to the countryside that the Duke of Dunleigh was dead. Some sort of riding accident, it seemed.

Bridget was exultant, sure that her nephews and niece would do something for them now. They had missed the funeral, which was a shame, but she was so sure that help would come.

Months ticked by. News came that Katherine had married, and then the three boys in quick succession, and the Willenshire family thrived. No help came.

When their credit was finally turned down at the grocer's, Pippa came home and told her mother that something needed to be done. They agonized over sending a letter, which might be ignored, and finally, finally, came to a decision.

There'd be no letter, no warning. They would simply go to London and confront the Willenshires at their home.

The closer they got, however, the more Pippa began to worry. They were poor relations, and there was no real love between them and the family. She remembered spending some time with Katherine when they were children, but would Katherine remember? What if they were brushed aside like leaves in the wind?

Lifting her hand to her lips, Pippa began to bite her nails.

"Stop that," Bridget snapped. She was leaning up against the seat opposite, eyes closed, and Pippa wasn't entirely sure how her mother knew that she was biting her

nails.

She returned her hand to her lap. “Sorry, Mama. I’m just nervous.”

“So am I. But we’ll be there before nightfall, so calm down and try and compose yourself. We don’t want to seem too desperate.” She opened her eyes, sweeping a calculating look over her daughter from head to foot. “Tidy up your hair, can’t you? And when we get closer, pinch your cheeks a little to put some colour into them. You’re white as a sheet, and you don’t want to look like a spinster. You want to look marriageable .”

Pippa bit back a sigh, obediently running her hands over her hair.

She was proud of her hair, which was thick and wavy, coming to her waist, and had a rich chestnut shade. However, it was a lot of hair to manage, especially with no maid or anybody to help her put it up beyond her mother.

At twenty-three years old, Pippa had no more marital prospects than she’d had two years ago, before her father died. The memory of him still made her chest clench. Not a day went by without her thinking of his last words, his last request, and how she’d failed already.

“Pip, I want you to be happy. I want you to find love. It’s not easy to find, I can testify to that, but it is worth it. I swear to you, it’s worth it.”

I’m trying, Papa. I swear, I’m trying, it’s just so hard .

Pippa was pretty enough, but not in a particularly eye-catching way. At the moment, society loved unusual beauties, and women who stood out ethereal blondes, sleek, raven-haired ladies, women with red-gold hair like goddesses.

With brown hair and blue eyes, Pippa was not exactly remarkable . She was of average height, with a decently featured face, and an ordinary sort of figure. Besides, there hadn't been much Society for them now that they were plain old Miss Randall and the Dowager Viscountess. At times, it felt as though they were still in mourning, going nowhere and seeing no one.

Stop wallowing in self-pity, she scolded herself. Papa wouldn't want it.

"Your cousin William might give us an allowance," Bridget murmured, half to herself. "He can certainly afford it. Ideally, they might even take you out into Society for a Season. Sponsor you, you know. If so, you must resolutely apply yourself and approach the matter with due seriousness. Cast aside any fanciful notions of romance, my dear. It would be prudent to select a gentleman of considerable means and enter into matrimony for reasons of practicality rather than sentiment."

Pippa pressed her lips together. "Papa wanted me to find love."

"Your Papa was not practical," Bridget shot back coldly. "If he had been, he would have left you a dowry and me a larger widow's settlement."

A flash of anger went through Pippa. "That's not fair, Mama. You loved him, I know you did. You and Papa married for love."

"Indeed, we did," Bridget conceded. "And now I darn my own dresses."

There was a taut silence after that. Pippa swallowed hard, trying to calm herself down. She'd found herself all but raging at her mother more times than she could count over the past two years. Living in such close quarters was always a recipe for disaster, and Bridget seemed to have become colder and sharper since the death of her husband.

She's the only family I have left, Pippa reminded herself. We have to stick together.

She leaned forward, clearing her throat. "Mama, what will we do if Cousin William won't see us? What if they won't help us?"

Bridget's face tightened, and Pippa guessed that her mother had considered this possibility many times over the past few days.

"I don't know," she answered bluntly. "This is our last hope."

Pippa sat back, a shiver of fear going through her. The plain fact of the matter was that they had no home to go back to. Their rented rooms with its hired furniture would not be waiting for them back home. They could not afford to travel to London and pay for their rooms. Doubtless their landlord had already ushered in some hapless new family.

Not that Pippa had been reluctant to leave. The rented rooms had never felt like home, and their rapid fall had been noticed and catalogued by the town. The rector's wife occasionally brought charity-baskets around for Pippa and her mother, and that was almost too humiliating to bear. They saw the new Viscount and his family in church, and relations between them were strained. The townsfolk made it clear that they thought the new Viscount ought to do something for Pippa and her mother, and the new Viscount had made it equally clear that he disagreed. He had become mulish and resentful under the social pressure and did not bother to hide his annoyance.

No, there was nothing for them back home. Home, as it was, had disappeared entirely.

I wish I could believe that London would be any better, Pippa thought tiredly. If only...

She did not get to finish this thought, because at that instant, there was a resounding crack and the carriage lurched sideways throwing Pippa and her mother hard against the door.

“What in heaven’s name...?” Bridget squawked. “Pippa, do step outside and ascertain what is amiss. Are we perhaps ensconced in a ditch? Inquire of that insufferable coachman what he believes he is about. At this pace, he shall jolt us all into a state of utter disarray.”

There was nothing to do but obey. Pippa climbed awkwardly out of the carriage and discovered that they were indeed in a ditch. The carriage stood at an angle, the front left-side axle dug into the dirt. She saw the problem at once.

“The wheel’s broken,” she said aloud.

The coachman had come down from his perch and was standing on top of the ditch, staring down at the crippled carriage in resignation. He shot her an annoyed look.

“I can see that, Miss,” he responded. “Are you hurt?”

“No, we’re not hurt. But how long will this delay us?”

The coachman sighed, glancing up at the darkening sky. “I doubt help will come anytime soon, and we won’t be setting off again until morning.”

Pippa’s heart sank. “What? You mean we have to stay in the carriage all night?”

The driver shrugged. “I’d suggest you stay in an inn. There’s one just over yonder. Unless, of course, you can walk to your destination.”

“Walk?” Bridget chipped in, climbing ungracefully out of the carriage. “We’re not

walking up to my relative's house like a couple of paupers, our bags on our backs. You'll take us there, as we agreed."

The coachman shrugged again. "As you like. But then you'll need to find somewhere to spend the night."

Pippa turned to her mother, dropping her voice. "Can we afford an inn?"

Bridget's face tightened. "Just about."

"We could walk."

"No."

The word was uttered with finality. Bridget turned to face her daughter fully.

"Appearances are everything, and first impressions are crucial. We shall commence our journey as we intend to continue, arriving in a manner befitting proper ladies." She turned to the coachman. "Will you bring our boxes up to the inn?"

He grunted an affirmation, and Bridget turned away with a sigh.

"Come along, then. Let us make haste before all their lodgings for the night are taken. And for heaven's sake, repair that tear in your sleeve. You appear quite dishevelled."

It was not a particularly nice inn. The innkeeper looked them both up and down, pursed her lips, and bluntly requested payment upfront. Pippa saw the way her mother clenched her jaw against the obvious insult, and carefully counted out their precious coins to pay. She felt like stepping forward and slamming her fist against the

counter.

Don't you know that my cousin is the Duke of Dunleigh? She would shout. My father was the Viscount Randall. We're ladies.

She didn't bother, of course. Calling on the names of rich relations wouldn't make more money appear in their purses, and the innkeeper probably wouldn't believe them anyway.

They were shown to a small, dusty room with cobwebs in the corner and a gritty, unswept floor. There was one bed for them both to share, and it creaked ominously when Pippa sat on it. She bit back a sigh and turned her attention to the hole in her sleeve.

"This might serve us better, now I think about it," Bridget murmured, pacing up and down. "We can arrive in the middle of the morning, as if we were paying a call, rather than at the end of the day like a pair of supplicants."

"That's what we are, though, isn't it?" Pippa remarked. "Supplicants. Poor relations."

She'd made a mistake. Bridget rounded on her.

"I will not have you spouting such nonsense," she hissed. "I am a Viscountess, and you are a viscount's daughter. My brother was a duke, and a rich one. I was a rich woman. When you marry – and you'll marry well, I shall make sure of it – all will be righted again. We are coming to take our rightful place in Society, and don't you forget it."

Pippa avoided her mother's eye, bending over her sewing.

"I liked our old place in Society," she muttered.

Bridget pretended not to hear her.

“We shall go to bed early, I think,” she said, half to herself. “And start fresh in the morning. Our fates rest upon the morrow, and all must be executed to perfection.”

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Whitmore Manor, London

“You must attend, Nathan. You cannot withdraw, not for this gathering.”

Nathan bit back a sigh. There was so much work to be done. Ledgers to review, documents to write up, just endless, endless work. He couldn't concentrate, not with his mother demanding so much of his attention.

“Nobody will notice if I'm not there,” he objected.

“Lord Davenport will notice. He's a family friend, and it is Amanda's first Season. She is his daughter, and you've known her for years. You must go.”

“I'm not sure Amanda will care if I go or not. I went to her come-out, didn't I?”

There was a brief silence, and Nathan risked a glance up at his mother. She was, unsurprisingly, frowning at him.

Nathan's study was a small room, designed with practicality in mind rather than design. He was well aware that his mother hated the poky little space, equally as much as she had when the previous Viscount Whitmore, Nathan's father, had occupied it.

Lady Rose Whitmore was a diminutive woman, small and bright like a bird. She still preferred black velvet and pearls, as if still in mourning, and her greying hair was kept neatly pulled back. The black velvet aged her more than any wrinkles, and she was still a remarkably beautiful woman.

Nathan resembled his father, with his tall, broad-shouldered frame and pale brown hair. However, his eyes belonged solely to his mother, being large, sharp, and green. He did not consider himself handsome, with a face and figure more suited to striding around a muddy field in all weathers, rather than donning silk and dancing slippers.

“I have so much work to do, Mother,” he tried again. “Lord Davenport will understand.”

“He won’t,” Rose answered with finality. “I must insist that you escort me, Nathan. If you don’t attend, the insult will be too deep to ignore.”

That was a point he could not argue with. Sighing, Nathan replaced his quill pen, leaned back in his seat, and eyed his mother.

“You really want me to go?”

Rose pursed her lips. “You must go, Nathan.”

He sighed again. The Season was coming to an end, at long last. Nathan would have preferred to head to the countryside when London began to fill up for the yearly Season, but his work wouldn’t permit him. Furthermore, his mother would merely admonish him to make an appearance.

“I thought you’d have given up on finding me a bride for this Season, Mother,” he drawled. “I thought I’d been clear.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Do you know what Lord Colin Beckett says about you? The man who’s known you since childhood, and your dearest friend? He says that you throw yourself into work too much, and it’ll leave you a sad old bachelor one day.”

“I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t talk about me behind my back to my friend,”

Nathan responded, a little shaken. “Why should I marry if I don’t wish to?”

“Because if you don’t, you’ll be alone. I won’t live forever, Nathan,” Rose shot back. “Family is the most important thing in the world, and aside from me, you don’t have one. Your work won’t sit by the fire with you and hold your hand.”

I’m too tired for this.

“Very well, very well,” Nathan snapped ungraciously, getting to his feet. “I said I would come, and so I suppose I must. Now, if you don’t mind, Mother, I’d best go and get ready.”

“I’m glad,” Rose said, all smiles now that she’d gotten her way. “I’ve ordered the carriage for six o’ clock sharp.”

He grunted and stepped past her into the hallway. There was a mirror hanging opposite the door to his study, and Nathan found himself suddenly confronted with his reflection. He flinched, and paused, leaning forward to inspect himself.

Nathan had never been a dandy. In fact, he despised the over-reliance on ever-changing fashions one saw in the world these days. Good looks were a piece of good luck and not much else, and really counted for nothing. It was unfair that ladies were expected to market themselves by the blind luck of how their faces were shaped. Now, money was an asset worth having. Nathan recalled all too well the hard days of his youth, when a few bad investments and a run of ill luck had brought the Whitmore family almost to ruin.

Almost .

It had been hard work and perseverance which had brought them back from the brink, and now the Whitmores were a wealthy and well-respected family once again.

If he allowed himself to grow distracted, might they not slip back again? Nathan leaned closer to his reflection. Had that line between his eyebrows always been there? He forced himself to relax his forehead, but the line remained. He rubbed the space with his forefinger. The line remained, etched into his skin.

Shaking off the thought, he turned resolutely away from the mirror and hurried upstairs. If the carriage was coming at six, that didn't leave him much time to get ready.

I hope you appreciate this, Davenport, he thought sourly.

"You shall ask Miss Davenport to dance, won't you?" Rose asked.

Nathan, who had been staring out of the window and watching the dark scenery flash by, heaved a sigh. "Yes, Mother."

"And don't sigh like a dissatisfied child every few minutes."

"I shall not."

Rose adjusted her muffler, leaning back against the plush carriage seats. This was their finest carriage, freshly lacquered, with new padding on the seats and a few rugs and furs set aside solely to be used inside. It was a mark of pride for Nathan, keeping the carriage immaculate and up to date. In times gone by, people had pursed their lips in amusement when the Whitmore carriage rolled by, mud-splashed, and lopsided, with squeaky springs.

Not anymore. Not ever again, not if Nathan had anything to do with it.

Even the Davenports had been a little ashamed to own their friendship, in those days.

“You haven’t answered my question,” Rose pressed. “You must ask Miss Davenport to dance.”

“I shall,” he answered, hearing a touch of defensiveness in his own voice.

Stop it. You aren’t a petulant child, so don’t act like one.

Rose seemed satisfied with this and gave him a faint smile.

“Poor Amanda has had such a bad Season,” she added, sighing.

He frowned. “Really? I thought she was quite a success.”

“She was, but the Season is coming to an end, and still no betrothal. She’s quite downhearted. Not even an eligible proposal, from what I heard. It makes no sense, she’s such a pretty girl.”

“There’s always next year.”

Rose threw him an affectionate glance. “You would say that, Nathan. It’s different for ladies. Amanda is nineteen years old, after all.”

“What an advanced age,” Nathan remarked wryly. “Being eight years older than her, I must be positively ancient.”

“It’s different for men,” Rose said, as if that answered all of his questions and left nothing more to discuss. Nathan let the subject drop.

Anyhow, they were almost upon their destination.

Davenport House was huge, with cavernous ceilings and recently redecorated hallways. Every noise echoed. With the ballroom packed with people, music, and chatter, the noise was deafening.

Rose was immediately pounced upon by her little retinue of matrons, widows, and dowagers, and they all hustled away to sit by the wall and gossip. Nathan was left alone.

He prowled around the edges of the party, thinking about the paperwork waiting for him at home, and wondered how soon he could leave.

He spotted Lord Colin Beckett – or rather, Colin spotted him – and the man hurried towards him.

Colin was about twenty-five and betrothed to a very lovely girl. He was short and round, with a mop of tight red curls and a perpetual smile.

“I was surprised to see you here,” Colin remarked, falling into step beside his friend. “Did your mother force you out?”

“I think you know she did.”

“I’m surprised she hasn’t hustled you down the aisle so far this Season. Didn’t she want you to marry this year?”

Nathan sighed. “She did, indeed, but I think perhaps she’s finally understanding that I don’t wish to marry. Not yet, at any rate.”

“Well, you’re seven and twenty,” Colin pointed out. “Most men are married by your

age or at least giving it serious consideration. Don't you want to get married?"

Nathan clenched his jaw. "I have too much work to do. What woman wants to marry a man chained to his desk? Once our finances are a little more stable, then I..."

"How much more stable do you want them to get?" Colin interrupted. "There shall always be more work to do, friend."

"It hardly matters. I have yet to encounter a lady whom I wish to take as my wife, and I have no intention of entering into matrimony merely to satisfy the desires of my mother for a daughter-in-law."

Colin shrugged. "As you like. Personally, I thought that Miss Davenport had her eye on you."

Nathan glanced sharply at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"You can't tell me you didn't notice, or that Lady Whitmore didn't warn you."

Nathan said nothing. Now that he thought about it, his mother had been talking about Miss Davenport a great deal during the Season. He'd assumed it was because their families were so close, and that she was fond of Miss Davenport herself.

Could there have been another motive? It didn't matter, of course. Nathan was not in love with Amanda. She felt more like a younger sister than anything, and he was quite sure that she felt just the same.

"Upon my word," Colin murmured, giving him a gentle nudge. "Here she approaches."

Sure enough, when Nathan glanced up, he saw Amanda pushing her way through the

crowd towards them, beaming.

Amanda Davenport was considered a great beauty, and for good reason. She had pale blonde hair, matched with fresh, creamy skin, and a pair of large, expressive brown eyes. Her clothes always suited her perfectly, and she seemed to prefer pale, pastel colours in her gowns, to better flatter her complexion.

“There you are, Lord Whitmore!” she announced, descending on them. She spared a brief smile and nod for Colin, but her focus remained upon Nathan. “I’ve been looking for you all night. I just opened the ball with Papa, of course, but none of the ladies here seem to have your name on their dance card! How can that be?”

He smiled nervously. “I haven’t asked anyone to dance, Miss Davenport.”

“Oh, you poor thing. Well, don’t worry. I shall dance with you. See, I saved you a spot on my dance card.”

She fluttered the card in question in front of him, smiling coyly. Sure enough, there was one space left in her very full dance card. The next dance, the second one of the evening. Everybody got their ‘duty dances’ out of the way in the first set – dancing with fathers, brothers, relatives – and the second or third dance was when the real fun began.

“I see,” he managed. “Thank you, Miss Davenport.”

She seized his arm and towed him away towards the dance floor.

“I can’t bear to see you standing all alone,” she said, over her shoulder. “You are so funny, Lord Whitmore.”

He smiled faintly. “Thank you? And let me congratulate you, by the way, on a fine

Season.”

She stopped dead, and he almost walked into her back. Spinning around, Amanda narrowed her eyes at him.

“Are you jesting with me?” she inquired with a hint of indignation.

Nathan felt rather cornered. “N-No, of course not! If I’ve given offence, Miss Davenport, I hope you’ll forgive me.”

She eyed him for a moment more, then sighed and continued her push towards the dance floor. Already, the musicians were starting up the strains for the next set. It would be a waltz, Nathan noticed, to his chagrin. The waltz was more or less established in polite Society these days, but there were a few families who disapproved of it. Up until recently, the Davenports had been among those families, but it seemed that they had changed their minds. Perhaps when it became time to find Amanda a husband.

“It was not a successful Season, and I am not betrothed,” Amanda explained brusquely. “I thought you might have known that.”

“Indeed, but you seemed to be having fun.”

She chuckled, shaking her head benevolently. “You are quite amusing, Nathan. However, it is not a matter of amusement. It concerns the prudent arrangement of one’s future. There were several gentlemen whom I considered with interest, yet alas, naught has come of it. Ah, well.” She shot a quick, thoughtful glance up at him. “The Season isn’t quite over yet.”

He cleared his throat. “Are you sure you should be talking to me of this sort of thing? I am a gentleman, and you a lady, after all.”

She gave a melodic titter of laughter. “Oh, heavens, Lord Whitmore, you are indeed amusing . We’re old friends, aren’t we? I can talk to you as I would talk to an older brother.”

Nathan forced a smile. “Of course.”

Something like relief settled over him. She’d just referred to him as a brother, which meant that Colin was wrong, and she did not have any designs on him. She simply liked him as a friend.

Well, I can be a friend, can’t I?

He had a feeling that Lord Davenport would be happy enough to see his daughter marry somebody like Nathan. Perhaps in years gone by, things would have been different, back when the Whitmores were poor and an embarrassment to the rest of the ton .

But that was then, and this was now. Now, things were very different.

“I’ve never understood this madness for ladies to marry during their first Season,” Nathan found himself saying. They had reached the dance floor and took up their positions for the waltz. Amanda stood entirely too close, fluttering long, pale eyelashes up at him. “Why can’t you enjoy a few Seasons in Society instead of settling down right away?”

“Heavens,” Amanda chuckled, shaking her head. “I can enjoy Society once I’m married, can’t I? That is when the merriment commences.”

Nathan said nothing, but he couldn’t help thinking of all the ladies he’d known who got married, and a year later found themselves with a child and a house to run, a bored husband, and a palpable sense of dissatisfaction. And then, all Society would

have to say would be that she had lost her bloom and would immediately lose interest in the girl. It had happened to many famous beauties, women who had the eye of Society upon them for a few glorious months, only to shrink back into obscurity.

It was sad, in Nathan's opinion. Was that all the women had? A burst of glory, then the drudgery of children and housekeeping for the rest of their lives?

It's none of your concern, he told himself firmly.

The dance began. Amanda clung onto him, almost as if she were trying to support herself, and kept shooting quick, thoughtful glances up at him.

"And what about you, Lord Whitmore? Not betrothed?" she said at last, clearly keen to keep the conversation going.

"No, I am not in love," Nathan heard himself say.

"That's a pity. Miss Emmett is most fervently yearning for your company, I assure you."

"I... oh. How do you know?"

"Well, she told me," Amanda shot back, tossing her hair back from her shoulder. "She begged me not to tell anyone, as if it wasn't already obvious."

Nathan cleared his throat. "If she told you something in confidence, Miss Davenport, you ought not to have broken that."

She looked annoyed at this. "It hardly matters."

"If she told you and asked you to stay quiet about it, then..."

“Oh, hush, you don’t understand how things are between women. Most ladies are such awful gossips. Besides, you aren’t in love with her, are you? Are you in love with Miss Emmett?”

“No, I am not.”

“Of course you’re not,” Amanda agreed, allowing herself a small – and he almost thought, relieved – smile. “How could you be? She’s got all those nasty freckles.”

Nathan shrugged. “I always thought freckles were quite becoming.”

Amanda shot him another annoyed glare. “They’re ugly , Lord Whitmore. How can you think otherwise?”

He judged it best not to argue.

“And her skin is not good,” Amanda continued. “And she’s got hardly any fortune. She’s a dull thing, but I do feel sorry for her, so I keep her as my friend. I knew you wouldn’t care for her, though, and told her so.”

Nathan felt colour creeping up his neck. “Miss Davenport, you shouldn’t be unkind, you know. If she is your friend...”

“She’s not,” Amanda snapped, then flushed. “I mean to say, she is , but we’re both in Society to find husbands and start families, after all. What more would a woman want?”

There was a brief silence after this. Amanda kept glancing up at him, clearly hoping that he would speak, but Nathan could only think of how long was left in the set.

“My Mama keeps telling me that we would make a fine couple,” she said at last.

Nathan flinched. “I have no intention of marrying, Miss Davenport.”

She snorted. “ No man has any intention of marrying until he finds the right woman. It’s all strategy, you know, Lord Whitmore. A man as clever as you must understand that.”

On cue, the music ended with a flourish, and the dancers drew apart. Feeling thoroughly rattled, Nathan stepped back and made a neat bow. Murmuring something about finding refreshments, he made to turn and leave. Amanda’s hand on his arm stopped him in his tracks. Glancing down, he found her staring up at him, her expression thoughtful.

“Think about what I said, Lord Whitmore,” she said quietly. “I think it would be best for us both.”

She walked off without explaining any further, leaving Nathan with a growing feeling of unease.

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The butler looked down his long nose at them.

“Their Graces are not accepting guests yet, madam,” he said, with just a touch of incredulity in his voice. Just enough to make Pippa want to sink down into the ground in shame.

Bridget, to her credit, was not cowed. She lifted her chin.

“Do you know who I am?”

The butler wasn't cowed either. He looked her up and down and pursed his lips.

“No, madam.”

“I am Lady Randall, Dowager Viscountess Randall. I am the duke's aunt, and this here is Miss Randall, his cousin. We are here to visit family, if I were you, I'd change your attitude, my good sir.”

Pippa bit back a wince. Perhaps the butler was a little snobbish, but making an enemy of him wouldn't make the family any more likely to like them.

The butler stared at them for a long moment, then heaved a sigh.

“Very well. You will be shown to a parlour while I ask their Graces if you'll be received today.” He stepped back, and they both hurried inside before he could change his mind.

The butler shot them both a tired, disapproving stare. Pippa tried not to notice.

“Follow me, please.”

After two years of living in increasingly smaller cottages and finally a set of low-ceilinged, musty-smelling rooms, Pippa found herself a little unsettled in the vast hallways. The ceilings flew up away from them, cavernous and echoing. Portraits of serious-faced Willenshires stared down at them from the walls, interspersed with landscapes and works by the old masters.

Their footsteps echoed, the sound following them along the stone hallways. The butler strode ahead, leaving Bridget and Pippa to scurry along behind him.

My mother grew up in this house, Pippa thought, with a shiver. She was a Willenshire.

What was it like?

Bridget had never spoken much about her childhood, or about her brother. Aside from the brief, shining period when Pippa was brought to play with her cousin, Katherine, there'd been no connection between the family.

The butler gestured for them to step into a neat little parlour, mercifully smaller and cozier than the yawning hallways. She suspected it was an insultingly drab and small room, but could only feel relief at not being shown to some fine, huge space that was too large for them.

“Please remain here while I inform their Graces of your presence,” the butler said severely. “If they are not able to see you, you will have to leave.”

“I hope they’ll see us,” Pippa burst out, before she could stop herself. Bridget threw her an angry glance, and she felt colour rise to her cheeks. The butler was eyeing her curiously, and she smiled nervously. “I haven’t seen my cousins in such a long time. I haven’t even been able to congratulate them on their marriages.”

The butler’s expression softened. “If their Graces cannot see you today,” he said kindly, “I’m sure they will make time for you later. Please, make yourselves comfortable. Tea will be sent along soon.”

With that he withdrew, closing the door behind him. Bridget threw Pippa an annoyed stare.

“What on earth are you doing, trying to charm the butler?”

Pippa flushed. “Mama, I’m only trying to be pleasant. And he was much kinder to us after all. People only want to be treated kindly.”

Bridget snorted, tossing her head. She strode over to the window and stared out. Outside, a gentle rain began to fall, casting a dreary mist upon the windowpanes. The hired carriage with its newly fixed wheel was waiting as they’d asked, with their cases sitting hopefully on the top.

Pippa lowered herself onto a plush sofa, quietly marvelling at how fresh and soft it was, not even a little threadbare.

“I never asked, Mama,” she said, after a moment or two of silence, “but why did I spend time with Katherine? If there was such a breach between you and my uncle, why was I permitted to play with her when we were children?”

Bridget heaved a sigh, and for a long moment, Pippa thought she was not going to answer.

“My brother went abroad for business,” she said at last. “The Duchess – well, she’s the dowager duchess now, I suppose, but I called her Mary – wrote to me. You and Katherine might be friends, she thought. So, for a little while, we paid visits and you girls played together.”

“I see,” Pippa digested this. “And why did the visits stop?”

“My brother came home,” Bridget responded simply.

Silence descended again. Pippa was suddenly struck by how quiet it was. Back home – not that those rooms had felt like home – there was always noise. Chatter and rattling cartwheels from the square outside, or conversation from the shop below, or pacing footsteps from the attic above, which was leased out to another family. There was always something to break up the silence.

Not here. Here, the lack of noise was like a soft, heavy blanket, covering every corner of the room and smothering their own desire to speak. Pippa wasn’t sure that she liked it.

However, the silence meant that they could hear approaching footsteps well in advance.

Exchanging a nervous glance with her mother, Pippa rose to her feet. Wordlessly, they turned to face the door, hearts hammering, and waited.

The door flew open, and Pippa grabbed at her mother’s hand for support. Bridget squeezed back.

A tall, stern-looking man strode in, olive-skinned, with dark hair and sharp green eyes. He was followed by a beautiful woman with a mane of red hair, wearing a simple muslin riding gown.

There was a tense pause, the four of them staring at each other.

“Aunt Bridget,” the man said at last, expression unreadable. His gaze landed on Pippa. “And you must be... you must be Cousin Pippa.”

Pippa recovered herself at last, remembering that she was facing a duke. She began to sink into a curtsy.

“It’s good to see you, your Grace...” she began, but in a flash, the man was in front of her, raising her up by her elbow.

“Enough of that,” he said, flashing a somewhat awkward smile. “I am uncomfortable enough with being curtsied to as it is. We’re family, there’s no need for that. Or any of this your Grace business. My name is William.”

This, Pippa reflected, was a good start. She rose up, glancing at her mother. Bridget stepped forward.

“I apologise for coming without warning, my letter must have gone astray,” she lied smoothly. “I shall be frank, William. Our families have never been close, mostly due to my brother. Your father. He never forgave me for my marriage, and...” she cleared her throat. “Enough of that, I think.”

William’s face tightened at the mention of his father but said nothing. Bridget continued.

“I wanted to visit and try and make amends, but there never seemed to be a right time. I’m sorry if we have arrived at a bad time.”

“No, nothing like that,” William assured her. “This my wife, Lavinia.”

There was a softness on his face when he introduced his wife, who stepped forward with an easy smile. Pippa felt a pang of jealousy. What must it be like to have such a relationship with somebody? There was clearly a great deal of love between the two, a genuine thing that one saw rarely in Society.

Pleasantries were exchanged, and the butler duly reappeared with a tea tray and genial smile for Pippa. The four of them sat down, eyeing each other nervously.

“Family is important,” Lavinia said, while they sipped their tea. “I should like us to see more of you two, especially as you are widowed, Lady Bridget.”

Bridget smiled. “We could stay nearby for a while, to spend time with you?”

“Oh, no, you must stay here,” William said at once. “We have plenty of rooms. You can have a bedroom each, and a private parlour for yourselves.”

This, of course, was exactly what Pippa and Bridget had hoped for. Perhaps it was more than what they’d hoped for. Barely biting back a triumphant grin, Bridget inclined her head.

“I’d like that, thank you. You were always such a generous boy, William.”

He gave a tentative smile. “My father mentioned you, you know, and Cousin Pippa. We were reading his last letter to me only today, for the first time, and he mentioned my responsibilities towards you.”

“You must not feel obliged towards us, William,” Bridget said, at the same moment that Pippa said, “Why did you only read your father’s last letter to you today?”

She immediately wished she hadn’t spoken, because William shifted uncomfortably, glancing at his wife.

“It was to be opened and read by me only on my wedding day,” he said at last. “I didn’t open it immediately. I would have sent word to you in a few days, however. My father wanted...” he paused, glancing at his wife as if for help.

“You must be exhausted from your trip,” Lavinia spoke up. “I’ll show you to your chambers, and you can settle in. Have you brought any things?”

“We have a few cases,” Pippa spoke up, and immediately flushed. Now they would think that she and Bridget had come with the hopes of staying with them. Which, of course, they had , but still.

“I’ll have them fetched for you,” Lavinia answered at once, not even missing a beat. “The rest of the family will be thrilled to see you. Both of you.”

“I suppose you’ve heard of all the marriages we’ve had lately?” William said, laughing to himself. “Henry got married, Aunt Bridget. Henry . And Alexander, and Kat. I wonder if you remember the Rutherfords, Aunt Bridget? Well, Katherine married Timothy Rutherford.”

Bridget’s face relaxed into a smile. “Yes, indeed, I recall. The oldest boy, yes? What a fine match that will be.”

“Uh, no, not the oldest boy, the other one. Timothy was always my friend, and Kat’s too. He is, of course, the second son.”

There was a brief pause. “Katherine threw herself away on a second son?” Bridget said, laughing incredulously. “A plain old mister ? Goodness. If my brother were alive, he would never have allowed such a thing.”

There was an uncomfortable silence after that. Lavinia and William exchanged quick, meaningful glances. Pippa pinned her gaze on the ground, red with mortification on

her mother's behalf.

"Timothy is my friend, and he adores Kat," William said, carefully. "And she loves him. It's quite a good match, Aunt."

Bridget recovered herself, smiling tightly. "Of course, of course. Pay me no mind. I am happy for her, of course. Are they all here?"

"Not at the moment, but I'm sure they'll be keen to meet you. And..." William glanced at his wife again, "... and my mother is here, too. She generally lives with my brother, Alexander, but at the moment she is staying with us. I sent a footman to find her and tell her that you're here."

With impeccable timing, footsteps echoed in the hallway again. The door opened, and a pale, faded woman entered.

She was a little older than Bridget, but much smaller and thinner, with long, bony hands that she wrung together. Her gown was a good one, but old-fashioned, and did not sit right on her thin frame. She said nothing, only glancing between them.

William got to his feet, edging over to his mother.

"Mother, this is Aunt Bridget and Cousin Pippa. You remember them, don't you?" he said, his voice a little brighter than was natural, as if he worried his mother might not understand.

She cleared her throat, cloudy eyes landing on first Bridget and then Pippa.

"Of course, I remember," she said at last. "You have grown up beautifully, Pippa. And Bridget, it is very good to see you. I'm glad you're here. Shall we walk? I'd like to speak to you."

Bridget nodded slowly, glancing at Lavinia and William for permission.

“I shall write to my brothers and Kat, to let them know you’re staying with us,” he said. “Lavinia, would you show Pippa to her chambers?”

Lavinia nodded, and smiled at Pippa, gesturing for her to follow.

This is it, Pippa thought, heart hammering. My life is changing, again. I wonder what the future holds for me now?

Without giving herself a chance to think twice, she followed Lavinia.

Will it last, though?

Pippa tried to keep her worries to herself, as she followed Lavinia down endless, winding corridors.

The house was vast, worryingly so. Even the house they’d lived in when things were good was smaller than this one. When Pippa had visited to play with Katherine, they’d stayed in the nursery, and somehow the place had seemed smaller.

Now, she lived in fear of losing her way.

How will I find my way around?

“We’ll put you in the Blue Room, and your mother in the Grey Room, across the hall,” Lavinia said, twisting around to smile at her. “There’s a morning-room beside the Blue Room. It needs airing, but I shall have that seen to directly, and then you can use it as a parlour. I hope you’ll be comfortable here.”

“You’ve very kind,” Pippa burst out. “We... We shouldn’t have come without

warning. I apologise.”

Lavinia threw her an odd look. “I thought you said you’d sent a letter ahead, only for it to go astray?”

Pippa reddened further. “I did. That is, we did. Perhaps we should have waited, since you’ve only just gotten married.”

“I don’t mind,” she responded with a shrug. “William’s family is a little... well, I’m sure you know about the old duke already. The man was something of a monster. All of his children had strange relationships with him. His poor wife, Mary, adored him, but he never treated her well. She misses him so badly, but he was never worthy of her. Perhaps I ought not to speak so openly of it, but there has been so much trouble between William and his family because of this. It’s been... it’s been difficult. Have you any siblings, Pippa?”

She shook her head. “I always wanted siblings, though.”

Lavinia chuckled. “It’s certainly nice to have siblings.”

They reached a long, wide stretch of corridor, the doors painted different colours. They stopped before a blue door with a plaque reading The Blue Room .

“This is yours,” Lavinia said, gesturing for her to step inside. “Go on, see what you think.”

Pippa gingerly turned the handle, not quite able to believe that she was here , that she was welcome .

There was a chance to be something beyond a miserable, penniless spinster.

She stepped into a room larger than their sitting room back home. The room was square and high-ceilinged, with a four-poster bed that seemed bigger than her entire bedroom back home. The room was tastefully furnished, and a wide, high window looked out onto rolling lawns and rose gardens.

My mother left all of this behind when she married my father, Pippa thought, in a rush of surprise. That selfless act did not seem to fit in with Bridget's desire to improve their lives now.

She must have loved him so much.

A lump rose to her throat when she thought of her father. The two years since his death had numbed the pain a little, but not enough. It would never be enough, really.

"It's beautiful," she said at last, turning to face Lavinia. "Thank you so much, you and William, for your hospitality."

Lavinia gave a wry smile. She was leaning against the door frame, arms crossed, watching Pippa thoughtfully.

"I hope you'll be comfortable. Now, I shall go and make sure your boxes are being sent up."

She turned to go, but Pippa spoke again, stopping her in her tracks.

"The letter... the one from the old duke... it mentioned me, did you say?"

Lavinia lifted an eyebrow. "Yes, it did."

"I find that so strange. He was angry at my mother for the marriage she made, and never showed any interest in us. After my father died, Mama wrote to him for help,

and he refused to help us.”

She shrugged. “We were surprised too. The old duke was not a good man, but he was a surprising one at times. For example, he thought that Timothy Rutherford was a good match for Kat, despite him being a poor second son.”

Pippa bit her lip, remembering her mother’s contemptuous words regarding that marriage. They would have to be cautious with their words in this company, lest they offend their patrons.

“What did he say, then? I mean, what is William meant to do for Mama and me?”

She was not speaking well. Pippa felt like a clumsy, countrified simpleton. How was she going to manage in London Society? If she went into London Society. Perhaps they had no intention of bringing her out at all. They certainly had no obligations towards her. Even their hospitality was more than what she had expected.

Lavinia did not seem upset or offended, however. She only eyed Pippa carefully for a long moment, a faint smile curling her lips.

“He said that you may wish to marry, and William should help you find a suitable match,” she said at last. “I might guess that your mother wishes you to marry, too.”

“Indeed,” Pippa confessed. “I don’t feel inclined to marriage myself, but there’s no other choice, is there?”

Lavinia tilted her head to one side. “There is always another choice, my dear. But you must be tired, and you’ll want to settle in. We can talk about this later. Do you like riding?”

“Riding? Horses? Um, well, I suppose so. I don’t mind.”

She grinned. “I like to ride. You can come with me, sometime. Kat won’t be coming, on account of the baby, and nor will Abigail.”

“Who is Abigail?”

Lavinia chuckled. “You have much to do in order to catch up with this family, Pippa. Take your ease and allow yourself to rest. You shall require your strength,” she added, and slipped out of the door, closing it behind her.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

A tap at the door made Nathan flinch. He tore his eyes away from the column of ledgers, unable to swallow his annoyance.

“Yes, who is it? For heaven’s sake, don’t stand there scratching at the door, just come in.”

The door creaked open, revealing the butler. The man did not seem happy at being snapped at. Nathan felt a twinge of guilt.

“My apologies for my tone,” he muttered. “I am preparing for my meeting with Lord Davenport later. There’s a great deal to manage.”

The butler inclined his head, giving the air of a much put-upon man who bore his lot with fortitude.

“I see you have not finished your breakfast, your lordship.”

Nathan glanced at the barely touched dishes and his own clean, empty breakfast plate. He generally requested to eat his breakfast in his study, so he could get a good start on the day and get a good bit of work done. Generally, he did not eat much on a morning. There was too much that needed doing.

“I’m sure it was delicious,” he said, a trifle lamely. “What was it you wanted, then?”

“Lord Beckett is waiting in the foyer, your lordship.”

Nathan frowned. “Colin?”

“Yes, Lord Whitmore. He said something about a planned riding excursion?”

Nathan remembered in a rush, flushing. “Oh, of course, of course. Oh, heavens, I forgot entirely.”

He glanced down at his half-finished notes, and bit his lip. They would likely not return home until luncheon, and unless he was to skip luncheon entirely – probably not a wise choice, considering that he had not eaten breakfast either – he would have hardly any time to prepare for Lord Davenport’s visit.

I could tell Colin that I’m too busy, or that something has come up. He’d understand, wouldn’t he?

He glanced up, meeting the butler’s eyes. The man’s expression was carefully neutral, but Nathan was sure he saw a flash of disapproval in his eyes.

You’ve already cancelled too many arrangements with your friend, haven’t you?

He bit back a sigh. If I take a short break, I can return fresh to my work.

“Tell him I’ll be down directly,” Nathan said. “I’ll just change into my riding attire.”

The butler’s face relaxed into a smile. “Very good, your lordship.”

It was a fresh, crisp morning, ideal for riding. The cool air tinged their cheeks and noses pink, and frosty grass crunched under the horses’ hooves.

For a few moments, Colin and Nathan rode side by side, sitting straight in their saddles, and didn’t talk much. It was a comfortable silence – or at least, it would have

been, if Nathan had not been so preoccupied with the work waiting for him back home. Meetings with Lord Davenport were always stressful. Sometimes, he couldn't help but feel that the man was remembering all too well the time when the Whitmores were not titans of business, but the human version of plain bad luck.

"Louisa's coming to tea with the family and me today," Colin remarked, somewhat idly. "My mother keeps talking about her dowry. It's not sufficient, I know. I keep telling her that I don't care in the slightest. I'd marry Louisa if she hadn't a penny but I don't believe that Mother can understand that."

"Indeed, she can be rather mercenary," Nathan agreed. "But she's happy that you are marrying for love, isn't she? And Louisa is such a dear girl."

Colin flushed, beaming the way he always did when Louisa was mentioned.

"She is a most cherished young lady. To be candid, I can scarcely fathom my good fortune. She is the very love of my life, and I am resolved to take her as my wife. I consider myself exceedingly fortunate. Yet, at times, I find myself grappling with a sense of ingratitude."

"Ingratitude? What do you mean?"

Colin shrugged. "I confess I am rather apprehensive as well. The institution of marriage is a grave matter. It has the potential to bring one joy beyond one's most fervent aspirations, yet it may also plunge one into despair. What if I were to err in my choice? What if I prove to be an unsuitable husband? The thought of causing her unhappiness fills me with considerable trepidation."

"Small chance of that, I should think," Nathan replied easily. "She adores you, and you adore her. I can't think of any better way to start a marriage. Just be yourself, Colin. You are kind, generous, and cheerful. Keep those qualities, and all shall be

well.”

Colin chuckled, shaking his head. “Pray, I knew you would possess the sagacity to offer the right counsel, dear friend. Upon awakening this morn, I found my thoughts in disarray and my heart racing as though it might leap from my breast, for I was quite overcome with trepidation. I said to myself, 'Steady now, my good fellow, take a moment and proceed to visit Nathan as you had resolved. He shall provide assistance.' And indeed, you have. I am most grateful.”

Nathan threw his friend a small smile.

Thank heavens I didn't cancel our ride.

“I never asked, by the way,” Colin continued in his easy, cheerful way. “How was the ball? After Miss Davenport whisked you away, I never saw you. I noticed that she saved you the waltz, though.”

Nathan pursed his lips, some of his good humour filtering away. “It doesn't mean anything, Colin.”

“Mayhap not. But this is getting towards the end of the Season. I only say it to warn you, by the way, but I think Miss Davenport is trying to catch you. And I think her parents and your mother are happy with the arrangement.”

“Oh, nonsense, Colin. Surely not. What woman would want to pursue me ?”

Colin threw him a shrewd look. “Your modesty is a fine quality.”

“I am not being modest. I am realistic.”

“Ah, you seek realism, do you? Very well, allow me to present this for your

consideration. You are a lord, remarkably rich, of a good, old family. You have no sisters or interfering brothers to get in the way of a new Lady Whitmore, and you are rather handsome. You are also famously unattached.”

Nathan sighed. “Enough of this conversation, Colin. I do not believe that Miss Davenport is trying to catch me, and if she is, it is only out of desperation. She’ll come to her senses in a day or two, and it’ll be all forgotten. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Very well, very well. Now, before I forget, I have a rather important question to ask you. It’s actually the reason I brought you out here.”

Nathan glanced at him. “Oh, how intriguing. Do explain.”

Colin drew himself up, clearly composing himself to ask something important.

“The wedding preparations are going along well, but some elements are missing.”

“I should love to help, if I’d be of any use.”

He chuckled softly. “I have a proposition for you, Nathan. Would you do me the honour of being my second? My best man, if you will. I envision you by my side at the altar, holding the rings as we all gaze upon Louisa and marvel at her extraordinary beauty. I need a gentleman who possesses a steady demeanour, one who won’t be overtaken by emotion and risk dropping the rings, if you understand my meaning.”

Nathan allowed himself a quick, gratified smile. It was a great honour to be asked, and not one he’d expected. He and Colin were extremely close, but Colin was a gregarious sort of man with a great many friends, and plenty of cousins and so on.

“That’s a fine privilege, Colin. Thank you.”

“So, you’ll do it?” Colin said, looking anxiously at him.

“Of course. Did you think I would say no?”

Colin shifted in his saddle, giving a short, quiet laugh. “Oh, I hardly know. We are friends, to be sure, but there are times when it seems that all you care for is your work, old friend.”

That stung, but Nathan shook it off. He wasn’t about to spoil the day.

“To celebrate,” he said, flashing a grin, “shall we have a race?”

Colin grinned back. “Oh, I certainly would. I suppose the real question is, are you ready to lose?”

“Ha!”

“All seems to be in order,” Lord Davenport said, throwing a benevolent smile at Nathan. “This investment is a good one. You’re watching the market closely, though, aren’t you? Taking note of the variables? Things can change overnight, you know.”

Nathan bit back a flare of annoyance at the off-hand question. Lord Davenport would never question any other businessman this way, and certainly not a gentleman.

Steady on, he warned himself. Lord Davenport has known you since childhood. And he has seen you fail before.

“Of course,” he responded coolly, sitting back in his chair. “It’s as safe a bet as we’ll find on the market these days. You know how careful I am.”

“I do, I do,” Lord Davenport answered, tossing the papers back onto the desk. “Heavens, business makes me thirsty. Any chance of more tea, my boy?”

“Naturally.”

Nathan got up to pull on the bell, and when he turned around, Lord Davenport was watching him with a shrewd, calculating look in his eyes. It was not unlike the way he would inspect a page of figures, looking for an error.

Or perhaps looking for a profit to be had.

“There’s been a great deal of talk about you this Season, Nathan.”

Nathan kept a polite smile on his face, settling down in his chair. “Oh? I can’t think why.”

“Heavens, boy, can’t you really?” Lord Davenport chuckled. “All of Society wonders when you’ll marry. You’ll have to secure a suitable match, you know. To have sons and all that.”

“I have time for that.”

“Ah, indeed, we all believe that we have time, until suddenly we wake up one morning and discover that we are old, that time has fled by, and opportunities to do things we always wished to do have come and gone.”

Nathan’s smile wavered, and he fought to keep it in place. “What a bleak picture.”

“I agree,” Lord Davenport nodded. “Come, the Season is not yet concluded. The final ball has not yet graced us with its presence. My family and I intend to remain in London until the very last moment, on account of Amanda’s Season, you know.” He

sighed, shaking his head. “She’s been a bit of a disappointment, to be sure. I can’t think why she’s not more popular. She’s beautiful, rich, and our family is an old and respected one. I think it’s this new, modern wave of sentimentality. They’re all looking for love and romance and believing that the world is like novels. Ridiculous, truly ridiculous.”

“It would set one up for disappointment.”

“Not my Amanda, though. She’s purely practical. Papa, she says, let me only marry a man who is rich and well-bred enough, and a gentleman, who I can like as a friend, and I shall be beyond happy.”

“Reasonable expectations indeed,” Nathan agreed. He was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable. Lord Davenport kept shooting him quick, shrewd glances, as if trying to see whether a point had been made clear.

“I do hope you are not entertaining unreasonable expectations, Nathan,” Lord Davenport said, voice careful. “Your Papa would have been most disappointed. Sentimentality only ever leads to disaster, I can promise you that.”

Nathan cleared his throat. “I am not a sentimental man, Lord Davenport, nor a romantic one. I am not looking for love.”

“Very well. Very well. Seek out a young lady who possesses all the requisite virtues – affluent, from a respectable family, accomplished in her manners, comely, if it pleases you – and should you find her agreeable enough, take her hand in marriage. Do not afford yourself the luxury of prolonged contemplation.”

“I rather thought that marriage was a serious endeavour. Is it wise to not think it over?”

Lord Davenport shot him a long, keen look. Abruptly, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk.

“May I give you a little advice, my boy?”

“Certainly,” Nathan said, as if there was anything else to say.

“Trust someone older and wiser than yourself to pick out a suitable mate for you. Me, for example, or your esteemed mother. I imagine you do want to be happy...”

“Most people do,” Nathan couldn’t help muttering. “It’s rather natural.”

Lord Davenport went on as if he hadn’t spoken.

“...and you have a greater chance of happiness if you do as you are told by those you trust. I could make some recommendations, if you’d like.”

Nathan cleared his throat again. He wished the butler would appear with the tea tray, so that they could change the subject.

“I am not sure I’ll marry this Season after all, Lord Davenport.”

Lord Davenport narrowed his eyes. “We want Amanda married off before the end of the Season. There’s still time for her. And as for you, well, you could do no better than our family, don’t you think?”

Nathan found that he was struggling to breathe. “Lord Davenport, I’m not sure I understand you.”

The older man gave a brittle chuckle and leaned back in his seat.

“Oh, I believe you comprehend my meaning most admirably, dear boy. Consult with your dear mother, if you would be so kind. Allow yourself to be guided by those who possess greater experience and wisdom than you, would you not? You are a man of affairs, and I am well aware that you lack both the inclination and the leisure to flit about in Society in search of a suitable lady. Pray tell, is it prudent in the realm of commerce to frequently embark upon ventures of a precarious nature?”

Nathan found himself a little bewildered by the sudden change in subject.

“No, of course not.”

“Of course not,” Lord Davenport agreed. “The higher the stakes, the more careful we ought to be. We seek advice. We take a safe choice. Turning our back on practicality and safe choices will lead to our losing a great deal. A very great deal indeed. And time might well be running out.”

Before Nathan could respond, Lord Davenport got to his feet, ostentatiously taking out a gold pocket watch and checking the time.

“I don’t believe I have time for tea after all,” he remarked, with faint disappointment. “I had better be going. I hope you found this conversation enlightening, my boy. I am fond of you, and I do my best to give you good advice for the sake of your old Papa.” He paused, leaning forward. “And I should very much like, one day, to give you advice as an almost-son to me.”

Nathan swallowed thickly. “I... I shall think on it.”

Lord Davenport nodded, smiling. “I’m sure you shall. But don’t think too long, eh? Time waits for no man, and nor will Amanda.”

He left without another word, leaving Nathan sitting at his desk and feeling deeply

unsettled.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

“I’m surprised a second son can afford all of this,” Bridget commented, tight-lipped. “Although, I suppose it is Katherine’s dowry that paid for it.”

Pippa flinched, throwing her mother an alarmed glance. “Mama! You can’t speak that way. Katherine and Timothy are hosting us. This is where we’ll meet the rest of the family. They invited us to a party , Mama.”

“Gratitude is all very well,” Bridget responded tartly, “so long as it is not taken too far .”

Pippa gave up.

They had spent the first night at William and Lavinia’s home only the previous night. Pippa had found herself lying awake for hours, despite sleeping in a larger and more comfortable bed than she had ever had.

My whole life has changed, she’d thought, over and over again. But what if it doesn’t last? What if I only get used to it, and then it’s over?

She was being foolish, she knew that. Nothing lasted forever, and anyway, if she wanted a more comfortable life, she’d have to marry somebody who could provide it for her.

It didn’t help the nerves.

The carriage on loan from William, of course rolled to a halt in front of a well-appointed, pretty little town-house. It wasn’t as large as the Willenshire manor, of

course, but it was five or six times as big as anywhere Pippa had lived in her entire life.

A woman stood out on the front steps, smiling and waving. She was tall, pretty, and with the same colouring as William; olive skin, light eyes, dark hair. She was also pregnant to her second child, her belly curving out under her dress. A man of average height stood beside her. He was wiry, with dark blond hair and large green eyes, a handsome oval face and round wire-rimmed spectacles.

“This must be Mr. Rutherford,” Bridget muttered under her breath, and Pippa cringed.

“Please, Mama. Don’t be unkind.”

“Who said I would be unkind?” she shot back. “Don’t speak to your own mother like that, Pippa. Now, wipe that look off your face. Smile, for heaven’s sake. You have to be pretty and entertaining, or they’ll ship you off to one of the other cousins.”

That was all they had time for before the door was opened by a liveried footman, and it was time to climb out.

“Pippa, Aunt Bridget!” Katherine said, beaming. “I’m so happy to see you. William wrote and told me all about your visit. We’re all quite thrilled to see you!”

Pippa never thought about curtsying, which she probably should have done. Instead, she threw her arms around her cousin, hugging her tight.

“Pippa!” Bridget hissed, obviously mortified, but Katherine only laughed and held on tighter. She pulled back, inspecting Pippa closely.

“You are extremely pretty,” Katherine announced. “I have rooms all prepared for

you, and I hope you'll stay with me for at least a few days, perhaps longer, before you decide to go back to William. Now, as he and Lavinia are just married, they won't be going into Society straightaway, so I thought I could take you to a few events, while you find your feet and make a few friends. I daresay you'll be wanting to make a good match this Season?"

Pippa opened her mouth to respond, but it was Bridget who answered.

"Oh, heavens, yes," she said, laughing. "If we're to take our proper place in Society again, Pippa will need to marry. We're hoping for a Marquess at least."

Katherine blinked, taken aback for just an instant before she recovered.

"Well, the party tonight will have plenty of eligible gentlemen," she promised, throwing a smile and a wink at Pippa. "And since it'll be hosted here, we can all relax and spend some time getting to know each other. Speaking of which, this of course is my husband, Timothy."

She laid a hand on her husband's arm, smiling affectionately up at him. Timothy, who had been staring adoringly at his wife during this entire speech, dragged his gaze away from her to smile and nod at Pippa and Bridget.

"I'm thrilled to meet you," he said, shaking first Pippa's hand then her mother's. "Katherine has talked incessantly of your visit, ever since we first learned that you were in London. I hope we'll be friends. We have an extensive library, by the way, in case you want to borrow any books while you're here. Unless you brought some from William's home?"

Before Pippa could answer, Bridget spoke up again.

"Oh, I doubt Pippa and I will have time to read," she said, smiling faintly and adding

a pointed inflexion on the word. “We shall be far too busy, I’m afraid.”

Timothy’s smile wavered. “I see. What a pity.”

Pippa wanted to cringe. It seemed that the initial meeting with William and Lavinia had gone well enough to go to her mother’s head, and now she was feeling haughty about Timothy, the infamous second son .

“Well, I shall show you to your chambers,” Katherine said, interrupting the brief, tense moment that followed. “And Pippa, I have a little surprise for you in your room.”

“Oh!” Pippa gasped, snatching up the gown from where it was draped across the bottom of the bed. “Oh, it’s beautiful!”

It had, of course, occurred to Pippa that she had no dresses suitable for a fine London party. There’d been no need for showy gowns in their new life as a dowager viscountess and her daughter. Even before Philip’s death, they hadn’t gone much into Society. Over time, the dresses Pippa did have had gradually deteriorated, so that even if they hadn’t been embarrassingly out of fashion, she could hardly have worn them.

The dress Katherine had set out for her was beautiful. It was pale blue, edged with icy lace, with a daringly low neckline which skimmed her shoulders, a tight bodice, and swathes of ruched silk forming the skirts. The smooth, high-quality material slid between her fingers like water. She imagined herself wearing it and shivered with pleasure.

Perhaps it was silly to be so excited about something as simple as wearing a pretty

dress, but really, Pippa thought she deserved a little excitement.

“It isn’t new,” Katherine warned, “But I only wore it a couple of times earlier this Season, and it is most certainly in fashion. I have some other gowns you might like to have, all from this Season. They are all worn at least once, I’m afraid, like this one. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Oh, Katherine, it’s beautiful. I can’t wait to wear it!” Pippa laughed, clutching the material to her chest. “It’s been so long since I...”

“Indeed, we are most grateful,” Bridget interrupted, taking the gown roughly from Pippa and tossing it onto the bed again. “Pippa, darling, you mustn’t be so excited about everything . Cousin Katherine will tell you that it’s simply not fashionable to care quite so much. You don’t want people to think you’re a country girl, do you?”

Pippa’s cheeks coloured. She cleared her throat, looking away.

“Come now, Aunt Bridget, that’s a little unkind, isn’t it?” Katherine said, managing a laugh. “Society manners are so very boring, I think. Pippa will do best by being herself and being original. There’s no sense in being like everybody else, is there?”

Bridget pressed her lips together in a thin smile and said nothing.

“Now, I shall let you settle in, and then you can come and join me in the parlour for tea,” Katherine continued, smiling at Pippa. “I am glad you’re here, both of you. We have a great deal to catch up on, I think.”

She left after that, closing the door softly behind her. Once they were alone, Bridget gave a harsh, sharp laugh, throwing herself down into an armchair.

“The audacity of it,” she muttered.

Pippa went red. “Mama, what is wrong with you? You were so rude to Timothy, and to Katherine! They are our hosts . If they tell William that we are impolite and ungrateful, we may well be packed off home!”

Bridget had the grace to blush. “I was a little sharp, mayhap, but really, Pippa, a worn dress? Could she not buy you a new gown?”

“I didn’t expect a new gown of any sort,” Pippa retorted. “She didn’t have to give her old dress either. She could have let me look like a frumpy old drab in my ordinary clothes. It was thoughtful , Mama. And look at how lovely it is! It’s brand-new, just about. I am not complaining.”

Bridget gave a moue of displeasure. “Well, I suppose it is better than nothing. But a new gown would have been best! We’ll have to adjust this to fit you, I suppose. And try not to be too thrilled by everything at the party tonight, Pippa. It is so very vulgar .”

Pippa clenched her jaw, the happiness of her new gown and her reunion with her cousin entirely gone.

“Yes, Mama. I shall try.”

The small, intimate party was nothing of the sort. At least, Pippa felt that it was nothing of the sort. The house seemed to be crowded with people, all talking and laughing. Katherine had introduced her to what felt like a horde of people, their names slipping from her mind like water.

She knew, of course, that forgetting somebody’s name or making a similar mistake would be most frowned upon. There was not a great margin for forgiveness in

Society at any rate.

I can do this, Pippa reminded herself frequently. The blue gown had gotten her many compliments so far, and she felt more beautiful in it than she had in quite a while.

As Katherine had promised, there were a good many youngish men in the party, around Pippa's age or a little older, trailing around behind older relatives or clustered with a group of friends in the corner.

Pippa found that Katherine, as the hostess, did not have much time to spend with her. It was a little nerve-wracking, but after the first hour, she began to feel a little more at home. People were polite, if not particularly effusive, and so far, all was well.

"I have somebody I want to introduce you to," Bridget whispered, hooking her arm through Pippa's. "Lord Owen Barwick, that gentleman over there by the refreshment table. He's the Marquess of Allerton, and unmarried, of course. See how handsome he is."

Pippa followed her mother's gaze. A tall gentleman stood there, broad shouldered and remarkably handsome. He wore a blue coat in the latest style, and had his fair hair combed back in a dishevelled way that seemed very fashionable and very intentional. He had clear blue eyes, like chips of ice in his well-featured face, and those sharp eyes raked across the room.

He was standing with an older woman, tall and austere, resplendent in black velvet and studded with pearls and diamonds. She had grey hair piled ornately on the top of her head, and a severe, haughty expression.

"That is his mother, the Dowager Marchioness. Lady Henrietta Barwick, that is. Henrietta and I were friends, once. Of course, once I married your father and left Society, it was all at an end between us, but I believe she still has a soft spot for me. I

wrote to her to inform her that I was coming to stay with William, and that our fortunes were on the rise. She responded most graciously. I think she will be most amenable to an introduction, so you must be on your best behaviour.”

Pippa swallowed thickly. The nerves which she had just begun to get control over began to return.

“I... Do I have to meet him now, Mama?”

Bridget threw her an incredulous look. “What a question! Of course you must. Lord Barwick may be the only gentleman you need to meet at this party, if all transpires favourably between you. You must know that I am thinking of you making a match of it, don’t you? You might have a dowry settled up on you by William, and our connection to the Willenshires will do us a great deal of good. The Barwicks are rich, to be sure, but not quite such an old family as we are. There’s a great deal to be gained on both sides.”

“He’s very handsome,” Pippa managed hesitantly. “But he seems very stern. And... and see how he glared at that lady just there, in the pink dress. Oh, lord, Mama, they’re laughing at her behind their hands! That is most cruel.”

“Well, she should be more careful with her appearance, then, shouldn’t she?” Bridget responded heartlessly. “Come, I shall introduce you now.”

Pippa could not have said where the panic came from, only that it was powerful and sudden. She swallowed again, anxiety shimmering in her stomach.

“Not just yet.”

Bridget threw her an annoyed stare. “Whatever is wrong with you, Pippa? This is our chance, and you are wasting it?”

“I...I...” Pippa floundered. She was suddenly aware that she had to get out of the crowded ballroom, and she had to get out right away. The noise was suddenly unbearable, as was the heat.

I can't breathe.

“I need some air,” she said stoutly, turning away before her mother could grab her. She hurried through the crowd, knocking against people in her eagerness to get out. She twisted around, making sure that her mother was not following her.

Just as she was almost running, she walked straight into the back of a tall, broad-shouldered gentleman.

“Ouch,” she managed, stumbling back. She would likely have lost her balance and landed in an undignified heap on her backside, had the gentleman not grabbed her by the elbow, steadying her.

“Thank you,” she began, an apology dying on her lips, as she looked up at the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Nathan blinked down at the young woman who had just walked into him.

She was yet another unfamiliar face at the wretched party, the one his mother had strong-armed him into attending.

“What are you going to do, Nathan, sit at home and work all day? You must socialise .”

He felt as though he’d socialised quite enough. More than enough, in point of fact.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said, at the same moment he said, “I do beg your pardon.”

“I only wanted some air,” the woman continued, nodding towards the French doors behind him. “It’s far too hot in here. Not,” she added hastily, “that I am not enjoying myself. It is a very nice party.”

Nathan chuckled faintly. “I’m not sure that’s the fashionable opinion. It’s the end of the Season, so you should be saying that everything is dull, and everybody is tired, and there is hardly anybody left in London.”

Perhaps that was a trifle too acerbic for small talk, and certainly not appropriate for conversation with a stranger he had only just met. He was fairly sure he had been saying inappropriate things to people all night, earning himself disapproving stares and curious glances.

The girl, however, only chuckled, shaking her head.

“I know you are being ironic,” she said with a sigh, “but I am a country girl, and to me, this room is positively full of people. I can scarcely breathe. They are all very pleasant people, naturally, but there are so many of them. Oh, dear, you’re laughing. Have I said something else wrong?”

“Not at all. I have never seen someone so determined to enjoy themselves, that’s all. Uh, I don’t believe we have been introduced?”

It was a not-so-subtle hint for them to be officially introduced, as it really was not proper for them to have a conversation otherwise. The lady, however, did not seem to notice.

“No, no, I don’t think so. We never troubled ourselves greatly with such concerns in the countryside, you know.”

She reached past him and edged open the French doors, and Nathan felt obliged to clear his throat.

“I hate to say it, but it might not be considered proper for you to go out onto the terrace by yourself,” he said carefully. “Ladies don’t, you know.”

She paused, frowning. “Yet the doors are fashioned of glass, transparent to the eye, and all are present within.”

He cocked his head to one side. “Forgive me for saying it, but you really have not been much in Society, have you?”

She wilted a little. “Oh, is it so very obvious? I thought I was doing well. Thank you for telling me, good sir.”

“Lord Whitmore,” Nathan supplied helpfully.

“It’s a pleasure,” she said, distracted by a high-tiered cake being carefully carried through the crowds by a trio of footmen, towering above them all.

Nathan took the opportunity to eye the woman carefully. She was not familiar, and with her charmingly oblivious manners, he was willing to guess that this was her first real entrance into Society. She was old enough to be a debutante, at about twenty-two or twenty-three years old, and he would have bet money that she had not had an official come-out.

She was remarkably pretty. Her gown, for a start, was not suited to a debutante or a shrinking violet. No, it was a rich, sumptuous thing, made of expensive, well-cut silk and trimmed with fine lace. She had brown hair and clear blue eyes, set in a heart-shaped face that was open and entirely at ease.

Nathan had seen many young men and women with the infamous ‘Society Manners’. It was a way of appearing confident, open, and at ease with oneself, without actually risking a word out of place or revealing a single thing by accident. It was a rather artful set of manners, producing gentlemen who were loud and haranguing, and ladies who were falsely modest and coy.

Either way, the whole business was false, and it grated on Nathan. Why could people not be themselves, instead of leaving everybody to try and work out whether they meant a thing or not?

This young woman did not seem to be afflicted by these manners. No doubt the more spiteful of gossips would mock her innocence, claiming that she was too old for such naivety, but Nathan did not believe that she was naive.

She was simply herself.

She glanced up at him, catching him looking at her, and he felt heat spreading across

his cheeks.

Why haven't I bowed and made my excuses? Why do I want to remain with her?

"I do find these events rather taxing," he found himself saying. "I often wish I was more social. I try, believe it or not, but I find that after no more than an hour, all I can think about is going home."

The woman chuckled. "As I said, I lived in the country for my whole life, so this is the largest gathering I think I have ever attended. London is... well, it is interesting. I am enjoying my stay, so far."

"I hope you continue to enjoy it," he responded, making a short bow. "Tell me, who..."

"Pippa!"

A sharp voice cut across the ballroom, making the woman and Nathan jump almost out of their skins. He glanced over to find an older woman, tight-lipped, striding towards them. She was tall and beautiful, although more than a little fearsome. The lady – Pippa – seemed to shrink a little.

"My mother," she whispered.

The woman reached them, shooting Nathan a quick, incisive glare. "Who is this, Pippa? You told me you wanted a breath of fresh air. I expected you to come back directly afterwards. There are people you must meet."

"This is Lord Whitmore, Mama."

Lord Whitmore bowed. "Charmed, madam."

“I am Lady Randall,” the older woman responded tartly. “Why are you standing here by yourself, Lord Whitmore? It’s rather singular.”

Now, that was particularly rude. Nathan felt a flare of annoyance at the woman’s tone. The name Randall did not spark any memories, but no doubt he could find out easily enough. He was willing to bet that they were not rich and well-known enough to be anywhere near as haughty as this woman.

“Your daughter mentioned that you have just come from the country,” he found himself saying. “I suggested that she should not go out onto the terrace by herself. It is generally thought to be improper.”

Colour spread over Lady Randall’s face, and her jaw tightened.

“Yes, indeed, I recall that,” she muttered. “I have been in London myself, you know. I had a Season, like everybody else.”

“Mama...” Pippa said, her voice a touch pleading.

“Do excuse us, Lord Whitmore,” Lady Randall said, pasting an insincere smile on her face. “Somebody is waiting to meet my daughter and myself. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

He didn’t particularly believe that. Nathan said nothing, only making a neat bow. He watched them scurry away, with Lady Randall gripping her daughter’s arm a little too tightly. At that moment, a pause in the music and a lull in conversation allowed him to hear a few snippets of their conversation.

“What are you thinking, telling our business to strangers like that?” Lady Randall hissed. “Mind your tongue in future, my girl. I won’t tell you again. Nobody forgets anything in Society, and once you’ve said a word, you can’t take it back.”

Pippa sighed mournfully. "I never did get any fresh air, Mama."

"Oh, let us not dwell on that now. We have tasks to attend to before we take our supper. Now, put on a pleasant smile and think about some interesting things to say."

Nathan watched them disappear into the crowd.

Why do I feel unsettled all of a sudden?

What has changed?

"Nathan! There you are! Kat told me you'd be here, but I wasn't sure if you'd try to withdraw."

Nathan paused, in the process of swigging back another glass of champagne.

"Henry," he said, grinning. "It's a pleasure to see you."

Lord Henry Willenshire had been a friend to Nathan for many years. When the Whitmores' fortunes dropped, the old duke – Henry's father – had forbidden him from seeing Nathan. He had been quite open about it, too, writing to Nathan to inform him that his friendship with his sons was at an end, and he should not contact them again.

Henry, never one to quietly submit, had done his best to see Nathan now and then, and their friendship had thrived. Nathan knew, more than many people, how cruel and spiteful the old duke had been. It was a sad thing to admit, but the Willenshire children were much happier now that their father was gone.

Henry clapped Nathan on the shoulder. “I believe Eleanor wanted to speak to you before the night was out, some business matter or another. Did you see how well our new tea set designs have sold? I cannot take a scrap of credit for their design – it was all her. My wife is a business genius, I think.”

Nathan smiled. “I’m happy for you, Henry.”

Everybody in Society knew that Henry and his wife, Eleanor, were perfectly matched. They were both outspoken, fiercely intelligent, with a hunger for challenges and a knack for business matters. At their wedding, Nathan remembered feeling a sudden, unforeseen pang of jealousy. Why was it so hard for him to meet somebody who suited him so well? Eleanor and Henry seemed to be made for each other.

Stop it, he told himself. Marriage is a tricky business and you ought to approach it like a business merger, not a romance novel.

Henry paused, squinting at his friend. “You seem a little off tonight. Is everything all right?”

“Me? Oh, fine, fine. I just...” Nathan sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “Mother wants me to marry, and insists upon me attending the Season. Really, I could do without all the parties and outings. I have so much work to do.”

Henry nodded slowly, pursing his lips. “You have a decent steward, though, don’t you? And your man at the bank? In fact, you have quite a few reliable clerks and whatnot who could take some of the work off your shoulders.”

Nathan shook his head. “No, I feel better doing it all myself. You can’t be too careful, after all.”

“Indeed,” Henry agreed. “But you do trust them, don’t you?”

He paused. “Well, yes, but that’s not the point, is it? I don’t like to delegate.”

“Slippery slope, old friend. If you don’t delegate anything , then where draw the line? You don’t want to wake up one morning and find that life has passed you by, do you?”

Nathan flinched at that. He bit the inside of his cheek, looking away.

“That’s the sort of thing my mother would say,” he muttered, “as a way to convince me to marry Miss Davenport.”

Henry shrugged. “Perhaps you should listen to her. About not letting your life pass you by, that is not marrying Miss Davenport. I’m not sure you’d be a match.”

“No, nor I.”

“Let’s talk of happier things,” Henry said, after a while. “Have you made any new acquaintances tonight?”

Nathan perked up a little. “As a matter of fact, I have.”

“Oh, do tell?”

“She didn’t properly introduce herself.”

Henry grinned. “Ahh, a she ? How thrilling. Pray, continue.”

“I think she’s quite an original. Pippa Randall, I believe. That is, her mother is Lady Randall, so I assume...” he broke off as Henry gave a bark of laughter.

“Oh, what a coincidence!” he chuckled. “Nathan, Pippa Randall – she’s a plain miss

– is my cousin.”

“What? You are jesting.”

“I am not. Lady Randall is Aunt Bridget, and they came up from the countryside only a few days ago. They stayed with William for a while, but of course Will and Lavinia aren’t socialising much, so they’ve come to Kat. We plan to spring her on Society for the rest of the Season.” Henry paused, tilting his head thoughtfully. “You like her, do you not?”

Nathan felt himself flushing like a schoolboy.

“I... I hardly know,” he confessed. “I enjoyed our conversation. Generally, I find idle conversation to be an ordeal – you know my disposition – yet she was... she was unlike any other. It is difficult to articulate the reason. I should not be reluctant to encounter her again.”

Henry shot him a shrewd glance. “Well, I can vouch for it, my cousin is a likeable sort of girl. I should warn you, before things go much further, that she has no money and nobody beside us to protect her. Her mother is widowed, and her father was not a rich man at the best of times. Aunt Bridget was cut off when she married him. You know what father was like.”

There was no mistaking the way Henry’s voice hardened when he said father , spitting out the word like a curse.

Nathan nodded slowly, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Indeed, I know.”

“Anyway,” Henry continued, “Will might settle something on her, but then again, he

might not.”

“I don’t care about that,” Nathan continued honestly. “I... I just think I would like to see her again.”

“In that case, I shall have you two sitting together,” Henry announced, grinning.

“Is that allowed?”

He leaned closer, nudging Nathan’s shoulder. “The hostess is rather fond of me. I shall flutter my eyelashes and request it as a favour, and I bet she’ll oblige.”

Nathan rolled his eyes, chuckling. “The hostess is your sister. If anything, that would make her less likely to oblige you, not more so.”

“Wretch. Just wait and see, eh? Wait and see.”

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Pippa twisted around, looking back over her shoulder at Lord Whitmore. He was watching her , a realisation which sent shivers down her spine.

She'd seen a good many handsome men in her time, and many of them were here tonight. But there was something different about Lord Whitmore. He had an ordinary enough face, to be sure, but something lit him up from within. There was an animation in his eyes which she hadn't seen in the others, something that drew her gaze like a magnet.

Is this it? she thought, her heartbeat speeding up. Is this how it starts? Was this what it was like for Mama?

She exhaled shakily, biting back a smile. He had seemed drawn to her , too. Or perhaps that was wishful thinking? Where had the rush of anxiety come from?

Suddenly, she realised that her mother was speaking to her.

"In future," Bridget was saying, "you'll stay by my side, or with female friends. It's not proper for a lady to wander across a ballroom without any sort of escort of company. This is my fault; you weren't to know. London Society is much different from what you are used to in the country, and the rules are much more stringent. This is serious . Pippa, are you listening?"

"Of course," she responded mechanically. "I am enjoying myself, Mama."

Bridget threw a quick, fond glance over her shoulder. "Well, I'm glad," she muttered. It was the first kind look and word Pippa had received from her mother since before

they'd left home to visit their relatives, and the shock of it jolted her out of her reverie and almost drove the picture of Lord Whitmore from her mind.

"However," Bridget continued, ruining the moment, "parties like this and the Season are not for enjoying . We have work to do, and connections to make. Now. Let's introduce you to Lord Barwick, and quickly. Supper will be called at any moment."

Pippa bit back a sigh.

Abruptly, they were there, in a spacious little corner with Lord Barwick and his mother staring down at Pippa like eagles inspecting a rabbit.

"Lord Barwick, Lady Barwick, it's an honour," Bridget fluted, making a neat curtsy which Pippa nearly forgot to copy. "This is my daughter, Miss Pippa Randall."

"Charmed, I'm sure," Lord Barwick murmured, gaze raking her up and down appreciatively. Lady Henrietta Barwick seemed less impressed.

"Rather thin," she remarked, half to herself and half to her son. "Do you not feed her, Lady Randall?"

"I think Miss Randall is a very pretty sort of girl, Mother," Lord Barwick said, shooting Pippa a benevolent smile. "Very pretty indeed."

Lady Henrietta pursed her lips in obvious disagreement. "Well, Miss Randall, tell us all about yourself. Do you play the pianoforte? What a silly question, of course you do. And watercolours, do you..."

"I do play a little the piano," Pippa interrupted, suddenly desperate not to have her meagre accomplishments trotted out for inspection beneath the Barwicks' bead little eyes. "But I prefer to play the violin."

There was a brief silence, during which Lady Henrietta's disapproving gaze grew heavier.

"Violin? Not a very ladylike instrument, in my opinion," she said, as if her opinion was the only one that mattered. "I daresay you did not have opportunity to learn the harp, which is a much more appropriate stringed instrument. But then, I suppose allowances must be made, considering what sort of education your father must have been able to give you. Rather poor, I imagine."

Pippa felt herself bristling. "My father gave me the best education I could wish for," she said sharply, tugging away her arm when Bridget tried to take her wrist. "I could have learned the harp, if I wished it, but I didn't. I wanted to learn the violin, with my Papa, and so I did."

There was a brief silence after this. Lady Henrietta was stone-faced, but her son appeared to be holding back laughter.

"You give your opinion very decidedly," Lady Henrietta said at last, voice hard. "I am not sure I can approve of that."

Pippa lifted her chin. "I am not sure I requested your approval, Lady Barwick."

The woman's expression turned thunderous, but before she could say another word, or before Pippa could say something else to destroy her reputation further, supper was announced, and the guests began to end their conversations and file out into the hall, and from there to the dining room.

Bridget made a perfunctory curtsy, snatched up her daughter's arm, and marched her away.

"That," she hissed, "was not very funny, Pippa."

“I was not trying to be funny, Mama. Lady Barwick was very rude.”

“Nonsense. She is a grown woman, a dowager – like me – and she is looking upon you as a potential daughter-in-law. Of course, she is strict and serious about the matter. But now, didn’t you think that Lord Barwick was handsome?”

Pippa’s heart sank. “He is not ugly or plain, Mama, but I do not feel drawn to him.”

Bridget sighed in exasperation. “Goodness, as if that matters in the least. And here I thought you would be pleased at having such a handsome man show interest in you. I chose him carefully, you know. He’s only a little older than you, and very good looking.”

“Perhaps you should marry him, then, Mama, if you think that he’s so handsome,” Pippa muttered, and received an elbow in her ribs.

“Enough of that insolence,” Bridget muttered tartly. “Now, you will be sitting next to Lord Barwick at the table, so be sure to be on your best behaviour, and bring out your finest manners. Don’t eat too much, but don’t sit there with an empty plate – it’ll look odd. Be sure to ask him lots of questions about himself, and be very interested in the answers.”

Pippa sighed. “What if his answers are boring, Mama?”

“It doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is your reaction to them.”

Bridget fell silent as they entered the supper-room, a space bigger than the entire shop and rooms they’d occupied back home, with a long table set in the middle. Neat little cards indicated where each guest was meant to sit, and people were rounding the table, eyes peeled for their name on the little cards.

Lord Barwick and his mother had gotten ahead of them, somehow, and were standing by the table with thunderous expressions. Bridget hurried over to them, and Pippa was obliged to trail along in her wake.

“There’s been some mistake, I think,” Lady Henrietta said at once, flashing a tight-lipped smile. “Miss Randall’s place is here, but mine and my son’s place is across the table.”

Bridget stared down at the place settings. “But that can’t be right. I arranged this!”

Pippa didn’t bother to ask just what her mother had arranged. She was too busy staring at her own name, written neatly on thick, creamy card. And, of course, she was looking at the name beside it.

Lord Nathan Whitmore.

I’m sitting next to Lord Whitmore, she thought, unable to hold back a shiver of pleasure.

Somebody cleared their throat, and they all turned to see Lord Whitmore himself standing there, a faint smile on his face. Beside Lord Barwick’s glittering finery, Lord Whitmore seemed a little duller, a little more drab, like a grey stone next to a vibrant gem.

But the comparison was not a bad one, in Pippa’s opinion. He made Lord Barwick seem too showy, like a gawky young man dressed up in gilt and paste jewels.

“I believe this is my seat, Lord Barwick,” Lord Whitmore said, smiling innocently.

Lord Barwick narrowed his eyes briefly, as if thinking of something to say. There was nothing to say, however. Most of the other guests had taken their seats, and of

course now was not the time for an altercation. Lord Barwick gave a brief, wordless bow, and slid away through the crowds, followed by his mother. Bridget muttered something under her breath and disappeared in search of her seat.

That left Pippa and Lord Whitmore alone.

Well, not exactly alone , not in a supper-room full of people, but it almost felt like they were alone.

“You moved the place cards, didn’t you?” she said, not entirely sure where the words were coming from.

Lord Whitmore grimaced. “That rather depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“On whether you’re pleased at sitting next to me or not.”

She had to laugh at that. “I am pleased.”

“Then indeed, I did move them. Not personally, of course, but I knew that a little shuffling was going on.”

A slow smile spread across his face, a warm expression that made Pippa want to smile back.

They took their seats, being one of the last people to sit, and the first course began to be served. Soup, of course.

“It’ll be odd eating a meal with more than two courses,” Pippa found herself saying, even though Bridget had expressly forbidden her from referring even obliquely to

their poverty. “We’ve been eating very simple meals since before Papa died.”

“Frankly, I believe that is a more practical way of dining,” Lord Whitmore conceded. “This food looks delicious, to be sure, and I happen to know that our hostess does not let anything go to waste. But in many homes, the wasted food is quite shocking. When at home, with one’s family, why should we need four or five courses, when one or two is more than sufficient?”

She nodded. “I think the world would be a better place if more people were as practical as you, Lord Whitmore.”

He smiled wryly over at her. “I believe that the world might also be a less genteel place. I don’t much care for traditions and how things ought to be done.”

She found herself smiling back, her soup cooling in her bowl. “I must agree. All of this,” she paused, gesturing to the fine supper-room and the food, “is very nice, but rather stressful, don’t you think?”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

There was a brief silence while they enjoyed their soups, but Pippa found her gaze drawn sideways more often than she would have liked. Once or twice, Lord Whitmore was already gazing her way, and he flushed when their eyes met.

He likes me, she thought wonderingly. My first real outing into Society, and I found a man I like.

How lucky I am!

Almost immediately, anxiety swept in.

What if I make a mistake? What if he gets tired of me? Or mayhap these are just Society manners, and he is simply being kind, and I have misinterpreted it? Oh, heavens.

Or what if he is simply a flirt? I know that some gentlemen do that, and toy with ladies' hearts. Would I be foolish enough to fall for such a trick?

"Tell me, Miss Randall, do you like music?"

"Hm?" she blinked, feeling a little dazed. "I am terribly sorry, I was not paying attention."

He only laughed, not seeming offended at all. "I was speaking of music, Miss Randall. It's a very proper subject for a dinner party, you see."

She gave a huff. "Well, I told Lady Henrietta Barwick that I played the violin, and she deemed it an unladylike instrument, and thought that I should have learned the pianoforte or the harp instead."

"Oh, dear. Well, the Dowager Lady Barwick is known for her sternness and strict opinions. I think that the violin is a wonderful instrument, and a difficult one to learn. I hope I have the opportunity to hear you play sometime."

Warmth spread through Pippa's chest.

"I... I should love to play for you. My father loved to hear me play. He loved music and played several instruments himself."

Lord Whitmore nodded, glancing her way. Their eyes met, and he held her gaze.

"He sounds like a most interesting man. I should like to hear more about him."

A lump formed in Pippa's throat. When was the last time I could talk about Papa?

"Really?" she found herself saying.

Lord Whitmore nodded again, a shy smile spreading across his face.

"Yes. I should like it very much, Miss Randall."

Supper flew over. Pippa had expected the endless courses to drag on, while she smothered yawns and tried to feign interest. What a change from her expectations! Instead, she and Lord Whitmore talked incessantly about everything and nothing. Conversation was so easy with him. Pippa found herself noticing how his eyes lit up when he talked, and the way his brows waggled when he told a story that was most endearing.

I like him, she thought, hiding a smile. I like him very much, and I am well on my way to caring for him more and more.

Her thoughts, of course, ran straight to love. Naturally, it was far too early to think of such a thing. She was still unsure whether he did like her, or whether their conversation had simply been a friendly one.

But there was hope, wasn't there? There was something to explore.

When Katherine got to her feet and announced that the ladies would withdraw to the drawing room, Pippa felt more disappointed than she could possibly have known. She rose reluctantly to her feet, and the gentlemen all rose too. Feeling eyes on her, she glanced across the table to find Lord Barwick staring at her.

“I suppose I shall see you later, then,” Lord Whitmore said, smiling hopefully. “When the gentlemen join the ladies in the drawing room, that is. I believe there’s talk of a billiards game, but I shall try to get out of it.”

He wants to talk more with me, she realised, with a jolt of excitement. That’s promising, isn’t it?

“I shall look forward to it,” she heard herself say, then hurried to join the queue of ladies filing out of the supper room.

Out in the cool, dark hallway, Pippa was still blinking and trying to adjust her eyes to the gloom when somebody snatched up her arm.

It was, of course, Bridget.

“Oh, Mama, you made me jump.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Bridget muttered. “Supper did not go as planned. Lady Henrietta is offended, but Lord Barwick is still interested. It may still be salvaged.”

Pippa nodded faintly, chewing her lip. “Mama, do you think it’s possible to fall in love at first sight?”

Bridget shot her a sharp look. “Love at first sight?”

She cleared her throat. “Not love, exactly, I know that love takes time to build up. I mean, I suppose, interest. Not just finding someone handsome but finding them appealing in other ways. Their conversation, their interests, that sort of thing. Feeling as if you just fit together.”

She risked a glance at her mother and found that Bridget was smiling faintly.

“Yes,” she said at last, sighing. “It is possible. When I met your papa for the first time, it felt as though all of the air had fled from the room. It was thrilling. He’d be glad to know that you feel that, too. And Lord Barwick is such an eligible match. I’m glad you like him, darling.”

Pippa cleared her throat. “I wasn’t talking of Lord Barwick, Mama. I meant Lord Whitmore.”

Bridget stopped dead. Her hand, resting on Pippa’s forearm, suddenly tightened.

“Lord Whitmore is not being presented to you as a suitor,” she hissed, glaring into her daughter’s eyes.

A few other guests walked past them, heading to the drawing room, and shot curious glances their way.

“Why not?” Pippa whispered back. “Is he betrothed elsewhere? Is he a confirmed bachelor?”

“No, nothing like that. But Pippa, you need to marry well. The Whitmores are hardly an old family, and while they do have money, money is only one element of what is needed for us to retake our place in Society. You need a title, my girl, and the only way to get that is to marry a man with one.”

“Lord Whitmore has a title,” Pippa said, bewildered. “He’s a lord.”

“He’s a viscount. And I told you that you need at least a marquess,” Bridget sighed angrily, shaking her head. “I should have kept a closer eye on you. I do not give my permission for this nonsense with Lord Whitmore, as he is not suitable for you. You’ll court Lord Barwick, or somebody better, if you can find them.”

“You can’t stop me from talking to Lord Whitmore.”

Pippa wasn’t sure where the words had come from but immediately regretted them. Bridget’s head shot up, eyes narrowing.

“Why would Lord Whitmore want to marry a girl from a disgraced, fallen family, with no money and nothing but her mother’s maiden name to recommend her?” she enquired, voice icy. “Don’t be a fool. If Lord Whitmore has any sense – and he’s said to be a very clever man – he will marry a woman with better breeding than himself, or at the very least a large dowry. You, my girl, have neither.”

“But what if he falls in love with me?”

Bridget gave an exasperated sigh. “Pippa, you poor foolish girl, love is not something these people think about. You think that because I threw away everything for your father, many others do the same. It is a rarity. Love is something talked about a great deal in Society, but it is not factored into practical decisions. And here is another practical matter for you to consider. What will we do when your cousins’ charity runs out?”

Pippa flinched backwards. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that, at the moment, they are very much enjoying playing the benevolent relative. But suppose you or I offend them in some way, or they get tired of hosting us? It can get expensive, having another pair of mouths to feed. When that occurs, mark my words, we shall both find ourselves turned out with no place to take refuge. No, our only hope is for you to marry and marry well. And that will not be achieved by dancing around Lord Whitmore. Heavens, the man probably only felt sorry for you, on account of you acting like a gawping country girl!”

Every word seemed to hit Pippa like a slap in the face. She wilted more and more,

until by the end of her mother's speech tears began to prick her eyes.

Am I a fool?

“Come, do not contort your visage like a petulant child,” Bridget chided. “We ought to proceed to the drawing room with the others. They shall surely wonder at our delay.”

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“Oh, hard luck, friend!”

Somehow, Nathan didn't think that Lord Owen Barwick really did care that he'd missed his shot.

Sighing, Nathan straightened, and let the next player take their turn at the billiards table.

He was a little disappointed at having to play out the game. Some of the other gentlemen had already joined the ladies in the drawing room, but Timothy had been so insistent that Nathan play with them, at least for a little while.

The conversation he'd had with Miss Randall kept going through Nathan's head. What he'd said, what she'd said, the way she laughed, the way she looked at him... he swallowed thickly.

I like her. I should not be averse to getting to know her better.

Of course, it was fairly plain that Miss Randall's mother wanted her to make a match with Lord Barwick. The woman had hustled her daughter away from Nathan as if she were afraid, he might run after them, and it was plain that the girl was meant to sit next to Lord Barwick at dinner.

I'm surprised Lord Barwick isn't pressing his advantage, making his excuses and hurrying to the drawing room to get a place by Miss Randall already.

Or perhaps he doesn't see me as competition.

Owen took his shot, potting a ball neatly. He was already winning.

“I see you met Miss Randall earlier, Nathan,” Owen remarked, eyes focused on his next shot. “She’s making quite a stir, ain’t she?”

“She’s a very pleasant young woman,” Nathan responded, as vaguely as he dared.

“For a country girl, she has interesting manners. Very open. She had better be careful, though. What she sees as friendliness might be seen as flirting.”

A ball landed in a pocket. A cold feeling spread through Nathan.

“I’m sure she would not intentionally flirt with anyone,” he found himself saying.

“Perhaps not,” Owen conceded, straightening up. “But you know what Society is like. We’re all so focused on each other, at times we only see what we want to see. She’s a friendly little thing, very lively. She ought to take care, though. These things can be misinterpreted, as I said.”

It was a short conversation, and Owen moved away almost immediately. Nathan, however, stood in silence, his head swimming.

It was entirely possible that Miss Randall was only being friendly. How embarrassing would it be to have misinterpreted her kindness?

No, he scolded himself. Don’t doubt yourself. Owen clearly has an interest in her himself, so of course he wants to put you off.

Unless he knows something that you don’t. An affection, perhaps, or some attachment. It isn’t as if you are any good at interpreting social occasions.

He spent the rest of the game in gloomy self-doubt. By the time it ended, he had decided to start afresh, to let Miss Randall take the lead.

But he was one of the last gentlemen to enter the drawing room. All the seats were taken, and Owen was standing in front of Miss Randall, who was bracketed by her mother on one side and Lady Henrietta Barwick on the other. The girl looked rather subdued and not entirely happy. She did meet his eye, however, and gave a faint smile, but then Owen moved so as to block their outline.

Nathan had been standing in the corner for a few moments, debating his next course of action, when his mother approached.

Rose was pale, her eyes heavy, and he knew at once she had one of her ‘megrim’ coming.

“I hate to ask, darling,” she whispered, “but might you take me home? Miss Molyneaux started playing the pianoforte, you know how she loves to play, but she is so terribly heavy-handed, and all those discords and that thumping is giving me a megrim. Of course, if you are enjoying yourself, I can go home alone and send back the carriage?” she added hopefully, but Nathan shook his head.

“Certainly, I shall escort you home, Mother. Do fetch your shawl, and I shall bid farewell to our hosts.”

Rose nodded, looking undeniably relieved. Nathan tried to catch Miss Randall’s eye as he passed, but her trio of guards seemed to have edged even closer to her, and there was of course no hope of escape. He could, of course, have elbowed his way into the conversation and made a point of speaking to her, but that would have taken a more confident man than Nathan.

Since I’m going home early, I can get a good bit of work done, he thought, but the

idea did not bring the wave of satisfaction that it usually did.

He left the party while it was in full swing, and nobody seemed to notice very much, except perhaps Henry. Nathan longed to turn around as he walked out of the room, to see if Miss Randall had noticed, but he was very much afraid that he would turn around and find that she had not noticed and did not care.

It seemed the safer option, then, not to turn around at all.

Ignorance is bliss, after all. Or so Nathan reminded himself, as he strode down the cool hallway towards the open door, through which he could see the blocky shadow of their carriage waiting.

It was a silly hope, anyway. In a week or two, I'll hear that Miss Randall is engaged to Lord Owen Barwick, and that will be that.

He's a marquess, after all. What woman wouldn't prefer a marquess to a plain old viscount?

It was cold inside the carriage. Outside, rain had begun to fall, pattering gently against the roof. They made commendable progress, owing to the scant traffic upon the roads at that hour of the evening, though not as much as would ensue later, once the guests commenced their departure.

Nathan generally felt a rush of relief once he was safely on his way home again after a party. His study was safe, his work would always be waiting for him, and there were no fraught social interactions to navigate. His accounts and ledgers and paperwork were all things he could control, things that made sense .

People, on the other hand, were nonsensical, ridiculous creatures.

Take Miss Randall, for example. He'd been so sure that she liked him, that she was perhaps interested in him more than general friendliness required. Who knew where it would lead?

But now, however, he wasn't sure she had meant anything at all. It seemed like there was no way of telling, and he might have simply seen what he wanted to see. He felt like a fool for having allowed Henry to move around the place-cards.

And yet I want to see her again, so desperately.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Nathan?"

He glanced across the carriage to where his mother sat, very straight and pale, eyes closed.

"It was a fairly pleasant party," he heard himself say. "The Willenshires always throw good parties."

"Mm-hm. I noticed you sitting by Miss Randall. She's their cousin, you know."

He swallowed. "I know, Mother."

"A pleasant girl, everybody was saying. Her mother is a little too prideful for her station, and you can smell the ambition coming off her. Still, there are greater crimes in the world than wanting something good for one's daughter," Rose added, sighing. "I shouldn't object to knowing that Randalls a little better."

"Miss Randall is a pleasant girl," Nathan murmured. "Do you not think... I mean, could she perhaps be a little flirtatious?"

Rose opened her eyes. "I know I raised you better than to accuse an innocent girl of fast behaviour, Nathan. I shall pretend I did not hear that."

He flushed. "I am sorry, Mother. Too much champagne. I only say it because I felt... well, at one point I rather thought Miss Randall liked me, only later, Lord Owen Barwick hinted that she may have been toying with me. And, of course, she was sitting with him and his mother later, in the drawing room."

Rose snorted. "Well, I don't have the measure of Miss Randall yet, but I certainly know Lord Barwick. I shouldn't pay any attention to him. I daresay he has ulterior motives."

"Ulterior motives? I heard that Miss Randall has no money."

Rose pursed her lips, staring out of the window. "The Barwicks have a good deal of money themselves," she said thoughtfully. "He could have another motive in mind. Nevertheless, it hardly matters. Make your own mind up, my dear. I'm sure we'll see Miss Randall again. If you like her, try and speak to her, won't you?"

Nathan said nothing, fiddling with his cuffs. He wasn't entirely sure what to say, or even whether he should trust his own memory. Perhaps he'd simply been blinded by a pretty face and a set of unusual manners.

He felt his mother's eyes on him before too long.

"I heard that Lord Davenport paid you a visit recently," she said simply.

Nathan sighed. "And I imagine you know exactly what was said. It all happened with your permission, I daresay."

She chuckled. "Nathan, dear, you should know by now that nothing happens in this

house without my knowing about it. I've known for a while that Lord and Lady Davenport would like to unite our families in one way or another. Since Amanda will be unmarried at the end of her Season, this will solve both problems nicely."

"He should not think of his daughter as a problem to be solved. Anyway, I am sure Amanda will find somebody she truly cares about to marry."

Rose didn't answer for a long moment. Moonlight flashed through the window, bathing the inside of the carriage in a silvery-blue glow. Nathan smothered a yawn, horrified that he was beginning to feel tired. There was no time for that. He had work to do once he got home.

"I think Amanda would make you happy," Rose said at last, voice quiet. "I think you would make her happy. But then, I believe that you would make any woman happy, because you are my son and I'm quite, quite prejudiced in your favour. But she would make an admirable daughter-in-law for me, and a good viscountess."

He was silent for a moment. "I don't believe that Amanda wants to be a viscountess."

"Perhaps not, but Society is full of ladies and gentlemen who did not get what they wanted. Amanda is pretty, and reasonably rich, but she has relied on her looks this Season and did not apply herself to being interesting, kind, or pleasant. As a result, many gentlemen have turned to sweeter ladies, and she is left on the shelf. Of course, we all make mistakes when we are nineteen years old, but Amanda does not have much time to rectify this. Her parents were always set on her only having one Season, and assumed that she would marry in her first year. They are not happy at the prospect of paying more money for a second Season. The girl is getting nervous, I think. Her future is not as bright as she thought it would be."

Nathan bit the inside of his cheek. "I'm sorry for her," he said, honestly enough. "But I don't think I want to marry Amanda Davenport."

Rose nodded slowly. “Well, you must make your own decision. But you will think about it, won’t you? Think about it seriously.”

Nathan sighed. “Very well, Mother. I shall think about it.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, close the curtains!” Bridget moaned, dramatically swinging her forearm over her eyes. “I feel as though my head is splitting in two.”

Pippa stood at the bottom of her mother’s bed, faintly baffled. Bridget never complained of headaches, and was not prone to megrims, certainly not anything as debilitating as this one seemed to be. At first, Pippa had thought that the anxiety of their travels and reintroduction into Society might be the cause. She had also considered that perhaps her mother had drunk a little too much champagne the night before.

Neither option seemed particularly likely.

“You never have megrims, Mama,” Pippa spoke up, hurrying to close the tiny gap in the bedroom curtains. “I shall ask Cousin Kat to summon the physician.”

“Certainly not,” Bridget snapped, sounding a little more like her old self. “I’ll just rest today, that’s all. What a pity. I was so looking forward to a morning with Katherine.”

Pippa carefully said nothing. It was plain during their stay at Katherine and Timothy’s house that Bridget did not much care for her niece and certainly disapproved of Katherine’s choice of husband. Such sentiments could not be shared, of course, but Pippa lived in fear of her mother saying something inappropriate. It was as if she saw herself as a rich viscountess once more, or even a duke’s daughter, free to say and do as she liked.

Bridget was clever enough to understand this too and had therefore kept her mouth

closed until now. Perhaps that was where the invention of the megrim had come from.

“You always told me that a headache or a megrim or a little trifling cold ought not to stop me from doing anything,” Pippa found herself saying, unable to control her mischief.

Bridget sniffed. “I don’t recall saying that.”

“I recall it, Mama. You said, the day of Lord Everington’s ball, that I was going whether I liked it or not, headache or no headache. In fact, you said that megrims were the plague of a weak-willed woman.”

Bridget shifted in bed, adjusting her head against the pillow.

“I have no memory of such a conversation, and even if I had, this is an entirely different situation. Now, are you going to make my apologies to Katherine or not?”

Biting back a smile, Pippa bobbed a neat curtsy. Bridget watched her through narrowed eyes.

“Of course, Mama. I shall go at once.”

Lavinia and Katherine were already in the downstairs parlour, with tea-things laid out on a low table. They glanced up at Pippa as she entered, smiling.

“There you are, Pip,” Katherine remarked. “Here’s some tea for you, and you must try these cakes. I must say, I am disappointed that Aunt Bridget cannot join us. I had no clue she was so prone to megrims.”

Nor did I, Pippa thought, taking her seat and accepting the cup of tea. Katherine had taken to calling her Pip , as a nickname, and Pippa secretly liked it very much. Bridget, of course, disliked the nickname and thought it common.

“She sends her regrets,” she answered, although Bridget had not actually done anything of the sort. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“One’s health must come first,” Katherine affirmed, leaning back in her seat, hand drifting over her rounded belly. “Or so Timothy reminds me every day. He’s quite nervous about the birth of this baby, poor thing. More nervous than I am, I think.”

Lavinia chuckled. “I do worry about the state William will find himself in when I am with child. You know how he worries, Kat.”

Katherine snorted. “You do not have to remind me. Pippa, you are lucky indeed to be an only child. Siblings are nothing but a headache.”

Pippa couldn’t quite make herself smile at that.

“Perhaps,” she conceded, “but I always wished for a brother or sister. Just one, you know. Besides, if I had had a brother, our lives would have been much different.”

There was a brief silence at that, and Pippa wished she hadn’t spoken. Perhaps it was vulgar to allude to how low she and her mother had fallen. Perhaps it was simply not the custom to articulate the obvious: that had Pippa been a boy or possessed a brother, he would presently hold the title of Viscount, and their destinies would have diverged entirely.

At the very least, debts or no debts, they would not have been turned out of their home so unceremoniously.

She cleared her throat, setting down the teacup.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” Pippa murmured. “I’m so little used to Society, I’m forever saying the wrong thing.”

Lavinia and Katherine exchanged glances. Lavinia leaned forward, taking Pippa’s hand.

“Do not apologise for honesty,” she told her firmly. “Society would have us all demur and bluff and dance around the truth to our heart’s content, making liars out of us all. You should be proud of your frankness.”

“Lavinia is right,” Katherine confirmed. “Besides – and I didn’t want to tell you this, in case you got a little too vain – but you are being talked about a good deal in Society at the moment.”

Pippa gulped. “Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?”

The women laughed.

“It is both,” Katherine conceded. “But you are generally well-liked, Pip. Your manners are good, honest and forthright, with no coyness or affectation. You are pretty, you are pleasant, intelligent, and rather charming. Of course, you have no fortune, which is a mark against you, but really, that only serves to deter the less eligible gentlemen. You don’t want to be sought after by fortune-hunters, do you?”

Pippa paled. “Fortune-hunters?”

Lavinia nodded seriously. “That is why – against your mother’s wishes – we have put about that you have no dowry and no fortune, and are not likely to get anything from William or I. Sometimes, fortune-hunters marry women who are not as rich as they

thought. It never ends well.”

She found herself envisioning marriage to a man who was one of these fortune-hunters , a man who had imagined her to be a rich woman. She imagined his rage and fury against her once he discovered the truth and shuddered.

Katherine shot Lavinia a reproving look and laid a hand on Pippa’s shoulder.

“Don’t scare her, Lavinia! Pip, you must not fret. We won’t let you marry a man like that. Men of good quality generally have fortunes of their own. So long as you don’t have your eye on a duke or something like that, I imagine you can make quite a good match.”

Pippa smiled faintly. “I see. Thank you, Kat. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful.”

“You don’t,” Lavinia said firmly. “And don’t worry so much about ingratitude.”

Katherine leaned back again, eyeing Pippa narrowly.

“You do want to be married, don’t you, Pip?”

“Of course. Naturally, I want a husband.”

“There is nothing natural about it,” Katherine said firmly. “Not all women are inclined towards marriage, just like not all men are. If you don’t wish to marry, Pip, now is the time to tell us.”

“I am not opposed to the idea,” Pippa answered carefully, “Although I did always rather want to marry for love. I know that isn’t practical, but...”

“Not practical?” Lavinia laughed. “ I married for love, and I have secured a duke.”

Katherine chuckled, elbowing her sister-in-law.

“Careful, Lavinia. That’s my brother you’re talking about, there. However, she is right, Pip. I married for love, too. All three of my brothers did, as well.”

Pippa cleared her throat. “I’m happy for you, really. But I just don’t believe I am lucky enough, or pretty enough, or rich enough, to have those choices.”

“I was not rich,” Lavinia remarked quietly.

“Nor was Timothy, but I loved him all the same,” Katherine added. “The thing is, Pip, marrying for love is not really a matter of luck, or beauty, or wealth. It is about integrity, about knowing what you are searching for and not resting until you find it. And integrity is something I believe that you have in abundance.” She paused, tilting her head to one side. “Mayhap a little luck won’t hurt, though.”

Pippa had to laugh at that. The conversation drifted away from men and marriage to more mundane matters. She sat back in her seat, sipping tea, and letting her thoughts drift.

They made it sound so easy – marrying for love and no other reason. It couldn’t possibly be so simple.

Certainly not with Mama around, Pippa thought, barely suppressing a sigh.

For the first time, though, she felt as though she had someone else to discuss the matter with. Before, there was of course only Mama. Others would listen politely if she insisted on speaking of such matters, quietly praying for her to stop talking and likely resolving to speak to Bridget about it all.

But Lavinia and Katherine were different. They were family. They cared.

It felt right .

I'm glad we came here, Pippa thought. I feel almost safe here.

A tap on the door jerked them out of their conversation. The door opened, admitting the butler.

"A Lord Barwick has called for Miss Randall," the butler said, addressing himself to Katherine but glancing briefly over at Pippa. "Shall I tell him you are not at home?"

Pippa swallowed thickly. The infamous excuse – the family is not at home . She and Bridget had heard it over and over again in the weeks following the viscount's funeral, when they most needed help from their friends.

It turned out that they had fewer friends than they thought.

Katherine and Lavinia exchanged surprised looks. Katherine glanced over at Pippa.

"Well, Pip, do you want to see him?"

She hesitated. The simple answer, of course, was no . She did not. But word would undoubtedly get back to her mother that the marquess had visited, and been subsequently turned away, and then she would fly into a rage. It was not really worth it, then.

"Of course," Pippa managed, not able to sound too convincing. "But you won't leave me alone with him, will you?"

Lavinia snorted. "Certainly not ."

"Show him in, then," Katherine said, addressing the butler. The man bowed and

withdrew, leaving an uneasy silence behind.

“He’s paying her calls, then,” Lavinia murmured, glancing over at Pippa. “He is making his interest known.”

“A marquess is not a terrible match,” Katherine sighed, shooting quick little looks at Pippa. “If she likes him, that is.”

It wasn’t a question, and so Pippa did not bother to answer.

A few minutes reprieve was all they got. Footsteps echoed along the hall, and the butler reappeared, followed by a familiar, smiling figure.

“Ladies, Your Grace, good day to you,” Lord Barwick remarked, his quick gaze flicking through the room. He didn’t seem particularly pleased to see Lavinia in there, or even Katherine.

It’s her house, Pippa thought, with a sudden flare of anger. She swallowed it down, however, getting to her feet and exchanging pleasantries.

“What a surprise, Lord Barwick,” Katherine said smoothly. “I’ll ring for more tea. Please, sit.”

“I hope my unannounced visit is not too much of a disruption,” Lord Barwick answered, taking a seat and stretching out his legs complacently. “But I simply had to call on Miss Randall here. Tell me, is your dear mother around, Miss Randall?”

Pippa cleared her throat, shifting a little. It had not occurred to her just how much of an imposition Lord Barwick’s visit was. It was not visiting hours, he was not a close family friend or family member, and he was unannounced.

In short, he should not have come. She glanced over at Katherine and Lavinia, whose cool, serene faces revealed nothing.

“She has a megrim,” Pippa managed. She knew then that her mother had not known about Lord Barwick’s visit. If she had, she would never have stayed upstairs with a megrim or a headache.

So, his visit truly was unexpected then. Pippa shifted again, suddenly feeling vulnerable.

I wish Mama was here, she thought, and then, Goodness. I don’t think I’ve wished that in a very long time.

“I understand I shall see you at Lord Henry’s garden party tomorrow,” Lord Barwick said, looking around. “Generally, I find outdoor parties something of a bore, but I shall be sure to attend.”

Pippa blushed at his bluntness, not daring to glance over at Katherine. This was her brother he was talking about! Lord Barwick didn’t seem to notice, or to care.

“I’m sure it will be a fine event,” she heard herself saying. “I am quite excited.”

He threw her a good-humoured smile. “What an open-hearted little thing you are, Miss Randall. Tell me, do you play the pianoforte?”

“I... Yes, I do. I believe your mother asked me this question recently,” Pippa said, finding herself floundering. “You were there. Don’t you recall?”

Lord Barwick blinked, momentarily taken aback. “I cannot recall. But no matter. You must play for me sometime, Miss Randall.”

It was not a question, but rather a statement. Pippa was beginning to feel truly embarrassed. Katherine and Lavinia had not said anything, and she could almost feel the waves of disapproval headed towards Lord Barwick. He had not noticed, and she had a feeling that if he did notice, he would not care.

“I don’t play the pianoforte much, and never in public,” Pippa found herself saying, meeting his eye squarely. “I learned it because ladies are meant to, you see, but I prefer the violin.”

Lord Barwick lifted his eyebrows. “But you’ll play to oblige me, I’m sure?”

“I’m afraid I must respectfully decline your request, Lord Barwick.”

There was a brief silence after that. Lord Barwick blinked, as if struggling to get his head round it all. Out of the corner of her eye, Pippa saw Lavinia hide a smile behind her hand.

“I see,” he said at last, voice more clipped than before. “What a disappointment, to be sure.”

“Will you be staying for luncheon, Lord Barwick?” Katherine asked smoothly, and this time there was ice in her voice. He looked at her properly for the first time and pursed his lips.

“No,” he answered at last, perhaps finally understanding that he was not as welcome as he had assumed. “In fact, I think I should be getting along.”

Lord Barwick left rather quickly after that, leaving a silence behind him. Katherine cleared her throat and spoke first.

“I don’t like him,” she said, addressing herself to nobody in particular. “It is not my

concern, of course, but I do not like him, Pip.”

Pippa swallowed, nodding silently. “My mother likes him as a match for me.”

Katherine said nothing to that. Really, there was nothing to say.”

I don’t like him either, Pippa thought. But what am I to do?

You must do something , chimed in a little voice at the back of her mind. Do something soon, or else you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.

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The day was grey and cloudy, not really ideal for a garden party. Still, the event had been scheduled for at least a month, and accepted several weeks ago, so they were going.

Nathan tried not to feel too miserable. It was just a party. Indeed, there was work to do at home, but garden parties were day-time events, and he was likely to return home and be hard at work well before sunset.

Lately, however, Nathan felt that he had been distracted. Work didn't enthrall him the way it once had. Piles of paperwork had always made his heart sink a little, but now he felt so miserable he could hardly force himself to get started. His mind had been wandering during meetings, too.

He was thinking of Pippa Randall far more than he ought to have done. There was no real reason for the woman to be on his mind as much as she did, and yet he couldn't seem to shut her out.

She'd be at the party, to be sure. Nathan wasn't sure if he were excited for that or dreading it.

His plans to hold back and wait and see what happened with Miss Randall seemed rather foolish now. She was in Society to be married, everybody knew that. Women came to London for nothing else.

What sort of woman would choose a viscount over a marquess?

"Nathan? Nathan, I am speaking to you!"

He jolted out of his reverie, tearing his eyes away from the scenery flashing by, and blinked at his mother.

Rose was watching him with a faintly amused expression, eyebrows raised.

“You were a hundred miles away,” she remarked. “Pray, share your thoughts.”

He flushed. “I wasn’t thinking of much, Mother. I am simply not looking forward to this garden party, that is all. I don’t generally enjoy them, you know that. Not that it matters much, of course.”

She pursed her lips. “I’m sure Miss Randall will be there.”

He sighed. “That thought already occurred to me, Mother.”

“Do you plan to speak to her? You should, you know.”

“I imagine it will be unavoidable.”

Rose fell silent after that. Nathan glanced up at her once, afraid that he’d been too brusque and hurt her feelings but only found that his mother was eyeing him with a strange, unreadable expression. When she caught his eye, she smiled and turned towards the window.

“I hope you do talk to her,” she said at last. “You might rescue her from Lord Owen Barwick. You know what sort of reputation he has.”

“He’s a marquess, Mother. He’s a good match.”

“Is he really?”

Nathan hesitated. “Well, no, I suppose not. But he is rich, and he is a...”

“If you remind me again that the wretched man is a marquess, I shall scream.”

Nathan had to smile at that. He wisely let the subject drop.

*

Lord Henry Willenshire was not a remarkably sociable man, everybody knew that. He was an extensive traveller, a sharp businessman, and a hard worker. Some people had their opinions on whether or not a lord ought to have a business, but they were generally the sorts of ladies and gentlemen that had never had to even consider working a day in their lives, or even worrying where the flow of their money came from.

Nathan privately pitied such men.

Lady Eleanor was also much frowned upon, in being a woman – a married woman, at that! – who refused to keep herself at home, sewing things in preparation for children, and proceeded to efficiently and diligently run a most successful pottery business. Nathan had confessed himself surprised to hear that Henry, of all men, was marrying, but now it was clear that he and Eleanor were perfectly suited.

When Nathan stepped onto the terrace with Rose on his arm, Henry came forward to greet them with his easy smile.

“Nathan, how good to see you! And you too, Lady Whitmore! I’m surprised you could pry him away from his work,” Henry laughed, shaking his head.

Rose laughed politely, but it seemed a little strained. Nathan felt a twinge of guilt. He knew that he’d been particularly difficult lately, especially when his work had

stopped producing as much joy as it once had.

Henry, thank goodness, did not seem to notice their reticence. He and his wife entertained less than any of their family, most likely due to their busy schedule. It seemed that they were more preoccupied with managing their guests. There wasn't much time for conversation. Nathan and Rose slipped past them and headed towards the table.

Compared to other members of the ton, Henry and Eleanor's home was somewhat modest. The garden, however, was excessively beautiful. It was not as expansive as some grounds, of course, but it was well cared for, full of lush plants and sprawling meadows, herbs, vegetables, and more.

The tables and chairs had been set out on the terrace, overlooking a rolling, green lawn. It was a relatively small party, mostly familiar faces.

Nathan noticed Pippa Randall straight away. She was already sitting down at the table, with her mother on one side and Lord Barwick – of course – on the other. The Dowager Marchioness, Lady Henrietta was standing behind her, deep in conversation with Lady Randall.

For an instant, he met Miss Randall's eyes across the terrace. There was resignation and boredom in them, the expression of a young woman who is beyond bored. Something lit up in her eyes when she first saw him, something that made his heart beat faster.

Or perhaps it is your imagination. Perhaps you are only seeing what you want to see.

He bit back a sigh and let his mother steer him through the guests towards their end of the table, far away from where Miss Randall sat. It would be a long afternoon.

As the last of the guests found their seats and the chatter quieted down, Eleanor rose to her feet, smiling round at her guests.

“Now, everybody, we have a special treat. Usually, we all enjoy a little pianoforte music with our food, but of course, the instrument can hardly be dragged out onto the terrace!”

There was a mutter of laughter at that, and Eleanor continued.

“So, before we eat, I have asked Miss Pippa Randall to demonstrate her skills on the violin. She has brought her instrument specially on my request, and I must say, you are all in for a delightful surprise. Pray, proceed, Pippa. Whenever you find yourself prepared.”

The air seemed very still as Miss Randall rose to her feet, gripping a glossy violin in white-knuckled hands. She smiled faintly around, then lifted the instrument to prop beneath her chin. The bow dragged across the strings, and a shimmering, ethereal note filled the air.

Nathan leaned forward. On closer inspection, the violin was only glossy due to a recent application of wood polish. It was a well-maintained instrument, to be sure, but knocked and scratched with age, and faded in places. Still, the instrument seemed to bend itself into Miss Randall’s grip, as if the two of them were one creature.

Closing her eyes, Miss Randall began to play in earnest.

It was some strange, simple piece, one that Nathan did not recognize. Generally, ladies who played music at parties chose jaunty tunes that one could dance to, or classical pieces that showcased their talents, or else fashionable songs that were played in everybody’s parlour. They were skilled, certainly, but Nathan had never found himself mesmerized by their performances. Not in this way.

There was absolute silence as Miss Randall's music unfolded itself, mournful and slow, as if telling a tragic story to which there could be no happy end. Tearing his eyes away from her, Nathan glanced up and down the table.

Almost everybody was fascinated, held captive by her spell. One older woman lifted a shaking hand to her lips, as if reeling from some long-forgotten sorrow brought to mind by the music.

Not everybody was listening so intently. Lady Randall was glancing up and down the table too, looking anxious and a little annoyed. She looked up at her daughter with a frown, as if wishing she would stop playing. Lady Henrietta, the Dowager, had her lips pursed together in obvious disapproval.

Lord Barwick was stifling a yawn, and Nathan found himself longing to throw a plate at the man's head.

How could they not see how beautiful the music was, how talented Miss Randall was? Did they truly not see, or did they not wish to see?

Abruptly, the music came to a sweeping crescendo and ended. Miss Randall opened her eyes, as if waking from a dream.

Applause broke out up and down the table. Nathan leapt up from his seat to applaud, and he was not the first one on his feet. Miss Randall blinked at them, seeming almost a little stupefied.

Eleanor stood up, beaming, still clapping.

“Well, Pippa, that was beautiful ! Everybody loved it, of course. You are most talented!”

Miss Randall blushed. “My father taught me.”

Abruptly, Lady Randall seized her by the wrist, pulling her down into her seat. The younger woman lost her grip on her bow, which clattered across the paving stones. She scrabbled for it with an intense urgency, and Nathan had to look away.

“That’s enough, Pippa,” Lady Randall hissed, probably a little more loudly than she’d intended, as Nathan clearly heard and so did others.

Eleanor fixed the woman with a pointed glare.

“Right. Well, then, shall we eat?”

*

The dinner passed swiftly. Nathan found his gaze diverted down the table again and again, where Miss Randall sat. She didn’t seem to speak much. In fact, her gaze was fixed on the plate in front of her, although she barely ate. Her mother and Lord Barwick talked over her head a good deal. The violin had disappeared somewhere, and Miss Randall’s hands, laid gently on the table beside her plate, occasionally flexed, as if wishing she had the instrument once again.

When the food was being taken away and people were lounging around the table in a more relaxed fashion, Nathan noticed a few people making their way towards the gardens, in twos and threes, obviously with the aim of taking a light stroll. There would be games after – croquet, or perhaps bowls, with a chessboard and backgammon board being promised for later.

“Poor thing, she looks bored to death,” Rose commented, nudging Nathan and nodding in Miss Randall’s direction. “If he’s trying to court her, he might want to try and speak to her.”

Miss Randall was in the same position as before, between Lord Barwick and her mother. They were talking animatedly about something or other, Lady Randall clearly trying to impress the marquess. Neither of them even glanced at Miss Randall.

They don't need to impress her, he thought, with a rush of anger. Lady Randall knows that her daughter will marry where she's told, and Lord Barwick is too full of vanity to imagine that he might need to woo any woman at all. He probably imagines she's in love with him already.

She didn't look like a woman in love. She looked like a woman plotting escape.

Nathan was on his feet before he realised what he was doing. Rose blinked up at him, perplexed.

"Nathan? What is it?"

"Excuse me, Mother," he answered, determined not to give himself time to lose his nerve. His feet carried him down the length of the table, until he was standing before the three of them.

Miss Randall noticed him at once, staring up at him with large eyes. It took a moment for Lady Randall and Lord Barwick's conversation to falter away. Once there was silence, he smiled tightly.

"Excuse me, I only came to see if Miss Randall would like to take a turn around the rose garden over yonder. There are quite a number of guests walking there, in full sight of the terrace. It'll be quite safe."

And, more to the point, quite proper.

Lady Randall's eyes bulged. "Sir, we are having a conversation."

“Are you sure?” Nathan found himself saying, before he could think twice about whether or not it was a sensible thing to say. “Because I have not seen Miss Randall open her lips in the last half an hour. I believe your conversation has moved on without her.”

She flashed him a taut smile. “My daughter does not...”

“Yes,” Miss Randall blurted out. “Yes, Lord Whitmore. I’d like to come.”

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Pippa could feel her mother's anger mounting. During the carriage ride here, Bridget had made it abundantly clear that today was intended for Pippa and Lord Barwick to spend time together. Already, she had convinced Eleanor to place the three of them together – with Lady Henrietta beside her son, naturally – and from there, it was expected that Pippa would stay where she was or at least allow herself to be moved around under her mother's direction.

A perfect opportunity. That was what Bridget had described it as. An opportunity for Society to watch the courtship progress, and for Lord Barwick to convince himself that Pippa really was the perfect woman for him.

She highly doubted that he cared to find a perfect woman . In fact, Pippa was not entirely sure what had made Lord Barwick pursue her at all. She had nothing to offer, not even a dowry. What had he to gain? Not love, that was for sure.

So the party had dragged by, painfully slowly, and Pippa had grown more and more miserable. Nobody came to save her – why would they? All they could see was a young woman sticking very properly by her mother's side, as she should, sitting by an eligible bachelor. They would consider themselves doing her a disservice if they had interrupted.

And then along came Lord Whitmore.

Pippa had to admit that her chest tightened at the sight of him. In a good way, of course. Was there a good way for all of the breath to be squeezed out of one's lungs? Mayhap. She had sensed her mother inflating with outrage when he asked her to walk with him, and spoke up before things could get out of hand.

In short, before her mother could dismiss Lord Whitmore and insult him too badly for him to try to speak to Pippa again.

Pippa very much did not want that to happen.

She tried to ignore Bridget's glare as she got to her feet, shaking out her skirts.

"It'll be quite proper, Mama," Pippa said, as if that were the concern. "We shan't be out of sight at all."

Bridget had gone a funny shade of purple and glanced over at Lord Barwick. He smiled lazily.

"I shall accompany you, then."

"Oh, no, Lord Barwick, there's no need for that," Pippa said, the words exiting her mouth before she could realise what she was saying. "Mother and you were having such a lovely conversation. I should hate to interrupt it. You must stay here, I insist."

Not giving him a chance to respond, she stepped away from the table, taking Lord Whitmore's outstretched arm, and the two of them hurried off.

The smooth paving stones beneath their feet gave way to rough gravel, interspersed with scrubby grass. They didn't even seem to be heading anywhere in particular, aside from away from the terrace and towards the roses. Pippa and Lord Whitmore did not speak for a few minutes. She was tempted to twist around to look behind them and discover whether they were being pursued or not.

She didn't hear running footsteps or her mother's squeal of anger, so it seemed that

they were safe. For now, at least. Pippa breathed out a sigh of relief.

“I... I hope I didn’t interrupt,” Lord Whitmore ventured at last. “But you really did look as though you needed rescuing. You looked rather... if I could be so bold, you looked a little bored .”

Pippa winced. “I’m afraid I was bored. Lord Barwick seems to talk over my head at all times. He seems to have a passing respect for my mother, at least, which I suppose is a good thing, but he is barely interested in me.”

She immediately wondered whether she had said the wrong thing. Was that too blunt?

But then, Cousin Katherine said that my blunt manners were considered rather charming by the ton . For now, at least.

She tried not to think about what might happen if the ton grew tired of her or decided that her manners were not as charming as they had originally decided. Society was notoriously changeable, everybody knew that. You got what you could while it still liked you and prayed to be well clear when their minds changed.

Or so her father had said, at least. Privately, Pippa wondered whether the world her father had left, years ago, was the same one she was in now. Was it different?

She gave herself a little shake, glancing up at Lord Whitmore to see if he’d noticed her sudden silence. It occurred to her that he did not seem to be eager to fill the silence with small talk. That was something she had learned very quickly – silence in Society was to be avoided at all costs. One always had to be saying something or listening to somebody saying something. Words must always be in the air. Silence was dangerous, and not to be tolerated.

So far, she’d seen countless men and women inwardly writhing at an extended,

awkward period of silence, and then all of them would speak at once to dispel it. She'd watched debutantes cringe at their own poor conversation skills, when uncomfortable pauses lengthened during a stilted conversation.

What was wrong with a little quiet?

"How are you enjoying Society, Miss Randall?" Lord Whitmore asked, after a moment or two.

She sighed. "Well enough. Everybody is very kind – well, almost everybody – and I am invited to a great many parties and such. However, I think our invitations are a courtesy to our family, the Willenshires, instead of to us."

Lord Whitmore winced. "Yes, I know the feeling. My mother is a much-loved and much-respected woman of Society, and often I am invited to places as a favour to her. Or worse, simply because I am the Viscount Whitmore. They aren't inviting me, they are inviting my title. It wouldn't matter who held the title."

"Do you think we were always so shallow?"

He glanced at her sharply. "Shallow?"

Pippa flushed but held her ground. "Indeed, shallow. It seems that all we care about are the things that are superficial – money, beauty, a title. Breeding, although more and more these days people are willing to overlook anything if one only has money."

Lord Whitmore considered this and nodded slowly.

"I am obliged to agree with you, Miss Randall. We are concerned only with superficial frivolities. However, Society itself is built on superficial nonsense. Think of it – if you were to host a party, you could not simply invite your friends. You may

invite your friends, if they are sufficiently well-known, well-bred, or rich enough. However, the vast majority of your guests must be comprised of people you do not know well and do not particularly like. And if you omit an important name from your guest list, well. Heaven help you. You shan't be forgiven."

She shuddered. "Yes, I know what you mean. I'm frankly quite glad not to have to host a party of that magnitude. But Cousin Henry and his wife Eleanor have organised this party, and not everybody is here."

"True," Lord Whitmore conceded. "But Henry is only a second son, and Eleanor was never a leader of Society. They shall never be patrons of Almack's, to be sure, but the rules are perhaps less stringent for them."

Pippa considered this. "I haven't been to Almack's yet."

"Count your blessings. I have, and it's something of a bore. Still, a fashionable person must have a subscription. Perhaps next year?"

Pippa went very still. "I won't be here next year, Lord Whitmore. If I am married, mayhap I'll be here with a husband. If not, my mother will probably take me home in disgrace."

Again, she had said too much. Biting the inside of her cheek, Pippa glanced up at Lord Whitmore. He was looking down at her with a faint frown between his brows.

"You have a rather dark view of your future, Miss Randall," he said at last.

She shrugged, a most unladylike gesture which would have earned her a rap about the shoulders from her mother if she had seen.

"A realistic one, I'm afraid. The time has come to put aside my nonsense and

childishness and set about being practical.”

The silence lasted longer this time.

“And who told you that, I wonder?” Lord Whitmore said, his voice so soft she could not decide who he was talking to, her or himself. She glanced up at him and opened her mouth to reply.

At that moment, with impeccable timing, a movement over his shoulder caught her attention. Pippa glanced over, and her heart sank.

“Oh, dear,” she murmured.

Lord Whitmore twisted to look behind him and gave out a sigh.

“Lord Barwick approaches, I see. What a surprise.”

They hadn’t even reached the roses yet. Bridget stood beside the table, craning her neck, watching them. Lord Barwick was striding across the grass, abandoning the paths in favour of a more direct route. There was determination on his face.

“Miss Randall!” he called, when he was still a fair distance away. “It has just occurred to me, Miss Randall, that if we are to conduct our game of chess, we had better start now.”

She felt vaguely sick. Lord Whitmore glanced down at her.

“I didn’t know you were fond of chess, Miss Randall.”

She clenched her jaw. “I am not. I can barely move the pieces, let alone play. My father tried to teach me, but neither of us had the patience for it.”

Lord Barwick reached them, offering a cursory and almost accusatory bow to Lord Whitmore. He was faintly out of breath, a testament to how quickly he'd walked to catch up with them.

Pippa breathed in, trying to pretend she was as forthright as Katherine, and as brave as Lavinia.

"We have just begun our walk, Lord Barwick. Perhaps another time."

Annoyance darkened his brow, hastily swept away and replaced with a false smile.

"I believe your mother requests of your presence, Miss Randall. You are to go inside, and we can play the game there. This sun is most injurious to your complexion."

All three of them looked up at the dense ceiling of grey clouds.

"Indeed," Lord Whitmore murmured.

There was nothing for it. Pippa reluctantly untangled her arm from Lord Whitmore's. Despite her carefulness, her gloved palm brushed the back of his knuckles. He flinched, drawing his arm away a little faster. Or was that her imagination?

Lord Barwick, barely holding back a triumphant smile, held out his arm, and she was obliged to rest her hand in the crook of his elbow. He tucked his arm tight against his side, trapping her fingers in a rather pinching grip. Lord Whitmore folded his arms behind his back, and Pippa felt a pang.

I want to stay here. I want to talk to him. He's... he's interesting. He cares about what I have to say.

She had no choice of course. Parting salutations were tendered, and Pippa was drawn

back towards the house, towards where her mother stood waiting on the terrace.

I don't have a choice. Do I? No, of course not. That's foolish talk.

"I hope you know, Miss Randall," Lord Barwick said, all smiles now that he had his prize on his arm again, "I shan't coddle you during the game. Chess is very serious, and very tactical. I shall not go easy on you, and I will certainly not allow you to win."

She bit back a sigh.

"I never imagined for a moment that you would, Lord Barwick."

The carriage ride home was tensely silent. Pippa tried not to mind.

It was not, of course, their carriage. Katherine had lent out hers, since Timothy was working and she was growing too big to bother with the chill air of garden parties and the like, along with having her firstborn to look after. Pippa privately wished that her cousin had been there. There was something about Katherine's sharp intellect and quiet confidence that made Pippa feel that she, too, might be a confident and outspoken woman, one who deliberately cultivated unusual manners, and did not care what Society thought of her.

The sort of woman who married the man of her choice, not a downtrodden viscount's daughter who had fallen a long, long way in the world. The sort of woman who, when a man she did not like offered to take her to the opera the next evening, would say no.

Pippa, of course, had said nothing when Lord Barwick benevolently offered to pick her up at seven o' clock, and simply let Bridget agree and make the arrangements.

“I thought I’d made it clear to you,” Bridget said abruptly, voice tight and angry, “that you were to entertain Lord Barwick today. I also thought I’d made it clear that Lord Whitmore is not a suitable suitor for you.”

Pippa swallowed thickly. Her mother was not even looking at her – she was staring out of the window, her expression unreadable.

“He was only being friendly, Mama.”

“Make no mistake, Pippa. He was entertaining himself, sharpening his skills of charm and fascination. He’ll use these skills in earnest when he comes across some debutante with a large fortune. I thought you were clever enough to understand this. Pray, tell me you are not entertaining hopes of him offering for you.”

Bridget’s voice did not waver from its smooth monotone, her expression never flickering. There was no emotion at all in her eyes. Not a single flare of anger or disappointment.

Pippa took a moment to compose herself.

“I have no expectations at all, Mama. Not from Lord Whitmore, or from anybody.” She stated, her voice almost as cool and calm as her mother’s.

Bridget glanced at her then, her gaze quick and sharp.

“Hmph. Well, I hope so. Because I meant what I said. Nothing lower than a marquess for you, and that rules out Lord Whitmore. And I expect you to be on your best behaviour at the opera, do you hear? Your nicest manners, and your prettiest dress. Of course, an opera isn’t ideal. There’s hardly any opportunity to talk, but that doesn’t matter if you look nice. You’re to sit upright and be very absorbed in the show, but if Lord Barwick wants to talk, you may whisper. Don’t be too absorbed in

the music, of course, in case he is bored and wishes to talk about something else.”

Pippa flinched. “Heavens. How complicated.”

“Indeed, the theatres can be difficult to manage,” Bridget agreed vaguely. “But I’m sure we can do it. Just remember to be alert to what Lord Barwick might require from you. Attention, conversation, or simply to sit there and look pretty and rapt. It will do you no harm to be endearingly fascinated by the opera, as long as he doesn’t think that he is less interesting than the music .”

Pippa turned away, watching the scenery skim back. She suddenly felt very, very tired. And cold, too, as if wandering around in the gardens had given her a chill.

“Can’t I simply sit there and enjoy the opera, Mama?” she asked, after rather too long of a silence had gone by. Her mother turned to face her fully, her expression angry and a little incredulous.

“Sometimes, Pippa, I think you only like to irritate me,” she replied.

Pippa flushed, turning away. “I only asked a question, Mama. Can I not just listen to the music?”

Bridget gave a short, derisive bark of laughter.

“No, of course you can’t. Don’t be foolish, Pippa. What do you think you’re there for?”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Rose had been staring thoughtfully at him over the breakfast crockery for the whole meal. Nathan had done his best to ignore it, but it was becoming impossible.

“Why do I feel that you have something to say, Mother?” he enquired, pouring himself another cup of coffee. He didn’t have long to sit over his breakfast today. Lord Davenport was expecting him to go over some documents. It shouldn’t be a long visit, barely an hour or so. He imagined that Amanda and Lady Davenport would be out paying calls. Or so he hoped.

“Oh, can’t a mother look at her son as he eats breakfast?” Rose responded, sounding a little annoyed.

“Not with such intensity, no.”

She sighed. “Very well. When we left the garden party yesterday, I rather felt that you were... well, that you were upset.”

Nathan ran his tongue around his teeth before he answered.

“I know we left... promptly , but I rather thought you’d had enough. You said that garden parties always leave you too cold.”

“And so they do,” Rose responded. “But do not attempt to deceive me, my dear. I saw you take Miss Randall off for a walk, only to be interrupted by that irritating marquess. He practically raced after you to split you apart, and the three of them guarded that poor girl as she were buried treasure.”

Nathan swallowed thickly. He could still remember the frustration and mortification of being left, standing alone in the middle of the lawn, partner-less, as Lord Barwick and Miss Randall hurried away.

Miss Randall had disappeared into the house with her escort, along with her mother and the Dowager Lady Barwick. They hadn't reappeared. When Nathan had gone into the house later, he found the four of them huddled in the parlour, with Lord Barwick and Miss Randall playing a game of chess.

Miss Randall had looked entirely miserable, and thoroughly bored. Lord Barwick was clearly having an excellent time, with a collection of Miss Randall's pieces taken off the board and sitting beside him, clearly trophies. Nathan had peeped in through the door, heart thumping. As he watched, Lord Barwick gave a squawk of delight, sweeping up another piece.

"Aha! And there goes your queen, Miss Randall. You'll struggle to play on without her, I can promise you that. After this, we ought to play another game, and I'll show you a few tricks, how about that?"

Nathan had withdrawn after that, and gone to find his mother, informing her that he would like to leave.

For once, Rose hadn't argued.

No, apparently, she's saved all her troublesomeness for now.

"I don't have the time nor the inclination to discuss this, Mother," Nathan said, trying to sound stern. It did not quite stick.

"You can't fool me, Nathan," Rose responded, waving a teaspoon at him. "I can tell that you like the girl. Why not admit it?"

“Because it is only a passing acquaintance. I barely get the chance to talk to her. Her mother clearly does not approve. It’s clear that the family have chosen Lord Barwick for her, and I am not confident enough in her affection to me to try and elbow my way between them.”

Rose narrowed her eyes. “So, you do admit that she has affection for you, then?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I wish I knew. She’s... clever, and eloquent, and charming, and most obliging. I feel that she likes me, and enjoys my company, but does she like me more than other men? I could hardly say so.”

Rose considered this, pursing her lips. “She certainly likes you more than Lord Barwick.”

“That is not hard. Many women marry without the safety of affection.”

“And you think that Miss Randall is among them?”

That gave him pause. Did he truly believe that Miss Randall would marry a man she did not love, did not even care for?

Careful, fool, warned a voice at the back of his head. You don’t know her. How can you say either way?

Of course, Nathan did not answer sensibly. He hadn’t answered anything sensibly in quite a while, now.

“No, I don’t.” he heard himself admit. “But she’s practical, I think. Or at least, she says that she’s trying to be.”

Rose nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "You discussed it, did you not?"

"Of course."

"She seemed to enjoy spending time with you, Nathan."

He flushed, looking away. "She's pleasant company."

"So are you."

"That means nothing."

There was a long pause, during which Rose sat back and folded her arms across her chest, eyeing him narrowly.

"You," Rose said at last, with finality, "are lying to yourself. You care for her, and if you have any sense at all, you'll pursue her. Nathan, darling, none of us have forever. Time passes by in a blink, and faster than you can imagine. Love is a rare thing, and..."

"Who spoke of love?" Nathan interrupted, getting to his feet. "I'm not in love, Mother. I'm sorry, I don't mean to be so blunt, but really, you do not know what you are speaking of."

"Well, I..."

"I have to go, I'm sorry," he interrupted again, bending down to kiss his mother on the top of her head. "You know how Lord Davenport hates lateness. I really have to go, or else I shall be late, and he'll have a good deal to say about that."

Rose pouted, leaning back in her seat. "Oh, Nathan. I wish you would listen to me.

I'm older than you, and a little wiser, and I have a good deal of wisdom to impart, if you would just listen!"

"When I get home, I shall listen to you at length," Nathan promised, smiling faintly. "But for now, I really must go."

She gave a sigh which he took as a dismissal and hurried out of the breakfast room and out to where his carriage waited in front of the house. The carriage jolted beneath his weight, the seats uncomfortably cool and unyielding.

The coachman clicked to the horses, and they pulled away. Nathan sat in cold silence, breathing deeply.

She's wrong. I don't have affection for Miss Randall. At least, no more than is natural. I promised myself I would keep a firm rein on my heart, and not let it slip away without my say-so.

Could I have broken my resolve already? I hope not.

He swallowed, adjusting his position. He wasn't entirely sure when he would see Miss Randall next. Some party or other, no doubt.

It hardly matters; he scolded himself. I shall think only of my meeting with Lord Davenport on the journey, and I shall not think of wretched Miss Randall, not even once.

He suspected that he was destined to break this vow. Several times.

"Yes, indeed, all is in order," Lord Davenport grunted, nodding approvingly. "Good

work as always, Nathan.”

“That concludes our meeting, then,” Nathan responded, carefully replacing the documents in his leather messenger bag. He was already thinking of the work waiting at home. His mother would probably want a long conversation with him about something important, which he was not looking forward to. Still, if she promised not to mention Miss Davenport or Miss Randall, there was no reason that they could not have a pleasant, cosy evening together. For once, there was no social engagement arranged, and Nathan was determined to get on top of his paperwork. If there was time, he might even relax a little with a novel.

“You’ll stay for tea, won’t you?” Lord Davenport asked, glancing at him anxiously.

Nathan hesitated. He had no objection to tea, of course, but he did not want to run into Miss Davenport. As he’d suspected, she and her mother were out paying calls, but the longer he stayed here, the more chance it was that they would come back and catch him, and politeness would constrain him to stay a little longer.

“No, thank you, Lord Davenport,” he answered, rising to his feet. “My mother expects me at home.”

As he rose, however, Nathan heard the rattle of carriage wheels on gravel, and the familiar high-pitched tones of Miss Amanda Davenport herself. His heart sank.

“Ah, they’re back early,” Lord Davenport said, in a bland, off-hand way which informed Nathan that it had been arranged ahead of time. “Well, you must stay and have tea with us now. My wife will insist upon it. I insist upon it. And you must hear Amanda play, as well.”

Nathan swallowed reflexively, cursing his bad luck. Caught in the trap of politeness once again.

It was hard to say why he felt so uncomfortable in the Davenports' music room. It was a large, well-appointed space, with a pianoforte on one platform and a harp on another, with dust-free bookshelves curling around the walls. It was an excessively pretty room, and exactly what a music room was supposed to look like.

Ah. That was it, then.

The room looked as though it had been chosen by somebody who wanted to impress visitors, rather than making a practical music room. All the music rooms that Nathan had visited tended to be something of a mess, with sheets of music piled up on the floor, on the instrument, on any and all available chairs. Any bookshelves were in a state of disarray, and one would never put a pianoforte in direct sunlight, no matter how pleasing it might make the player appear.

He noticed that chairs were placed casually in front of the pianoforte, as if waiting for an invisible audience.

"We'll have tea in here immediately!" Lady Davenport ordered a footman, clicking her fingers. Miss Davenport threw Nathan a coy look over her shoulder and ascended the platform to the pianoforte.

"What a treat, eh?" Lord Davenport said, nudging Nathan and flashing him a wink. "I'm a little biased, to be sure, but my Amanda is the finest pianoforte player in Society this year. Pray, sit down."

Nathan obeyed. There didn't seem much else to do. Amanda rather grandly took her seat, fingers hovering over the keys. Lady Davenport stood beside her, careful not to get in the way of the idyllically golden light streaming through the window and bathing Amanda in a halo of glittering sunlight. Lord Davenport sat directly beside Nathan, leaning towards him.

“Have you considered the matter I mentioned to you, then?”

Nathan had known that this was coming. Of course it was coming. Lord Davenport was not the sort of man to bring something up only once and never push the issue. Clearing his throat, Nathan shifted in his seat.

Amanda began to play. It was a fashionable piece, light but complex. There was no denying that she had talent. Her fingers danced nimbly over the keys, her feet tap-tapping the pedals at just the right moments. She played well, very well, and judging by the quick, self-satisfied smiles she kept throwing towards Nathan, she knew it, too.

Lady Davenport kept glancing over at Nathan too, unashamed gauging the effect Amanda’s playing was having on him.

I should be enraptured, he thought, in a strange, dizzy moment of disconnect. And yet I don’t feel a thing. Not a thing.

In a flash, he found himself remembering Miss Randall’s music, that swooping, mesmerizing violin with its haunting strains, familiar yet unfamiliar. His chest ached at the memory.

Lord Davenport cleared his throat, and Nathan realised that he had not answered. An answer, of course, was more than necessary.

“It’s a serious matter,” Nathan answered, hating himself for taking the cowardly way out and all but avoiding the question. “I shouldn’t like to rush my decision.”

“No, no, of course not,” Lord Davenport grunted. “But come, the Season is almost over. What else is there to decide? Amanda is a perfect match for you, and you for her. Why bother to look elsewhere?”

Nathan did not respond, and Lord Davenport shot him a hard stare.

“There has been talk of you paying attention to Miss Randall,” he said, his voice heavy and stony. “Little things, here and there. Nothing that can’t be explained away as a kindly gentleman taking pains to make a woman feel at ease when she is so clearly out of her depth. Such efforts are often misinterpreted. You would not be the first man to fall victim to such a thing.”

Amanda’s music was reaching a crescendo. Lady Davenport was fixated on Nathan, and when it came time to turn the pages, did not budge an inch. Amanda faltered, playing wrong notes, and hissed up at her mother.

“Mama! The page!”

Poor Lady Davenport flinched, flustered, and knocked the music off the pianoforte and into Amanda’s lap.

“Heavens, what a mess,” Lord Davenport muttered, the music pausing while they recovered themselves. “It isn’t ordinarily this bad, you know.”

Nathan cleared his throat. “It isn’t bad at all. Miss Davenport’s playing is exceptionally good. I believe she’s renowned in Society for her talents on the instrument.”

“And the harp, too, don’t forget the harp,” Lord Davenport agreed. He shot another look at Nathan. “I hear that Miss Randall screeches about on violin. Not a ladylike instrument, in my opinion.”

He said it in such a way as to indicate that there could be no other opinion.

The playing resumed, with Amanda’s confidence visibly diminished, and her mother

apologetic and flustered.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you sidestepping my question,” Lord Davenport spoke again, his eyes fixed on his daughter, his voice lowered so as to hide under the music. “I’m no fool, you know.”

“I never said that you were, Lord Davenport.”

“Mayhap I haven’t been clear enough, though. I shall remedy that now. You and Amanda have been all but betrothed for years. Your father and I always planned to make this match. Your mother had some foolish ideas about you choosing your own match, but I am a practical man and so was the late viscount. You can dither and delay all you want, but I shall expect you to offer for Amanda well before the end of the Season. I consider it a bargain struck between us.”

Nathan clenched his jaw, a muscle quivering in his cheek. “Oh? I wasn’t aware of such a bargain.”

Lord Davenport shot him a steely look out of the corner of his eyes. “Don’t play games with me, boy. I’m far too advanced in years for such frivolity. I have laid out my requirements of you, and now you must lay out yours. That’s how business is done. It’s how we have always transacted business. You and I, and your father and me before you. Let’s not make this more complicated than it must be.”

Nathan sighed, passing a hand over his hair. “I am still thinking about it, Lord Davenport. It’s no reflection on Amanda’s qualities. I should not be offended if, should she receive a better offer, she took it.”

“If she’d received one, I’d counsel her to take it,” Lord Davenport retorted. “But Amanda made a few crucial missteps this Season, and now she must fall back on the old ways of doing things. She’s happy for me to arrange this match, and so that is

what I am doing. Arranging it.”

The music ended with a flourish, so of course all private conversation was at an end. Smiling faintly, Nathan rose to his feet, clapping. Amanda beamed, curtsying. Lord Davenport clapped too, his heavy palms ringing out.

“Tea, then?” Lady Davenport asked crisply, having recovered from her embarrassment earlier. Amanda came straight across to Nathan, smiling up at him.

“Think carefully about how your reputation might suffer, should you renege on any expectations you may have given rise to,” Lord Davenport muttered. “Think very carefully indeed, my boy.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Pippa played a wrong note. Cursing to herself, she tightened one of the violin strings, testing it carefully. She drew the bow across the strings and nodded to herself.

Much better.

The sun was going down, and although the day had been unusually warm, a chill was beginning to creep across the garden. Pippa had gone so far as to bring a lantern and a shawl out with her. She did not want to go inside just yet.

Instead of sitting on the terrace, where all could see her, Pippa had found a snug little corner around the side of the house. Fragrant flowerbeds and blooming hydrangeas clustered around a gazebo, and trees and shrubs with broad, green leaves provided a little shelter. There was a narrow bench inside the gazebo, and she made herself comfortable there to practice her violin.

It felt odd to play it inside, in a music room. Always, she had played in her father's study, and then later, when they lived above the shop, she would have to go outside to a quiet place to play it, or risk annoying the shop-keepers downstairs.

"I thought I could hear you out here."

She flinched at the voice, spinning around to find Katherine standing there. She looked tired, more so than recently, and her belly was larger than ever. Her time had to be getting close.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Katherine added, flashing a wry smile. "I couldn't find you inside the house, and one of the servants mentioned they'd seen you come

outside. I couldn't spot you on the terrace, but then I heard the music. That's a beautiful piece, by the way, but I've never heard it before. Which one is it?"

Pippa smiled shyly. "It's my own composition. Just like the one I played at Cousin Henry's garden party."

She shuffled up on the bench, nervously gesturing for Katherine to sit beside her. Katherine did so, lowering herself with a wince.

"You are extremely talented, Pip," Katherine said at last. "Your own composition? Eleanor told me that everybody was asking her afterwards what you'd played, and she couldn't tell them. They would have complimented you on it, except that you were closeted with Lord Barwick, playing an endless game of chess. I believe some people tried to ask Aunt Bridget to pass on their compliments to you, but it rather seemed to irritate her."

Pippa bit her lip and said nothing. Her mother had informed her that the violin was not really a ladylike instrument, and she should stick to tried-and-tested pieces, instead of her own 'scrapings'.

"People are polite, Pippa," Bridget had said curtly, "but you can never tell what they're really thinking. Play a fashionable piece, and you're sure to win smiles and applause. Play your own composition, and you're taking a risk."

She certainly hadn't passed on any compliments.

Glancing up, Pippa found Katherine eyeing her closely, as if she could read her thoughts.

"Mama was never much taken with music," Pippa said, softly. "Papa loved it, and so do I, but Mama only seems to care about me making a good marriage."

“I sense that things are strained between you two at the moment. I don’t mean to pry,” she added hastily, “I only want to help. I’m not a fool, Pippa. It’s plain that you don’t much like Lord Barwick, yet Aunt Bridget insists on pushing you towards him anyway. It’s... it’s the kind of thing my own father would have done.”

Pippa pulled the violin close to her chest, almost hugging it like a doll.

“Were you close to your father?” she asked, in a rush.

Katherine’s face tightened in pain, and Pippa almost wished that she hadn’t spoken. It took a moment for her to respond.

“No,” Katherine said at last, “I wasn’t. He... he wasn’t the sort of man you could get close to. I hear that your father was very different?”

Pippa nodded. “He was the best father in the world. I miss him every day, still. He made Mama promise to take care of me, and to see that I could marry for love. I think perhaps she’s forgotten about that.”

Katherine was silent for a moment, considering. “I think Aunt Bridget is doing what she thinks is best for you. She’s lost sight of what matters most. But it’s up to you, Pippa, to stand up for yourself. If you don’t wish to marry Lord Barwick, you must say so.”

“I can’t. I haven’t a choice.”

“There’s always a choice.” Katherine shot back. “You’re a grown woman, a clever one. You have family, friends, support. Of course you want to please your mother, and of course you love her, even when she’s being... being difficult. But this is your life. The wrong husband will make you miserable, and I think you know that already.”

There was a brief silence after that. A gentle breeze rushed around the gazebo, rustling greenery against the wooden roof.

“What sort of man is Lord Barwick?” Pippa heard herself say, voice low. “Is he very bad?”

Katherine let out a long sigh.

“He’s a well-known rake, Pip. He made a rather half-hearted attempt to convince people that he was reformed at the beginning of the Season, but nobody believes that. He’s in his cups far too often, gambles heavily, treats women with great disrespect – except his mother, of course, who has rather an unsettling hold over him – and there are a great many more stories that I won’t tell you. I would not be happy to see you marry him, Pippa. I can’t stop you, nor should I influence your decision, but neither should your mother.”

Pippa leaned back, closing her eyes. She had a headache, pounding away behind her eyes. She felt sick. The joy of her music had been drained away. Or perhaps it had never been there to begin with. How could it, with all of this weighing on her mind?

“It’s as if Mama is a different person to before,” she whispered. “It was different before Papa died. He... he tempered her, somehow. Now that he’s gone, there’s no stopping her. Sometimes I feel as though I’m in a runaway carriage, careering down the road, and I can’t stop or slow down.”

Katherine reached out, taking her hand.

“I know how it feels,” she said, voice quiet. “But you are in control. And you can do something, Pip. You can, and you must.”

A twig cracked outside, and both women jumped. A figure stepped into the doorway,

and Pippa found herself sinking back into the seat, her heart dropping into the stomach.

“Here you are,” Bridget said coolly. “Hidden away. What are you two gossiping about, I wonder?”

Bridget paused outside the gazebo, holding her breath. She’d heard snippets of the conversation between her niece and her daughter, enough to know what they were talking about.

So, Katherine thinks to discourage Pippa from that match, eh? Bridget thought grimly. And no wonder. Pippa would marry a marquess, and she’d outrank Katherine herself.

Poor, foolish Pippa. She can’t possibly understand it.

Well, I understand it, and I intend to put a stop to this.

With a flinch, she heard Katherine speak again, her voice level and almost angry.

“I know how it feels. But you are in control. And you can do something, Pip. You can, and you must.”

It was too much, entirely too much. Bridget closed the distance, standing in the doorway. Both women flinched to see her. Pippa shrank back a little, and Bridget stared into Katherine’s face, waiting to see guilt there, and embarrassment at being caught.

She didn’t see either emotion, to her annoyance. It was infuriating, but then Katherine

had always been stubborn.

“Mama, I didn’t know... you were looking for me,” Pippa gasped, flushing and clutching her violin to her chest. “I came out here to practise.”

Bridget pursed her lips. She didn’t particularly like violin music. She had never objected to Pippa learning, so long as she comprehended that when the moment arrived to apply herself diligently to the essential endeavour of securing a suitable husband, she would set aside her industrious crafting and musical compositions to concentrate on more decorous pursuits befitting a lady.

Of course, Bridget had counted on being able to rely on her husband to help manage Pippa, but Phillip was gone.

She tightened her jaw against this thought, which brought the usual wave of misery, and concentrated on the present.

“I have been looking for you,” Bridget said crisply, turning her attention to her daughter. “You know how I feel about night air, Pippa. Besides, Lord Barwick is taking us all out to the opera tonight, as you know. He is a remarkably generous man.”

This was aimed at Katherine, of course, but the wretched girl did not even blink.

“You had better start getting ready,” Bridget added, when Pippa only stayed where she was, quiet and still. “I’ve laid out a gown for you to wear. Hurry! And for heaven’s sake, leave that violin in the music room. I told you to practise your pianoforte, just in case you were asked to play. And have you done it? Of course not.”

Pippa got to her feet with a reluctance that Bridget did not like to see. Pippa paused,

glancing at Katherine.

“Thank you, Kat. You’re... you’re kind. And you’ve been helpful. Thank you.”

Katherine inclined her head, and Pippa scurried off, slipping past her mother without looking her in the eye.

Bridget did not move. She was aware that she was blocking the entrance to the gazebo and wondered whether it was a little too threatening. They were, after all, staying in Katherine’s house, and if Katherine was displeased at them, she might put them out. She might even convince William to send them away. Their position was precarious, which made Pippa’s marriage even more necessary.

Katherine, however, did not seem intimidated, or nervous, or even surprised. She leaned back, lacing her fingers over her rounded belly.

“I take it you were eavesdropping, Aunt?” she asked coolly. Bridget’s eyebrows shot up towards her hairline.

“My daughter and I are most grateful for your hospitality, Katherine,” Bridget said, once she’d composed herself, “but this interference of yours must stop.”

Katherine pursed her lips. “And what interference is that?”

“I haven’t the energy to play these games with you. You know that I intend for her to marry Lord Barwick, and here you are, talking her out of it. She never disliked the man before you started to put ideas in her head.”

“On the contrary, Aunt. Pip has never liked Lord Barwick, not ever. He is not a likeable sort of man.”

“He does not need to be a likeable sort of man,” Bridget shot back. “And don’t call her Pip. Her name is Pippa. She does not like nicknames.”

Katherine slowly and carefully heaved herself to her feet. Annoyingly, she was on eye level with Bridget herself.

“No, Aunt Bridget, you do not like nicknames,” she said, voice soft but firm. “Pippa likes them. Can you really not tell what your daughter likes and does not like?”

Bridget’s temper flared. “Don’t you dare throw such accusations at me. You are the one who wants to prevent her marrying a marquess , just because you could not marry one.”

There. It was out. Bridget felt faintly shaky at her own daring. Should she have kept her mouth shut? Perhaps so.

Katherine, however, did not flinch. She did not seem angry or upset. In fact, her mouth tugged at the corner, and she seemed amused.

“I could have married a marquess if I wanted,” Katherine remarked dryly. “Many titled gentlemen liked me, Aunt. But I did not like them . I liked Timothy, and you can’t upset me by accusing me of bland jealousy. I am not jealous, Aunt Bridget. I am worried. Worried about Pippa .”

“Don’t speak to me about her as if you know her. You barely met her! She is my daughter, and I will decide what is best for her. Do you really think you have any say at all in the matter? Any say at all?”

Bridget was faintly aware that her voice was pitching higher, which of course was a bad idea. It was infuriating to have Katherine looking so coolly at her, as if she were the child having a temper tantrum, and not Katherine overstepping her bounds.

“Of course, I have no say,” Katherine responded, sounding a little amused. “Pippa is a grown woman, Aunt. She’s grown up and you never seemed to notice, I’m afraid. She loves you, and values your advice highly, but this is going entirely too far. She does not like Lord Barwick. What is more, he’s a rake.”

“He’s reformed. Reformed rakes make the best husbands, everybody knows that.”

“That’s a dubious proverb,” Katherine shot back. “And that’s even if they are reformed. Lord Barwick is not reformed, by any stretch of the imagination. I could tell you stories...”

“I don’t wish to hear any gossip, if you please,” Bridget interrupted, childishly glad to have an opportunity to take the moral high ground for once. “Lord Barwick is a perfectly suitable husband for my daughter. He’s wealthy, titled, and disinterested in fortune. He knows she’ll have no dowry, and he cares not. He’s marrying her for her own sake. What do you say to that ?”

Bridget took a step backwards, feeling a flare of triumph. Of course, Pippa was not in love with Lord Barwick, but what did that foolish girl know of love? Really, it was better to keep the heart out of the matter. Bridget had married for love, losing her head and her heart at once, and look at the mess that had gotten her into. Why could Pippa not marry a suitable man, and let love develop after ? Phillip would understand that, if he were here.

But he’s not here. I’m here, and this is my responsibility.

“Have you considered, Aunt, that Lord Barwick believes that William will give something to Pip?” Katherine said, choosing her words with care. “It’s a fair assumption. The Willenshires are an ancient and powerful family, and we all have a great deal of money. He might assume that William will settle his debts and provide a dowry.”

“Why should he assume that?” Bridget demanded, piqued.

Katherine sighed. Suddenly, she looked tired. The sun was almost gone, casting long shadows and throwing the inside of the gazebo into gloom.

“Because that is what families do, Aunt. And men like Lord Barwick know it.”

For a moment, Bridget wavered a little. Could she have miscalculated?

No, no, of course not. It’s jealousy. No doubt Katherine has her own candidate for Pippa and is upset that Pippa is more likely to obey me rather than her own cousin.

She took a step forward, meeting Katherine’s eye squarely.

“I’ll say this once, and only once, niece. We are grateful for your help, but we are family, after all. I am Pippa’s mother, and she is my daughter, and your relationship with her cannot and will not come between us. Her duty is to me. Her obedience belongs to me. I am her mother, and I know what is best for her. And what is best for her, quite simply, is a man like Lord Barwick. A marquess. If I could get her a duke, I would. And you, Katherine, are not to come between us. I will not tolerate that, do you understand? You don’t contradict my instructions or fill Pippa’s head with nonsense when my back is turned. I know what I am doing. Do you understand, Katherine?”

Katherine met her gaze but said nothing.

“I shall take that as a yes,” Bridget muttered. Turning on her heel, she strode back towards the house. She didn’t look around, not even once.

I know what I’m doing.

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“The Ghost At Marendale Manor ,” Rose read aloud, turning the book over and over in her hands. It was a smart, leather-bound copy, a gift from Timothy. He’d been given several copies of the book from his publisher, to distribute amongst his friends.

“It’s only volume one,” Nathan said, “but it’s quite compelling. I read the whole thing in one sitting. Timothy has done a marvellous job with his latest book. It’s already causing quite a stir.”

Rose chuckled, setting the book aside. “It is strange, being close friends with such a famous novelist. I feel rather guilty for not having read it.”

“I shouldn’t worry. He’ll probably read a passage or two tonight.”

They were in the carriage, rocketing through the night towards Timothy and Katherine’s home. A small soiree had been organized; a literary event meant to celebrate the publication of his latest novel. Mr. Rutherford was quite a household name now, connected with his expansive collection of novels, including the ones he’d published earlier in his career under a pseudonym. Katherine, who loved books and novels, was fairly beaming with pride at her husband’s work.

“It’s a ghost story, then?” Rose asked, faintly curious.

“Yes, but there are a great many other themes. There’s a romance, of course, between Lady Thomasin and the hero, Cornelius Rake. There’s something of a mystery regarding Marendale Manor itself, of course, and I have it on good authority that there will be bandits later on.”

Rose chuckled. "Timothy always had an excellent imagination. I am glad we can be here to celebrate tonight. I imagine the whole family will be there," she paused, shooting a quick glance at her son. "Including Miss Randall."

Nathan's cheeks heated, and he hoped that the darkness of the carriage managed to hide it.

"No doubt," he answered neutrally.

"The Davenports, too, will be there. Amanda is growing quite determined in her pursuit of you. Oh, I wish you did like her, Nathan. She'd make you a fine wife."

He said nothing, staring out of the window, and after a moment, Rose sighed.

"But mayhap she would not make you happy, then?"

He swallowed, shaking his head. "Things would be easier if I could fall in love with her," he admitted, "but I'm not. And she doesn't love me, Mother. Besides, it won't do her any harm not to get what she wants. She gets her way entirely too often."

Rose sighed again, and leaned forward to take his hand.

"Very well, Nathan. I shan't bring up this subject again, as I don't wish to upset you. But please do think more about Miss Randall. She's a sweet girl, and I... I want you to be happy. You're shut up in that study of yours entirely too much. There is a life beyond your paperwork, you know."

He smiled faintly, squeezing his mother's hand.

"You are very good to me, Mother. I am not always the son you deserve."

“Nonsense,” she huffed. “You are perfect .”

“Only a mother would think that about her children.”

Rose chuckled, releasing his hand and leaning back. “Nonsense. I am entirely unbiased.”

Before he could make a retort, the carriage slowed, and they were there.

Katherine and Timothy’s house was filled with a soft, warm light from countless candles, and the soft murmur of conversation filled the air. It was a markedly different sort of event than the usual parties and balls. There wasn’t even going to be any dancing.

Katherine’s brothers and their wives were there, of course. Even William and Lavinia, who were a few days short of the date they could officially return to Society after their honeymoon, but nobody seemed to mind very much.

There was no sign of the Davenports or Amanda, and Nathan allowed himself a brief sigh of relief.

Gilt seats lined with burgundy velvet had been set up in the library, arranged around a low platform. Books ringed the walls, neatly arranged in shelves. Nathan had been to enough of the Rutherfords’ literary evenings to know that guests were encouraged to browse the shelves, or even bring their own books.

A young lady, resplendent in a pale blue dress edged with silver thread, was standing by herself, inspecting the shelves. She glanced over her shoulder, and her profile was familiar.

Pippa.

A shiver ran down Nathan's spine.

Clearing his throat, he glanced down at his mother.

"Excuse me, Mother."

Rose nodded, head tilted, and he had every confidence that she knew exactly where he was going and why. No time to feel embarrassed, however.

Nerves fluttered in his stomach as he approached Miss Randall.

Why do I feel more nervous every time I approach her? Shouldn't I feel more confident, not less?

She turned at his approach, her face pale and unreadable in the flickering candlelight.

"Miss Randall," he greeted, giving a bow. She gave a bobbing curtsy in response.

"Lord Whitmore. I didn't realise you were such a follower of Timothy's works."

He smiled faintly. "I enjoy novels very much, and of course Timothy is my friend. However, I think I would like his work even if he were not my friend."

She stared up at him, unblinking. "I am surprised that you enjoy novels, Lord Whitmore."

"Oh? Why so?"

Pursing her lips, she considered. "You seem so... so serious. I would have thought

novels would be too frivolous for you.”

Come now, my good fellow, you possess the means to win her favour. Employ your charm. Perhaps a jest or a touch of mirth would serve you well.

“Well, don’t we all deserve a little frivolity at times?” he tried, flashing a nervous smile.

Miss Randall did not smile. She stared up at him, a faint line between her brows. She was certainly acting differently today. Had he done something wrong, said something he should not?

Abruptly, her gaze flicked over his shoulder, so rapidly that he almost missed it.

“Certainly,” she said, her voice low. “Excuse me, Lord Whitmore. The programme is about to begin, I think. I must find my seat.”

Without waiting for a reply, she hurried past him, clutching a book to her chest. Nathan turned to watch her go, and found Lady Randall standing a little way off, her face stony with disapproval. Miss Randall went straight to her mother, and the two women moved towards a pair of seats in the front row.

Nathan’s heart sank.

Oh, well done indeed. You scared her off.

She was right, though. The programme was starting. The other guests were filing into their seats, and by the time Nathan joined them, only one chair was left unoccupied. He was obliged to shuffle along a row and plump down in the middle, effectively trapped. He was also sitting directly behind Miss Randall, which was not intentional. Did she realise? Did she think that he had chosen that seat deliberately?

There was no time to worry about it. Katherine took her place on the platform, clapping for attention. An expectant hush fell over the guests.

“Welcome, friends and family!” she began, smiling around at them. “I believe you’ve all been to one of our literary evenings before – with the exception of my dear aunt and cousin. So, as we all know, there’ll be a series of readings and poetry tonight, and we can all discuss what we hear. To start with, however, I’m sure you all know that my dear husband, Timothy, has recently published another novel.”

There was a riot of applause at this, and Nathan watched as Alexander laughingly elbowed his brother-in-law in the side. Almost all of the guests loved Timothy’s work, and many of them had read his novels before his identity was revealed to the ton .

“I thought we could begin with a short reading from Timothy’s book, *The Ghost of Morendale Manor*, ” Katherine suggested, dropping a wink to her husband. “Would we all like that?”

There was more applause, and Timothy was obliged to get to his feet, red with embarrassment and pleasure, and took up his wife’s position. He was clutching his book in his hands, fingers tapping nervously on the cover.

“I spent a great deal of time on this novel,” he addressed them, clearing his throat. “I drew from real life more than for my other stories. While there are certainly ghosts and murders and haunted manors and perhaps even bandits later on, this book is, at its core, a romance. It’s about people , people like you and I, and the struggles we face.”

Nathan leaned forward in his seat. Well, you didn’t hear that very often in a novel. The more modern stories appeared to aim at being as fantastical as possible.

Timothy glanced among them all, cleared his throat one more time, and opened the

book.

“I’ll start at a passage near the end. It was Katherine’s favourite, you see. It begins with a speech by Lady Thomasin.”

In front of him, Miss Randall shifted, her shoulders tensing. Nathan frowned ever so slightly. He had no doubt that Miss Randall would have had the opportunity to read the book. Did she know what passage Timothy was talking about?

““ The thing about love, ” Timothy began, eyes fixed on the page, “ is that it is unpredictable. Poets and storytellers would have us believe that it is instant, unmistakable. They would have us believe it is shallow, which, after all, is what love at first sight must be. That’s not to say that it cannot blossom into something stronger, of course. But love at first sight is not love at all, but a sort of obsession, an infatuation that can be swept away like a rain-cloud in a gale.”

He paused, glancing up to gauge the reaction of the audience. Nathan looked around, too. The other guests were enthralled, leaning forward in their seats to listen. He found his gaze drawn once again to the back of Miss Randall’s head. Her shoulders were rounded, her head drooping. There was tension in her body now, a tension that had not been there before.

His chest constricted, and Nathan found himself longing to wrap his arms around her and console her for whatever had made her droop like a dying flower.

Of course, he could do no such thing, and ought not even to consider it.

“Proper love may, certainly, follow some of these fashions. It may come upon one at once, unstoppably, not unlike a runaway carriage striking an unwary pedestrian. It may occupy one’s senses, the entirety of one’s thoughts. The physicians are wrong, you know. One can die of a broken heart. I have seen it. Love, mostly, makes its own

standards. It will come upon you as it chooses, and there is very little you can do about it. It's a force which we poor humans cannot reckon with.'"

Timothy cleared his throat, glancing around at the audience. They were all leaning forward in their seats, eyes wide. Miss Randall's head had drooped lower. Nathan's hand was reaching out to rest on her shoulder before he knew what he was doing, and snatched it back.

"That may be true,' said Cornelius, offering her a wry smile, 'But I am not quite so eloquent as you, Lady Thomasin, not half as much. I must keep my speeches simple and short. I cannot reflect on the nature of love, I can only feel it. Let me say, then, that I love you. I love you, and this is not a thing I can argue with, not to myself or to others. I love you, and I was foolish to ever believe otherwise."

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““But I am not quite so eloquent as you, Lady Thomasin, not half as much. I must keep my speeches simple and short. I cannot reflect on the nature of love; I can only feel it. Let me say, then, that I love you. I love you, and this is not a thing I can argue with, not to myself or to others. I love you, and I was foolish to ever believe otherwise.””

Pippa kept her gaze aimed on the floor, these words echoing in her mind. Her heart pounded, and she felt faintly dizzy.

She'd read this book, of course. She'd read this passage. It came near the end, as Timothy said, but he'd wisely avoided giving any extra context. Wise, because this speech came as Lady Thomasin reveals that she intends to marry a villainous duke, in order to save her father from the debtor's prison. The readers were going to have to wait till the next volume to learn what happens next.

It wasn't this speech that had made Pippa's heart ache, though. That came later, in an impassioned speech from Lady Thomasin.

““What am I to do, Cornelius, what am I to do? Must I choose between duty and love? Oh, if love hurts the way this does, let me rid of it. What woman could ever follow her heart?””

It was a good novel, well-written and compelling. Of course, some critics were already disdainful of it all. Even Mrs. Radcliff and her contemporaries were mocked, with the latest fashionable authors, the enigmatic Bells, being ridiculed. Pippa had read the infamous Jane Eyre , and found it breathtaking, and so did everybody else.

With, of course, a few notable exceptions.

Timothy continued his reading, passing into the passage where Lady Thomasin and Cornelius are interrupted by the bumbling but good-natured lady's maid, a comic passage that was pleasantly jarring after the tension of the previous passage. Pippa found that she'd stopped listening, lost in her own head.

Lady Thomasin may not be real, but I know exactly how she feels. Falling in love with one man, only to find herself forced towards another.

That gave her a start. Was she really in love with Lord Whitmore? Things would be a great deal easier if she was not. Closing her eyes, Pippa concentrated on the sound of her own blood pounding in her ears, a heavy and reassuring rhythm. She wished the evening was over. She wished that her mother was not watching her every move, eyes narrowed as if she were waiting for her daughter to make a mistake.

She wished that Lord Whitmore was sitting beside her.

No, she didn't wish that. She wished that he were not there. His presence seemed to cloud her mind. And then, of course, there was her mother's not-so-quiet disapproval and annoyance whenever Lord Whitmore was near her.

An elbow dug into her ribs, making her flinch. Her eyes flew open.

"Can you credit this nonsense?" Bridget hissed. She spoke in a whisper, but still too loudly for the quiet room. Colour flooded Pippa's face.

"Mama ! You must not say that."

"Why? It's not a good novel."

“It is a breathtakingly good novel,” she insisted. “Everybody says so. I enjoyed it very much.”

Bridget snorted. “Well, I disagree.”

Pippa’s face was now beet red. She glanced furtively about, praying that nobody had overheard. Timothy and Katherine were their hosts , and their family. They had both been remarkably kind to both Pippa and her mother, and Bridget’s ingratitude was becoming more and more obvious.

The closer we get to what she considers our rightful place in Society, the more unpleasant she becomes.

Pippa wondered uneasily what things would be like if she really did become betrothed to Lord Barwick. How would Bridget behave then?

No sense in worrying about that. One can only hope that Lord Barwick loses interest in me. Heaven only knows I’m not a very interesting woman.

No, I’m not being fair to myself. I am moderately interesting, I suppose, but I am not rich and I am not titled.

What does he want from me?

Pippa thought uneasily of what Katherine had said. Since the incident in the gazebo, Bridget had not allowed Pippa to be alone with her cousin. It took quite some doing, and often Pippa was entirely mortified at her mother’s impolite inserting of herself in every situation, as if she were afraid that Katherine would poison her daughter if they were alone even for an instant.

Katherine must have noticed but had the grace not to remark upon it. Frankly, Pippa

thought that her cousin was too tired to fight, the baby draining her energy.

Besides, Katherine told me to stand up for myself, and I haven't yet. Perhaps she's disappointed in me.

This was an unsettling thought. Pippa found that she didn't want to disappoint her cousin, who'd been so kind and so very welcoming. Katherine's house felt more homely than home had in the last few years.

The sound of a woman beginning to recite a poetry verse jerked Pippa out of her reverie. She glanced up at the platform, and found that Timothy had finished his part, and others were taking their turn. Already Pippa was beginning to feel fidgety. She was tired, bored, itchy, all at the same time, hungry for something, although she wasn't entirely sure what.

The recital part of the evening ended with applause and excited chatter, and Pippa stood up with something like relief. At once, before she could move away, Bridget linked her arm through her daughter's.

"Not so fast, my girl," Bridget muttered. "I know you. If I look away for a moment, you'll be off consorting with unsuitable bachelors or whispering with your cousin in the corner. We are here for a reason, Pippa, and don't forget it."

Anger swept through her. Pippa longed to yank her arm free, but it would make too much of a scene.

"Yes, Mama, we are here for a reason," she shot back. "And that reason is to support Timothy and his new novel. You were ever so horrid about it, you know. It's an excellent novel."

"I think your time would be better served concentrating on more serious matters,

instead of wafting around and reading novels,” Bridget responded, without missing a beat. “Now, unfortunately, Lord Barwick and his mother aren’t here tonight. It seems that your cousin and her foolish husband did not have the wit to invite them.”

It was too much. Pippa drew back her arm, turning to face her mother.

“Didn’t have the wit ? Mama, Katherine is the cleverest person I know! She didn’t invite Lord Barwick and his mother because they are not literary-minded, and they do not approve of novels or of Timothy’s writing. Why would she invite them? She also does not approve of Lord Barwick’s attachment to me, such as it is, and she makes no secret of the fact.”

Bridget eyed her daughter stonily. “Mind your manners, Pippa. I am doing all of this for you, remember.”

For me? Pippa wanted to shout. No, you are not. You are doing this for yourself, and nobody else, regardless of what you have convinced yourself.

Before their sharp-tongued debate could turn into something less suited for a genteel event, the Dowager Duchess appeared.

“There you are, Bridget,” the Dowager said, smiling faintly. “And good evening to you, Pippa.”

Pippa made a neat curtsy. “Good evening, Aunt Mary.”

“I came to fetch you, Bridget. The O’Hares are here tonight, and Mrs. O’Hare – Clara Clarke as was – is keen to reacquaint herself. Do come along.”

Pippa held her breath. A muscle twitched in Bridget’s jaw. She shot a quick look at her daughter.

“Of course. I shall bring Pippa along.”

Aunt Mary tutted, linking her arm through Bridget’s. “No need. Let the young people entertain themselves, Bridget.”

And that was that. The Dowager drew Bridget away with an air of unassailable authority and Bridget could do nothing but oblige her.

I’m free, for a few minutes, at least, Pippa thought, barely smothering a grin. Turning, she headed straight towards the shelves, planning to pick up some novels she’d noticed beforehand.

That was her only aim. It had nothing to do with the fact that Lord Whitmore was standing in that exact spot, scanning the spines.

“I believe we are looking for the same book, Lord Whitmore,” Pippa said, a little shaken at her daring.

Lord Whitmore glanced down at her, a smile spreading over his face. Pippa felt that familiar, traitorous little skip in her heartbeat. She smiled back.

“Pride and Prejudice ? ” he asked, eyebrows raised. “The one that Miss O’Hare recited from?”

“Indeed. I read part of it once before but was never able to finish the book. I’ve heard that it’s quite an adventure story.”

Nodding, Lord Whitmore glanced up at the shelves again. Reaching up, he pulled down a slim tome. “This is it, I believe.”

He handed it straight to Pippa, and she raised her eyebrows.

“Well, if you located the book, you ought to have the privilege of reading it first.”

He smiled faintly. “Whatever happened to ladies first?”

She chuckled. “This lady can be quite patient, when she wants to be. Please, I insist. I have a great many books to read first, anyway.”

He held her gaze for an instant too long, and Pippa could have sworn that her breath was stolen away altogether.

Oh dear, she thought, heart thumping. Lady Thomasin was right. Love is nothing but a parcel of trouble. I rather wish that Timothy had recited that speech.

“I sensed that Lady Randall was not enjoying the evening,” Lord Whitmore said suddenly, breaking the silence away. “Is she fond of novels?”

Pippa gave a most unladylike snort. “Mama ? Novels ? Heavens, no. She thinks them entirely too frivolous. She would most disagree with what you said earlier.”

He looked blankly at her, faintly disconcerted. “What I...?”

“That everybody deserves a little frivolity,” Pippa reminded him, smiling wryly. “It was most insightful.”

Lord Whitmore coloured a little, laughing awkwardly. “It was a rather foolish thing to say, wasn’t it?”

“I did not think so.”

He held her gaze for a moment, as if trying to work out whether she was serious or not. Once again, Pippa felt that odd sensation of having her breath stolen, and it only

intensified the longer she held his gaze.

Is this love? I think it might be. Or at least the beginnings of it.

Oh, heavens, what am I going to do?

“Pippa!”

Bridget’s voice cut crudely across the murmur of polite conversation, louder than anyone else’s voice. Several people turned their heads to look, and Lord Whitmore even flinched.

Cringing with mortification, Pippa turned, slowly.

Sure enough, her mother was marching across the room, a look of grim determination in her eyes. She slowed her pace as she approached, having the good sense to remove the angry expression from her face, replacing it with a forced and insincere smile.

“Pippa, there you are. I told you to wait at our seats, did I not?” she said, her voice tight and clipped.

“No, Mama, you did not,” Pippa found herself saying. “And nobody else is sitting down now.”

Bridget’s lips tightened at this, and Pippa wondered at her own daring. She wasn’t usually in the habit of contradicting her mother, as it generally was not worth the trouble. It took two people to argue, after all, and Pippa had learned that if she stayed cool and calm, the argument would never happen.

Today, though, her calmness had deserted her. Anger tightened her chest, and she found herself clenching her fists at her sides.

Why can't I talk to who I wish? Why must Mama keep me so close beside her, like a little dog on a leash? It is not fair .

That might be a childish sentiment, but the words repeated in Pippa's head, over and over again.

It is not fair. It is not fair. It is not fair .

Bridget stared at her for a moment, as if wondering whether to say something else or not. At last, she gave a tight shake of her head.

"Well. My mistake, then. It hardly matters, as I've found you now. Come along, I have some people for you to meet. Good day, Lord Whitmore. Enjoy the evening."

There was nothing for it. Quietly seething, Pippa stepped over to her mother's side, and Bridget turned to lead them away.

"Wait a moment. Miss Randall?" Lord Whitmore said, his voice cool and level. Bridget reluctantly paused. Lord Whitmore held out the book in his hand, meeting Pippa's eye. "Your book. You must not forget it."

Pippa paused, about to tell him that she had said that he could read it first. Then she realised – it was a gesture. She took the book with a wry smile. Bridget looked as though she would like to forbid it, but kept her lips pressed together.

"Thank you, Lord Whitmore," Pippa said, meeting his eye squarely.

He said nothing, only giving a small bow. Then Bridget grabbed Pippa's wrist and towed her away.

"I cannot take my eye off you for a moment, can I?" she hissed, once they were out of

earshot. “I told you to leave that man alone.”

“This is not a large gathering, Mama,” Pippa shot back, teeth clenched. “I can hardly avoid the man.”

“Not with that attitude, at any rate. Now. Just because Lord Barwick is not here does not mean that we can’t do some groundwork . I shall introduce you to Lord and Lady Guye. They are close friends of Lady Barwick, and so you must make a good impression. As well as that, Lord Guye’s son is not a Marquess yet, but he will be once his father dies. It is not ideal, but one must always plan ahead.”

Bridget talked on and on in a sibilant whisper. Pippa was not listening. She kept the book clamped under her arm. It pressed against her ribs, but she was afraid that if she dropped it, her mother would not let her stop to pick it up.

She could see a trio of wan-faced people up ahead, two gentlemen and a lady, the younger gentleman presumably being the future Marquess. Pippa found that she did not care, in the least, about these people and their names.

I want to be with Lord Whitmore. I want to talk to him about books, about poetry, about everything . I don’t want to marry Lord Barwick.

There was no time for these thoughts, however, as they had reached the trio, and Bridget began to talk, her voice falsely animated, hands flapping about. Pippa kept a ladylike smile on her face and bobbed a curtsy when she was introduced. The young lord raked his gaze over her appreciatively, and she tasted bile at the back of her throat.

This is not fair. I cannot go on like this.

I’m not happy. Oh, heavens. Katherine was right.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

One Week Later

“It is quite customary to feel a touch of apprehension, is it not?” Colin inquired with evident anxiety. “There has been much discourse regarding being afraid and such, yet I never imagined... I am devoted to Louisa, for heaven’s sake!”

Nathan rested a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Marriage is a serious business,” he said, keeping his voice low so that the rest of the congregation could not hear. “It’s entirely natural to be nervous. In fact, if you were not nervous, I might think that you didn’t understand the seriousness of it all.”

Of course, he had hoped Colin’s nerves would not present themselves now, when they were waiting at the altar, on his wedding day.

The church was barely half full, and the wedding breakfast expressly by invitation only. Colin and Louisa both wished for a quiet, intimate ceremony, with only a few friends and the closest family members. Society would no doubt turn up its nose at being excluded from a wedding, but frankly, Nathan did not care. Colin and Louisa deserved the wedding that they wanted.

He had been a little surprised to be asked to be Colin’s best man. Colin was remarkably gregarious and had a great many friends and acquaintances. It was of course a great compliment, and Nathan had felt a flare of pride that morning, as he dressed in his wedding finery.

Apparently, another unforeseen duty of the best man was to console the groom when

his nerves got the better of him. Not that Colin was on the brink of fleeing the church, of course, but still.

“I suppose at the end of the day, it’s all about luck, isn’t it?” Colin remarked, almost to himself. “One doesn’t know one’s spouse, not really, until one marries them. You simply marry somebody you care about, and hope for the best.”

“To an extent,” Nathan agreed. “There is an element of luck. Let me ask you this, then. Do you believe Louisa to be the sort of woman to hide her true character?”

“Louisa? Heavens, no! She’s the most authentic young woman I have ever met,” Colin responded, snorting. “She’s entirely too honest at times. It’s most thrilling.”

“In that case, you can reassure yourself that you know exactly who you are marrying. And as to the element of luck, well, it can be reduced by marrying somebody you truly love, and choosing wisely. You have done both, so there’s no need for you to worry so intensely.”

Colin let out a long, slow breath. “Do you know, I think you’re right. I am being foolish, aren’t I?”

Nathan chuckled. “I never said that.”

“No, but you thought it. I know you, you wretch.”

Nathan nudged him gently with his shoulder, and Colin nudged back.

On cue, the church doors opened, and Louisa appeared in the doorway, a vision in silver lace and satin. The congregation rose duly to their feet, whispering and exclaiming at the bride. Louisa, however, never glanced at any of them, not even once. Her eyes were fixed on Colin as she slowly progressed up the aisle.

Colin, for his part, seemed to have stopped breathing, transfixed. Nathan bit his lip, holding back a smile, watching the two of them come together. Colin held out his open palm, and Louisa extended a white-gloved hand to put it in. They seemed to see nothing but each other.

Once they turned to face the rector, who was smiling broadly, the service began.

Nathan settled into his seat on the pew, finding that there was a lump in his throat.

He'd known about Colin's wedding for weeks, of course, and had looked forward to it. Colin deserved happiness, and so did Louisa. They were well-matched, and it was apparent to all that they were in love.

Jealousy, on the other hand, was a nasty, bitter thing, and had no place at a wedding. And yet Nathan found it forcing its way up his throat, burning as it went.

What must it feel like, to love so intensely and be loved back?

Marriage was a part of many, many people's lives, but how many of them could boast of feeling the same love he saw in Colin's and Louisa's eyes when they looked at each other?

When Nathan closed his eyes, he saw Miss Pippa Randall behind his lids, looking up at him with a faint smile, her ice-blue and silver dress swirling around her. His chest tightened, and he swallowed thickly.

There's no use pretending anymore. I am in love with her.

Well, that did him no good. Love was all very well, but only if it were requited. And was his love for Miss Randall requited?

It was hard to tell. Sometimes, he thought so, but at other times, she seemed to be actively avoiding him. Lady Randall certainly did not approve of him.

The ceremony reached the part where the bride and groom exchanged their vows. Nathan's eyes shot open, as he remembered he was to give out the rings. He was on his feet in in the nick of time, handing over the twin gold rings. Colin took them with an inward-looking smile, a soft expression on his face.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," the rector announced, beaming.

The congregation broke out into cheers. Nathan spotted his mother, who of course had known Colin for many years, blotting happy tears with the corner of her handkerchief.

And yet I feel nothing beside this hollowness. Why can't I even be happy on my best friend's wedding day?

No answer came. Nathan clapped mechanically along with everybody else.

The wedding breakfast was a cheerful, informal affair. The dancing had not yet started, and the meal was still progressing. Nathan was seated by the head table, swirling whiskey in his glass and trying to convince himself that he had an appetite.

There were many familiar faces at the wedding breakfast – Henry, for one, and his wife, Eleanor. Miss Randall and her mother were not there, of course, and nor was Katherine, on account of her progressing pregnancy.

Come on, now, Nathan scolded himself. You should be in better spirits. Your friend is getting married.

A quick glance at the head table showed Colin and Louise wrapped in conversation, staring dotingly at each other.

The plump, middle-aged woman nudged Nathan roughly in the side.

“Young love,” she said, nodding at Colin and Louise. “It’s fine to see, is it not?”

“Indeed, very much so,” Nathan answered, smiling faintly. “It’s Mrs. O’Hare, is it not?”

“Indeed, it is,” the woman responded, spearing a roast tomato. “And you are Lord Whitmore. Your mother is a friend of mine, and she discusses you frequently.”

Nathan winced. “Oh, dear.”

“Oh, don’t worry. All mothers rave about their children. The good ones, at least.”

“Good mothers, or good children?”

Mrs. O’Hare put the tomato in her mouth with a wink. “Well, now, that would be telling. Anyway, I hope to see Rose later today. She entertains hopes of you marrying this Season, yes?”

He cleared his throat, shifting. “I believe so.”

“And how is that going along?” She met his eye and snorted at the look in his face. “Oh, don’t look so horrified. A woman of my age and station tends to dispense with formality and get straight to the point.”

“Well, your frankness is certainly refreshing. Make no apologies to me,” Nathan responded, and Mrs. O’Hare grinned.

She was a pleasant enough conversation partner, and the breakfast slipped away most pleasantly, until a flare of music jerked Nathan out of their discussion.

“Time for the dancing,” Mrs. O’Hare said, with a sigh. “I recall that when I was young, I used to dance all night. I had the ankles and knees for it, you know. These days, my joints protest if I even dare to climb the stairs too quickly.”

Nathan chuckled at that, shaking his head. “Were you fond of dancing?”

“Fond of it? I lived for it. Young women are often like that, you know. They don’t look ahead. And the ones that do are told that they are foolish little things, bound to obey their parents and with nothing in their heads but gowns and trinkets,” she paused, snorting again. “I quite approve of this new movement for women to be well educated. Why shouldn’t a female grasp Latin and mathematics as easily as a man? I have a parcel of children myself, and I must say, the girls are cleverer than the boys.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Nathan replied. “I believe this new literary movement is encouraging women to read more, which can never be a bad thing. Unless, of course, you are one of those people who disapproves of novels.”

Mrs. O’Hare gave him a sharp glance. “Do I strike you as a person who disapproves of novels?”

He smiled wryly. “No, Mrs. O’Hare, You do not.”

The conversation progressed, with Mrs. O’Hare doing most of the talking. Nathan didn’t much mind, until a familiar name made him sit up straight and nearly spill his whiskey.

“They’re saying that Miss Randall, will be wed soon,” Mrs. O’Hare said, taking a sip of her wine. “I’m not surprised. I met her a while ago, and she is quite a breath of

fresh air. No fortune, of course, but naturally her cousins will settle something on her.”

Nathan swallowed thickly, trying to compose himself. “She... she’s betrothed?”

“No, not yet, but Lord Barwick’s pursuit of her is rather obvious, and she is accepting his attentions. Other gentlemen are already pulling back. No sense in wasting their time, if she already has an understanding with another,” Mrs. O’Hare sighed. “Frankly, I think I would have chosen better for her than Lord Barwick. Not that she could get better than a Marquess, but I’m not sure he’ll suit her. Still, it’s not of my concern. I daresay Miss Randall knows what she’s doing. Her mother certainly does.”

He felt ill. Nathan was aware that he’d drunk too much whiskey on too little food, and the room began to swim. The music seemed to be louder than before, and the laughter was growing raucous.

“It’s certain, then, that she’s going to marry him?” he pressed. “Is it not just gossip?”

Mrs. O’Hare glanced at him oddly. “Well, I heard it from Lady Randall herself, an old friend of mine, so I imagine it’s as settled as it’s going to be. Why do you ask?”

Nathan didn’t respond. He didn’t have an answer, of course. He knew he was acting strangely, and asking impolite questions, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Come, now, he thought. You knew this would happen, didn’t you?

Before he could process the thought, Nathan found himself on his feet, with Mrs. O’Hare staring up at him, mildly confused.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, his voice tight and a little too loud. “I find myself quite taken ill, Mrs. O’Hare.”

“Goodness,” she said, looking concerned. “Would you like to lie down? I’m sure there’s a quiet, dark room around here. I can summon a physician, and...”

“No need, thank you. But I must ask a favour of you. I shall return home immediately, but my mother seems to be having a good time. Would you mind telling her that I’ve left, but reassure her that I am well? And... and could you take her home in your carriage?”

It was not a proper request to make of a woman he did not know well, but Mrs. O’Hare’s expression softened.

“Of course, I shall,” she responded, with a look in her eyes that hinted she had guessed more than he would like.

There was no time to worry about that, however. Swallowing hard, Nathan pushed himself away from the table and set off, striding away down the hall. He had to get out of this place. Now.

Nathan tripped as he climbed out of the carriage, catching his foot on the lower step. Having drunk too much whiskey, his thoughts whirling around his head, he did not catch himself in time and sprawled out on the gravel.

The footman who had opened the carriage door gave a yelp of alarm, rushing to help him up.

“I’m quite all right,” Nathan said sharply, holding out a hand. “Don’t worry, Edward. I’m not in my cups, I’m only clumsy.”

The footman did not seem convinced, but he pulled back even so, letting Nathan haul

himself up onto his feet. He stumbled inside, ignoring the pain in his knees and palms where they'd scraped on the gravel.

This was one of the worst days of my life, he thought miserably, a thought which was followed by a wave of guilt at not having enjoyed Colin's wedding the way he should. Colin, of course, had not noticed, being entirely wrapped up in his new bride. As he should be, of course.

My dearest friend's wedding, and all I could think about was the woman I wish was beside me. A woman who is no doubt on the cusp of marrying another man, if rumour is to be believed.

Lord Barwick's pursuit of Miss Randall could only end in success. He was a better match, after all, and a woman like Miss Randall, with no wealth of her own, would do best to secure the best match she could.

He stormed through the house, heart thudding, feeling sick. No doubt news of his sudden departure would reach his mother soon enough, and then she would come hurrying back, worried about him.

I don't deserve her. I am entirely too ungrateful.

Nathan went directly to his study, brushing off the butler's offer of tea, and closed the door behind him, leaning against it. He let out a long, shuddering breath.

Is this what my life has come to?

I wish I'd stayed here, buried in my work. At least here I am sure of success. Why, oh, why did I let my wretched mother drag me out into Society?

He let out a shuddering sob, sliding down to the floor. There was a pile of paperwork

waiting for him on his desk. He should get started with it at once, but Nathan found that he could barely convince himself to breathe, let alone move.

I love her. I love her. What am I meant to do about it? Nobody warned me it would be so complicated. Nobody warned me.

Perhaps it would have been simpler to marry Amanda Davenport after all.

He paused, considering this thought, and shook his head. No, marrying Amanda Davenport would never be anything like simplicity. Quite the reverse.

Nathan sat where he was, curled up against the door, and stared into space until he heard the rumble of carriage wheels on the gravel outside. His mother, then, had come home. He dragged himself to his feet, pasted a reassuring smile on his face, and went out to meet her.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

It was the perfect day for a picnic, really. The sun shone, but not hot enough to make direct light unbearable, and there was just enough of a gentle breeze to cool them without blowing grass over the picnic spread.

The whole family had come out, even Aunt Mary. William did not seem particularly pleased to be kneeling on a picnic blanket at the top of the scenic Lark Hill, but neither did he complain. Even Bridget had kept her remarks to herself, mostly.

“I can’t remember the last time we had a picnic,” Pippa found herself saying, leaning back on her elbows. The food had mostly been eaten, and it was traditional picnic fare – cold chicken and meat, bread, cheese, good butter, jam, fruit, pies, and more, with a huge strawberry tart. Frankly, Pippa felt full to bursting.

“Oh, I remember,” Bridget spoke up, licking her finger to pick up the last of the tart crumbs from her plate. “It was quite a few years ago, before your father fell sick. It was meant to be a fine day, and we carried blankets and hampers up to the top of Reading Hill, right under that old oak... do you recall?”

A smile spread over Pippa’s face. “Yes, indeed, I do! It rained just as we’d gotten everything set out!”

Bridget let out a chuckle, shaking her head. “And the rain came down heavily . Everything was soaked, including us. We practically slid all the way down the hill.”

“Papa couldn’t stop laughing,” Pippa murmured. “He saved quite a bit of the food, and we ate it at home in front of the fire, while we dried off.”

“That seems like a very pleasant family memory,” Katherine remarked gently. “I wish I’d known my uncle. He seemed to be a kind, good man.”

“He was,” Bridget said, her voice a little shaky. “He was the best.”

Pippa eyed her mother, nibbling her lower lip.

She and her mother had not spoken much over the past few days. There had been a wedding only a few days earlier, between a woman that Pippa did not know and a man who was apparently Lord Whitmore’s friend. Understandably, then, Lord Whitmore had not been at any of the balls over the past few days.

That didn’t stop Pippa looking for him in every room she walked into. It didn’t stop her mother from keeping her close beside her at all times.

Sometimes, it felt as though she were in prison, with her own mother as a jailer.

But every now and then, there’d be moments like this, when they were mother and daughter again.

Bridget glanced her way, perhaps feeling eyes on her, and smiled faintly at Pippa. Pippa smiled back.

“Well, I hope that your first picnic in heaven only knows how many years is a pleasant one,” Lavinia remarked, leaning forward to help herself to another slice of strawberry tart.

“It is, I can assure you,” Pippa answered, smiling. “And the soiree you’re hosting on Friday seems most exciting! I am looking forward to it.”

“I’m glad,” Lavinia responded. “And you’ll play your violin?”

“Of course,” Pippa answered, before she could stop herself. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the smile drop off her mother’s face like a stone.

Before any words could be exchanged, however, a shadow fell across the picnic blanket. All of them twisted to look up at the newcomer, and Pippa’s heart sank into her stomach.

“Well, hello,” Lord Barwick drawled, grinning lazily. He plunged his hands into his pockets. “You all seem to be having a good amount of fun.”

“Lord Barwick, what a fine surprise!” Bridget chirped, in a way that convinced them all that her mother had organized the meeting. “It is lovely to see you.”

“Quite, quite,” Lord Barwick answered equably. “I came by merely to speak with Miss Randall, however. Can I tempt you to a turn around the park, Miss Randall?”

No. Heavens, no, Pippa wanted to say, but of course there wasn’t time.

“She would love to, I’m sure,” Bridget answered at once, shooting a stare at Pippa which dared her to argue. Pippa flashed a tight-lipped smile.

“Of course,” Pippa responded mechanically, as if there was anything else to say.

She got to her feet, brushing crumbs off her skirt. She could feel Katherine’s eyes on her, and carefully did not look at her cousin. It would do no good.

With a triumphant smile, Lord Barwick offered her his arm. She had no choice but to accept, and they strode away from the little gathering.

*

It felt as though the warmth had departed from the day. As they strolled—without any particular destination, for it appeared that Lord Barwick's intent was solely to engage in conversation with Pippa, rather than to walk anywhere or behold anything of note—the gentleman spoke. Relentlessly.

He talked about his hunting habits, about new purchases, about various men and women in Society, and so on. Occasionally, Pippa tried to weigh in on these conversations, but he either interrupted her or kept mulish silence until she had finished, whereupon he would pick up the thread of what he had just been discussing.

It was pretty clear that he didn't want to hear from her and had no interest in her opinions. After about ten minutes of silence on Pippa's part, he paused, glancing down at her.

"I say, you are a good little listener, aren't you? So many females these days are terrible chatterboxes, talking and talking until a man can't get a word in edgeways. They're all lovely to look at, but quite a strain on the ears." He laughed at his own joke. Pippa did not smile but he did not notice.

"Anyway," he continued, "as I said, that's a virtue of yours that I've noticed. You may not compete with the beauties of Society, but you've got manners to rival them all."

Pippa was now seething. She clenched her jaw and stared straight ahead, praying they would start returning to the picnic soon.

No such luck.

"I always thought I'd want a quiet, modest sort of girl for my wife," Lord Barwick mused. "The sort who wouldn't nag or make demands of me, and would be mild and doting and whatnot, the way a wife should be. Someone who I can come home to,

who won't harangue me about how late it is," he said laughing.

Well, this was too much. Pippa pulled her hand out of the crook of his elbow, turning to face him.

"And what makes you think," she said smoothly, "that I am such a woman?"

He didn't seem to notice the icy fury in her tone. Lord Barwick chuckled, reaching out to pinch her chin.

"What a sweet, modest thing you are. I'm quite fond of you, Miss Randall, and your mama likes me terribly. I think perhaps I should call on you and your mama, sooner rather than later, and we might talk about our futures. Ah, now, don't let your maiden modesty frighten you, all shall be well!"

Pippa thought that the flush of 'maiden modesty' which he'd seen in her cheeks was in fact a rush of red-hot anger to her face. She breathed in deeply, steeling herself.

"I think I shall return to my mother now, Lord Barwick," she said, voice tight.

Once again, he was oblivious to her tone and merely chuckled benevolently.

"Of course, of course. Shall we?"

He offered his arm again, but this time Pippa turned her back, ignoring him, and set off striding back by herself. It was the only expression of chagrin she'd seen on his face so far.

"What did he say, then?"

Pippa had had her eyes closed, head leaning back against the jolting carriage seat. It had been quite an ordeal, the family all fitting themselves into their respective carriages, along with the blankets and boxes and hampers and whatnot. In the end, Pippa and her mother had gotten into the last carriage, along with the picnic supplies. There was really not very much room.

She opened her eyes at her mother's question.

"What do you mean?"

Bridget gave an impatient sigh. "Don't be a fool. I know Lord Barwick means to make you an offer, although of course he'll make his intentions formally known to me, first. We arranged that he should speak to you today."

Pippa clenched her jaw. "You planned that 'accidental' meeting, then?"

Bridget sniffed. "Well, yes, of course I did. One can't leave such things to chance."

"No, of course not."

There was a silence, during which Bridget regarded her stonily.

"I do not like this attitude of yours, Pippa. Not one bit. Tell me what Lord Barwick said to you, at once."

Pippa breathed out slowly, trying to calm her impatient nerves.

"It was a lot of nonsense, Mama. He talked about the sort of wife he'd want – quiet, modest, never nagging or complaining, sweet, and so on. And then he seemed to think that I embodied those qualities. Me!"

Bridget gave a satisfied smile, leaning back in the seat.

“Well, yes. We’ve worked hard to make sure he sees the ladylike, wifely qualities in you. It seems we’ve succeeded.”

“But Mama, I’m not like that. I’m not! Why should I pretend to be somebody that I am not? It’s deceitful. I don’t want to be a quiet, meek little wife. I shan’t ever be that person! You certainly were not.”

“Enough,” Bridget snapped, the smile dropping from her face. “You are not to use my marriage to your father as an example. Your marriage will not be like that, Pippa. You must understand that now.”

Pippa groaned aloud, knuckling her eyes. “Why can’t it be that way? If I could only find a man to love and respect, then...”

“You will love and respect whoever you marry. Marriage comes first, then respect, then love. In that order. And don’t you dare try to say that my marriage was not like that, because as I said, you are not to consider our marriage as ordinary . Life is not like that. Anyway, we sacrificed wealth and position to marry, whereas wealth and position are your priorities here. Now, we...”

“Your priorities,” Pippa corrected, before she could stop herself.

Bridget glared at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“They are your priorities, Mama. Not mine. I don’t care about position, and as for money, I only want enough to live upon.”

Her mother stared at her for a long moment, and Pippa forced herself to stare back.

“And this is why I am here,” Bridget said at last, her voice deceptively calm. “To deal with such nonsensical ideas. Now, let’s discuss more important matters. When Lord Barwick proposes, you...”

“I shall refuse him.”

There. It was said. Pippa let out a slow breath, a crushing weight seeming to lift off her shoulders. She would not marry him. Of course, she would not. How could she ever have thought otherwise? Perhaps she ought to have been more firm with his attentions, but it wasn’t as if she’d had much choice.

Now, I find that I want him to propose quickly, so I can turn him down and get it over with.

Abruptly, Bridget leaned forward, clamping a hand around Pippa’s wrist.

“Repeat that,” she said, her voice low and cold.

“Ow, Mama, you are hurting me. Your nails are digging in...” Pippa tried in vain to pull away, but her mother’s grip was deceptively strong.

“Repeat what you just said to me.”

“I said that I would refuse Lord Barwick if he made an offer for me, and I will.”

Pippa met her mother’s eyes, tilting up her chin. The grip on her wrist increased, until pain shot up her forearm.

“You listen to me, you spoiled woman,” Bridget said, her voice icy. “I have worked hard to engineer this match for you. It is the best match you could have hoped for. You will be a Marchioness, safely married and firmly positioned in Society. Lord

Barwick is a handsome man, and young, and there is no reason why you should not come to love him. As for his proposal, you will accept. You will accept it. I am your mother, and I command it.”

Pippa swallowed thickly. Her mother’s eyes were flat and cold, unblinking. She found it harder and harder to meet her stare, but persevered. Katherine’s words came back to mind.

“You cannot force me to accept him,” she said, her voice trembling.

Bridget’s lip curled. “No, I cannot. But let me tell you this, Pippa. If you refuse Lord Barwick, you are dead to me.”

Pippa sucked in a breath. “You cannot mean that.”

“No? You think not? If you end this Season unmarried, Pippa, you shall be worthless, both in the eyes of Society and in mine. Why must I be saddled with such a disappointment? Heaven only knows what value your father saw in you. You are spoiled, ungrateful, and entirely too naive to understand what is good for you. I will never forgive you if you ruin this for us, Pippa.”

She swallowed thickly, feeling as though she were underwater. Pippa had never heard such venom from her own mother before, not even at their worst moments.

“Don’t you love me at all, Mama?” she whispered, her voice cracking on the last word.

Bridget released her wrist at last. Pippa cradled her bruised arm, trying not to look at the red crescent-marks in her skin.

“I am a practical woman,” she said, voice clipped. “I always was. I married for love

and look how we suffered for it. I shan't let you make the same mistake. Lord Barwick is the man you want, mark my words. I will make this request of you once and only once more. If Lord Barwick makes you an offer – and I believe he will – you are to gratefully accept it at once. At once. He's not a man who likes to be trifled with. Once you are a Marchioness, you will be set for life. You'll be safe, Pippa, can you not see that? And believe me, it is safer not to be in love. Love is pain, and there's no avoiding it. But a nice, clean relationship built only on mutual respect and a cool distance, well, that is the thing entirely." Bridget punctuated her words with a nod, as if energetic nodding might convince her daughter.

They stared at each other for a long moment. Pippa could hear her heart thumping in her ears. She felt sick, and there could be any number of causes. The hot sun, the movement of the carriage, or perhaps the realisation that her own mother would cease to love her if she did not marry a marquess.

"If Papa could see you now," Pippa heard herself say, her voice expressionless, "he'd weep."

White-hot anger flared in Bridget's face. She stiffened, leaning forward, arm pulled back as if she meant to deliver a slap.

Pippa stared at her hand. "Go on, then, Mama. Hit me. I shan't hit you back."

Bridget controlled herself with an effort, dropping her hand to her lap.

"Insolent girl," she hissed, lips tight. "But I have said what I have said. If you wish to continue being considered as my daughter, you'll marry the man I have picked out for you. You'll thank me in time."

Pippa said nothing. It didn't seem to matter.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Nathan blinked up at the butler as if he might have misheard.

“Lord Davenport ? We haven’t a meeting scheduled.”

The butler stared helplessly back. “Indeed, your lordship, but he is here and insists upon seeing you. He says it’s an emergency.”

Nathan bit his lip, leaning back in his desk seat. He had a veritable pile of work to get done before William and Lavinia’s soiree that night. It would be the first event they’d thrown as a married couple and was therefore quite noteworthy in Society. Nathan couldn’t miss it. However, if he entertained whatever emergency had brought Lord Davenport to his door, he might not get his work finished.

He bit back a sigh. I can hardly send the man away.

“Where is he?”

“In the parlour, your lordship,” the butler responded. “If her ladyship were here, she would doubtless attend to him, but at the moment he is alone.”

“Well, we can’t have that. Send in tea, and I’ll meet him presently.”

The butler bowed and slipped out, leaving Nathan alone in his study. He paused, tapping the end of his quill pen against the desk.

Something is wrong here.

I suppose there's only one way to find out what it is.

Nathan arrived at the parlour door shortly afterwards. He paused; fingers looped around the doorknob. He could hear the rhythmic thud-thud of a person pacing up and down inside, the sure sign of an agitated mind.

Or of anger.

Nothing to be done. Nathan opened the door and stepped inside.

Lord Davenport was indeed pacing up and down in front of the mantelpiece, but he stopped short when he saw Nathan.

“Where have you been, boy?” he demanded irritably. “I have been here for a full ten minutes, which I marked on that clock. What do you mean, keeping me waiting for so long?”

Nathan swallowed his annoyance.

“I beg your pardon, Lord Davenport, I was in the middle of some very important work. I believe tea was brought to you?”

The older man gave a disdainful huff. He glared at Nathan, tension in every line of his body, and it was clear at once that this was more than a simple social visit. Whatever the emergency was, it was serious.

“You mentioned an emergency?” Nathan said, dispensing with small talk and pleasantries. “I was quite concerned. Pray, sit down.”

Lord Davenport did so, albeit reluctantly.

“I’m here to discuss your marriage,” he said at last, watching Nathan closely.

Nathan cleared his throat. “Marriage? I don’t understand. I am not married, or planning to be so.”

“Indeed, that’s exactly it. I’ve had quite enough of your procrastination, young man. If your father was alive, he would be appalled,” Lord Davenport drew in a deep breath, giving a short nod. “I intend to put a notice of your engagement to my daughter, Amanda, in the Gazette .”

There was a brief silence. Nathan found that his mouth was dry. He swallowed hard, trying to work some moisture between his tongue and the roof of his mouth, which seemed to be somehow sealed together.

“I... I have not offered marriage to your daughter, Lord Davenport,” Nathan said, choosing his words with great care. Had he misheard? He must have misheard.

Lord Davenport snarled. “Don’t play games with me, boy. That’s exactly the trouble. I thought we had an understanding, you and I. I thought we’d agreed that you and Amanda would be a perfect fit. I took a step back because I assumed you wanted to court her in your own way. And now the end of the Season is looming, and there’s no proposal on the horizon. Amanda and my wife inform me that you avoid her, and never call on her. What am I supposed to think?”

You are supposed to think that I do not want to marry your daughter, Lord Davenport, Nathan thought, with a flare of anger. He kept his mouth shut, however. Probably for the best.

“And so, I am taking matters into my own hands,” Lord Davenport finished, with a decisive nod. “If you agree, I shall put the notice in the Gazette and go home to inform Amanda of her betrothal. It’s not a particularly manly way to woo a woman,

and it's most disappointing. However, I am willing to meet you halfway on this."

He sat back, looking rather satisfied with himself.

Nathan took a moment to collect himself.

"You presume to direct my marriage, then?" he found himself saying, not exactly sure at what point he'd chosen the words. "You'd strong-arm me into a marriage that I do not want, with your own daughter, no less? Do you hate her so very much?"

Lord Davenport went white with fury. His mouth opened, but Nathan did not give him the chance to speak.

"I'd hoped to avoid this conversation," he continued, "and I hoped that you, and your daughter, would understand what I was trying to convey to you without words. I do not want to marry Amanda, Lord Davenport. She is a well enough girl in her way, but she is not what I want in a wife. And I am more than sure that I am not what she wants in a husband. Frankly, we would make each other unhappy. It is not a worthy match, and I realised this almost at once. However, you kept pushing the issue, and I did not want to offend you, out of respect for our acquaintance and your friendship with my father. It is clear to me now that I have to be blunt and should have been so early on in these discussions."

There was a long, taut silence after Nathan had finished speaking. He was out of breath, just a little, and more than a little proud of himself.

It was too harsh, he thought, but then, I had to be understood. I left nothing out.

Lord Davenport stared at him, eyes bulging ever so slightly out of his head.

"Well," he said at last. "Well . I see how things are."

“Yes,” Nathan agreed, lacing his hands together. “I’m sorry I had to be so straightforward.”

Lord Davenport hauled himself to his feet, shaking a finger in Nathan’s face.

“There’ll be consequences to this, you know.”

Nathan met his eye. “Oh? What consequences? Do you intend to pull all of your money out of your investments? You would lose a great deal if you did that, and I would not suffer financially at all. Can’t we act like gentlemen over this, Lord Davenport? I don’t mean to insult Amanda. If anything, I would like to see her marry a man she truly cares for. Even you cannot pretend that Amanda cares for me.”

Lord Davenport pressed his lips together.

“If you’re thinking of that Randall girl,” he choked out, “you can forget it. It’s commonly known that she’s about to be betrothed to Lord Barwick.”

Nathan clenched his jaw. “Yes, I heard about that.”

Lord Davenport spluttered out a few half-finished curses, then stamped over to the door without a word of farewell, leaving the tea untouched on a low coffee table. He left the door swinging open, and Nathan heard him march down the hallway, bellowing at the footman. The front door slammed, and silence settled over the house.

Tentative footsteps approached, and then Rose peered in through the doorway. It was plain that she had just come home, as she was still in her walking-clothes, one glove on, one glove off.

“Dear me,” she whispered. “What on earth happened?”

“Lord Davenport wanted me to declare an engagement to Amanda,” Nathan murmured. “I told him I would not. He didn’t take it well.”

Rose heaved a sigh. “Oh, darling, I am sorry. I would have liked to have seen you marry Amanda.”

“I would not have been happy, Mother.”

“Well, you must be the best judge of your own happiness. Now, let’s not let this tea go to waste.”

Rose bustled into the parlour, pulling off her other glove, and sat down in the seat opposite. Nathan felt drained, his strength entirely gone all of a sudden. He couldn’t even consider the work that waited for him in his study. How on earth would he manage the soiree tonight?

Because Pippa Randall will be there.

He closed his eyes, chest aching. The girl hadn’t been far from his mind all day. And for all the previous day, and the previous one, and the previous one, and so on. Where would it end?

He heard the reassuring slosh of tea being pouring into a delicate porcelain cup and opened his eyes to find his mother offering him a cup and saucer.

“Drink up,” she said, smiling. “It’ll do you good.”

She was right. He did feel a little better after a few sips.

“I think our friendship with the Davenports is coming to an end,” Nathan remarked, at last.

Rose sighed. “That is a pity. But I must say, I don’t like how they have behaved this Season. They’ve pushed Amanda far too hard, poor girl. She is dreadfully spoiled, and it’s not a surprise she wasn’t able to charm anyone this Season. They should have raised her better. And trying to force you into marrying her – well, that’s just not what friends do.”

Nathan nodded, taking another sip. Rose eyed him over the rim of the teacup.

“I take it, then, you won’t be finding a wife this Season at all?” she asked, casually.

Nathan stared into the depths of his tea.

“I think I’m in love with Pippa Randall,” he burst out.

There was a short silence.

I can’t believe I just said that. What was I thinking?

He glanced up, and found his mother staring at him, eyes round with shock.

“Well,” Rose managed. “I knew you were fond of her, but I never thought... heavens, Nathan, you are in love ?”

“I’ve never been in love before,” he mumbled, “but I think this is what it feels like. I... I can’t stop thinking about her. She’s intelligent, and amusing, and so very sincere that I only ever want to be entirely honest and frank with her. I long for her company. I replay our conversations over and over in my head, and I... I can’t bear the thought of her marrying Lord Barwick. Of course, I can’t bear the thought of any hapless young woman marrying Lord Barwick.”

Rose winced. “Indeed, that is quite a predicament. What you have described bears a

striking resemblance to love, my dear. It makes sense that you cannot love Amanda, not when your heart is otherwise engaged. What do you intend to do, then?"

"Do?"

She smiled faintly. "Yes, dear. Do. Are you going to let your feelings eat you up from the inside, or do you plan to do something about it?"

He breathed in deeply. "Her engagement with Lord Barwick is not official."

"No betrothal is official until it appears in the Gazette . And no marriage begins until one's vows are exchanged at the altar," Rose remarked wisely, shooting him a glance.

Nathan swallowed thickly. "I do plan to speak to her. Tonight, if I can."

She frowned. "Tonight? At a soiree, in full view of everyone? How on earth will you find the opportunity?"

He deflated a little. "I...I don't know."

"Really, you ought to speak to her mother first."

Nathan let out a ragged sigh. "Lady Randall does not like me. I'd go so far as to say she despises me. She tries to keep her daughter away from me, as urgently as if I have the plague."

Rose pursed her lips. "I think she has rather overestimated her daughter's value on the marriage mart. Not to be impolite to Miss Randall, of course. She is pretty, and most charming, but those qualities matter little when compared to birth and wealth. Well, I shall not dissuade you from speaking to the girl yourself but do be careful. And don't lose your nerve!"

Nathan gave a short laugh. Now that he'd decided what to do, he felt relieved, almost light-headed.

“Lose my nerve? Why, I won't do that, Mother.”

She gave him a knowing look. “You think so? Braver men than you have said the same and been disappointed.”

“Well, I won't,” Nathan insisted, although he was conscious of a stinging worry at his own confidence.

The least she can do is say no, he told himself. I'll only tell her how I feel. And who knows where it might go?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Lavinia and William's soiree was going very well, it seemed. There were plenty of people here, yet it was not the stifling crush that Pippa had grown used to in Society. The aim of her cousins was not, it seemed, to fill their homes with as many people as would come. No, their gatherings were smaller, quieter, and more select, and apparently that made members of Society all the more eager to attend.

Pippa was privately aware that an invitation to any Willenshire gathering was quite a sought-after thing. As a member of the family, she was, of course, invited by default, but it seemed that other members of Society resented her. She supposed they did not consider her as a proper part of the family. She was poor and friendless, after all, and did not even carry the Willenshire name. There had been a few resentful glances and pointed comments over the days leading up to the soiree.

Pippa had learned not to mind. There would always be people who disapproved of her, for one reason or another.

Her mother was the most recent addition to their ranks.

Things had been strained between Pippa and her mother of late, perhaps unsurprisingly. Conversation was limited to small talk and vague remarks when they were with others. When they were alone, they didn't talk at all. The private parlour set aside for Bridget and Pippa's use was never used at all and sat empty.

Indeed, things were difficult between them. Pippa was privately relieved that Lord Barwick and his hawkish mother were not at the soiree. Not only did it mean that she avoided his company, but Bridget also seemed to relax her guardianship.

I suppose if Lord Barwick is not here, it does not matter who I talk to. Everybody knows I'm promised to him, it seems, she thought bitterly. There had been enough veiled comments from others to make her understand that her upcoming betrothal was well talked-of. It seemed that Lord Barwick had been most open about talking about his intentions, and apparently his wretched mother had shared her critiques on Pippa to just about every widow and matron in the country.

"You shall have to work hard to please your mother-in-law once you are engaged, Miss Randall," one be-feathered widow in black satin had advised, throwing her an indulgent smile. "She adores that son of hers."

Pippa had stiffened, looking the woman dead in the eye.

"To whom do you refer, Mrs. Hattan?"

Mrs. Hattan had only smiled and looked meaningfully, stopping just short of tapping the side of her nose.

"We know, Miss Randall, but you are right. Let us not say names until the announcement is out. It's a good match, you know. A very good match indeed. That mother of yours is a genius. I wish I could have gotten her advice for my girls."

Pippa had been forced to leave the conversation a little abruptly, anger pricking at her insides.

I can't marry him. I won't.

But then, what would become of her? Where would she go, if Bridget turned her back and disowned her own daughter? Only a few months ago, Pippa would have confidently said that her mother, for all her flaws, would never do such a thing.

Now, she was not sure.

I could stay with Cousin Katherine, or with William.

That was a glimmer of hope in the darkness, but hardly a guiding light. After all, despite their growing intimacy, Pippa did not really know her cousins very well at all. If there was a scandalous breach between mother and daughter, perhaps they would wash their hands of both, and then Pippa really would be in a difficult situation.

But I can't marry Lord Barwick. I can't, and I won't.

The only solution seemed to be avoiding his company and preventing him from making a proposal. How she was to do that, Pippa did not know.

A flourish of music summoned the guests to the other end of the ballroom, where a pianoforte and a harp had been placed in front of several semicircular rows of chairs. There was to be a musical element of the evening, and several ladies and even a few gentlemen were supposed to be exhibiting their talents.

Including Pippa, of course. Her violin lay on top of the pianoforte, waiting.

Bridget hadn't tried to convince her to play something more ladylike, at least.

Lavinia moved to the front of the room as the guests took their seats, beaming around at them.

"To begin, I am most proud to present my dear cousin, Miss Pippa Randall, playing a piece of her own composition on the violin!"

There was polite applause. There was always polite applause before a person began to play, the rapturous applause being reserved for the end of the performance, if it met

with the standards of the audience.

Smiling faintly, nerves thrumming inside her, Pippa got to her feet. This was the largest crowd she'd even performed in front of.

Not every lady's performance was well-received. The gentlemen, of course, were not expected to exhibit musical talents, so the ones who chose to do so were extremely confident in their abilities.

Pippa had cringed through more than once inexpert renditions of Fur Elise or Canon in D . Her own pianoforte playing was less than lustrous, which was one reason why she preferred the violin.

There was silence while Pippa climbed the platform. She passed Lavinia on the way, who nodded and smiled encouragingly at her. Pippa did her best to smile back.

Whispers had started up by the time she picked up her violin, turning to face the crowds. Nerves jumped in Pippa's veins. She took a breath, scanning the crowd.

The first face she noticed was her mother's, stony and grim, unsmiling. Pippa hastily looked away. She spotted Miss O'Hare next, a round-faced, homely girl with a friendly disposition, who had played several wrong notes during her performance at the last musicale and received belated and stiffly polite applause at the end of it, retreating red-faced.

And then Pippa saw Lord Whitmore.

He sat on the end of a row, beside his mother. His gaze was fixed on her, a look in his eyes that she could not interpret. He was dressed impeccably, of course, a garnet cravat pin glimmering at his throat. Pippa realised with a rush that he was the most handsome man in the room.

Or at least, she thought that he was the most handsome man in the room. Their gazes met, locking together as if by magnetism, and her breath caught in her throat. He gave a tiny, tentative smile, and a nod of encouragement, and Pippa was forced to bite back a smile.

How could I ever have believed that I could make myself love Lord Barwick? It was a childish thought, the ramblings of a woman who does not know herself and does not know the world around her.

She gave herself a tiny shake, and before the audience could start to shift and fidget – or worse, glance over their shoulders to see what she was looking at – she lifted her violin to her shoulder, wedging it under her chin, and began to play.

The piece she chose was one she had composed years ago. Lavinia had said it was Pippa's own composition, and that was not entirely true.

She had composed it with her father.

Lord Randall had often said that he was not as keen a composer as Pippa, but he had some talents in that respect. They had spent hours playing music together, hunched over untidy sheets of written music, exchanging ideas and engaging in experiments.

They had been some of the happiest hours of Pippa's life.

Closing her eyes, she found herself back there again, in the corner of the parlour where she and Papa had gone over their compositions. Bridget had used to sit by the fire and sew, snorting and making derisive comments about their 'nonsense'. Papa had only laughed at her, though, saying that she could never give a straight compliment.

And to Pippa's amazement, her mother had smiled to herself, shaking her head. She

had put down her sewing, as if unconsciously, and closed her eyes, listening to the music.

When was the last time I felt as though I were part of a family? When was the last time I felt as though I were not embarrassing my mother, and myself?

The music swelled, and Pippa felt almost disconnected from it, as if somebody else was moving her fingers and angling the bow, teasing long, mournful notes out of the instrument. Her eyes were still closed, and she wondered, just for an instant, how she must look to the rest, a woman standing so still with her eyes closed, the only movement the dancing of her fingers and the slide of the bow.

It was a short piece. Pippa had never wanted to bore the captive guests with a long song – virtue and talent wasn't to be found in minutes and seconds, but in the notes she played – and it quickly came to its end.

There was no bold flourish, no sweeping climax. The notes filtered away, fading, like the last drops of water shaken out of an empty bucket.

She opened her eyes, letting her bow-hand drop to her side.

For an instant, there was silence, but only for one heartbeat. Then the applause broke out, several guests rising to their feet. Pippa blinked, amazed. She could see Lord Whitmore's mother wiping away a tear from the corner of her eye.

Lord Whitmore was looking at her, of course, his expression still unreadable. He was on his feet, clapping as hard as he could.

Clearing her throat, Pippa dropped a curtsy and scurried off the stage. She was intercepted by Lavinia herself, who was going to play next.

“Oh, marvellously done!” she whispered. “What a beautiful piece of music! Everybody will want you to play at their musicales. You have a rare talent, cousin.”

“Th-Thank you. I’m sorry, Lavinia, but I need a breath of fresh air,” Pippa did not know that she was going to say that until the words exited her mouth. Suddenly, the space was too crowded, too stuffy.

Lavinia’s expression changed to one of concern. “Oh, my dear, are you well?”

“Yes, quite well, just a little too hot.”

“Go out onto the balcony then, to take some air. Nobody will notice you’re gone, not while the musicale continues. Be careful, won’t you?”

Pippa gave a smile of relief. She realised a moment too late that she was still holding her violin, but of course she could not go and replace it on top of the pianoforte now, not with Lavinia moving to take her seat at the instrument.

She hurried along the rows of seats, heading for the balcony. No doubt her mother was staring balefully after her, but there was nothing she could do. Bridget sat in the middle of a row, and her departure would be most certainly noticed. She would make a scene, and Bridget hated to do so.

Pippa estimated that she had at least ten minutes, perhaps more, to enjoy her solitude and the cool night air.

Propping her violin up against a wall, she slid open the French doors tucked away behind a curtain and stepped out onto a narrow stone balcony.

Cold air rushed over her, soothing her flushed skin and lifting her curls from her neck. Pippa stood still for a moment, closing her eyes and lifting her hands from her

sides, breathing in the fresh air. She placed her hands, palms down, on the damp-cold rock of the balcony wall, feeling her heart slowly return to its normal rhythm of beating. She could hear the faint swells of pianoforte music drifting out, a jovial and happy song in contrast to her mournful dirge.

It was a dirge, Pippa knew that now. A song she'd been longing to play for two years. A dirge for her father.

I did it. It's over. Safe. I'm safe. For now, at least. These ten minutes are mine, to do with as I please. This is my domain.

And then the French door behind her slid open.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

“What a talent,” Rose whispered, over and over again. She was wiping her eyes with her handkerchief, sniffing loudly. “What a talent. I must give Miss Randall a compliment. Such beautiful music, and her own composition, no less!”

A portly baron sat on the other side of Rose, rather infamous for his dislike of music in general. Nathan had wondered more than once why he was invited, but then, Baron Bowles was everywhere.

“She could have played something a little more cheerful,” he rumbled, shifting.

By now, Pippa had slid past them all, her place taken by Lavinia. Lavinia was playing a cheerful, popular piece, and playing it remarkably well, but Nathan could not concentrate. He had twisted in his seat to watch Pippa disappear through the French doors onto what was presumably a balcony and had eyes and ears for nothing else.

It was the most beautiful music I’ve ever heard, he thought numbly. Like she’d cast a spell over us all.

Rose shifted, outrage in her eyes, to face the Baron.

“Goodness, where are your finer feelings? That was most clearly a song of mourning. Did you not feel her sadness in every note?” She thumped her chest with a closed fist. “I have known loss, and so did that girl, I can tell you that now. I felt it, right here. A remarkable talent, remarkable!”

Baron Bowles began to look a little embarrassed. “I didn’t mean that it was a badly done piece, only that I like something with a little more bounce in it, you know?”

Rose's eyes bulged faintly. "Bounce? Bounce ? Heavens, man, you have no sensibilities! Why, I..."

Nathan stopped listening. Poor Baron Bowles would receive a lengthy lecture, conducted in whispers, and frankly, Nathan thought he deserved it.

More than one woman – and a few of the gentlemen – were left surreptitiously wiping their eyes after Miss Randall's performance. For his part, Nathan felt his chest ache, a lump forming in his throat that would not go away.

She had looked at him as she passed by, clutching her violin to her chest as if for protection. Their eyes had met, and held, and he believed with all his heart that she was trying to tell him something.

You're a fool, Nathan. You are seeing only what you want to see.

He was on his feet before he knew it. Engrossed in her scolding, Rose did not notice. Hardly daring to look back to see if anybody else had noticed, Nathan strode quickly to the back of the ballroom.

It was the work of a moment to step through the French doors and onto the balcony, where Miss Randall stood with her back to him.

She turned, of course, and regarded him with a faintly curious expression.

There was a moment of silence between them. Clearing his throat, Nathan spoke first.

"I should not be here," he heard himself say, a slight rasp in his voice. "It's not entirely proper. I shall leave at once, if you wish it."

She held his gaze. Nathan held his breath.

“I don’t mind,” Miss Randall said at last, her voice a little unsteady. “I... I just came out here for a breath of fresh air. I imagine you did the same?”

“Yes, indeed,” he inched closer, sticking to the other end of the small balcony – which was only large enough to admit four or five people in any case – and resting his elbows on the wall.

There was a moment of silence between them. Nathan stared out at the dark gardens surrounding the house, lost in thought. Beside him, Miss Randall was doing the same thing – leaning her elbows on the wall and staring at nothing in particular.

It was a comfortable sort of silence, however. Not the awkward, irritable kind where one was expected to say something, but neither you nor your conversation partner could think of anything.

No, this was a soft, cosy sort of quiet, more like peace than plain old silence.

“Your performance tonight was beautiful,” Nathan found himself saying. “I’m sure you’ll hear that over and over again. The compliments will come pouring in, I can guarantee it. You are remarkably talented, Miss Randall. My mother kept saying it.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Miss Randall’s expression grow sadder.

“My father helped me compose that song,” she said, voice quiet. “I’ve never played it in public before.”

“Was your father musically talented?”

She nodded. “Very much so. He encouraged it in me, too. Mama only wanted me to learn music to impress gentlemen, but Papa... Papa was different. He said that music should be played and enjoyed for its own sake, and anything else was a waste of time.

Folly, he called it.”

“Your music could never be described as folly .”

She turned to face him, her expression thoughtful. “I think my father would have liked you.”

Nathan grinned. “That sounds like a compliment.”

“It is. The highest I can give.”

“In that case, thank you,” he made a foolish, flourishing bow, and that got a laugh from Miss Randall. She was still watching him, her gaze sending shivers up and down his spine.

“You miss him, don’t you?” he found himself saying.

She glanced away, drawing her lower lip between her teeth.

“Every day,” Miss Randall said at last, her voice a little choked. “It... It hurts that he’s not here. I was always closer to my father than my mother. Oh, I know Mama misses him too. I know I shouldn’t be selfish.”

“You aren’t selfish,” Nathan found himself saying. “You aren’t . I was the other way round, you know. I am closer to my mother than my father. It hurt when he died, but not the tearing, aching pain that I know I will feel when I lose my mother.”

He swallowed hard, a lump forming in his throat. Nathan did his best not to think about what he would do if he lost Rose. What would he have in his life? Who would he have?

“It is like a tearing, I think,” Pippa said thoughtfully. “A deep, guttural pain. It gets better with time, I know. Papa never wanted us to spend time grieving him. He wanted us to be happy, and I strangely feel as though I’m betraying him again by not being able to do so.”

There was another brief silence after this, the two of them wrapped up in their own thoughts. His gaze was dragged back to Miss Randall, again and again.

Of course, it was not proper for him to be on the balcony. Nathan knew he would need to slip back inside long before the musicale ended. He could still hear music drifting out – somebody was playing the harp now, with a soprano warbling in time – so their time had not yet run out.

“I’ve been trying to speak to you lately,” he heard himself saying, voice a little strained. “I cannot discern whether you are intentionally avoiding me or not.”

She smiled faintly. “I am not avoiding you. My mother wishes me to avoid you. She wants me to marry a Marquess, not a Viscount.”

He nodded. This was not entirely unexpected.

“Lord Barwick.”

There was a tightening around Miss Randall’s mouth. “Yes. Lord Barwick. My mother does not consider the fact that I am not an eligible match for either you or him, on account of not having a title and not a penny of my own. I have nothing to recommend me but myself.”

“That is a fine recommendation indeed.”

The words were out before he could stop them, and Miss Randall shot him a quick,

inquisitive glance that made him blush.

“And you are certainly a fine match for Lord Barwick. Better than he could hope for. I... I sense that you do not like the man, Miss Randall.”

She dropped her gaze down to her hands, fingers knotted together and resting on the top of the wall. The fresh, cool night air was beginning to feel a little too cold, but Nathan had no desire to go back inside, none at all.

“I don’t like him,” she said, her voice so quiet he had to move forward to hear it. They were closer now than he’d intended, his hand only inches from hers on the balcony wall.

Be careful, man, he warned himself. Be careful!

“I won’t marry him,” she continued, staring out at the dark scenery. “I know that now. It seems that nothing I do is ever good enough for my mother, and I can’t simply swallow down my own desires and needs to achieve the goals she has set for me. She won’t listen when I tell her why Lord Barwick is not the right man for me. I don’t know what to do.”

He bit his lip. “I’m sorry, Miss Randall. This is a difficult situation for you. I... I don’t know how to help you, but if there’s anything I could do to make your life easier, please, just say the word.”

She turned to look up at him, her eyes glimmering in the moonlight.

“Just your presence makes my life easier, Lord Whitmore.”

Had she really said that? Nathan gulped, mesmerized. She was standing close to him now, barely a fingers’ breadth between them. A warm palm slid over his, and he

realised with a jolt that Miss Randall had put her hand on his .

Hesitantly and slowly, he lifted his free hand to rest over her shoulder. She didn't pull away, and Nathan's breath hitched in his throat. She tilted up her chin, face turned to him, eyes wide and expectant, lips slightly parted.

She's going to kiss me, Nathan thought, mind whirling. Or am I going to kiss her? Are we going to meet each other halfway?

He leaned down, heart thrumming hard enough for him to hear his pulse in his ears. He could feel her breath on his chin, soft and warm.

“Well, what do we have here?”

They broke apart as if they'd been burned. Nathan sucked in a breath, feeling as if he had been holding it for too long.

Lady Randall stood in the doorway, having approached on silent, velvet feet. The musicale was not over, judging by the music drifting in through the doorway. Her face was white and grim, arms folded tight across her chest.

Nathan felt dizzy. She had just seen him about to kiss her daughter, and her daughter preparing to kiss him back. Glancing over at Miss Randall – Pippa – he saw that she was bone white.

“Lady Randall,” he burst out. “This isn't... I'm not...”

There was really no excuse to offer, so Nathan closed his mouth with a snap.

“Mama, forgive me,” Pippa spoke up, her voice surprisingly level. “This is not how it appears?”

Lady Randall gave a harsh laugh. “Oh? And how should it appear?”

“I...”

“Enough. I do not want to hear a single word from you, Pippa. The disgrace is too much to even consider. You will be ruined beyond recovery if a single breath of this scandal escapes. Go back inside. We shall leave as soon as we can do so without drawing attention. Go!”

For a moment, Pippa looked as though she wished to argue. She wavered, glancing at Nathan. He felt as though he were rooted to the spot.

Ruined? Of course she’d be ruined. How could I have put her in such a position? What sort of man am I?

She turned on her heel and hurried back into the ballroom. Nathan made to follow her, but Lady Randall stepped in front of him.

“I think not, Lord Whitmore,” she said, her voice menacingly sweet.

“Lady Randall, I beg your forgiveness. The blame is entirely mine.”

“Indeed, it is yours, but my daughter will bear the entirety of the consequences, will she not? Your reputation will recover, hers will not,” she snapped.

He tilted up his chin. “I shall set this right. I intend to offer...”

“No,” Lady Randall interrupted, voice low and dangerous. “My daughter and I want nothing from you. Pippa is a boisterous young woman and has made all sorts of foolish decisions lately. You are one of them. Leave her alone, Lord Whitmore. If you wish to make amends for what you have done, you will leave this party at once

and leave me and my daughter alone. Do you understand me, or must I apply to the Duke of Dunleigh for help?"

Nathan swallowed. How would William react to learning that Nathan had besmirched his cousin's honour? He had never been as close to William as he had to the others. As a new duke, William had his reputation to uphold.

"I..."

"I think enough has been said about this subject," Lady Randall said tartly. "Unless you plan to discuss this matter with your friends?"

Nathan recoiled at the very suggestion. "No, Lady Randall, of course not! Never!"

She lifted her chin. "Then leave my daughter alone. Do you hear me, Lord Whitmore? Leave her alone."

She did not wait for a reply, instead turned on her heel and strode back into the ballroom.

Nathan was left alone, cold and shaky.

What am I to do? How can I set this right?

Am I really just a bad decision on Pippa's part?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

There was no conversation during the carriage ride home, on account of Katherine and Timothy sharing the carriage with them. The taut atmosphere had made itself known, and they stayed in uneasy silence, glancing at each other.

“Your performance was a success, cousin,” Katherine said, about halfway into the journey. “Everybody said so.”

Pippa smiled faintly. She had been bombarded with compliments but couldn’t enjoy any of them.

Lord Whitmore had left at the end of the musicale, leaving his mother behind. He had business, apparently. They had stayed another hour or two before Bridget complained of a megrim, whereupon they all piled into the carriage and headed home.

Bridget had not spoken to her, not a single word. Nerves fluttered in Pippa’s stomach, making her feel sick.

She had done wrong, of course. That was clear. Spending time along with a man on a balcony was bad enough, but almost allowing him to kiss her? Laying her hand on his hand so boldly? Pippa had no idea what had come over her.

Yet, even now, the memory of it made her chest tighten, in a good way. Lord Whitmore made her feel all sorts of things when they were together, some she couldn’t even identify.

Lord Barwick, on the other hand, only ever made her feel annoyed.

What is Lord Whitmore's name? I've heard it said before. Nathan, that's it. His name is Nathan.

A tiny smile crept over Pippa's face. Feeling eyes on her, she glanced up and saw Bridget looking at her. Her face was tight with anger, and Pippa's smile vanished at once.

This isn't over, not by a long shot.

On account of Bridget's 'megrim', she retired upstairs immediately, summoning Pippa with her. They went to their private parlour, which was cold from not having a fire lit, and smelled faintly musty from disuse.

Bridget lit the candles, closed the door, and stood in front of it, facing her daughter. The silence was absolute.

"Well," she said at last, voice tight. "What excuses do you have for me?"

Pippa swallowed. "I should not have been on the balcony with Lord Whitmore, Mama. And things... things went too far. It was wrong of me, I know. But nobody knows besides you, and so my reputation will be quite safe."

She gave a bark of laughter. "What a foolish little girl you are. There were a horde of people in that ballroom. If I noticed you sneaking out and Lord Whitmore sneaking after you, why should others not have noticed? You have no idea what has been seen."

This had not occurred to Pippa, and a cold shiver went through her.

"If my reputation is compromised," she said, the words coming out before she had time to think about them, "then Lord Whitmore will marry me, I can vouch for it.

He's a good man."

In a trice, Bridget had crossed the room, coming almost nose to nose with her daughter.

"This was your plan all along, wasn't it?" she hissed. "You flirted with Lord Whitmore to get out of marrying Lord Barwick."

"Mama, no!" Pippa blustered, swallowing thickly. "I would never do such a thing, I swear it. But you know that I care for Lord Whitmore, and I believe he cares for me. And I do not care for Lord Barwick."

"We have been through this time and time again. Oh, Pippa, I am too tired to argue with you." Bridget turned away, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I think I am getting a megrim after all," she muttered.

"Mama, I didn't mean..." Pippa began, but she was interrupted.

"Yes, indeed, you never meant for any of this to happen. I'm sure you didn't, but it has, and now I must deal with it," Bridget snapped. "Here is what we will do. Our aim must be to hide this incident from Lord Barwick or his wretchedly eagle-eyed mother. I do not think anybody noticed, but we must be vigilant. Lord Whitmore, I think, will not speak of it, and of course you will not. You must avoid him like the plague from now on. I won't have Lord Barwick having any reason to retreat from an engagement."

Pippa stood still, stunned. She felt almost as if she were in a dream.

Am I merely tilting at windmills? Why does she not listen to me? Does she not hear, or does she simply dismiss my concerns?

“I have thought long and hard about all this, Mama,” Pippa said, her voice quavering. “I cannot marry Lord Barwick. I am sorry that I cannot make you happy. If you choose to act as though I am dead, I cannot stop you, but I know that the consequences for myself will be much worse if I force myself to accept a betrothal and go through with a marriage to a man that I do not love and cannot respect.”

There was a long silence after this. Bridget turned slowly, her expression icy. Swallowing, Pippa spoke again.

“Please, Mama, don’t let this make a breach between us. We were so close, once.”

“Hear this, my girl, and listen carefully,” Bridget said, her voice calm. “If you do not oblige me in this and follow my instructions, I shall go straight to Katherine and tell her that you were kissing a gentleman on the balcony at her own brother’s soiree.”

“Katherine will....”

“Hear me out, Pippa, please. You believe that I am your enemy, I know that. You think that your cousins are your friends. They are pleasant enough, to be sure, but let me tell you this. The Willenshires have a great reputation to uphold. William is a duke, a new one, with a new duchess, and he will be treading on difficult paths for years trying to establish himself. Even the highest members of the ton live and die on public opinion, their reputations as fragile as glass. Imagine what would happen if William was known to have brought a cousin into his family with the most lax and shocking morals, creating scandal wherever she went?”

“I... I do not have lax morals ,” Pippa stammered. “Mama, I...”

“Quiet! I’ve heard enough of you and your excuses,” Bridget snapped. “You made a mistake, Pippa. We are all of us human, but there is no room in Society for mistakes. That almost-kiss on the balcony was just as damaging as if you had spent the night in

a man's house, unchaperoned. Believe me, it is. Your entire world will crumble. Nobody will have you in their houses for fear of being tainted. No young woman will be permitted to befriend you, and no man would ever dream of courting you for fear of the shame. And your cousins, of whom you are so fond? They'll turn their backs on you, too. Nobody's reputation is too strong to withstand contact with a fallen woman."

There was a silence. Pippa felt as if she were falling in more ways than one.

A fallen woman. The lowest of the low. An unlucky woman who failed to measure up to the austere standards and had the misfortune to fall from her perch. There's no getting up once one has fallen.

Bridget came forward, taking Pippa's hands. She gave a tentative smile, looking straight into her daughter's eyes.

"A small mistake ought not to ruin your life, Pippa. And I intend to see to it that it does not. Lord Barwick will save us, you may count on it. You must abandon hope of Lord Whitmore, do you understand?"

Pippa swallowed. "But... but why?"

Bridget sighed. "Lord Whitmore does not care for you, Pippa. I daresay he is opportunistic, and you have been obvious enough in your affection for him."

"I think he does care for me," Pippa pressed, and Bridget's gaze hardened.

"He does not. If he cared for you, he would never have put you in such a position, would he?"

This was a point that Pippa could not refute. She jerked back, thinking it over, and

found that there wasn't a reply. At least, none she could think off. A headache was pounding behind her eyes, and she was feeling more and more nauseous.

"You see, my poor girl?" Bridget asked, sounding faintly pleading. "I am your only ally. Believe me, if a breach opens up between us, Katherine will throw you out in an instant. If any scandal is attached to either of us, William will send us away, and then what will we do? You must see how vulnerable we are."

Pippa closed her eyes. She had been thinking the same thing about what would happen if a breach appeared between her and her mother. Could it be that she'd misjudged the situation? Her cousins were kind and friendly, to be sure, but how well did she really know them?

One thing was clear, however.

I've made the most terrible mistake. And now I must accept the consequences.

"Perhaps... perhaps you are right," she managed at last, her voice faintly strangled.

Bridget smiled, relief creeping over her face. "Of course, I'm right, darling. I know you and I haven't seen eye to eye on many things, but I am still your mother, and I still love you. It'll all work out, you'll see."

Pippa tried to summon a smile, but it would not come.

"Now," Bridget said, her tone turning brisk, "it's time for you to retire, I think. You may go."

Pippa walked out of the parlour, feeling somewhat dizzy, and stood in the hall for a moment or two, staring into space.

“Pippa? There you are.”

She flinched at Katherine’s voice, spinning around to face her.

Katherine waddled along, one hand on her swollen belly, looking concerned.

“Oh, hello, Katherine,” Pippa managed. “I am so sorry we had to come home early, but Mama was so unwell.”

“It’s quite all right,” Katherine said, smiling. “I hope she recovers. But it was you I wanted to see, Pippa. You haven’t been yourself lately, and tonight you just seemed... well, odd . And after you had such a success with your violin playing, too!”

Pippa managed a faint smile. “Thank you, cousin.”

Katherine frowned. “You are not in your usual spirits . Did something happen with Lord Whitmore?”

Pippa’s head snapped up. “What? Why him?”

Katherine chuckled, shaking her head. “I’m not a fool, you know. It’s clear that you’re in love with the man. And I quite approve, you know.”

She swallowed. “It’s... it’s apparent that I love him? Do you mean that everybody knows?”

The smile dropped from her cousin’s face. “Not exactly. I only meant that since I know you rather well, I could tell that you liked him. I never saw the two of you interact tonight, though.”

“We didn’t,” Pippa responded, a little more sharply than was fair. “Excuse me, Katherine, but I really should go to bed. I’m quite tired.”

Katherine nodded slowly, and Pippa turned and began to head up the hallway. She stopped dead in her tracks when Katherine spoke again.

“If there’s something weighing on your mind, Pip, you can always talk to me about it. I give fairly good advice, and I can always be trusted to keep a confidence.”

Can you?

Oh, Pippa wanted to believe it. She wanted nothing more than to unburden herself, to tell Katherine everything, to weep on her shoulder and mourn the tattered remnants of her life.

But it was too risky, entirely too risky. Who was to know what would happen if she told Katherine the truth? And words, once spoken aloud, could never be taken back.

So, Pippa forced a smile that she did not feel and met Katherine’s eye squarely.

“There’s nothing weighing on my mind,” she said, as lightly as possible. “I’m worried about Mama’s megrim, of course, and I’m rather tired. I have the normal concerns of a woman of my age, I think. Nothing to worry yourself about, cousin. You should be resting and preparing for the baby.”

Katherine did not smile back. It was fairly clear that she was not convinced. Pippa’s cheeks ached from smiling.

“I see,” she murmured. “Well, just let me know if you would like to arrange any sort of party, and we can always invite Lord Whitmore and his mother – she’s quite delightful, you know. I would be happy to oblige you. I care about you, Pip. I want

you to be happy.”

Happiness? Pippa thought, with a flare of anger. Why, that was never a choice. I was a fool to think that it was.

“Thank you,” she said aloud, quite mechanically. “That’s kind of you, but it won’t be necessary. We have a ball only tomorrow night, remember? Goodnight, Katherine.”

She turned on her heel and walked firmly along the hallway, leaving her cousin behind. Pippa’s throat burned from holding back tears. She knew that once she got back to her room, she would start to sob.

This time, Katherine did not call out after her.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Nathan drank his champagne in one gulp and immediately regretted it. It was not good champagne, and the sharp fizz scratched at his throat.

The Sinclairs were a family that wished to be considered sociable and wished to invite as many important people as they could, but never quite had the funds to do so. So, they stretched out their money by serving cheap drinks and fewer courses than what might be expected.

Still, they were a decent enough family, and a ball was a ball. Most people accepted the invitations.

Nathan had accepted his because he knew that Pippa would be here.

A full day had gone by since the musicale and their almost-kiss on the balcony. William had not turned up on Nathan's doorstep demanding a duel and nor had Lady Randall.

Nathan knew that he ought to have called that very morning, and proposed marriage at once. It was the gentlemanly thing to do.

He was a little afraid that Lady Randall would throw him out of the house, however. Perhaps it was best to let the situation calm down.

Perhaps he'd waited too long, because now Pippa was dancing with Lord Barwick.

The man was clearly in his cups. He was staggering around, eyes glazed and red-rimmed. Even from his place in the corner of the room, Nathan could see that he kept

treading on the poor woman's feet. Pippa winced, trying and failing to keep her face straight, and did her best to keep her poor, slippered toes away from Lord Barwick's stamping Hessians.

Lady Randall was here, of course, and Nathan was rather glad that he hadn't seen her. His mother had melted off somewhere, and Colin was enjoying his honeymoon. It was easy enough for Nathan to stay out of conversations, and stand quietly in a corner.

His heart was thumping. He had to do something about Pippa. There was no sense going to Lady Randall, who clearly disliked him, and was focused on protecting her daughter's reputation.

And that's not uncalled for, he told himself firmly. You ought not to have put her in that position.

An apology was necessary, of course, and to summon up the courage to make that happen, Nathan had drunk a couple of champagne flutes to steel himself.

The dance ended, although Lord Barwick briefly tried to continue, arms and legs jerking out. Pippa flushed red, pushing him none too gently towards the sidelines. Lord Barwick's mother was waiting, her face unreadable. Nathan moved towards them.

Lady Randall glanced up as he approached, and her eyes narrowed.

Nathan didn't give her an opportunity to speak. He made only the most cursory of bows and turned to Pippa right away.

"Miss Randall, if you aren't engaged for the next dance, I wonder, would you care to dance with me?"

There. It was out. It was said. She could demur if she wished.

To his amazement, Pippa's eyes brightened.

"Why, yes," she said at once, before Lady Randall could speak. "I would like that very much, Lord Whitmore."

Nathan allowed himself a breath of relief, and extended his hand. He could feel the glares of both Lady Randall and Lady Barwick boring into the side of his face.

Lord Barwick, however, appeared too drunk to care, or even notice.

The next set was beginning, so Nathan led her to the dance floor at once. It was, he noticed with a twinge of nerves, a waltz.

They took up their positions, facing each other, almost as close as they had been on the balcony the previous night. Pippa was looking up at him, her expression wistful, and he found his breath catching in his throat. He could not look away.

"Don't worry," Nathan said, voice low. "I won't step on your poor feet."

She bit back a smile. "That is a relief. They're horribly bruised."

"You ought not to have had to dance with him while he was in that state."

She shrugged. "Mama wanted me to do so."

The music began, and they started to dance.

"First of all," Nathan said, before he could lose his nerve, "I must apologise for what happened last night. It was most improper of me. I could have seriously compromised

you, and it was an ungentlemanly thing to do. I beg your forgiveness.”

She worried her lower lip, still looking up at him.

“Mama said that if you truly cared for me, you would not have done it,” she said, so quietly that he had to lean his head forward to hear.

“Lady Randall is both right and wrong,” he managed. “True, a gentleman would not have put you in such a position, and it is unforgivable. However, she is wrong to say that I do not care about you. May I be frank, Miss Randall?”

“A little frankness is refreshing, I think.”

“I have tried to do things the proper way,” he burst out, aware that their dancing was a little too slow and absent-minded to keep up with the rest. He didn’t much care. “I have tried, and it was a disaster. I know that I ought to speak to your mother, and then let her speak to you, and do things in the slow, dull way that those in Society usually do. But the truth is, Miss Randall – Pippa – I care for you. I believe I am falling in love with you.”

He heard her hitch in a breath, but she did not interrupt, and so he continued.

“I know I should not say it. I know I should do things carefully, the proper way. I have heard that you are betrothed or about to be betrothed to Lord Barwick, and if that is the case, I would not wish to make you uncomfortable. I will be silent on this subject at once, if you wish it.”

There was a brief pause, during which Nathan’s heart hammered against his chest relentlessly.

“I do not wish it,” she breathed at last. “And I am not betrothed to him.”

He let out a sigh. “Then, Pippa, I would like to court you. I wish to do things properly, in the eyes of Society and your family. I would like my intentions to be known, to you and to others. I wish to do things properly, and that means publicly. How do you feel about my offer? If you do not feel the same...”

“I do feel the same,” she said in a rush, and Nathan missed a step, staggering.

Certainly, a courting couple were never meant to be so blunt, certainly not in rushed whispers on a dance floor, of all things. But Pippa’s gaze had never left his face, and there was nothing but hope and happiness in her eyes.

She cares for me, Nathan realised, in a dizzying rush. My feelings are requited.

“Then I will speak to Lady Randall and you, tomorrow,” he said, grinning giddily. “I will inform your mother of my intentions, and I shall speak to William or Katherine, if you wish it. If... If Lady Randall refuses to give her consent, then I shall threaten to tell her that I almost kissed you on the balcony, and then she’ll have to agree.”

Pippa let out a gurgle of laughter, and Nathan beamed.

“I think that is a very fine plan,” she said, her smile threatening to tear her face in two. “For now, though, it will be easier for us both if you do not ask me to dance again. Mama is fairly raging, I think, and Lord Barwick is most unpredictable when in his cups.”

“Of course, I would not wish to cause you distress. I’ll call at ten o’ clock sharp, if I may.”

She nodded. “You may.”

The dance was drawing to a close. Nathan wanted it to go on forever, to keep Pippa

in his arms, to see her smile up at him and feel the heat coming from her skin.

A formal courtship, he thought, biting back a smile. She cares for me. She does. A formal courtship will almost certainly lead to an engagement.

Heavens, I'm very nearly a betrothed man.

Mother will be thrilled.

The music ended, the dancers stopped, and so Pippa and Nathan were obliged to stop, too. They bowed to each other as cheers and applause rose up from the watchers. The usual burble of conversation broke out.

The two of them stayed on the dance floor, staring at each other, each unable to break away. At least, Nathan felt as though he could not break away.

However, the moment only lasted for a few heartbeats, before Lady Randall stormed onto the dance floor and dragged her daughter away.

Until tomorrow, Nathan thought, with a secret, happy smile.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

He loves me. He loves me. He loves me.

The words went round and round in Pippa's head, as they had all night. Bridget was clearly displeased with Pippa dancing with Nathan, although there wasn't exactly anything she could have done about it.

She wanted to sing, dance, and skip through the halls. Of course, Pippa did none of these things. Not only would it make her mother suspicious, but it was barely past breakfast time.

She'd woken early, too excited to sleep. How would their meeting with Nathan go? He was arriving at ten o' clock, and it was currently half past nine.

Mama will be angry, she thought, but if I've secured a decent proposal, she can hardly object. Besides, Nathan is a friend of Henry's.

She was nervous, to be sure, but most of her feelings were a bubble of happiness and excitement.

This is the day I reclaim my life. I hope you can see how well I'm doing, Papa.

A voice echoed up the stairs towards her.

"Pippa? Are you up there? What in heaven's name are you doing?"

Pippa's heart sank.

In hopes of finding some time to herself, Pippa had retreated into one of the little white attics at the end of the guests' wing. They were small rooms, tidy and clean but seldom used, and when they were used, they were for guests when the house was too full. Apparently, governesses and tutors once slept up here.

This particular room had a window seat which looked down on the gardens, which made up for the steep set of stone stairs that led up to the room.

Thumping footsteps approached up the stairs, and Pippa bit back a sigh, putting her violin aside. The music must have been what led her mother here.

Bridget's reddened face appeared at the top of the stairs.

"There you are," she huffed. "What are you doing up here?"

"I just wanted some peace and quiet," Pippa murmured.

Bridget hauled herself into the room, glancing around with distaste. "This isn't the sort of place for a future Marchioness, Pippa."

It would have been sensible to bite her tongue and say nothing, but Pippa found words spilling out anyway.

"I'm not going to be a Marchioness, Mama," she blurted out.

Bridget narrowed her eyes. "We've been through this, Pippa."

Pippa stood up, breathing in deeply.

"Lord Whitmore – Nathan – confessed to me last night that he is in love with me. He plans to visit today to speak to you and formally ask me to court him. I don't want to

go against your wishes, Mama, but your threats of ruining me and casting me off mean nothing, not if I can marry Nathan.”

Bridget gave a choked noise. “You can’t mean it.”

Pippa hurried towards her mother, taking her mother’s hands in hers. “Mama, please don’t be angry. Don’t you want me to be happy? I know I won’t be happy with Lord Barwick, and you know it, too! But I love Nathan, and that’s the best start any marriage could have. I’ll be a viscountess, and I know he’s rich! More to the point, he knows that I am not, and doesn’t care about it. Please, Mama! Give us your blessing for our courtship.”

Bridget tore her hands away. “You don’t know what you’re speaking of, child. Do you plan to humiliate me? Only this morning...” she paused, pulling out a crumpled letter from her sleeve and shaking it in Pippa’s face, “... only this morning I received a letter from Lady Barwick, informing me that you meet with her approval and that Lord Barwick intends to make you an offer soon. Today, even! We are so close, Pippa, so close! You can’t possibly falter so close to the finish line.”

Pippa bit her lip. She felt like crying.

I’ll never get her to understand.

“Mama, please ,” she begged, voice cracking. “Papa wanted us to stay together, to support each other. Why must you do this to me?”

“Why must you do this to me ?” Bridget snapped. “Why can you never listen?”

Pippa stepped back, composing herself. She felt like crying, like throwing herself on the ground and sobbing.

Mama will never give her permission for me to marry Nathan.

I think I might marry him anyway.

And what would be the results? If she refused to marry Nathan at her mother's request, Pippa knew in her heart that she could never marry Lord Barwick. So she'd finish the Season as a sad little spinster, reliant on her cousin's good graces. Maybe their good graces would continue, maybe they wouldn't. It was hard to tell. Either way, her Season, such as it was, would be a resounding failure. An irrevocable one.

And if she went ahead and married Nathan, there was no telling how Bridget would react. Might she make peace with it? Mayhap. But if she did not, there would be a chance for reconciliation later. Pippa would be a viscountess, safe at last.

And that was what Mama wanted, wasn't it? For me to be safe? For us to be safe.

"I going to marry him if he asks me, Mama," she heard herself say, voice choked with tears. "I wish you would give us your blessing."

Bridget held her gaze for a long minute. For an instant, there was anguish in her eyes, quickly replaced with anger.

"I know where all of this began," she hissed, shaking a finger in Pippa's face. "With that wretched violin!"

Before Pippa could understand what her mother meant, Bridget had stormed past into the room, snatching up the violin which still lay on the window seat.

Ice-cold fear surged up into Pippa's throat.

"Mama, no!"

Bridget sidestepped her easily, holding the violin aloft.

“Well, I am your mother, and I take away anything you have as easily as that ,” she snarled, dodging again. “If I say no more of this wretched scraping, then there will be no more , do you hear me?”

She lifted the violin into the air, holding it by the neck, and at once Pippa saw what she meant to do. She meant to smash the violin down on the empty hearth, splintering it into a million pieces.

Pippa gave a wordless cry, and threw herself forward, trying to snatch the instrument out of her mother’s hands. Bridget dodged again, backing towards the staircase. Pippa tried to grab it once more, and Bridget grabbed her by the shoulder and pushed her away.

Pippa staggered backwards, and suddenly there was no more ground beneath her heels. She just had a moment to see shock and horror in her mother’s face before she tumbled backwards, falling down the stairs.

Falling tended to be a rather strange thing. A handful of seconds, all stretched out to last a moment or two in one’s perception, but without the ability to actually do anything about the extra time. Pippa faintly recalled flashes; the ceiling above her, the coldness of the air which rushed past her.

And then, thump . Then nothing.

Pippa’s hearing returned to her first of all. There was a clamour all about her, half a dozen voices talking all at once.

Katherine's voice emerged from the chaos first of all, speaking authoritatively.

"You must step back, Aunt Bridget. Give her some air. The physician will be here shortly."

A bubbling sob erupted from somewhere above Pippa's head. She raised her brow, unable to recall where she was or how she'd gotten there. She was lying on a stone floor, it seemed, the cold leeching through her thin morning dress.

I can't move. Why can't I move?

Panic surged through Pippa's consciousness. She was faintly aware that there'd been a fall. Indeed, that was it, a fall. An accident. She and her mother had been fighting over the violin, she had been pushed, and then... then, nothing.

A male voice sounded. "Kat, a guest has arrived."

Katherine gave a most unladylike curse. "A guest ? At this hour? Send them away, whoever it is. Oh, and somebody must go to tell Lavinia and William. This is serious. They'll be concerned."

A guest. A memory stirred. Was she expecting a guest?

In a rush, Pippa remembered. Nathan . Nathan was coming today, to talk about their future, to tell her that he loved her, to begin their courtship officially. She must speak to him!

Pippa managed to open her eyes a crack and tried to force out some words.

All that came out was an incoherent burble.

Her vision was blurred, but Pippa could make out the blur of Katherine, leaning over her, and her mother, kneeling by her head. At once, Katherine leaned closer, taking her hand.

“Pip, darling? Did you say something? I think she’s coming around.”

“She can’t stay here, lying on the cold floor,” came Timothy’s voice. “She’ll catch her death of cold.”

Bridget gave a moan of anguish.

“She can’t be moved yet, not until the physician says so,” Katherine said firmly. “But you’re right. Somebody go and fetch blankets, and for heaven’s sake, send away the guest. Pip, what did you say? What do you need?”

Pippa wanted to lick her lips to moisten them – they felt dry and cracked, as though they would peel off if she tried to smile – but her tongue was heavy in her mouth. A searing pain was shooting through her head, too.

“Violin,” she managed.

Bridget hiccoughed. “I have your violin, Pippa, darling. I’ll keep it quite, quite safe for you, I absolutely promise. Oh, my darling girl, what have I done?”

Katherine threw a sharp glance at her aunt. “Yes, Aunt, what have you done?”

Pippa was faintly aware of darkness nibbling at the edge of her vision, threatening oncoming unconsciousness. She didn’t have much long left, it seemed. However, she swallowed thickly and forced out another word.

“Accident,” she whispered.

The last thing Pippa saw before she melted away into unconsciousness was her mother, a hand pressed over her mouth to muffle sobs. The last thing she heard was Katherine's voice, tinged with panic.

“Where is that physician?”

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Nathan was shown into one of the parlours, with a promise of tea to come. His nerves were jumping inside him, but there was excitement there, too.

Somehow, he knew that Lady Randall would not be able to talk Pippa out of her feelings for him. She was of age, and she was determined enough to know what she wanted.

It was odd to think that he was on the brink of a real courtship, for the first time in his life.

Mother will be thrilled, Nathan thought, smiling wryly.

The clock in the corner chimed, and he strode over to inspect it, taking note of the time.

Strange. I've been here for a full fifteen minutes already. Guests are never kept waiting this long. I wonder what's happening.

Something like worry coiled in his gut. Nathan seated himself in an armchair by the fire, only to immediately bounce up again and resume pacing the room.

Five more minutes passed by, then ten, and at last he was beginning to feel worried. Nathan was just about to leave the room and go in search for someone who could tell him what was going on – surely, he hadn't been forgotten, or ignored – when footsteps approached.

He just had time to compose himself before the door opened.

It wasn't Pippa, however, who stepped into the room, or Lady Randall. Instead, he found himself face to face with a rather flustered and dishevelled Timothy, in his shirtsleeves.

"Nathan, it's you," Timothy said, forcing a distracted smile. "We weren't expecting you. Now is not a convenient time, I'm afraid."

"I do have an appointment. I am here to see Pippa. That is, Miss Randall. She is expecting me." He gave a wry smile which he hoped conveyed his purpose. "I am here to speak with her mother, too. It's a rather important matter."

Timothy was still distracted, glancing around as if he couldn't wait to leave. He ran his fingers through his hair, making it stick up wildly.

"Oh," he murmured. "Oh, dear."

The worry came back, Nathan's gut churning with unease.

"What are you talking about, Timothy? What is happening?"

He paused, closing his eyes. "I'm afraid there's been an accident, Nathan."

His voice seemed to be muffled, as though Nathan was underwater. He didn't recall deciding to sit down, but suddenly he was sitting down, on the armchair by the fire he'd vacated earlier. Timothy remained standing, fidgeting with his fingers and seeming distracted once again.

"An accident?" Nathan repeated.

Timothy nodded. "I'll be as brief as I can. Miss Randall – Pippa – fell down a flight of stairs only half an hour ago. She hit her head quite badly. We don't believe that

there are any broken bones, but she is disoriented and weak, and we don't dare move her. The physician has only just arrived. We're all in quite a state, as you can imagine."

Nathan gripped the arms of the chair.

"She's... she's hurt?"

Timothy nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"I must see her."

"I... I don't think that's a good idea."

Nathan was suddenly on his feet again, once again having no idea of when he'd chosen to do so.

"I must see her," he repeated.

Footsteps approached again, and the door opened to admit Katherine. She looked pale and drawn, holding her arm protectively over her belly.

"Oh, Lord Whitmore, it's you," she said, in a tone that he did not know how to interpret. He wasn't sure that she was displeased to see him, but it was abundantly clear that he was not welcome at this particular time.

Nathan didn't care. Pippa was hurt, seriously so.

"How badly is she hurt?" he asked, directing his question straight to Katherine.

She sighed. "It's hard to tell. The physician is examining her now. Word has been

sent to my siblings. Lady Randall is of course inconsolable.”

Nathan was sure that Katherine muttered something after this comment, something like as well she should , but surely, he hadn’t heard right.

“I want to see her,” he said, as firmly as he could muster.

Katherine lifted her eyebrows. “Who, Lady Randall?”

“No, of course not. I want to see Pippa.”

She didn’t even flinch at his casual use of her Christian name.

“You cannot see her, Lord Whitmore. Of course you can’t. She is unconscious and needs rest and quiet. I understand your worry, and I...”

“No, no, you don’t understand,” Nathan burst out, taking a step forward. “I love her! I cannot go on without her. I need...” He made to step around Katherine, but she moved to intercept him more quickly than he might have expected.

“I do understand,” Katherine said, her voice firm and unyielding. “I’m sure this is upsetting, but there’s nothing to be done about it. We must let the physician work, and time will tell how well she recovers.”

“I must...”

“No, Lord Whitmore,” she interrupted. “You must not. The only thing you must do now is go home and wait for news.”

“Can I not wait here?” he begged, throwing her a pleading look.

Katherine was unmoved. “No. You’ll insist on seeing her earlier than the physician would wish. I am sorry, Lord Whitmore. We’ll keep you informed of her condition, you can be assured of that, but for now, you must go home.”

She turned to her husband, laying a hand on his arm.

“A cup of hot, sweet tea for Lord Whitmore, to help with the shock,” she said, in a quiet voice, almost as if Nathan wasn’t listening. “Then he must leave at once. It’s for the best.”

“No need for the tea,” Nathan answered, his voice shaking. “I... I shall leave now. I am sorry to have intruded.”

He didn’t wait for a response, leaving the parlour and heading towards the front door. A nervous-looking footman handed him his hat and gloves, which Nathan pulled out without thinking.

She’s hurt. Seriously. Could she... might she... was Pippa going to die?

He closed his eyes.

No. She can’t. She must live. She must.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Pippa hesitantly opened her eyes, and then immediately closed them again. The light was blinding.

There was a dull ache in the back of her head, uncomfortable but not the searing pain she remembered from last time she was conscious.

She was lying on her bed, on her side, pillows and blankets tucked up all around her.

Carefully, Pippa opened her eyes again, this time just a crack.

Morning sunlight filtered into her room. How long had she been asleep?

A snore caught her attention. Gingerly pushing herself up into a sitting position, Pippa at once found the source of the snore.

Bridget sat slumped in an armchair, angled towards Pippa's bed. A book was half-falling out of her hand.

"The Ghost of Morendale Manor ," Pippa read aloud, barely suppressing a smile.

Bridget gave another snort, then her eyes opened. They widened when she saw Pippa sitting up. In a flash, she was at Pippa's side, clutching her hand.

"My darling girl, you're awake! You're awake !" she gasped, tears spilling down her cheeks. Pippa barely had time to marvel at the fact that her mother was crying before Bridget threw her arms around her neck, squeezing her tight.

“I... How long was I asleep?” she stammered.

Bridget pulled back, wiping away a tear from the corner of her eye.

“Two days,” she whispered. “Stay here, I must let the others know. Your cousins are all staying here, and the physician visits three times a day.”

Before Pippa could say a thing, her mother had bounded across the room, hauling on the bell pull.

“Two days?” she quavered.

“Yes, my darling girl. You hit your head rather badly. It... It was my fault.”

Pippa glanced away. Her memory was intact, it seemed. She recalled the argument with her mother, the fight over the violin, the push, the fall.

“It was an accident,” she murmured. “You didn’t mean to push me down the stairs.”

Breathing in deeply, Bridget perched on the edge of the bed. It took Pippa a moment to interpret the expression on her mother’s face.

Guilt. It was guilt. She... she’s ashamed.

“I told Katherine everything,” she said, her voice quiet. “Including... including you and Lord Whitmore on the balcony. Katherine was shocked and furious. Furious at me. She told me I had been a terrible mother, and frankly, she is right. I’ve been blinded by my own ambition. I forgot my promise to your father and I forgot what I owe you, as my daughter. I’ve had several days, sitting here by your bedside, to think about my behaviour. Katherine’s scolding helped. I saw myself through her eyes for once, and I did not like what I saw. Can you ever forgive me, Pippa?”

Pippa was silent for a moment, with Bridget waiting anxiously for her reply.

“Water,” Pippa managed at last, her throat dry and her voice hoarse. Bridget scrambled to pour her a glass, and Pippa sipped, grateful.

“Of course I forgive you, Mama,” she whispered, once her mouth felt less numb. “But truly, I can’t marry Lord Barwick. I am sorry.”

Bridget swallowed, looking away. “William did some investigating. It seems that Lord Barwick has a great many debts, and not much money to offset them. He... He was hoping to get a settlement from William and assumed that a large dowry would be settled upon you. When William told him that under no circumstances would such a thing happen, then Lord Barwick quite promptly withdrew his interest.”

There was a little silence.

“I see,” Pippa said flatly. “I am glad that I did not like the man, then.”

Bridget closed her eyes. “I cannot believe how blind I was, how foolish . Oh, Pippa, can you forgive me? I cannot undo what I’ve done, and I can only be glad that you were so determined not to give in. If you were engaged to the man by now, heaven only knows how we would extricate you from such a predicament.”

Pippa smoothed the blankets beneath her palms.

“Well, I am not betrothed to him, so let’s be grateful for that. Has... has Lord Whitmore come to visit me? He was meant to call on me the morning of my accident.”

“Ah, yes, I do recall some guest arriving when the physician came. He was sent away, of course. We were all in an uproar.”

Pippa swallowed. “And... and was he told the reason?”

Bridget frowned. “I’m afraid I don’t know. Why?”

Why? Because Nathan might think I cancelled our meeting, that I have no desire to court him after all.

“Did he come back to see how I was?” she managed, her throat drying up again. She wanted more water, but her stomach felt hollow and empty. Already, she could feel the water she’d drunk sloshing around in there, and was a little afraid she might vomit. She was already as weak as a kitten, and vomiting would not help.

“I’m afraid I don’t know that either, darling. I have been up here with you all this time. Why, should he have come to see you?”

Pippa bit her lip, looking away. Of course, she was being silly. A man like Nathan probably had a horde of eligible ladies after him. Perhaps his attention had already been distracted.

Well, if he can forget me so easily, then he was never meant for me in the first place. That’s that.

Then why does it hurt so much?

“It’s all right, Mama,” Pippa said aloud. “I imagine I’ll miss quite a bit of the Season while I recover.”

Before Bridget could respond, the door opened, admitting Katherine. Timothy hovered in the doorway.

“You’re awake, and looking well,” Katherine said, relief in her voice. “The physician

is coming to examine you soon, but he said that if you woke up today, it would be a very good sign.”

“I feel well,” Pippa admitted. “Aside from a faint headache. I’m rather hungry, actually.”

“Well, we’ll fetch you something to eat at once,” Katherine assured her. Hesitating, she glanced over at Timothy. “In the meantime, you have a guest. If you don’t wish to see him, I’ll tell him so at once, but he’s called several times a day while you were unconscious. Almost as often as the physician, in fact.”

Pippa sat up a little straighter. “He?”

Katherine hid a smile. “Why, yes. It’s Lord Whitmore. He says that he has something to discuss with you.”

She sucked in a breath. “I... I would like to see him.”

Katherine nodded. “I’ll send him up directly. And I shall chaperone you; you won’t even know I’m there. As for you, Aunt Bridget, why don’t you go downstairs and have something to eat?”

“I think I might, Katherine,” Bridget said, heaving herself to her feet with a sigh. She leaned down, pressing a kiss to Pippa’s head. “I love you, my darling girl. I won’t get in your way ever again. Losing you was...” she paused, swallowing. “It was almost unbearable.”

Pippa closed her eyes. “You won’t lose me, Mama. I’m not going anywhere.”

She spotted her violin leaning against the window seat. The wood appeared to have been oiled and polished lately. She allowed herself a small smile.

They all filed out of the room, except for Katherine, who settled herself demurely in the corner, and took out a book.

“Mama was reading one of Timothy’s novels,” Pippa remarked.

Katherine grinned. “Oh, yes. She’s reading them all. I think she’s discovered that she rather likes novels.”

There was no time for more, because abruptly drumming feet echoed on the stairs, and Nathan burst into her room.

He came to an abrupt stop, looking rather abashed at having created such a commotion, and swallowed hard, striving to compose himself.

“Pippa,” he breathed. “You’re awake. I thought... I thought you’d never...” he bit off the end of that sentence, although she could easily guess what he’d intended to say.

She held out her hand and he came towards her, taking her hand and sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I thought you would die,” he said softly. “They said I couldn’t see you until you had woken up, which I suppose makes a great deal of sense, but at the time...” he swallowed, the sentence tapering off.

He looked rather pale and tired, as if he hadn’t slept well, his hair uncombed and his clothes rumpled. Her hand felt right in his, their fingers locking together as if they were made for each other.

“It was just an accident,” Pippa said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t keep our arrangement.”

He smiled faintly.

“Don’t worry about my mother . I think Mama and I have solved our differences, I’m only sorry that it took such a serious incident to do so. She won’t make me marry Lord Barwick now , for certain. I’m free at last.”

Nathan squeezed her hand. “I rather hoped, Pippa, that you might consider marrying me .”

She met his gaze, his eyes large and hopeful. A warm feeling spread through her chest.

He loves me. I found it, Papa. I found true love, and Mama was wrong – I didn’t have to change myself for it or temper my opinions. I was simply me , and he loves me for that.

“Yes,” she heard herself say, squeezing his hand back. “Yes, Nathan. Of course, I will marry you.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Six Weeks Later

The end of the Season approaches, and so the author of this journal is writing her last article.

For now, at least.

Dedicated readers of the Chatterbox will recall the newest, intriguing member of Society, in the form of Miss Pippa Randall, a fascinatingly refreshing young woman. A cousin to the Duke of Dunleigh himself, Miss Randall proved to have nothing to recommend herself but a pretty face, a most pleasant disposition, and a determination to settle in Society.

For some time, it was said that she would marry Lord Barwick and enter Society as a Marchioness. Some claimed that her subsequent betrothal to none other than the elusive bachelor Lord Whitmore was less of a good match. However, Lord Barwick's imprisonment and banishment to the debtor's prison clearly shows that Miss Randall's sharp mind did not fail her – better to be a Viscountess than a debtor's wife, to be sure!

We congratulate Miss Randall today, on the day of her marriage, and wish her the greatest happiness.

We also must draw attention to the affairs of Miss Amanda Davenport, who has been connected with the Earl of Tovey. Lord Tovey is not considered a remarkably handsome man, with rather prominent teeth and a notable and rather serious stutter, but what he lacks in looks he makes up for in wealth and is said to be most devoted to

Miss Davenport.

What's more, Miss Davenport is said to be quite enraptured by him . What will the next Season bring, I wonder? We will have to wait and see. Fare well, my readers, fare well!

“Don't read that nonsense on the day of your wedding , Pippa!” Katherine scolded.

Pippa chuckled, setting aside the scandal sheet. There was something almost reassuring about its light, airy tone. It was the last scandal sheet of the Season, as there was no point writing about gossip when there was nobody worth writing about in London. The anonymous author would continue writing when the next Season began.

I'll be a married woman, then. Maybe I'll even have a child on the way.

She bit back a smile.

It was almost time to leave. Pippa was dressed, hair curled and carefully arranged on the top of her head. She wore diamonds at her neck and in her ears, and felt a little overdressed.

I suppose I can't really be overdressed for my own wedding.

Bridget appeared behind her, tweaking one of the little glass flowers nestled in Pippa's hair.

Since the fall and Pippa's illness – it had taken a week or two for her to regain her strength – Bridget had been like a different woman. She was quieter, read more, and was much less opinionated. Katherine quietly confessed that having pushed her own daughter down the stairs – accidental or not – had almost broken Bridget.

“It’s not the sort of thing one forgets about oneself,” she admitted. “I think Aunt Bridget received a sudden look at the woman she had become, and did not like it one bit.”

Pippa had kept her own counsel about it all. She was glad to repair her relationship with her mother, but they still had quite a way to go. It was a pity that it took such a painful and shocking incident to bring them back together.

“You look beautiful, darling,” Bridget murmured. “I have something for you, though. Your Papa longed to see you marry, but you must know that he’ll always be with you. With both of us.”

She withdrew a silver pocket watch, glinting on a silver chain. Pippa sucked in a breath.

“I remember that watch. It has Papa’s name engraved inside, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does. You can keep it in your pocket, if you like. So he can walk you down the aisle.”

Pippa swallowed hard, a lump rising to her throat. Bridget kissed the top of her head. For a moment, they stayed like that, staring at their own reflections in the mirror, and thinking.

The church was full. Pippa took only a moment to compose herself before she entered. There were nerves fluttering in her stomach, of course, but it was mostly excitement.

I’m getting married.

She smiled at the guests she'd passed by. The O'Hares were all there, as well as the other friends she'd made during her Season. She spotted Nathan's friend, Colin, and his new wife.

Her cousins were all there, of course. William and his wife Lavinia held hands, smiling at her as she passed by. Henry and Eleanor linked arms, leaning against each other. Alexander and his calm, placid wife Abigail were whispering together like schoolchildren, beaming out at Pippa.

Katherine had gone ahead of Pippa, as her matron of honour, and was just settling into the pew beside her own husband. Timothy was smiling at her adoringly. Rose, Nathan's mother – who Pippa was already very fond of – was dabbing her eyes already with a lace-trimmed handkerchief.

And there, waiting at the top of the aisle for her, was Nathan.

He looked resplendent in his wedding suit, a velvet burgundy affair with a rich ruby cravat pin nestling at his neck. He was beaming at her.

Bridget kissed her daughter on the cheek, and settled into one of the front pews, leaving Pippa alone to look up at her future husband.

Nathan reached out, a trifle tentatively, and let his fingertips graze her jaw.

"You look beautiful," he whispered.

"So do you," she responded, hiding a smile.

The ceremony hurried by in a blink, almost as if it were part of a dream. And when the vows had been said and the ring sat comfortably on Pippa's finger, the rector took a step back, smiling.

“I present Lord and Lady Whitmore as man and wife.”

There was an explosion of applause, and Pippa took a moment to glance over at the front pew. Her mother was there, her cousins, their spouses who felt like cousins too, and her brand-new mother-in-law.

My family, she thought, smiled dazedly.

The rector cleared his throat. “You may kiss the bride.”

Nathan tilted up her chin, and Pippa threw her arms around his neck. Wrapping his arms around her neck, he did just that.

Amidst the assembly of guests at the wedding, William felt a surge of satisfaction. The final missive from his father had urged him to look after his cousin, and he had fulfilled that duty with great care. He had generously provided a substantial dowry for Pippa, and it brought him genuine joy to do so. Casting his gaze slightly upwards, he silently reflected: "All has been accomplished in accordance with your wishes, father. Now, it is time for us to proceed with our lives, free from your directives.

The End

Thank you for finishing the final book in my Willenshire s series, titled “ The Spinster’s Stolen Heart” .

If you made it here without reading the earlier books in the series, you're missing out!

Click the link below and dive in there's so much more waiting for you.

Willenshires

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

Stonehaven Manor, Sixteen Years Previously

“Look at the board, boy, look at the board. What does it say ?”

That tapping noise, which was the sound of a long, thin switch against the blackboard, was starting to appear in Jasper’s dreams. He’d dreamt about it just last night, along with Mr. Fyre’s thin, cadaverous face, with those awful bulging pale eyes.

“Look at the board, boy!” the schoolmaster repeated, tapping the switch again. Swallowing hard, Jasper forced himself to stare at the blackboard.

The board was full of markings, shapes and lines which he knew were meant to represent words. Other boys his own age could interpret them with ease, he knew that from his humiliatingly brief time at Eton. In moments of desperation, he had asked a few of them how they learned so easily, but they only stared at him, blinking in confusion, and replied that they just did .

Mr. Fyre took a step towards him, and Jasper flinched.

The schoolroom was icy cold. Mr. Fyre said that it helped to “cool” the mind, whatever that meant, and since winter was well along, there was a thin film of ice on the inside of the windowpanes. Jasper’s hands were numb with cold, the nail beds faintly mauve, which had done nothing to improve his efforts at writing on his slate.

He curled his fingers into fists and forced himself to stay still as the schoolmaster stalked towards, whipping the switch to and fro in front of him.

“There is a single sentence written on that blackboard, sirrah,” Mr. Fyre said, his voice deceptively cool and calm. “You will do me the honour of reading it aloud. At once.”

Jasper swallowed dryly. What time was it? It seemed like an age since breakfast, but he was terrified of glancing at the clock behind him and learning that it was barely ten o’ clock. Schooldays dragged, painfully so. The palms of his hands still smarted from yesterday’s lessons.

He stared at the blackboard, fear tasting acrid in his mouth, and willed the letters to make sense. The first word he could just about recognize – it was his name, with the characteristic J at the start, and a swooping P halfway through. The next two words were short, only three letters between them.

Perhaps it would be easier if Mr. Fyre’s handwriting was a little simpler, something bold and easy to decipher, like the print in a book. Instead, the man insisted on curling, looping words that even experienced readers struggled to decipher. Or so Janey said, and she could read and write just fine, even if she was only the head housemaid.

“J-Jasper,” he began, gasping a little, “Jasper i-is a... a... st.... sta...” he stammered and stuttered, the longer fourth word refusing to make sense at all. The more he squinted, the more the letters jumbled themselves up. He swallowed hard, aware of Mr. Fyre prowling closer and closer. Jasper stuttered for a few minutes, and then eventually fell silent.

The words weren’t going to come. They never did when he was frightened or under pressure. Mr. Fyre was behind him now, circling him slowly like a predator rounding its prey.

“Very disappointing, sirrah, very disappointing indeed,” he murmured, voice low. If

Jasper hadn't known better, he might have thought that the man was disappointed, truly.

Fortunately, Jasper did know better. He clenched his fists tighter and tighter, staring ahead at the blackboard until the words blurred, becoming even more unintelligible.

With a sigh that might have sounded as if he almost regretted what must be done, Mr. Fyre came to stand at Jasper's side, testing the strength of the switch. He glanced past Jasper, to the shadowy corner behind them both.

"You see, Your Grace? I do my best, but the boy simply does not want to learn. However, I shall persist. Hold out your hands, sirrah."

Jasper numbly held out his hands, palms up, in a practised motion. His skin was already stinging in anticipation. Mr. Fyre lifted the switch.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Fyre," came a deep voice from the corner. The schoolmaster was already bringing the switch down, and nearly lost his balance in an effort to halt his own momentum.

Taken aback, he glanced over at the third occupant of the room.

"Your Grace? Discipline is vital in these matters, especially when..."

A tall, broad-shouldered man came stepping forward, his black hair flecked with premature grey. He yawned, looking bored.

"I will handle this, Mr. Fyre. Go to the kitchen and request a cup of tea. I'll summon you back when lessons can resume."

"But, Your Grace..."

“I said,” the Duke of Stonehaven responded, ice creeping into his voice, “that I would handle it. I am not used to repeating myself.”

Mr. Fyre quailed at that. Mumbling something and dropping his gaze, he hurried for the door, stopping only to set the switch down across Jasper’s desk.

The door closed, and a heavy silence descended on the room. Jasper let his hands drop to his side, and fixed his gaze on the blackboard.

“You truly can’t read it, then,” the Duke said, voice clipped.

“No, Father. I cannot. I... I have tried, truly.”

“There is no such thing as trying in this world, my boy. One either does a thing, or one does not. That is all that matters.”

The Duke heaved a sigh, raking a hand through his hair. Jasper bit his lip and tried to stand as still as possible.

“I’m sure you cannot believe it, but I was remarkably pleased when you were born,” the Duke said suddenly. “A baby within the first year of marriage, a son . I was thrilled. Little did I know that there would be no more children, not even daughters, and that my son would turn out to be little more than simple-minded. My son would, at the age of twelve, be unable to read !”

On the last word, he brought his fist down onto the desk in front of Jasper with a resounding crash . It echoed around the room, and Jasper fought not to flinch.

It is not fair. I am trying. I am trying. It’s not my fault the words jump about. They don’t make sense.

“I am not simple-minded,” he said. To his horror, he spoke aloud.

The Duke turned his head slowly to look down at his son.

“I beg your pardon?”

Sucking in a breath, Jasper forced himself to look up. His father did not like to be looked in the eye, everybody knew that, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself. They had the same eyes, everybody said so. A clear blue – true blue, not tinted by grey or gold or even green, but a pure, sky-blue – fringed with black lashes and framed by heavy black brows.

As far as Jasper could tell, their eyes were the only similarities he and his father shared. He was entirely happy for it to remain that way.

“I am not simple-minded, Father,” Jasper forced himself to say. “I am not. I can’t... can’t read and write very well, and I don’t understand why not, but I am not simple-minded.”

The Duke only stared at him, unblinking.

“Then read out the sentence on the blackboard.”

Jasper’s eyes blurred with tears. He fought not to let them fall – crying only made the Duke a hundred times more angry.

“I can’t.”

“Shall I read it to you?” the Duke said, although it was not really a question. He turned to look at the board, and read out, with perfect diction: “Jasper is a simple-minded fool, but may yet excel with careful tutelage and discipline. There. That is

what it says.”

He could have chosen an easier sentence for me to read, Jasper thought sourly. He said nothing, of course.

The Duke stood in front of him, arms folded behind his back, head cocked.

“I do not know what to do with you, Jasper. I even heard a rumour that some brainless housemaid was meddling in your teaching, which might explain why Mr. Fyre’s methods are not working as well as they should.”

“Nobody else is teaching me, Father,” Jasper lied at once. Janey would be dismissed, no doubt, if their secret lessons were revealed. People could be cruel, like the parents at Eton who had called Mr. Pippin a milk-and-water-master, whatever that meant, even though his careful, gentle methods were the only thing that had seemed to help Jasper learn at all.

Mr. Pippin was gone, of course, and no amount of begging could convince the Duke to hire him as a private tutor, instead of Mr. Fyre.

The Duke stared down at his only son, anger and disappointment fizzling in his eyes. Jasper forced himself to look.

“Well, we must persist,” the Duke said at last. “Mr. Fyre is a good teacher, and an excellent disciplinarian. I have no doubt that your inability to learn stems from your own obstinacy. I am confident that you shall endeavour to improve in the future. Now, extend your hands.”

Jasper held out his hands again, palms up, and his father picked up the switch.

His palms throbbed and stung, but at least he had been granted the rest of the day off. It wasn't out of kindness, but because his palms and fingers were now too swollen and raw to hold a piece of chalk.

Jasper hurried along the endless, dark hallways that criss-crossed Stonehaven Manor.

When I'm grown up, he thought for the thousandth time, I'm going to leave this place forever.

He wasn't a fool. His father would not live forever, and when he died, Jasper would become the Duke of Stonehaven. And then his life would change.

I will dismiss that awful Mrs. Price, he thought gleefully, and have Janey Nettle as housekeeper instead. Everybody likes her, and she's kind and clever. I shall have Mr. Pippin come here to instruct me in the art of reading – I am certain I would make good progress under his tutelage – and all shall be well.

He rounded a corner and found himself in the largest parlour in the house, face to face with his parents' portrait hanging ten feet high. It was a stark reminder that he was not the duke, and was not, in fact, anyone important at all.

The Blue Parlour, as it was called, was near the front of the house and was generally used to receive guests. Privately, Jasper hated how each room had to have a specific purpose. Why couldn't rooms just be rooms? Some of the tenants on their land only had a handful of rooms in their entire home, perhaps even one or two!

A shape stirred on the chaise longue, underneath the tall, glaring portraits.

“Jasper, darling? What are you doing out of the schoolroom? You may come here and kiss me, if you like.”

Jasper went forward obediently to kiss his mother.

The Duchess had always been a thin woman, pale and delicate, as the fashion required. Her portrait was white-skinned and elegant, large dark eyes peering out of a beautiful, dainty face. In recent years, her thinness had turned to something almost skeletal, the sort of frame that made doctors glance meaningfully at each other and whisper in corners.

Jasper knew that his father raged at his mother, infuriated at her refusal to either die – and therefore allow him to marry again – or produce another child. These days, she seemed closer to dying than producing a sibling for Jasper, and yet she held on.

He kissed her cold, papery cheek, and she smiled tiredly up at him.

“You look very much like your papa, Jasper. Now, go on and finish your lessons.”

“I have no lessons today, Mama. Mr. Fyre said so.”

“Oh?” the Duchess yawned, disinterested. “Then go and play.”

“I want to talk to you, Mama.”

She shifted, turning her head away from him. “I am too tired for that, my dear. Go and play.”

He didn’t move. “Mama, do you think I am simple-minded?”

She opened her eyes a little wider. “Who said that you were simple-minded?”

“Papa.”

“Oh,” the Duchess rested a little heavier against her pillows. “Well, I hate to say it, but your papa is generally right about things.”

Jasper’s cheeks burned. “I am not simple-minded, Mama! I was very good at many subjects at Eton. I could do mathematics much easier than the other boys, and geometry. Not Latin, but I could remember all sorts of things, if somebody would read it out to me. Once, I...”

The Duchess waved a languid hand. “I am very tired, Jasper. Why don’t you go and play? Or do some lessons with Mr. Fyre?”

He bit his lip. “I told you, Mama, I have no lessons today. I thought you might talk to Papa and tell him that I am not what he thinks I am. I thought you might help me.”

The Duchess shifted to look at him again, and her dark eyes were blank and flat.

“If you do not want your papa to think of you as simple, Jasper, then you must learn to read and write. I am sure that if you apply yourself, you will find that it is not hard at all. Now, off you go, I am very tired.”

Jasper hesitated, and some of his reluctance must have transferred itself to his mother. The Duchess opened her eyes wider again.

“Jasper, do not be stubborn. Already you have gotten poor Janey into a great deal of trouble, over those secret lessons you were having.”

He sucked in a breath. “She... she was only trying to help, Mama. With my reading.”

“What use does a maid have for reading?” the Duchess muttered, seeming peevish all of a sudden. “I liked Janey very much, but the housekeeper said that she was getting above herself , and so she has been removed from being head housemaid and sent

back down into the kitchen. She is nine-and-twenty and thus it shall prove a most arduous undertaking for her to navigate such circumstances, with little prospect of advancement thereafter. That is your fault, Jasper.”

His face burned. Tears pricked at his eyes, but Jasper bit his lower lip until the pain distracted him from crying. He could not cry. Men did not cry. Dukes did not cry, not even if their hands were switched until they could not close their fingers into fists. His father’s words echoed in his head, taunting in their accuracy.

Nobody will help you in this world, my boy. Better keep your feelings to yourself and concentrate on not being left behind. If you shed another tear, a single tear more, I shall have to give you ten more strokes.

“That is not fair,” Jasper heard himself say. “She didn’t deserve that.”

“We never get what we deserve in this world,” the Duchess responded at once, closing her eyes. “I am very tired, Jasper. Go on back to the schoolroom and carry on with your lessons.”

He swallowed, feeling bone-tired all of a sudden. “I have no more lessons today, Mama.”

“Don’t you? You should have told me so, then.”

“I... I did tell you so.”

“I am tired, Jasper,” the Duchess repeated, feeling for a thin blanket tossed over her lower body, and hauling it up to her chin. “Go and play.”

After a moment, it was clear that there would be no more conversation from his mother. He turned and tiptoed silently away, leaving the still, stale air of the Blue

Parlour behind.

Nobody is going to help me, he thought suddenly, the idea landing in his head like a cannonball, stopping him in his tracks. Mr. Fyre does not care about helping me. Father only cares about his reputation and that I am his only son. Mama... Mama never thinks about me at all, I think. Anybody who does want to help me – like Janey or Mr. Pippin – are only taken away from me.

If I want to be helped, I shall have to help myself.

He squeezed his hands into fists, nearly crying out aloud at the pain. The pain was good, though, making him angry and staving off the sudden, ice-cold sadness the bloomed up inside and threatened to make him sick.

He had known, deep down, that nobody was ever going to help him, or understand – except perhaps poor, demoted Janey – but now, the knowledge had bloomed and taken root. It was no longer a feeling. It was a fact.

Jasper Demeridge, heir to the dukedom of Stonehaven, was entirely alone in the world, and would have to make his choices accordingly.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

London, Sixteen Years Later

The ball was, as all good parties were in the height of the Season, a tremendous crush.

Unfortunately, that was literal. Holding her breath and lifting the two glasses of lemonade to shoulder height in an attempt to stop them spilling, Margaret wriggled through the last of the crowd and came out in a small circle of space near the wall.

There was a row of chairs circling the ballroom, designed for the infirm and for chaperones and matrons, but also for tired young ladies who had few acquaintances and few to no names on their dance cards.

Like Margaret, for instance.

Mr. Arthur Green was sitting where she had left him, spreading out his thin frame to keep all three seats free. He smiled nervously as she approached, lifting a hand to fiddle with his spectacles, like the shy young man that he was.

“Thank you, Miss Molyneaux, you are very kind. I really should have fetched the lemonade myself.”

She smiled. “It’s quite alright, Mr. Green.”

Privately, she thought that the nervy, mild-mannered Mr. Green would have had worse luck in forcing his way through the crowd than she had. She handed over one lemonade, and glanced around, a frown furrowing her brow.

“Where is Marigold?”

“Hm? Oh, Miss Marigold is dancing, I think. A gentleman came to ask her shortly after you went for the lemonade.”

Margaret bit back a sigh. Marigold was seventeen, and really too young to be out at all, but their mother had decided that this would be her year, and so here she was. She seemed to be exclusively targeted by leering old gentlemen, and almost all of Margaret’s time was taken up with fending them off. She had no time to look for a suitor of her own, although Mr. Green did seem promising.

He was around twenty years old, two years younger than herself, the fourth or fifth brother in some rich household with not too many prospects for himself beyond what his own wits could carve out. So far, Margaret had found him difficult to talk to and almost comically afraid of most women, but he was kind, and one never knew where these things might go.

She peered around and caught sight of Marigold in the middle of the dance floor. Immediately, her heart dropped.

“It’s a waltz,” she said aloud. Mr. Green, mid-sip, spluttered.

“Why, I... yes, I suppose it is.”

“Marigold isn’t supposed to waltz.”

Mr. Green shifted uneasily. “Oh. I did not know you were opposed to the waltz. I know that some people do find it rather improper, but...”

“I don’t find it improper, not for a grown woman who can decide whether she wants to waltz or not, but my sister is barely seventeen, and she expressed discomfort with

the dance. And is that... is that Lord Tumnus?"

She knew it was, even before she said the words. The wretched man was close to forty these days and had never so much as looked twice at a woman over the age of nineteen. In fact, his tastes were rumoured to run even younger than that, which perhaps explained why he had pounced on Marigold with such eagerness.

"Excuse me," Margaret muttered. "I must just deal with this."

Before she could storm over to the dance floor, Mr. Green was on his feet, shifting uneasily.

"You don't intend to intervene, do you, Miss Molyneaux? It would be rather shocking, you know. The dance will be over in a minute or two, anyway. Why not let it run its course?"

Margaret eyed the spinning couples with trepidation. She could see Marigold's golden head rotating in the middle of the crush, in the arms of a tall man with a face like an axe, leering down at her with nauseating intensity.

"No," she said decidedly. "I must do something."

She moved forward, or at least she would have, if a woman had not detached herself from the crowd and stepped in front of her, so abruptly that Margaret actually bumped into her.

Margaret's heart sank yet again. At this rate, she could expect her heart to do its beating from down in her boots.

"Lady Alice Bow," she stammered, backing away. "I did not see you there."

The woman in question shook out her skirts, straightened the heavy rope of pearls at her neck, and smiled at Margaret. It was not a pleasant smile.

“Heavens, Miss Molyneaux, how clumsy you are! I fear that you have stepped on the hem of my skirts. See, there is a tear.”

Margaret who knew fine well that she had not stepped on the wretched woman’s skirts, looked down anyway. Indeed, there was a small tear at the hem of the fine, emerald-green silk gown, about the length of a thumb.

“I fear I must ask you to pay for the cost of the gown,” Lady Alice said, sighing in false regret. “Of course, I could just ask you to sew up the tear, but I think that would be rather humiliating, wouldn’t it? I could never ask you to do such a thing.”

Margaret allowed herself to imagine slapping Alice’s perfectly proportioned face.

The fashion was for fair beauties at the moment, which meant that Alice’s rich, flaxen curls and Marigold’s golden hair were all the rage. Alice was tall, willowy, and pale, with pursed pink lips and large, fluttering blue eyes. She always knew what colours would suit her best, and her dresses were cut in the newest and most expensive styles, as colourful as possible.

Margaret was well aware that besides the likes of Lady Alice and her own younger sister, she resembled a modest sparrow next to a pair of flamboyant parrots. Margaret’s hair was a light brown, thick and wavy but fairly ordinary, her eyes an unremarkable brown, her face even-featured but not brilliant, while her figure – well, there was no denying it. She was solidly built.

At least, that was what her mother had said, when the two girls were dressing for the party tonight.

“Try not to stand beside your sister too much, Margaret,” she’d said, almost as an afterthought. “You’ll look ugly if you do. What possessed you to choose that plum-coloured muslin? It quite drains you. Still, it’s too late to change, and besides, everybody will be looking at Marigold anyway.”

It was odd how words could burn into a person’s brain and stay there, resurfacing at the worst moments. Such as now, for example.

“I haven’t torn your gown, Lady Alice,” Margaret said, lifting up her chin to look Lady Alice in the eye. “See how smooth the edges of the tear are, hardly frayed at all? It’s been punctured by a heeled boot, I think. See, I am wearing dancing slippers. They are flat. The tear would be longer and ragged, if I had stepped on it.”

Lady Alice’s smirk dropped from her face. “Oh, of course, I should have known better than to argue with you, Miss Molyneux. You’re quite the scholar, if I remember rightly.”

Mr. Green stepped forward, and Margaret immediately wished he had not.

“Oh, do you two ladies know each other?” he said, glancing nervously between them.

Alice hesitated, but only for a moment. Her eyes lit up, and a truly beautiful smile graced her face. She turned the full force of it on Mr. Green, who blinked and began to blush.

“We were at finishing school together, Mr. Green,” she said, her voice light and melodious. That was the kind of skill the finishing school had taught – how to speak nicely. Margaret had never paid much attention.

Mr. Green was turning decidedly red. “Oh, how pleasant. You must be friends.”

Friends ? Margaret wanted to scream. Why on earth do you think we should be friends? Haven't you been listening to any of this?

“Indeed,” Alice laughed, blinking slowly. She reached forward, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Now, I remember you , Arthur. Your father was a great friend of my father. I remember your older brothers chasing you around the attics when you were small, and locking you up in a trunk. Do you remember?”

“I do remember,” Mr. Green said, laughing as if he hadn't just confided in Margaret how terrified he had always been of his older brothers. “Of course you were there – I'd quite forgotten. My older brother, Thomas, was quite in love with you. He used to tell anybody who would listen that he would marry you when he was older.”

Alice threw her head back and laughed. It was a very ladylike laugh.

“Oh, how hilarious. Well, I only remember you , Mr. Green, presenting me with a little bouquet of daisies one day when I visited your family, when you were no older than eight or nine. Do you know, I think I still have them pressed in a book somewhere?”

Mr. Green's face lit up. “Truly? You kept them?”

Margaret turned away. It was painful to watch. She had seen Alice try this trick on a great many gentlemen. She knew how to be fascinating – another skill taught at their finishing school – and how to make a gentleman feel as though he were the most interesting creature alive. And while he believed that, well, they would do frankly anything for her.

On cue, the music stopped, and the dancers broke out in applause. There would be a moment's reprieve before the next melody commenced, and the flurry of parting with former partners to seek new ones would ensue.

“Oh, a new set is starting,” Alice remarked, her tone calculatedly light. “I do so love to dance. Don’t you, Mr. Green? Unfortunately, I have no partner.”

This development was not a surprise to Margaret, but apparently it entirely bowled over Mr. Green. He hesitated, flushing red, clearly summoning up his courage.

“Would you care to dance, Lady Alice? I should hate for you not to be able to dance when you wished to do so.”

Alice gave a pleased, surprised little exclamation, and threw a triumphant look over the man’s shoulder at Margaret.

“Oh, Mr. Green, I should love to!”

He glanced apologetically at Margaret and handed over the half-finished lemonade.

“Do excuse me, Miss Molyneaux.”

“Think nothing of it,” she answered automatically, but the pair were already moving off towards the dance floor, arm in arm. Arthur shot one last glance at Margaret, and then the crowd swallowed him up.

Oh, well done, Alice, you have managed to get the last laugh once again, Margaret thought sourly, draining the lemonade. But now you have to dance with him, don’t you?

She would tire of him soon enough, probably long before the dance ended. She would abandon him as soon as she could, secure in the knowledge that she could easily steal him away from Margaret, should the necessity arise. Mr. Green, shy again and feeling as though he had done something wrong, would make his way back to the seats, but Margaret would not be there when he arrived.

Margaret would have felt sorry for him, if all of her empathy wasn't being used up on herself. She had lost count of the times that Lady Alice had swooped in during a party and scooped some man away from Margaret.

A gentleman and a lady stepped out of the crowd, and Margaret shook herself out of her maudlin thoughts and hurried to meet them. The lady was trying to twist away, but the gentleman had her hand trapped in the crook of his arm.

"There you are, Marigold," Margaret said shortly, throwing a vague smile at the gentleman. "Here, I have some lemonade for you."

The man scowled at her. "Ah, you must be the sister. We haven't been introduced, so..."

"I am Miss Molyneaux," Margaret interrupted. "And I'm sure you needn't worry about us not being introduced, as I don't believe you were properly introduced to my sister either before you asked her to dance, Lord Tumnus."

He narrowed his eyes, and Marigold took the opportunity to whisk her hand out from his arm and came to stand beside her sister. She smiled gratefully up at her and drained the lemonade.

Marigold was already very much admired. She had had no proper coming-out party – they could not afford such a thing – but she was sweet, and beautiful, and formed like a perfect little doll, and apparently that was enough to put her on a level with all kinds of plainer heiresses.

Lord Tumnus sniffed, gaze raking Margaret up and down with visible disdain. "It's Margaret, is it not?"

Margaret kept a tight smile on her face. "It is Miss Molyneaux, actually."

“Goodness, your parents liked their M names, didn’t they?”

“Very much so. We usually call my sister Goldie, though. If you’ll excuse us...”

“Now, wait a moment. I’m going to fetch Miss Marigold here some refreshments, and we’re going to sit and talk for a moment, aren’t we?”

He smiled briefly down at Margaret, the smile never getting anywhere near his eyes.

She smiled too, equally insincere. “Oh, I think not, your lordship. I think Marigold wants to stay with me, don’t you, dear?”

Marigold nodded earnestly.

“There you are, Lord Tumnus. Marigold needs to rest, and frankly I’m not sure that our mother would approve of...”

“Actually,” he interrupted – quite a rude thing to do, interrupting a lady, although Margaret was used to small slights like that by now – “It was your mother, Lady Keswick, who introduced us to start with.”

A cold sensation crept down Margaret’s spine, and she glanced down at her sister, eyebrows raised questioningly. Marigold gave the tiniest nod.

“I see,” Margaret managed, voice tight. “Well, thank you for taking care of Marigold for a while, Lord Tumnus. We shan’t keep you any longer.”

She didn’t wait for him to argue or to insist. Instead, Margaret simply tightened her arm through Marigold’s and towed her sister off into the crowd. Her heart pounded for a moment or two, until she assured herself that they were not being followed and allowed herself a breath of relief.

“Thank you, Maggie,” Marigold whispered, voice tight. “I don’t like him. He makes me feel... he scares me, Margaret. I didn’t like how he looked at me. It was like he was hungry.”

Margaret shivered. “Well, you’re safe with me, you know that. But what was Mama thinking of when she decided to introduce you to him?”

“I don’t know, but I want to go home. Will you ask Mama if we can go home, Maggie?”

“I shall tell Mama that we are going home,” Margaret corrected firmly. “Just stay with me, and we’ll find her.”

“Thank you, Maggie. What happened to Mr. Green, by the way? He seemed very nice. I thought he liked you.”

“So did I, until Lady Alice Bow appeared and charmed him away.”

Marigold pulled a face. “I hate that woman.”

“You, my dear, are too sweet to hate anyone. Lady Alice has a grudge against me, that’s for sure.”

Marigold frowned. “But what did you do to make her so angry at you?”

Margaret shook her head, sighing. “I haven’t the slightest idea, Goldie, not the slightest idea.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:45 am

The carriage ride home was cold, in more ways than one.

Goldie, wrapped in rugs and exhausted from dancing all night, fell asleep quickly, her head resting against Margaret's shoulder.

"We should have stayed longer," Lady Keswick said, voice flat and emotionless.

Margaret glanced over at her mother. "Goldie's tired. It was the right time to leave."

"If you say so."

Lady Keswick was a remarkably good-looking woman for her age, and the rich black velvet of her mourning clothes only seemed to improve her figure and face. She was tall and graceful, with none of the stockiness that afflicted her oldest daughter. She had sharp, beautiful features, and an air of authority that seemed to make crowds part for her.

Or at least, it had done, before her husband died of a sudden apoplexy and left the Molyneaux house notably low on its finances. Lady Keswick had not seen fit to burden her daughters with the details, but Margaret was not a fool.

"You ought not to call her Goldie in public, you know," Lady Keswick suddenly said. "It's a rather childish nickname."

Margaret bristled. "Mama, she is a child."

"Nonsense. Marigold might be married by the end of the year, a woman grown."

“She doesn’t wish to marry yet.”

Lady Keswick turned to look out of the window, although it was dark outside and surely all she could see would be her reflection, pale and hazy and staring back.

“I have been meaning to speak to you about something rather serious, Margaret, and I suppose that now is the best time.”

This was not a good sign. Drawing in a deep breath, Margaret steeled herself. At least Goldie was asleep and would not have to overhear anything troublesome. Margaret knew that her younger sister was fragile and tended towards anxiety. She was kind and wanted to alleviate everybody’s suffering all of the time.

Regrettably, the world was not fashioned in such a manner. Gentle and amiable young ladies like Goldie were often devoured and discarded, or at the very least, subjected to the advances of gentlemen like Lord Tumnus.

Who, apparently, had been introduced by Lady Keswick herself.

No, this “conversation” would be nothing good, Margaret was sure about that.

Lady Keswick took her time, fidgeting with her gloves and cuffs. For a moment, Margaret wondered whether her mother was actually nervous .

“It’s no secret that your father left us in a dire predicament,” she blurted out, quite suddenly. “The money is all but gone, and that’s before we take into account the debts he racked up. Your father was not a bad man, or a cruel one, but he was certainly foolish. There’s no dowry for you girls, not a penny. There is some money set aside for me, as a widow, but not much. Not enough to save us.”

Margaret swallowed. “I had guessed as much.”

Lady Keswick passed a hand over her face, and Margaret realised with a jolt that her mother's hand was shaking.

"You are very clever, aren't you, Margaret?"

She flinched. It didn't sound like a compliment.

"Always guessing, always figuring things out," Lady Keswick continued, a definite hint of bitterness creeping into her voice. "Well, let me tell you this. If you were pretty rather than clever, then perhaps you might have made a great match and saved us all. As it is, you can barely hold on to Arthur Green, the most unimportant son of a mediocre house. An offer from him..."

"...is not likely," Margaret interrupted. She wasn't entirely sure what drove her to say as much, only that her mother was likely to find out sooner or later, and it was probably best to just get it over with. "Lady Alice Bow took him away, and I fancy he'll be dreaming of her for a while now."

Not that Alice would think twice about a man like Arthur Green, even if he was too foolish to see it. Margaret felt sorry for him, even though she should probably keep her pity for herself.

"Wonderful," Lady Keswick said, voice heavy and tired. "Well, Margaret, you are nearly three-and-twenty and have never been beautiful. You are clever, although that does not particularly work in your favour. You have never applied yourself to catching a man's attention, and it's too late to try now. I think it's fair to assume that you are destined for spinsterhood."

Margaret avoided her mother's eye and picked at her skirts. It was last year's dress, the plum-coloured muslin, and seemed to suit her worse than it had then. There were a few discreet darns on the hem, but they could not afford to replace the gown. New gowns for Margaret were a waste, anyway. As Lady Keswick had reminded her

frequently, nobody would look at her.

“I think so, too,” she said at last, when it was clear that some response was expected. “And we have years before Goldie can be expected to make a decent match. If we can just...”

“Not necessarily,” Lady Keswick interrupted. “There is a gentleman very interested in Marigold at the moment. She can marry at once, you know. Seventeen is not so very young.”

There was a moment of silence between them.

“I hope you do not mean Lord Tumnus,” Margaret said at last, voice strained.

Lady Keswick had the grace to look embarrassed. “He’s a rich man, Margaret. He doesn’t care that Marigold has no dowry. He might seriously consider marriage with her.”

A wave of nausea rushed over her, making Margaret genuinely afraid that she might vomit up the mixture of champagne, lemonade, and biscuits that were all she’d eaten in the past few hours.

“You cannot let Goldie marry that man,” she managed at last. “You can’t. He’s... he’s awful. Didn’t you hear that rumour about him and some poor, friendless girl out in the country? He’s a monster!”

Lady Keswick sighed. “Men are just like that, Margaret.”

“She was fifteen!”

“Girls mature faster, my dear, you know that.”

“Nonsense. Nonsense!”

“Keep your voice down,” Lady Keswick hissed, nodding at Goldie. “Unless you want to wake up your sister and discuss it with her. She is not of age, and I am her mother, and that means I shall decide what is best for her. I have a legal and a moral right to do so.”

“You cannot believe that Lord Tumnus is going to be the best for her,” Margaret hissed. “Even you could not believe that. Goldie is terrified of him, don’t you see?”

“And what would you have me do, Margaret? It’s not as if you are going to save us all. I don’t think you understand just how close we are to disaster. It’s not simply a case of having no money anymore. We are destitute . Despite having let go most of the servants and selling off all the land we can, while we can, we are going to lose the house. Your father’s creditors are drawing near, much like hawks surveying their territory, and it won’t be long before one of them takes decisive action. Once they sense an opportunity, the situation could deteriorate rapidly. And then, Marigold will be vulnerable, and prey to far worse men than Lord Tumnus. I can assure you that there are worse men than him, and you will have no way of defending her from them.”

Lady Keswick fell silent after this impassioned speech, spots of colour burning in her usually white cheeks. She sat back against the carriage seats, staring blankly out of the window.

Margaret found that she was holding her breath, and a pain was spreading across her chest. A headache throbbed between her temples, and she felt sicker than ever. It could be a combination of the sickly lemonade and her own tension, or it could have been the jerking and rattling of the carriage. The coach was in dire need of re-springing, as well as reupholstering, a thorough scrubbing, and a proper re-lacquering. Alas, they found themselves lacking the funds to undertake even a fraction of these necessary repairs.

“I see,” Margaret said at last. “It doesn’t seem fair that we’re left to deal with Papa’s debts.”

Lady Keswick shrugged. “It isn’t fair, but the money and land were all his. Now that he’s dead, his creditors have the right to take a piece of the estate before it passes to us. We’re women, my dear. We don’t really own anything, not even ourselves.”

Goldie shifted against Margaret’s shoulder, sighing in her sleep. Margaret’s heart clenched.

Not my sister, she thought, feeling ill. I can’t let this happen to her. I have to save her. I must save her. Nobody else will.

I can’t save her.

“So what do you propose?” Margaret said at last. “We push Goldie at Lord Tumnus, who may or may not deign to marry her?”

Lady Keswick was quiet for a long moment after that.

“Not exactly,” she said at last. “Not yet. Only a few hours before we left, I received this ,” she withdrew a letter from her reticule, holding it up in something like triumph.

“And what does it say?” Margaret asked tiredly. She was thoroughly sick of her mother’s sense of drama.

“Let me give you a little context. One of your father’s creditors has written to me about the debt, seeking repayment. As he is – apparently – a gentleman, I thought I might try and throw myself on his mercy. I explained the situation, and waited to see what would happen.”

“A true gentleman wouldn’t chase a man’s widow and daughters to reclaim a debt,”

Margaret snapped.

Her mother continued as if she had not spoken. “Imagine my surprise and curiosity when the gentleman wrote back, requesting to meet with me – and both of you – to discuss the matter further. He says – and I quote – that a mutually beneficial arrangement might be met.”

Lady Keswick sat back, smiling triumphantly. A sense of unease prickled in Margaret’s gut.

“That could mean anything. It could mean that he thinks we have valuable things in our home, or that he is our only creditor. He might be less of a gentleman than you think and have some nefarious scheme in mind.”

“Nefarious scheme ? Goodness, Margaret, you read entirely too many novels. Still, I happen to know that this gentleman is single, and a duke . Imagine if he were to fall in love with Marigold?”

Margaret sighed. “Well, that isn’t likely to happen, is it?”

Her mother sniffed. “Stranger things have happened. Men of his calibre, my dear, do not need to marry rich women. Why should he not marry the pretty, young little thing?”

“Because Goldie is a child, Mama.”

Lady Keswick shook her head. “Not in the eyes of many men, my dear.”

That was an unsettling thought, and Margaret stayed quiet for a while after that. Only ten minutes later, they reached home.

Molyneaux Manor had once been a very fine place, the pinnacle of fashion and good taste. Of course, that was back when Margaret assumed that everything in her home was properly paid for, properly owned by them.

She was wrong about that. Only days after the funeral, the house had been stripped of its valuable things, which it turned out they had never properly owned at all. Lady Keswick had rushed around the house in a mad dash, trying to collect the things she wished to save before they could be taken by blank-faced men with notebooks. They marked off everything they took, noting its value beside.

Now, the place was emptier than before, dustier than before, and noticeably quieter. They hadn't entertained since before Lord Molyneaux died.

Margaret was vaguely aware that she ought to miss her father, but then again, it wasn't as if she'd seen very much of him before he died, except at the occasional suppertime. At times, it felt as though he'd never been there at all.

Goldie was put to bed almost immediately, yawning and stretching and entirely unaware of the conversation which had gone on over her head, about her future and theirs.

Upstairs, Margaret retreated to her own bedchamber. She had no lady's maid, of course. The head housemaid used to do her hair and Goldie's, and take care of their clothes, but the woman had put in her notice months ago, citing unpaid wages. Margaret felt guilty over that. She had gone to her jewellery box, intending to take something to sell to pay Lucy's owed wages, only to find that the box was empty.

Her mother had taken it all, half a year ago, and admitted to it freely. They had had a shouting match over that.

She undressed quickly, shivering in her night things in front of the empty grate. Firewood, of course, was expensive, and not to be wasted on bedroom warmth. She

would warm up quickly enough once she was in bed.

Margaret did not, however, get into bed right away. After a moment's thought, she seized her candle and ventured out into the dark hallway. Almost all of the lights were off, except for her mother's room at the end of the corridor, a beam of light making its way out into the hall.

Lady Keswick sat at her dressing table, applying a cold cream to her cheeks. She glanced briefly at Margaret in the mirror.

"Not asleep yet? I thought you were exhausted; you were so keen to come home. Did you want to borrow some of my cream? It's very good for the skin. Very smoothing, very whitening," she paused, glancing over at Margaret again. "You could certainly benefit from a night-time cream, I think. Some cream, or perhaps a powder..."

"I'm here to talk about that creditor," Margaret interrupted. "I assume you've already told him to meet us."

"You are right. He is coming tomorrow, so I expect Marigold and you to wear your nicest gowns and to be on your best behaviour."

"You truly think he'll agree to a deal? Even if he does, we'll still have other creditors to worry about."

Lady Keswick shrugged. "It's an opportunity, is it not? I think he may be willing to help us because... well, because he's a rather odd man. I don't believe he's been in Society these last few years, and he had a reputation as being somewhat harsh."

"Then how do you know he won't demand his money at once and throw us out?"

Lady Keswick screwed the cap back onto her little pot of cream, turning her face this way and that to admire her skin. She gave a small pout into the mirror, and Margaret

was reminded for the thousandth time that her mother had been described as a Great Beauty when she was young.

“He is unpredictable, from what I have heard,” she continued, thoughtfully. “I think that if he was simply going to demand his money back from us, he would have sent bailiffs and collectors to do so. I believe he’s done so in the past. This meeting means something, Margaret. It isn’t a formality, or a courtesy. He’s not a man given to either. He wants something from us, and it’s not the money we owe him. I, for one, want to find out what it is.”

Margaret swallowed hard. Suddenly, it seemed colder than before, her nightdress even thinner and more flimsy than when she’d left the bedroom. The wooden floor was ice cold under her bare feet.

“Who is he, then, Mama? What’s his name?”

Lady Keswick sighed. “I imagine you’ve heard of him. It’s the Duke of Stonehaven.”