







# The Wallflower's Awakening (Broken Hearts' Redemption #9)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** In the fertile soil of adversity, two wounded hearts must decide whether to wither beneath society's scorn or to bloom in defiance, cultivating love where only duty was meant to grow.

Sheltered wallflower Lady Juliet Fairmont withers under the scornful glare of high society each social season. Though she yearns to find a kindred spirit who will cherish her nurturing soul, duty chains her to an ambitious family impatient to marry her off. When a moonlit misunderstanding in the gardens leads to scandal tainting the shy wallflower, she soon finds herself bound by vows to the brooding Marquess of Estfield.

Haunted by first love's tragic end, imposing Weston Edgeworth, The Marquess of Estfield, barricades off further heartbreak by isolating himself from society's schemes. But unexpectedly inheriting a title chains him to responsibilities and matrimonial pressures he scorned. After a salacious scandal at a masquerade ball entraps Weston in marriage to the timid Lady Juliet, he braces for persistent misery. Yet as the reluctant newlyweds toil restoring the neglected grounds of his estate, her quiet empathy waters long-dormant seeds of hope in his guarded heart. And Weston wonders if this gentle soul might help transform sterile duty into a unexpectedly blossoming union.

However, outside forces soon sow chaos that threatens to uproot their tender seedlings of trust. Can two profoundly guarded yet hopeful souls ultimately cultivate an enduring bond from lifes unexpected calamities? Or will destinys cruel shears sever even the deepest roots before loves sweetest fruit may bloom?

The Wallflowers Awakening is a historical romance novel that you will love. No cheating, no cliffhangers,

and a happily ever after full of romance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

## Page 1

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Lady Juliet's palms continued to redden as she inspected the flowers in the garden. Fragrances of fresh roses and all forms of sweet leaves wafted through the air, and her nostrils welcomed all of them. Her shiny dress dragged on with her as she walked across the garden, feeling her shoes dig into the soft soil. She reached for her corset and loosened it a little, letting out a tight exhale in the process. One of the extravagant characteristics of the Willowbrook Estate was the pruned bushes that lined its gardens. Over the years, it had become a place of solace for Juliet herself. A place she could escape to, while running from the roars of the public, from her father, who would waste no opportunity to let her know her social period was coming to an end and hasten her resolve to find a man she would call her husband, or her half-brother, who would all but sing the same tune. In the Willowbrook gardens, she could let herself get lost in the roses, clear her head, and loosen her dress as little or as much as she could.

"Lady Juliet?" The familiar voice of her maid called from the garden's entrance. Juliet turned to look at her, at her gently folded hands and long white gown. Her maid was just as old as she was, maybe a few months older, and had grown to become one of her closest confidants over the years.

"Estelle, is there any reason you decided to tighten my corset even harder this morning?" Juliet asked, reaching for the string one more time. She could barely breathe and trusted Estelle well enough to be herself. While she grew a bit comfortable, she couldn't help but look forward to the next time she would be able to take off the whole thing, the next time she would be able to fully breathe.

"I apologise, milady. I didn't intend to—"

"It's alright." Juliet said, turning back to the flowers. "They look beautiful, don't you agree?"

"They do." Estelle's voice was louder. She had entered the garden.

"You know, I still remember walking across these flowers with my mother." Juliet continued, her fingertips grazing the flowers, triggering the floodgates of her memories. "Nothing gave her as much joy as the garden did."

"She must have been a happy woman." Estelle mentioned, her voice even closer.

"The happiest." Juliet responded, leaning forward to sniff a rose. Vivid images of her mother crept through her mind. She could see her, smiling heartily as the cool afternoon breeze wove through her hair. The happy memories do not come without consequences. The memories of her mother laughing in the gardens as her face glowed from the sun will always be followed by the ones where she died on a harsh winter night, only a few days later. Tears formed around Juliet's eyes. She couldn't hold back the reminiscence. She had never been able to. She remembered her mother's last days, how she struggled to eat, drink and retain her weight.

How she struggled to laugh.

"Milady, perhaps you need to stay away from the garden for a while." Estelle offered, knowing Juliet stopping all of a sudden could only mean one thing.

"And do what, Estelle?" Juliet asked.

A brief pause ensued between them and in that moment, all that could be heard was the rustle of nearby leaves gently being tugged by the wind.

"The new season is upon us." Estelle continued, a new form of excitement laden in

her voice. "Shall I send for the dressmaker? We might trade in a few choices and see what she comes up with this year?"

Juliet scoffed. "You should know by now, just how little the seasons mean to me. They've always been a way for my father to have me paraded around the halls like one of his paintings. This year is not going to be any different."

"You never know, milady."

"Oh, don't tell me you're this blind." Juliet said, heading down towards her maid. "None of these men ever want to marry Lady Juliet, the woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. They want Lady Juliet, daughter of Lord Willowbrook. They want the dowry. It's all they've ever been after. If you think this season is going to be any different, you're even more naive than I thought."

Estelle lowered her head, interlacing her fingers nervously. "Yes, milady."

Juliet sighed. "Look, I did not mean to cause you any sadness. I am just tired of everything. You know how it always happens, Estelle. The Estate gets riddled with men who are nothing but sycophants and social climbers. For once in my entire lifetime on this miserable earth, can I find a man who wants me for my heart and not what my father has to offer? Is that too much to ask?"

"What about Lord Neville? He never wanted you for your money, if I could remember." Estelle asked. Lord Neville had been one of her potential suitors the previous season.

"I had one dance with him and he spent the entire time glaring at my chest." Juliet replied.

Estelle grew silent and Juliet turned to the bushes one more time, her gown dragging

the flecks of the dark soil along with it.

"Do you think it was also this hard for my mother to find a husband? Did she have to wait this long?" Juliet asked.

Estelle drew a sigh, contemplating the question. "I cannot be sure. What I know is that if Lady Celia were alive today, she would want you to marry someone who truly knows your heart, not your dowry."

A wave of a slight smile swept across Juliet's face. She stretched out her hand and let it gently run through the roses. She dreaded new seasons. They only brought her fresh heartbreak and a growing hatred for the men in her town, but she knew better than to avoid it. Like all of her problems, she also had to face this one with her head high.

"Send for the dressmaker." She finally said, feeling the soft petals around her fingers. "I have a few ideas for this season and I must know if she can bring them to life or not."

"Yes, milady." Estelle nodded and her voice grew fainter. Juliet didn't need to turn to know her maid had left the garden.

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Weston's idea of life started and died with Eliza. For over six years, nothing had come close to summoning his spirit back to life again. He had been living through life instead of in it. He walked around like a ghost, spoke to acquaintances like a ghost, and even riding felt empty to him.

As he skipped across the green fields of his recently owned manor, he couldn't feel any joy from it. The harsh wind blowing through his hair as his white stallion galloped through the fields, the enormous view of the faraway mountains and the

misty valleys, and even the loud chants of his friend who was only a few yards behind did nothing to trigger any happiness in him. He was floating through life, and as far as he was concerned, he was fine with it.

Soon, he slowed down and let his friend catch up with him, ready to listen to an earful.

"Well, thank the heavens you stopped. For a while, I thought you were going to ride into the sunset and never turn back." His friend started, his voice rising with each word.

Weston scoffed. It wasn't like the idea never occurred to him in the first place.

"It is not my fault that the horse you ride is weak, Charles." Weston replied, gently tugging on the rope wrapped around his stallion.

"Indeed? Do you truly believe the issue lies with the steed?" Charles asked, the discontent in his face masked by the rumbles of both horses.

"Well, what else could it possibly be?" Weston asked.

"I could think of many reasons, just off the top of my head." Charles replied, the heat in his voice still evident.

Weston rolled his eyes. "Somehow, I don't doubt that."

The sun started dipping into the sky and cast the most glorious shade of hue onto the Estfield manor. Like most of the estates on the outskirts of London, the Estfield Manor witnessed the brightest and the harshest sides of nature, depending on the season. A few miles later, Weston got off his horse and started to lead it across the fields, his legs grazing past the overgrown leaves.



"We should start to prepare for the season." Weston started. "It is closer than we think."

"And are you going to entertain any of the festivities this time around?" Charles asked.

"I always entertain the festivities."

"No one is here but us and the horses, Weston. You don't have to put up the facade. The horses aren't going to tell your mother." Charles replied, dragging the rope alongside Weston.

"I do not know what you're talking about." Weston replied, wondering just how long he could feign ignorance.

Silence ensued between them for a few moments. They both continued to walk their horses with nothing but the warm sun shining on their faces.

"Very well, then." Charles replied.

Weston drew a sigh. Charles had been his closest friend for as long as he could remember, and he knew his friend wouldn't let this go easily. Perhaps it might do him some good if he shared the weight on his heart with someone else.

"It is the day after tomorrow." He started.

Charles turned to look at him. "What?"

"The day after tomorrow. It'll be six years since Eliza—" He paused. Six years, and he still couldn't bring himself to say the word. Six years, and he was still hoping it was all a dream. A nasty nightmare he would wake up from soon enough.

"Oh." Charles whispered, a wave of understanding crashing into him. "Do you plan to visit her resting place then?"

"Yes." Weston replied as if it wasn't the kind of question that needed consideration. Of course, he was going to visit her grave. He always did, even when it wasn't an anniversary.

"I shall come with you." Charles said, his voice firm.

"Charles. It is a long way away. I don't want you to—"

"I am not asking for your permission." Charles replied, the air of finality in his voice palpable.

Weston nodded, grateful. While he had become disillusioned with the world, it wasn't lost on him that Charles had been nothing but a good friend to him over the years. As he led his horse to the closest shade, he wondered how he would've survived the past six years if Charles hadn't been there, acting as the voice of reason and giving him the needed advice.

"I take it Lady Beatrice doesn't know the details of your journey? Or that you plan to go on one at all?" Charles asked once they stopped under a giant oak tree.

Weston scoffed. "And what good will come of that?"

The last thing he needed was for his mother getting wind of the fact that he was going to visit Eliza's grave. He could almost picture her, eyes wide and her throatily angry voice yelling at him.

"What you need to have in your mind is your progeny, Weston. You have way too much responsibility now to keep pining over your lost love."

Weston thought of his father and what he would say if he were alive today. He didn't know his father for long, but he knew he was a proud man who also bothered himself with posterity. He knew his father would support his mother without hesitation. Perhaps it was a good thing he only had to deal with one overbearing parent instead of two.

"Your mother may seem controlling at times, but you know she comes from a place of love, don't you?" Charles asked once the dust had settled a little. "I know this is a difficult conversation to have, but it is necessary. Not just for your good but for Estfield Manor."

Charles wasn't wrong. The pressure to produce an heir was heavier on him, now more than ever. Before the fate of the manor depended on him, his cousin, Richard, had been the one who had to worry about all of this. When the news of Richard's death reached him in his house one cold night, he felt all kinds of shivers run through him. Richard had died without an heir, which meant he was next in line. Not only did he come into even more responsibility, he had to deal with the never-ending rants of his mother. Beatrice never shied away from bringing up Richard in any conversation with her son, no matter how minute.

"Richard died without an heir. If you do not want to suffer the same fate, I suggest you start to look for a wife. One that'll give you lots of children."

Every time he had this talk with his mother, he would try to end it as fast as possible without having it turn into a full-blown altercation. He couldn't tell her he was nursing the wound Eliza had left in his heart, the wound he wasn't sure was going to heal anytime soon.

Right after the death of his father when he was fourteen, Weston had to forcefully mature into a man as early as possible. Childlike wonders didn't do him any good anymore. He couldn't find joy in the smallest things like the leaves, the sky, or the

sun like he usually did. For a while, he became a shell of himself. Eliza had been the one who was able to breathe new life into him. She had been the only one who could get him to open up and enjoy life once again. The joys of life peaked with her. After her death, Weston knew nothing would be able to bring him back to life anymore. Not the vast acres of land he'd inherited, not the title of Marquess, not even the value that came with being the new owner of a manor.

"You know the social season is only a few days ahead. Who knows? Perhaps you may find someone this time around. Someone whose heart matches yours. Someone who wants you for what's in your mind and not your estate."

Weston smiled. "The sun has a higher chance of freezing."

"I'm sure there's some lady in another part of the country right now thinking the same thing." Charles replied.

Weston said nothing in reply. He'd been through several seasons, and yet he couldn't bother to pay attention to any woman for longer than thirty seconds. They were all vain and haughty. They weren't ready to pay attention to whatever he had to say either. They weren't engaging in conversations.

They weren't Eliza.

"It is getting late." Charles whispered. Grabbing the rope one more time. "Unless you want to receive another lecture from your mother over dinner, we should head back."

Weston didn't argue. He'd had his daily fill of the outdoors anyway. He might as well retire into his room and pore over his books until the night fell.

As they rode back to the manor, Weston couldn't help but wonder if Charles was right. Could this season be the one he finds someone for himself? Someone who

could make him happy like Eliza did?

Almost as soon as it came, the thought disappeared. Like he'd said earlier, the sun had a better chance of freezing over.

## Page 2

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Breakfast at the Willowbrook Manor was a grand affair. The table was usually filled with all sorts of baked and roasted foods. Fruit like grapes and figs hung from corners of the table, and space was barely left for each family member to have a spot to eat.

This morning was no different. While there were only five people surrounding the table, the food available was enough to feed an entire village for a day. Juliet made a mental note to appease the ladies in charge of the kitchen. The silence around the dining table was palpable and was so thick it could be cut with a butter knife. Spoons clinked against fine china, and full mouths gently chewed. Juliet's eyes scanned every other member of the dining table for a minute. Right before her, on the other end of the table, was her father, Lord Peter Fairmont, whose face was completely buried in his breakfast. On her left was her half-brother, Adam, and his wife, Camilla, feeding him grapes and bits of roasted pork. As Adam took in another grape from his wife, he gently leaned closer to her and playfully bit her cheek. She laughed and gently pressed her face into his arm, a wave of red betraying her cheeks. Juliet tried as much as possible not to grimace. She decided to look the other way instead, and her eyes settled on the last member of the dining table, Aunt Grace, who was busy looking around the table as well. When their eyes met, Juliet tried to return to her food as much as possible.

"Juliet. I heard you sent for the dressmaker." Aunt Grace started, and Juliet forcefully closed her eyes, hoping whatever was about to happen would go by very fast. "That means you're preparing for the new Season. Are you going to try and make an effort this year?"

Juliet cut a piece of chicken skin off her bone and grabbed a fork. "I don't know. Will the gentlemen of the up-coming season still possess the same lack of wit as the

predecessors?"

Grace sighed. "You're going to have to settle on a husband one of these days, Juliet. You're not growing any younger."

Juliet noticed her father was no longer paying attention to his food. From her periphery, she could tell he was staring straight at her.

"Perhaps I shall continue to tend to the garden until I find one good enough for me." Juliet replied.

"Juliet, no man is going to want you in a few years. You'll be too old for them." Adam chipped in, his voice sleek and meandering.

"Perhaps that is for the best." Juliet said, a tiny retort etched into her voice. She didn't like Adam very much, and her dislike for him began to rise again.

"That's enough." Her father growled, his hands slowly beating the table.

Juliet grew silent. Arguing with Aunt Grace or Adam was one thing. Arguing with her father was practically a death sentence. Peter threw her a long, cold stare, and for a moment, Juliet wondered what hell her father was about to unleash on her. Then he turned to Adam and Camila.

"Camilla, You shall be in charge of the gardens from tomorrow."

Juliet's ears stilled. "What?"

"I'll be honoured, my Lord." Camilla replied, the smile on her face evident in her voice.

"Father, what is this?" Juliet asked, feeling the news hit her like a ton of bricks.

"I'll have you know that no daughter of mine shall spend her marriageable years whistling alone in a garden and tending to roses."

"Father—"

"You shall make yourself as appealing as possible to the men that'll grace our estate this season. If you can't land a husband, you might as well move to another part of the country."

"Father—"

"That's enough from you. You've failed to get yourself a husband for the past three years. That is the most unusual behaviour." Peter said, his voice rising. Juliet knew nothing could be done to appease her father whenever he started to boil from within. The best thing to do was to keep quiet and not to fan the flames of his anger.

"Perhaps if you spent half the effort you do on the roses into looking for a husband, you might have gotten one by now." Adam said in his annoyingly sleek voice.

Juliet glared at Adam. He was enjoying this as he did anything that brought her misery. Camilla was still holding onto his arm. Juliet's eyes darted from him to her. She was staring back and had the most coy smile on her face. One that annoyed Juliet even more. Camilla was a social climber. That much was obvious. No one in their right mind would want to settle for her half-brother. Apart from his title and inherited wealth, he had nothing to offer. Adam couldn't hold long conversations without angering either the women he was engaging with or just women in general. Sometimes, she found it hard to believe they both came from the same father.

"This season, you have to get yourself, at the very least, a Marquess or an Earl."



Adam continued. Juliet turned to look at her father, hoping he would do something and keep him quiet, but alas, Lord Peter's eyes were buried in his food once again.

"You have a substantial dowry. No man wouldn't want to be with you." Adam continued.

"Was that how you got her?" Juliet mentioned, turning towards Camilla, whose smile dropped almost instantly.

"Have you been hit on the head by a brick?" Adam's eyes widened in anger.

"I mean—your dowry was just as sizable as mine. Even more."

"Have you gone mad!?" Adam asked again, now rising from his seat.

"Remind me again, how did you and Camilla meet each other?"

"Father, are you going to watch her talk to me this way?" Adam asked, turning to look at Lord Peter.

"Perhaps we all need to simmer down." Aunt Grace said, her maternal instincts kicking in. "Adam, why don't you sit down and continue with your food? You know how Juliet can be sometimes."

"It's no surprise she can't find a husband." Adam replied, lowering himself onto his seat.

Aunt Grace rose from her chair and gently slid closer to Juliet.

"What did you do that for? You know how angry your brother can get." She said her voice in a mellow and admonishing whisper.

"Half -brother." Juliet corrected. "And I don't mind the anger at all. I don't think you should too."

"This isn't going to help anyone, Juliet." Aunt Grace continued. "You can't spend the rest of your life looking after roses."

"Why not?"

"Because you're a lady, Juliet. You can't think about what's good for yourself alone. You have to think about Willowbrook all the time. Not getting married on time is reflecting poorly on the estate. Come with me."

Aunt Grace rose from her seat one more time, took a short bow before Lord Peter, and exited the dining room. Juliet grabbed a glass of water and sipped it before doing the same. She could feel Adam's heated gaze in the back of her head as she slowly made her way out.

"So, I did not want to say this in front of your father because I do not want another war on my hands." Grace started, once they were out of earshot and in a quiet part of the court. A few guards stood still at the closest entrance, and some maids gently walked past them, quickening their steps once they saw Aunt Grace.

"What is it?"

"I have found a way for you to shed your wallflower ways. You say the problem is that these men only want you for your money and what you look like. Is that right?"

"Yes?" Juliet replied, narrowing her eyes. If she knew anything about her aunt, it was how eccentric and unusual her ideas might be sometimes.

"What if you come to the Spring Masquerade Ball?"

Juliet felt a shade of heat brush through her cheeks. The Spring Masquerade Ball was one of the most significant events of the year, and it was always hosted by her Aunt Grace herself.

"You want me to dress up as one of the masquerades? Do you really think me that unappealing, Aunt Grace?" Juliet asked.

"Juliet. You are as pretty as they come. But perhaps you can strike up conversations better with men when they don't know what you look like. You know what they say; a mask gives a lady the right amount of courage."

Juliet sighed. The idea wasn't utterly repulsive to her. Now that her garden was at stake and at the risk of becoming a giant pound of dust, thanks to Camilla's exceptional gardening skills, she needed to take action now more than ever.

"Think of just how many of the men of London you shall be able to dazzle without showing your face." Aunt Grace continued, an encouraging edge visible in her voice.

"A disguise makes even the meekest of maids a bold lady at a costume ball." Juliet mentioned.

"Absolutely." Aunt Grace replied. "So you shall come?"

Juliet let a few seconds pass as she thought the idea over one more time.

"Why not?" She finally replied. If this would get both her father and her brother off her back, she was ready to do it.

"Wonderful." Aunt Grace whispered, the delight in her voice as present as the thick air in the court. "I shall get the dressmaker started on your costume."

"One more thing." Juliet continued, watching the elation on Grace's face slowly fade. "I shall be able to design my costume with roses, yes?"

Aunt Grace became full of smiles again. "Of course, my darling. Whatever you want."

Juliet nodded. While she didn't exactly show it, some part of her was looking forward to the Masquerade Ball. Perhaps this might be the solution to her problem after all.

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Estfield Manor was filled to the brim with men and women from all parts of London, and the idea of going out to meet them made Weston uncomfortable.

It was his sister Anne's coming out ball, and if it were up to him, the event would be as minimal as possible. Unfortunately, his mother was in control, and she wanted to ensure her daughter's integration into the social society was known to all and sundry.

Weston rose from his chair and walked to the nearby mirror. He adjusted his cravat before heading out of his bedroom. He could hear the wave of murmurs from the hall as he walked to his sister's bedroom, but he tried to pay it no mind. He should manage to push through the day, and before the event would come to an end, he could retire to his room. He stopped right in front of Anne's door. One of her maids was fixing her arm gloves.

Anne saw him appear through the mirror placed right before her.

"Oh, Weston. This is all very wonderful, is it not?" She asked, unable to contain the excitement on her face.

"Yes, it is. And you look really beautiful." Weston replied, leaning against the

doorframe. "Any man would be lucky to have a dance with you tonight."

Anne had always been one for fairytales. She believed in love and happy endings and all the stuff people grow out of after life had dealt with them. She was the complete opposite of Weston.

"Are you ready?" Weston asked after the maids had left her side, leaving her to look at herself in the mirror again.

She nodded slowly. "Yes."

Weston managed to crank up half a smile. He stretched out his right hand and watched his sister walk to him. She slipped her arm in his, and they both walked past her doorway and towards the giant steps that led down to the hall.

"Is it a bad thing if I say that I am feeling nervous?"

"It is okay to feel nervous." Weston replied, giving his sister a reassuring squeeze. "Perhaps you might find a handsome man to dance with tonight. He will ask for your hand in marriage, and you shall ride off into the sunset with your beautiful children."

"Hilarious." Anne whispered, rolling her eyes. Weston stifled a chuckle. Soon, they got to the steps, and after giving Anne one more reassuring smile, he descended with her amidst the loud music and the wild chatter of the noblemen and women, all walking around, mingling with each other.

"Lady Anne." A deep voice greeted her once Anne's feet touched the floor. "I am Lieutenant Marcus Henderson. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Anne put her hand in his and watched him kiss it. "I am pleased as well."

"May I have the first dance? I would be honoured."

Anne turned to Weston, her curious eyes searching for his approval. Weston nodded and threw her a full smile. She let Marcus take her hand in his and lead her into the middle of the hall.

"He is a very fine man." Weston heard his mother say behind him, causing him to almost jump out of his skin.

"Pray, you cannot approach me so stealthily, mother." Weston sighed.

"What do you think of her?" Beatrice continued, ignoring her son's warning. She'd gestured towards a young maiden in the brightest blue gown in the hall, chatting with a few more ladies.

"Who is that?" Weston asked as though he was interested.

"Lady Helena Waters. Her father is the Duke of Thornewood. Pleasant on the eyes, is she not?"

Weston shrugged. "I suppose."

"She holds a lot of power at court, Weston. You and her together would be an unstoppable match."

Weston nodded. "I'll think about it, mother."

Of course, he wouldn't. From afar, he couldn't be less impressed by Lady Helena. He couldn't be less impressed by everything and anything at this ball. He'd become immune to the wonders, the pomp and pageantry of events like this.

His eyes turned to the middle of the court one more time. Anne and Marcus were still together, gently swaying to the addictive quartet. For a minute, he imagined them to be Eliza and him instead, having their first dance on the very same court. He remembered meeting her for the first time in a satin green gown, one that had brought out the magnificence in her eyes. He remembered the chills he felt through his body when Eliza had put her hand in his for the first time. Now, everything around him was just a hollow reminder of the joy he once had in his life. He'd managed to steel his heart over the past six years. He could do the same for this one night. As Anne and Marcus continued to dance through the night, Weston wondered if anyone would be able to pull him from his reverie. If anyone would be able to shine a light into his wounded heart and fill the hole Eliza had left in him.

His eyes took another sweep of the court one more time and landed on Lady Helena Waters. She was no longer talking to her friends. Instead, she was looking right back at him. Weston judged she'd been doing that for quite a while.

Helena slightly bowed from where she stood, a bright smile on her face. He returned the smile and gave her a slight nod as well.

This was going to be quite a long night.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Outside the Willowbrook Manor, Juliet stood with her family, gently fanning herself as they waited for their respectful carriages. While the sun had disappeared entirely from the sky, the dresses they all had on still managed to put them in a lot of heat, Juliet especially. She was donned in a bright blue gown that dragged on the dirt as she walked. Her face was completely covered with a mask that had been designed by the dressmaker a few days back after Aunt Grace told her about the Masquerade Ball. The mask had slight adornment of roses on all sides, and to a point, she looked immensely ridiculous.

"I can't believe you're wearing this to the ball." Lord Peter sighed, taking another look at his daughter. He was making no effort to hide his dissatisfaction. "You might as well decide to only go to the ball in your inner wear."

Juliet said nothing. Angering her father as they waited for their carriages to arrive had never been a good idea. She'd seen it first-hand when he'd thrown a fit because one of his partners wouldn't let him have some share in a certain farmhouse. Her father could get really cross if he wanted to, and whenever he did, no one could do anything about it.

"It's the dress I wanted." She decided to say instead.

"Well, if your plan is to make sure all the men tonight stay away from you, I would say you're off to a good start." Adam sneered from the other side. Juliet turned to look at him, a devilish expression on her face. One he fortunately couldn't see due to the mask she had on. As usual, he had Camilla by his side. She was dressed in a simple green frock and had her hair done up by her maids. Her gloved hand had slipped into Adam's arm, and she'd leaned into him just as she did at the dining table.



"I know why I'm going to the ball, but why are you going?" She asked, still staring at Adam. "You already have Camilla. Why do you need to be there?"

A slight pause ensued between them as she watched Adam struggle to find his words.

"I'm going because Father's going." Adam replied, his voice hazy and lower.

"Father is going as my chaperone. Are you doing the same for Camilla as well?" Juliet asked, a smile creeping up her face.

Adam's face grew red. "What are you implying, Juliet?"

"Well, to each their own. Endeavouring to revive one's marriage is not always a misguided notion. At times, one simply requires the right individual to facilitate such a revival."

"Father? Did you hear her?!" Adam yelled, turning to look at Lord Peter.

"Stop angering your brother, Juliet." Peter said, looking ahead. A cloud of dust was slowly approaching them, and in front of the cloud were two carriages bearing the insignia of the Willowbrook Manor.

"Well, the carriages are here. Now you can keep your mouth to yourself as you ride with Lord Peter." Camilla said, a hateful expression on her face. Juliet smiled again, grateful they couldn't see her face.

"Would you like to have a mask too, Camilla? I could have the dressmaker bring it to you before we get to the ball."

Camilla's eyes grew dark. She was growing angry as well.

"You know, I heard Lady Violet Northam and her group of gossip mongers will be at the ball." Camilla resumed. "If I were you, I'd stay away from anything that could cause me any form of scandal."

"Are you sure she didn't just tell you herself? Perhaps you're a member of this group you speak of." Juliet retorted. Having a mask on her face might be the most excellent idea she'd ever had, after all. If her face had been uncovered, she wouldn't have been able to give back these sharp, snide remarks at her half-brother and his wife.

"That is enough!" Juliet heard her father yell. "You're a Lady, Juliet, and you will comport yourself as such. No one likes a Lady with a loose tongue."

"But Father—"

"Do not interrupt me again, or I will have this embarrassing thing taken off your face!" Peter continued.

The carriages stopped before them, and they all climbed in. Adam and Camilla got into one, and Juliet got into the other with her father.

"And you are still not free of your obligations. The whole reason I'm allowing this profanity of a dress in the first place is to make sure you secure a husband." Peter continued once the carriage started to move. "If you fail to do that today, I will be very disappointed in you."

Juliet sighed. "I feel very comfortable in this attire, Father. Any man worthy of my hand will wish to know my character before trying to see what I look like."

"I do not care for your tone, Juliet. I see the roses around your face are beginning to affect your tongue and your reasoning."

Juliet didn't think to protest. Nothing good was going to come from it.

"I apologise, Father."

Peter waved his hand in disregard as the carriage crossed over a huge stone, causing it to become unstable for a while.

"Remember, your only task today is to impress the members of the elite class in any way necessary. I do not care if they have to see your face. Make sure you represent Willowbrook in an orderly fashion. Do not wag your tongue dangerously at the men like you do to your brother."

"Yes, Father." Juliet replied.

"And try to behave like a lady this time. We do not want a repeat of what happened last year."

Juliet shook her head, trying to shake away the flood of memories threatening to escape their prisons in her mind. She had tried incredibly hard to forget what had happened the previous year but her father bringing it up now had made all her efforts ultimately futile.

She'd been in the garden at one of the grand affairs during the season, examining the roses. It also happened to be one of the days that Willowbrook Manor housed several people from all parts of London. She'd gotten stung by a bee and had grown disoriented. She'd fallen into the dirt soil, dampening her dress and her well-made hair. Somehow, she had managed to appear in the drawing room, looking majestically unruly and sending the ladies and the men into temporary shock. The look on their faces had continued to haunt her, even to this very day, more so now that her father had brought it up.

"Yes, Father." She repeated, now doing all she could to lock away those memories once again. Some part of her was looking forward to the ball, and not even her father's unkind remarks could take that away from her. She looked outside the carriage window as they rode past the rocky road. The sky was slowly darkening, and the cold, dry evening winds were starting to blow onto her face. Willowbrook Manor was a prison. One she couldn't wait to escape. She couldn't wait to be done with her father's temper tantrums and her half-brother's foolish remarks. Perhaps this might be the night she found her one true love, once and for all. She needed this to happen more than anything else.

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As he adjusted his cravat in front of his mirror, Weston's mind strayed a little, and he wondered just how tightly he would have to squeeze it so he could die and escape his mother. She sat in his bedroom chair, watching him button up his red waistcoat.

"I don't know why you would choose to appear at the Ball looking like a merchant commoner. Your choice of color baffles and disappoints me, Weston." Beatrice started, staring hard at her son through the mirror.

Weston reached for his tie one more time and thought about how long it would really take for life to get sucked out of him.

"Couldn't you wear something else? Like the blue jacket, I had the dressmaker make for you the other day. You were supposed to wear it for Anne's coming out ball, and you didn't."

"Crimson has always been my colour, mother. You've seen me wear it almost all the time. I don't see any reason to change it this time around."

Of course, that wasn't the absolute truth. He couldn't be less interested in the ball. He

was only going in the first place because it was another opportunity for his sister to familiarize herself with society's elite. Just because he couldn't find someone to settle down with didn't mean he wouldn't try to ensure Anne didn't suffer the same fate.

"You wouldn't impress many women in that garb, Weston." Beatrice continued.

That was the point. Weston thought, but he decided to keep it to himself. The last thing he needed was another fit on his hands. His friend, Charles, had traveled to South England and would not return until dusk. He had no one in his corner like he used to.

"The only reason I am attending this ball in the first place is for Anne. Nothing else." He said, remaining as level-headed as possible even though his heart and mind were both screaming out. "I don't exactly look forward to auctioning myself off like some prized horse."

"This is just as important for you as it is for Anne." Beatrice continued, a scolding edge evident in her voice. "Since you decided something was wrong with Lady Helena—"

"I never said anything was wrong with her." Weston retorted, growing well aware that his mother was only trying to bait him.

"I handed her to you on a silver platter, and you decided to do nothing with it."

"And that was no fault of Lady Helena, mother. I wasn't interested."

"You need to stop hounding around with this narrative. You're a Marquess now. It is your duty to have a wife. I don't want to hear any nonsense about Eliza anymore. It has been six long years. Brooding over the past is not going to do you or anyone else any good."

Weston nodded. "Yes, mother."

The fate of Estfield Manor relies on you. Look at what happened to Richard."

Weston drew a tired breath. Not this again.

"He died without an heir. Do you want that to be your fate as well?"

"No, mother."

"Then I suggest you start impressing on London's elite spinsters. None of them will be as influential as Lady Helena, but we might be able to salvage what's left of this crisis."

Weston nodded again, his hands now on his sides as he stood before the giant mirror. He was done dressing up.

"I will get married when I am ready, Mother. Not a second before."

"You will not take that tone with me, son." Beatrice retorted, rising from the chair. Her shoes knocked menacingly into the ground as she walked towards Weston, an angry expression on her face. "Be that as it may, I am still your mother."

Weston nodded and lowered his face to the ground. "Apologies, Mother."

"Now, you will attend the ball with your sister, and be sure to talk to a few other women. Most of them are going to be behind their masks, so striking conversations shouldn't be as hard as it has to be. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, mother."

"Good. I shall go check on your sister to see if she's ready. Inform the steward to ready the carriages. We leave in a few moments."

Weston nodded.

"And change that waistcoat. The blue one is far bet—"

"I either go like this, or I don't go at all." Weston interrupted, his voice solid and firm. He might be required to obey his mother, but this decision he had to make himself.

Beatrice huffed in desperate resignation and, a few moments later, stalked angrily out of her son's room.

Weston turned to look at the mirror. The clothes made him feel restricted and somewhat limited. He wasn't free. The pressure of the title was bearing down on him, and he knew it was only a matter of time before he snapped.

A few months back, he'd purchased a cottage along the Scottish border. No one else knew this apart from Charles. For a few moments, he entertained the thought of having to retire to the cottage and live the rest of his life surrounded by silence and sheer freedom. He exited his room and asked one of his servants to fetch the head steward.

"Are the carriages ready? We leave soon." He asked once the steward appeared.

"Yes. The horses are being brushed one last time, Marquess." The steward replied. Weston nodded and watched him retire back into his duties.

He was absolutely sure the steward would be capable of taking care of the Manor himself if he had to. He returned to his room and looked outside the window at the vast grassy fields ahead. The sky had grown entirely dark, and the moon was

beginning to appear slowly. He reminded himself once again that he was only doing this for his sister. The image of his secret cottage resurfaced in his mind once again. He thought of the silence he would be able to enjoy if he could escape the shackles of politics. He never asked for any of this, and if he could give them away, he would in a heartbeat. The idea of living out his years among tall trees and a babbling brook became a guilty fantasy of his.

"This is only temporary." He whispered as if giving himself a sordid reminder. All he needed to do was ensure his sister was well-received by the social society. He liked the lieutenant she had danced with the other day. If he were serious about her, he would return to ask for her hand. Weston was sure Anne liked him too, and if all went well, a wedding would be underway. Once he managed to marry his sister off to a good man, he would try to escape his life. He would run away from the estate, from his mother, from the title and the pressure that came with it. He would leave everything behind.

Even his beloved crimson waistcoats.

A maid gently knocked on his door, shaking him from his reverie.

"What is it, Hilda?" He asked, turning to look at her and muster the slightest smile.

"Lady Beatrice and Lady Anne are ready for you, my lord." Hilda replied, taking a slight bow.

Weston nodded and gently waved her off. "I shall join them in a moment."

He turned to look at his mirror once again. He just had to get through tonight and a few other nights that would come with it. This was only temporary. Once his sister was settled, this would no longer be his story. He could reach for the freedom he had been dreaming about for so long. Once and for all, he would be able to have a life of



his own and live it the way he wanted without any input from his mother whatsoever.

But for now, he needed to face this night and everything it would bring head-on. No matter how hard he tried to protest, there was no escaping the night. He'd been attending events for a long time. This would be no different. He just needed to get through the night, and then, freedom would be on the horizon.

He reached for his mask atop the bedroom dresser.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Lady Grace swam through the chatter aimlessly, her gaze fixed only on the search for Juliet. The Spring Masquerade Ball was held every year to integrate new men and women into the elite society so they could get accustomed to each other and hopefully get married. While this year's was no different, Grace had more at stake because the major reason she held it was to find a match for her niece. Juliet had suffered one too many rejections in the past seasons, and it was beginning to weigh down on Grace.

“Marvelous party, as usual, Lady Grace. You've outdone yourself.” A voice called amongst the chatter as Grace continued to wade through the crowd. She stopped and gave a courteous reply before heading off one more time.

Grace herself was not fortunate to have a husband, a feat which by no means was a fault of hers. She had gotten married a long time ago, but her husband had suffered a severe case of the fever and was not able to survive it. This was also around the same time her beautiful sister, Lady Celia, suffered the same disease. Grace remembered just how distraught she had been when her sister and husband died with merely months between. Since the terrible disaster, she had always felt some form of innate responsibility for Juliet.

Grace saw one of the housemaids moving around the crowd with fruit trays and hurried towards her.

“You. Wait!” She called as she quickened her steps. Amidst the loud chatter surrounding them, the maid heard her and turned in her direction.

“Is anything the matter, my lady?” The maid asked, a quizzical look of concern

resting on her face.

“Juliet. Have you seen her?” Grace asked once she got close enough.

“Last time I saw her, she was hanging by the balcony.”

“Thank you.” Grace said, gently tapping the maid on the arm and heading off once more.

She was almost at the door leading to the balcony when she got stopped one more time by a feminine voice, determined to compliment the effort she put into planning the ball.

“Marvelous effort on your part, Lady Grace.” The voice called behind her. She froze. She would recognize that voice anyway. It was the voice behind most of the salacious scandals in town. The voice of the one and only infamous gossip monger in all of London. Grace cleared her throat anyway and turned to look at her.

“Lady Violet Northam.” She said curtly, taking note of the slightly tall lady in a silky green gown before her and the two other ladies who stood firmly behind her.

Lady Violet's mask was flimsy at its very best. It covered her face but not enough to deem her unrecognizable. Perhaps that was what she was going for.

“So nice of you to come.” Grace greeted, trying to remain as level-headed as possible.

“Pray tell, are you jesting? I would never miss this for the whole of England.” Lady Violet replied, gently pulling out her makeshift fan.

“I hope you've been well entertained by the maids. Let me know if you need

anything.” Grace said again, unsure of where the conversation was going.

“I find everything to be quite to taste, thank you very much.” Lady Violet replied, a smile of satisfaction settling on her face.

“I’m glad.” Grace replied. “I’m afraid I must hurry. I am searching for someone, and it is important I see her as soon as possible.”

“I shall let you go, Lady Grace.” Lady Violet replied, slightly bowing. Grace did the same and took off again. Her niece was at the balcony, and she needed to talk to her, or warn her.

Lady Violet Northam was like a hound, who always sniffed around balls and parties for scandals. She could turn the tiniest miscommunication into a massive war. It is no wonder she still attended balls and parties like this since she hadn’t found a husband yet.

“There you are.” Grace sighed, immense relief coursing through her veins once she set her eyes on her niece. “I was worried you might have stolen one of the carriages and rode back to Willowbrook.”

Juliet stood, slightly resting against the railing. The mask was still settled on her face, but Grace could tell she wasn’t happy.

“What happened?” Grace asked, moving closer to the railing near Juliet.

“This is a futile effort, Aunt Grace. The men I’ve been engaging with so far only either want me to take my mask off, or they want to know who my father is.”

“Oh, dear.”

“Father has gone to chat with other chaperones. I do not know where Adam and Camilla are. I am all on my own here. I might take you up on that idea and steal a carriage after all.”

Grace allowed a moment of silence to pass between them—one filled with everlasting chatter and loud music.

“You know that will only enrage your father.” Grace replied. “Perhaps you just need to try harder.”

“I have tried as hard as I can, Aunt Grace. Perhaps marriage is not cut out for me.”

Grace reached for her niece's shoulder and squeezed it affectionately. “Your future husband is out there, Juliet. For all we know, he is probably here, right now, in the hall, dancing miserably because no other woman will interest him.”

Juliet smiled behind her mask. “I appreciate this a lot, Aunt Grace.”

Grace smiled and squeezed Juliet's shoulder again.

“I promise you, there's someone out there for you. Sometimes, all you need to do is to stop looking.”

Juliet nodded. Grace shifted away from the railing and made to go back inside the hall.

“I have to go. There are people in there who need me. If you require any assistance, do not hesitate to call upon me. Or worse, ask one of the maids to fetch me.”

Juliet smiled. “Thank you, Aunt Grace.”

Grace turned away from Juliet and headed back inside. Some part of her felt wounded as she found herself amidst the crowd of masked men and ladies dancing. She couldn't help but feel like she had failed Juliet somehow, and in failing Juliet, she had failed her sister.

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“It must be exciting, isn't it? Becoming a Marquess?” Lady Helena Waters asked in the middle of her slow dance with Weston.

Weston, who couldn't be less bothered, replied with a grunt.

“My mother informs me that part of the reason you came to the ball is for your sister.”

Weston nodded. He looked past Helena and into the crowd. His eyes swept around for his sister.

“You have to admit, though, this is more delightful than you thought it would be.” Helena said, oblivious to Weston's disinterest.

Wrong. It was worse. So far, all the women he'd chatted with were more interested in his newly acquired title. After talking with the third lady at the party, he began to grow suspicious that his mother had been sending those ladies to him with tales of his new title.

His eyes finally landed on Anne in the corner of the hall, dancing wholeheartedly with a tall, handsome young man. Weston smiled, perhaps for the first time since getting to the ball. Anne did know how to pick them.

“Do you think we might have the opportunity to dine together anytime soon? There is

still a lot about you that I am curious to know.” Helena asked, shaking him out of his reverie.

Weston suddenly grew hard of breathing. He was feeling suffocated, and he needed to get out as soon as possible. He thought of the most subtle way to excuse himself without the lady taking offense.

“I’m afraid I must ease myself. Would you excuse me, Lady Helena?” He finally said. A wave of red hot flashed across his cheeks as the last word escaped his mouth. Helena looked at him for a while, intricately amused. After a while, she bowed gently.

“Absolutely, my lord.”

Weston threw her a grateful smile and broke the dance. He could feel Helena's tight glare on him as he headed outside the hall. He removed his mask the second he stepped out of the hall, and relief coursed through his veins.

He felt the cool evening air sweep across his face and heaved a sigh of relief. One more second in the hall, and he would've run out like a madman. That would give the ladies much to talk about and help his chances of landing a maiden. Weston wondered just how distraught his mother would be if that happened.

He started to wander, looking around, letting the gentle breeze continue to settle on his face. It didn't take much time before he found himself in a quiet garden laced with flowers of all sorts. His curious side leaned down to inspect the flowers and admire them. Slowly, the flowers grew from curious pieces of art to a reminder that beauty existed all around him. Perhaps he had closed his eyes a bit too tight and needed to open them a little. Eliza was the last beautiful thing in his life. Maybe he was starting to heal.

His array of thoughts was instantly interrupted by the most curious sound. At first, he could not tell what it was, but as he walked closer to it, he started to make it out. It was the sound of a woman sobbing quietly. He moved closer to the direction of the sound, which was deep in the gardens. That was when he saw her.

She was sitting on a wooden bench, slightly illuminated by the bright moon. Like him, her mask was also off her face but the rest of her attire was ridiculously designed with roses.

“I assume it is not the boring party that makes you cry?” He said aloud, his way of informing her of his presence. She became alert instantly and reached for her mask.

“Good lord—uh—I deeply apologise. I thought I would be alone out here.” She said, bringing her mask closer to her face, ready to fix it back. Weston could see the sheer horror in her eyes.

“You don't have to wear the mask if you don't want to.” Weston replied. “Like you, mine is not on my face.”

The lady froze, at first unsure.

“Masks are but a mockery of who we are, don't you agree?” Weston asked. He walked towards her, fixing his eyes on hers the whole time. If he noticed the slightest bit of discomfort, he would retreat his steps.

“Where did you get that from? Some old book riddled with dust in some ancient library?” The lady asked, the upset expression on her face slowly fading

“You may say so.” He replied, although she couldn't be further from the truth.

Eliza had said it to him.



Weston reached into his pocket and pulled out a white scarf. "For your tears, my lady."

"It's Juliet. Juliet Fairmont." Her voice was soft as she reached for the scarf. "Thank you."

"Lady Juliet." Weston said as if feeling the name around his tongue. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Lord Weston Edgeworth."

Juliet returned the scarf to him after drying her face. "The new Marquess of Estfield. My father might have mentioned you once or twice."

"With good things, I hope." Weston asked, lowering himself onto the bench beside Juliet. She never complained. For some reason, he could tell she welcomed him instead.

"You do not want to know." Juliet replied.

"The whole thing is rather pretentious, don't you think? A masked ball." Weston asked.

"I am only here because I am being pressured to get married." Juliet replied.

"As am I" Weston said, excited to find a kindred spirit. "The pressure has gotten even heavier on me now that I've recently come into the title."

"That must be hard." Juliet replied. "This is my third season without a husband. The only thing my father hasn't threatened to do to me is consign me to perdition himself."

"I don't imagine that to be an enjoyable experience."

“No, it is not.” Juliet replied. “Having the Earl Of Willowbrook as a father takes its toll.”

“My sister Anne is in the ball as well. This is her first year as a member of the elite. I feel responsible for her, hence the reason I'm here.”

“That must be exciting. Having a sister.”

“It can be exhausting at times.” Weston replied. “She enrages me most days, yet I must take care of her.”

“She is your sister. It is her job to enrage you.”

Weston leaned further into the bench. The faint sounds of the crowd murmurs and the loud music could still be heard, but not enough for it to be a disturbance. The garden's serenity and the fragrance of the nearby roses eased him into peace. He felt relaxed out here, with Lady Juliet, rather than in there, with the multitudes of people trying to dance with him. He turned to look at Juliet. Part of her face shone in the moonlight. While there were still dried traces of tears on her face, she couldn't look even more flawless than she did if she tried.

Perhaps she could. He would like to know that.

“What about you? Do you have a sister?” He prodded.

“No. I do have a half-brother, though. Pray, I desire to discover a means to dispatch him and dispose of his remains in the river without drawing undue attention.”

“He annoys you that much?” Weston asked, stifling a chuckle.

“He might as well be the bane of my existence.” Juliet replied.

“My mother is mine. She had always been pressuring me to enter matrimony posthaste.”

“Parents.” Juliet responded. “Whatever shall we do without them?”

“Everything.”

Juliet laughed. Not the kind of pretentious lady-like laugh he'd seen over the years at several courts. She laughed heartily, without a single care in the world. He watched her and felt a grin creep up his face.

“I apologise.” Juliet said as soon as she stopped laughing.

“You have a joyous laugh. You do not need to apologise for it.”

Juliet nodded and threw him a slight smile. He was glad she was comfortable enough to take his word for it.

“So you haven't gotten engaged before?” Juliet asked.

“I have. Once. It seems so long ago now, in hindsight.”

“May I ask what happened?” Juliet asked.

Weston looked into her eyes. At that moment, he wanted to tell her. He wanted to tell her about Eliza and how she had been the one thing that brought light to his life. He wanted to tell her about how miserable he had been ever since she died. He wanted to say to her about the fall he had witnessed and how she wasn't able to survive it. He felt safe with her and wanted her to know all about him.

“My lord?” Juliet said, shaking him out of his reverie.

“I do not want to bore you with ancient history.”

“The boredom might be precisely what might save me this night, Lord Weston.”

It was Weston's turn to laugh. And he did, just like her.

As he opened his mouth to speak, a voice behind them froze him into one spot.

“Good heavens!” Lady Violet Northam squealed like a cat being strangled.

Juliet turned to look at her, sheer terror written on her face.

Oh, Lord.

Instinctively, she reached for her mask and placed it on her face. This was not good.

“This is impossible.” Lady Violet's voice rang out again.

“This is not what you think.” Weston started, but he might as well be speaking to the wind.

Lady Violet had disappeared just as soon as she'd come.

The terror in Juliet's eyes multiplied as she watched the determined gossip monger scramble towards the hall.

Her life was about to take a turn for the worse.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Weston could see the freedom he once envisioned slowly slipping from his grasp. Life was about to deal him another pain, and he was going to take it.

“This is terrible.” He heard Juliet say. He didn't need to listen hard before picking up the desperation in her voice. She knew trouble was looming, too. It was only a matter of time. “No, this is more than terrible. This is a catastrophe. A plague. Oh dear lord, my father is going to feed me to his horses.”

“Lady Juliet—”

“You do not understand. I am already on thin ice. This is going to destroy me. It'll destroy my father. For heaven's sake, it will destroy Willowbrook.”

“Lady Juliet—”

“I can't breathe. Why can't I breathe?—”

“Lady Juliet—”

“Why can't I breathe?!”

“Juliet!” Weston had no choice but to grab her arms as his voice rose.

She froze in place. He was touching her. Why was he touching her?

Weston seemed to realize he had gone too far as well, and his hands slowly fell off her arms.

“Perhaps you need to take your mask off.” He said, pointing to the embroidered mask on her face.

“You jest a lot, my lord.”

“Look, whatever trouble is coming now can't get any worse. Would you prefer to die from lack of air, at this ball, for that matter? Take it off.”

Juliet reached for her mask and slowly loosened it off her face.

“Do you feel any better?”

“A little.” Juliet replied, holding on to her mask for dear life.

“How fast do you reckon this spreads?” Weston asked, looking through the path he'd come into the garden.

“Knowing Lady Violet, I would say the whole of London is going to find out about this before the day breaks.”

Weston felt his heart drop. The last thing he needed was a scandal. This was supposed to be a quick thing for him. He came for Anne. He didn't come to get himself in the middle of some salacious gossip. He wasn't here to become a staple on every mouth across London.

His thoughts were interrupted by growing murmurs, causing his heart to drop even further.

“Oh, Lord.” He heard Juliet whimper.

“What exactly is happening here?” Juliet heard her father's unmistakably angry voice

soar through the quiet garden.

She placed her mask on her face one more time. Weston turned to look at her.

“I prefer to do it this way.” She said, not waiting for him to protest.

Soon, the soft bushes parted ways, and her father appeared behind them. He was followed by her half-brother, his wife, and a worried Aunt Grace.

Juliet felt her cheeks heat up. The whole family was here.

“What have you gotten yourself into, sister?” Adam asked, moving closer to her.  
“Was last year not enough of a lesson to you?”

Juliet shut her eyes tightly and tried to push back the unwanted memories into their cage. The last thing she needed was to add a breakdown to her tragedy.

“Father—”

“I said it couldn't possibly be true.” Peter interrupted, too angry to let his daughter get a word in.

“When I was informed about this—this preposterous fraternisation, I said it couldn't possibly be my Juliet.” Peter continued.

“What are you doing? Sneaking off into the garden with a Marquess? Is this why you didn't want to get married? So you could perform immoral acts with men at parties?”

Juliet's eyes widened in disbelief. “What?”

“Just when I thought you couldn't possibly disappoint me any further.”

Weston couldn't help but join in at this point.

“I fear this has all been blown out of proportion.”

“You will speak when spoken to, young man.” Peter said, turning to look at Weston, sheer venom in his eyes.

“Do you realise what you've done?” Adam said, his eyes squarely on Juliet. “To yourself, to us? To the family? Everyone back in the hall is aware of this, and it is only a matter of time before this spreads.”

“Good lord.” A feminine voice called from behind the bushes. Weston felt the color drain from his face. It could only be one person.

“Well enough, Lady Beatrice appeared the same way Juliet's dad had come, intense disbelief scrawled all over her face.

“Weston.” Beatrice started. “So this wasn't a lie. You were caught in a compromised position with a spinster?”

Weston frowned. What exactly did Lady Violet say?

“Mother, I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding.” Weston said, not oblivious to the fact that his explanation was all falling on deaf ears.

“Oh, Heavens.” Beatrice continued. “Who knew the price of coming to this ball would be to have my family's name dragged through the mud?”

“What a night.” Juliet heard Camilla say. Slowly, more people joined them in the garden. One-sided arguments turned into full blown chaos, and it grew even louder.



Weston turned to look at Juliet. He could tell, even with the mask on her face, that she was crying. Her tears triggered something in him. Something primal. Something unusual.

Something he was most definitely going to regret.

“Perhaps there is a way to settle this.” He said. The loud murmur around him drowned out his voice. He turned to look at Juliet again. He couldn't bear to see her in pain.

“Everyone, quiet at once!” He screamed. His voice pierced through the cold night air, causing silence to occur at once. All eyes were now on him.

This was going to blow back on him. He knew that.

“Perhaps there is a way to settle this.” He repeated. The words were there, at the tip of his tongue. Saying it, was going to change his life forever. It was going to eliminate any sort of freedom he was hoping he could achieve at the end of the day.

Saying it, would change his destiny, but hopefully, it would help Juliet a little.

The piercing gazes continued to burn into his heart. He didn't want to wait any longer.

“I would like to marry Lady Juliet.”

There. Like the air of a new season, his words sent waves of fresh murmurs sweeping amidst the crowds.

Juliet took off her mask in utter shock and turned to look at him. He didn't reciprocate.

He couldn't.

There was no going back.

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Breakfast at the Willowbrook Manor, two days later, was a disaster. The usual clinking of spoons against plates was nowhere to be found. In its place were loud words from every corner, berating Juliet.

As she had predicted, the rumors had spread beyond control, and she could do nothing about it. At first, the gossip had been met with speculation. Lady Violet was a notorious gossip monger, and she had a reputation for spreading fake news. However, when the scandal sheets took over the story, and it started to appear on paper, the lack of conviction instantly faded away. A day later, every Earl, Duke, and Lady had grown aware of the news. The one and only Marquess of Estfield, caught in a garden with an unchaperoned spinster.

“You have tainted this house forever. I hope you know that.” Peter said, bringing Juliet back to the present. Right before her was a boiling cup of tea and some cloves of fish that hadn't been touched since they landed on her table.

“I can't believe this is happening. Look at this.” Adam cut in, in his usual chipper self, showing Peter a passage in the gossip sheets.

“People believe the marriage proposal is only but a veil to cover the shame the two culprits had brought on their respective houses.”

Juliet frowned at the giant title on the paper. Especially at one particular word.

Unchaperoned.

She had her father with her. All she did was sneak out for some air, and somehow, it had ruined her and her family for life.

“This is your doing, Juliet. How am I going to face the other Lords the next time I meet them.”

Juliet brought a white handkerchief to her mouth, cleaning off imaginary food smears.

“This is all one big misunderstanding.” She said, her voice as meek as it could be.

“If you knew what was best for you, you would remain quiet. You have done enough damage already.” Peter continued, his voice rising with each word.

Juliet didn't reply. She knew better. She cast a glare that could turn one into stone at Adam and his wife. She could tell they were enjoying this moment.

“Now, you're going to marry a complete stranger. We don't know anything of Lord Weston Edgeworth. I hope this makes you happy.”

Juliet stared at her food one more time. Suddenly, the meager desire to eat that she once had disappeared.

Without saying a word. She rose and exited the dining hall. Her shoes knocked on the floor angrily as she skirted past the hallways and towards the balcony, to her sanctuary. Tears threatened to escape her eyes, and she didn't want to give her family that satisfaction.

“Milady.” She heard Estelle call. Her feet froze on the ground.

“Estelle.” She replied, watching her maid approach her.

Estelle handed her a small lace scarf once she got close enough. The tears forming around Juliet's eyes were now beginning to flow freely.

“I just wanted you to know I'm on your side.” Estelle whispered. “Today and always.”

Juliet nodded, gently dabbing her face with the scarf. “Thank you.”

“Do you need me to come with you to the garden?”

Juliet tried to return the scarf to Estelle, but she motioned for her to hold on to it.

“No.” Juliet replied. “I think I need to be alone for this one.”

Estelle nodded and watched her mistress head down the hallway one more time. Juliet wanted to scream. She tried to yank her clothes off and throw her head against the wall. Everything was happening so fast. Her story was on every tongue in the entire town. They knew everything.

At least, what they've been led to believe.

She entered the garden and felt the familiar fragrance from the flowers infiltrate her nostrils. She needed to talk. She needed to vent. She needed to scream and be allowed to feel all the emotions going through her.

She needed her mother.

Her hands gently grazed through the flowers, memories of the pleasant times she once had with her mother pouring in like heavy rain. She could almost hear Celia tell her about the history behind each flower as they trudged through the garden. It had always been her mother's most prized possession. Now, it was hers, and if things kept

going this way, it wouldn't be anymore. Juliet thought of the words being said about her, the pictures people were painting.

Caught in the gardens alone with a respectable marquess

At least, that was how the gossip sheets had eloquently put it. At that moment, a wave of uncertainty swept through her.

Was she going to get through this?

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Weston could feel the headache coming. It was only a matter of time before he needed to lie down. For a minute, he prayed the headache would take him right there and then. The drawing room at the Estfield Manor had been his abode for the past few hours.

His mother was right in front of him, pacing back and forth in despair. Too focused on his head pounding over and over, he was unable to take in what she was saying. He decided to push through it and listen again.

“I cannot believe this is what you've turned our family into.” Beatrice started, waving her hands in desperation. “How could you let such weakness take over you?”

“Mother, the news is completely misconstrued.” He started.

“I saw you, Weston. The entire society saw you with her. And you're going to sit there and tell me what we all saw was a lie?” Beatrice continued.

Weston shook his head. “Yes. That is what I'm telling you.”

“You have tarnished our image, Weston. Look at this.” Beatrice screamed, waving a piece of browned paper before her son. Weston didn't need to wonder. He knew exactly what it was. A piece of the gossip sheets. The one detailing his rendezvous with Juliet.

“Do you know how many Lords, how many Ladies in London are reading this right now?” Beatrice asked, still waving the paper aimlessly.

Weston tapped his forehead, trying to push back the headache threatening to attack his head. Going up against his mother had always been a futile attempt. The best thing he could do was sit and take it in silence.

“And then you go ahead and propose a marriage? Do you have any idea just how much damage you've caused?” Beatrice asked.

Weston shrugged. “On the bright side, you've always wanted me to get married.”

“Yes! To a respected lady. No one in town is going to ever take Lady Juliet seriously anymore. And since you're taking her as a wife, you will receive the same treatment.” Beatrice continued. “Oh, Lord. Where did I fail as a parent?”

Weston knew, right from the moment he made that proposal, in the gardens, in the presence of way too many people, that any idea of freedom he once envisioned had vanished. Life as he knew it was about to change for him, and not for the better. He knew whatever would come after this wouldn't be easy, not for him and certainly not for Juliet.

“To think you had a perfectly great mate in Lady Helena, and you wasted it all for some... wallflower?!” Beatrice continued, the frustration in her voice still evident.

Weston said nothing. Instead, he reclined further in his chair and let his mother spew

her venom on him. This was the price he had to pay for making one of the biggest mistakes of his life.

He wished his friend was here. Charles still had a day left in his journey, and judging by how news travels around London, he could guess Charles would've caught wind of everything by now.

“You have failed this house, Weston.” Beatrice continued, but her words didn't matter to him. They stopped having that effect a few years ago. All that was running through his mind was the thought of the social torture he would have to go through in the coming days.

As his mother continued to berate him, he thought about Juliet and how she was handling this. Was her father also spewing bile at her, like his mother was doing to him? Was she going to get ostracized from society? Was she going to get through this?

To think, if he never went to sit with her, none of this would've happened. He only had to deal with a few problems of his own before the masquerade ball.

Now, he had become overwhelmed.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Juliet adjusted her seating position after the carriage skipped through several rocks.

“Sorry about that, my lady.” The horseman yelled from the front, his hands gripping the ropes as tight as he could.

Juliet didn't reply. She was too deep in thought to do so.

I would like to marry Lady Juliet.

Like a dog barking repeatedly, Weston's words echoed in her mind and brain.

I would like to marry Lady Juliet.

What was he thinking, anyway, proposing marriage? If he were going to do so, he would've at least waited.

She was beginning to long for the times she had to herself right after the event. Sometimes, as she passed people walking down the street, she couldn't help but wonder if she was being judged. The carriage was tightly shut, so it wasn't like anyone could see her. The Willowbrook insignia, however, was visible on every side. Perhaps people judged her as she rode past. She couldn't help but wonder what was being said about her.

“She has ruined her family's name. Dragged it through the mud like a ruined walking stick.”

“Such a shame. She had so much promise.”



She could swear she heard some maids talking about her back in Willowbrook as she crossed the hallway into the garden.

“If only she had waited. I bet people would be trailing behind her like butterflies.” The first maid had said to the other.

“What do you know? She doesn't have any prospects. Perhaps that is why she did what she did.” The other maid had replied.

“You think she wanted to get caught?” The first one had asked again.

The other maid had shrugged. “Who knows what runs through the mind of these people?”

At that moment, Juliet had loudly cleared her throat, announcing her presence. Like frightened ice, the maids had dispersed into different directions, scampering for fear of their jobs and, most possibly, their lives.

“We're here, my lady.” The horseman announced, pulling her straight out of her thoughts. Juliet felt the carriage stop and the horseman alight from his position. He walked to her side of the carriage and gently held her hand as she climbed down.

Aunt Grace's house was almost as big as the Willowbrook Manor, which was saying a lot because she lived alone with only a few maids. As Juliet gently walked across the fields leading to the house's entrance, she wondered if her Aunt ever got lonely, living alone in such a big house.

Perhaps that is why she throws such huge parties. She thought to herself.

She was let in almost instantly and led into the drawing room.

“Lady Grace will be with you shortly.” The footman announced, bare seconds before leaving Juliet all by herself. She was left to her thoughts one more time.

I would like to marry Lady Juliet.

At first, those words had been a source of intrigue to her. How could a total stranger, one she had met for the first time in those gardens propose a marriage at the exact same spot on the same day? She could still hear those words in Weston's voice. The intrigue faded away quickly and soon turned into fear.

What if she was only about to trade one prison for another? Will she have it easy at the Estfield Manor after getting married to the Marquess? Will she have it even worse? Who is Estfield's version of Adam and Camilla? She met Lady Beatrice at the gardens that fateful night, and she wasn't that different from her father—rigidly minded, stuck on the rules that guided the society, and most especially, easily irritated.

“Oh, darling.” Grace's voice called, pulling her out of her spiral once again. She turned to see her aunt approaching her, arms wide. Grace pulled Juliet into a warm hug. One she didn't know she needed until it was happening. She could feel herself sinking into Grace's embrace. She wanted to remain like that for as long as she could.

“Your feelings must be in all places now, aren't they?” Grace asked.

“The gossip sheets might one day be the death of me.” Juliet replied, breaking the hug herself. They both lowered themselves onto chairs facing each other.

“I know this will not help, but scandals like these don't live for long. In a few days, some Duke is going to do something worse, and people will have something else to talk about.”

Juliet grew silent. While her aunt was right to an extent, it still didn't completely hide the fact that she was going through a hard time. She wanted her life erased from people's mouths. She wanted them to know one way or another that there had been a great misunderstanding, and she was nothing but a victim of a baseless rumor.

"I received some horrible faces on my way here. I don't see those ending anytime soon." Juliet replied, unable to see an optimistic side to things.

Aunt Grace grabbed her hands and squeezed them gently.

"I promise you, no gossip goes on for long. It's what makes them effective. They're short-lived."

"And how would you know that?"

Grace slackened her grip on Juliet's hands and leaned back.

"Because I have gone through this too."

Juliet frowned. "Really?"

"It happened so long ago. I do not want to bore you with horrible stories." Grace replied, waving at the air to stress the lack of seriousness.

"What happened?"

"It is not important for you to know."

"Please." Juliet pleaded. "I am crashing underneath my wings here. I need to know if you're correct. I need to know if it does get better."

In the moment of silence that ensued between them, Grace looked into her niece's eyes with pity.

“Alright.” she finally said. “Three decades ago, I attended a ball just like this one. I was still in my spinster years, so my mother was forcing us to attend events held by members of the high society.”

“And by us, you mean—”

“Celia, your mother and me. Yes.”

“I see.”

“She was so beautiful, your mother. Whenever we traveled together, she was always the center of attention. Men from all walks of life came up to have a chat or a dance with her.”

Juliet felt a slight smile creep up her face. Her mother was indeed beautiful. She knew that, but it was great to know she was extensively known for her beauty in her early years.

“Sometimes, it got overwhelming.” Grace continued. “So whenever we went to a ball, and she became the center of attention, I would try to find a place to hide. Somewhere with silence. Somewhere with no one.”

“Like a garden.” Juliet affirmed.

Grace smiled. “Yes. Like a garden.”

Juliet nodded.

“One time, the Duke of Flower Harbour held a coming out ball for his daughter, Rose. As usual, Mother had stuffed us into carriages and had made us attend. As usual, your mother had gotten center stage. She took the attention away from me, away from Rose.”

Juliet placed her hands on her mouth. “That must have been horrible.”

Grace smiled. “Now, you see me, I am used to it. I didn't mind at all. Rose, on the other hand, grew upset. So when I snuck out of the ball to find a place to hide, there she was, near the fountain, drawing into the soil with a stick. She was a kindred spirit. We were both feeling the same things. So I went to sit with her, of course. Moments later, we were laughing and making fun of the desperate men wanting a dance with my sister.”

Juliet laughed. “That must have been relieving.”

“For a while, it was.” Grace continued. “Then, a young Lord exited the ball as well and found us. He asked for Rose to dance with him. I still remember how his mouth reeked from the wine and the fish. Rose had refused. The young Lord was hurt, of course, so he walked back to the ball and began to spread a lie.”

“Oh Lord.” Juliet frowned. She could see tears forming behind Aunt Grace's eyes and, for a moment, wondered if she could tell her to stop the story.

“He said he'd found Rose and me near the fountain, holding hands and kissing like lovers.” Grace said.

Juliet felt the color drain from her face. “What?”

“Of course, people believed the lie. Why not? It was salacious gossip, and it was as juicy as it came. Quickly, words spread, and we couldn't do anything about it. Mother

didn't let me out of my room for months. The only person I was allowed to see was Celia. She would come to my room every day and tell me the latest stories on Father's new acquaintances and the people mother met at the market.”

“Oh.” Juliet whispered, unsure of what to say.

“It was only because of Celia I was able to stay sane in my room during those harrowing months. When I was finally free to come out, I had learned that Lady Rose—” Grace froze. The tears were now beginning to fall freely from her face. Juliet watched her reach for a white handkerchief and slowly dab her face.

“I found out Lady Rose couldn't handle the aftermath. So she jumped into the river and drowned.”

Juliet's eyes widened in shock.

“Look.” Grace sniffled a while later, gathering herself. “Now it's been almost thirty years, and no one remembers anymore. Of course, the news faded a year later, and it was only brought up whenever Lady Rose's death was mentioned, but my point still stands. Gossip fades quickly.”

Grace reached for Juliet's hand and squeezed it once more.

“You just have to give it time. Remain resilient. Do not give them the satisfaction of seeing you fall. Not your father, not your brother and his wife. Not any of those mouthy people walking the streets.”

Juliet nodded slowly and continued to process everything her aunt had just told her. She couldn't help but wonder how long she would have to suffer through the eyes of judgemental people.

“Perhaps there might be a good side to this.” Aunt Grace continued.

“What good side could there possibly be?”

“Well, your intended husband. You don't know anything about him. For all we know, he is as charming as they come and would take care of you completely.”

Juliet allowed her mind to wander to that night in the garden before the chaos ensued. Weston had proven himself to be a great conversationalist.

“Perhaps, now, you can focus on building a rapport with your husband. You never know. You may find a true partner in him.”

Juliet shrugged. “You do not know that. He might be a monster.”

“You do not know that either.” Aunt Grace continued. “We don't know what burdens the heart of other people, Juliet. We only know ours. Even the most aggressive war hero may write sonnets in his own private time.”

Juliet let a slight laugh escape her mouth.

“I once heard of a ruthless king back in the days who passed the time by painting each of his wives. People say he only had three and never let them want for anything.”

“Now, that is a true gentleman if I've ever met one.” Juliet replied, causing Grace to laugh a little.

“This may not be as bad as you think, Juliet. This may be your way to true freedom.” Grace said when her laughing stopped.

Juliet sighed. “But what if it is only another prison away from Willowbrook? What if this marriage is only going to trap me forever in sadness?”

Grace smirked and squeezed Juliet's hands even harder.

“We would have to wait and find out.”

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Weston drowned his third cup of brandy in a single gulp.

“Another!” He screamed, raising his cup. His eyes were red, and the drink pushed back the headache he had suffered for the past few days.

In a tavern near the Estfield Manor, Weston had decided to settle in to make the most of his bleak future. On his right, also settled in a chair with him, was Charles Longworth, who had only just returned from his travels the day before.

“Perhaps you might want to slow down on the brandy.” Charles said, his voice laced with worry. He had always known Weston to be a composed and firm gentleman. Watching his friend lose some sense of control was hard to imagine.

“I shall determine the right time for me to stop.” Weston replied. He raised his cup one more time and drew the attention of the stewardess. Soon, she arrived with a giant jug filled with brandy and filled his cup to the brim.

“Weston.” Charles started. “Do you think drinking yourself into a stupor is the right idea?”

Weston decided to nurse his drink this time around. Instead of drinking it in one go, he took a few sips.



“I’m getting married to a lady I barely know. We are well past having the right ideas, do you not think?” Weston replied, gently placing his cup on the table before him.

Charles reclined further in his seat. The fact that he had been on a journey didn't mean the news didn't get to him.

“I have heard everyone's version of what happened, Weston. I know how unreliable the gossip sheets can be. I still haven't heard your version, and I intend to.”

A hysterical chuckle escaped Weston's lips. “What is the point? It will not change anything. I will remain trapped in this life I thought I was going to escape in time.”

“I agree. But it helps if you talk about it. Keeping things inside will kill you, just as too much brandy will, too.”

Weston scoffed. “This was all my fault. I should've left her alone. I shouldn't have approached her when I heard her tears across the flowers.”

“There is only so much guilt you can place on yourself, Weston.” Charles continued.

“We only took off our masks for a while. All of this happened because we decided to take off our masks.”

Charles sighed. “The past is in the past, my friend. Perhaps this might be your way out.”

Weston was partly inebriated from the brandy, but he could still understand simple sentences. “What are you talking about?”

Charles reached for Weston's shoulder. “Maybe this is how you get the family you have always wanted.”

Weston frowned. “What?”

“I know you always thought you would get this with Eliza.”

Weston felt his heart shudder.

“This is how you get your family, Weston. You might think you're in a sordid situation, but there are ways to make the best of it.”

“This is no way to get a family.” Weston said.

“Maybe this Lady Juliet will make a fine wife and a great mother for your children. You never know.”

“You do not understand me, Charles. This is a disaster. I have tied myself to a marriage I want no part of. I don't want to have a family. I want to escape.”

Charles pushed his chair forward. “We can't all have the things we want, Weston. We can only try and enjoy the things we do have. You are about to have a wife. Do not write off your marriage before it has even commenced.”

Weston grunted in response and reached for his cup once again. As he brought it close to his lips, he noticed, in his periphery, a group of men across the tavern, staring straight at him.

He drank all that remained in the cup and placed it back on the table.

“If you look any harder, you're going to have to draw a portrait.” He said suddenly, looking straight at the men. Red-faced and embarrassed at being caught, they turned away.

“Maybe it will be better if you come look at me clearly right here, wouldn't it?”

“Weston—” Charles called.

“Do you have questions you wish to ask me?”

“Weston, what are you—”

“Maybe you need me to provide you with a new layer of gossip to spread around town?”

“Weston!” Charles called, his voice firm and loud. “You are already in trouble with the public. Do you think it is reasonable to add to your problem?”

Weston said nothing. Instead, he returned his gaze to his empty cup.

“How do you think it will translate when people hear that the Marquess of Estfield was picking fights with men in a tavern?”

“I do not care what people think anymore. They are going to make their own conclusions anyway.”

“Your wedding is only a few days ahead. Perhaps your energy will be useful if spent preparing for it.”

Weston pressed his fingers against his forehead. There it was again. The troubling headache that wouldn't let him go. Charles was right, as much as he didn't want to admit it. He was getting married to Lady Juliet in a week. He needed to start working on being a wonderful husband.

His head pounded at the thought. In a week, he would no longer be able to imagine

what true freedom would have felt like. In a week, he would be well and truly unable to go anywhere. The cottage on the Scottish border might as well fade away from his memories.

He had no choice. Life had thrown him into a bad situation, and it was up to him to make the most of it.

He might as well enjoy himself as much as he could. His time in taverns was limited.

Against his better judgment, he reached for his cup again and raised it into the air.

“Another!”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Estelle pressed one more brightly colored Rose at the hem of Juliet's dress. She rose from the floor and took several steps backward to admire her mistress fully.

“You look astonishing, Lady Juliet.”

Juliet turned to look at the large mirror a few steps before her. Estelle wasn't wrong. This might be the dressmaker's best work yet. The emerald gown shone as fragmented rays of the sun hit it from several areas. A veil the same color as the dress elegantly sat on her head. In another world, this was the best day of her life. She raised the gown and twirled to take in the view fully.

“After the wedding, I might just burn it.” She said, her voice impressively monotonous.

“Why on earth would you do that?” Estelle asked, covering her mouth in shock.

“Estelle.” Juliet replied, turning to look at her. “This dress is going to haunt me for the rest of my life. When I turn old, and my skin starts to wrinkle, I don't want to look at it and get transported to this moment.”

“Milady—”

“Nothing about today is going to be memorable. I am trying to make sure of that.”

Estelle sighed. She didn't know what else to say. The dress had cost her mistress so much money and the dressmaker so much time.

“Perhaps we might give it back to the dressmaker? She might be able to sell it to another lady.”

“This—” Juliet resumed, gently waving the gown. “Is one of a kind. It will torment me even more if I see it on someone else. The best thing to do will be to burn it.”

Silence descended between them. In a few moments, her father would walk through those doors and drag her to the Chapel. Weston and his family were probably waiting for her already. She wondered if her intended husband felt aloof and uncomfortable about this day just as much as she did.

“Shall I fetch a few more roses for the veil?” Estelle asked, dusting her palms against her apron.

“No. This is enough.” Juliet replied.

This was enough.

As her eyes swept through each rose plastered on her dress through the mirror, she thought of her mother. Would she also be in support of the entire situation if she were alive today? Would she allow her daughter to marry a stranger and risk her lifelong happiness? Would she let her burn the dress after the wedding? Would she adorn the dress with even more roses?

“She would have adored the way you looked today, milady.” Estelle said, her voice a calming response to the questions swirling through Juliet's mind.

“Estelle. I know my father hired you, but I couldn't possibly ask you to—”

“I am coming with you.” Estelle interrupted, her voice solid.

“Look, I don't know what woes the Estfield Manor might bring. I do not want to subject you to whatever torture is waiting for me.”

“There is nothing left for me here if you leave. I might as well come with you.”

Juliet smiled. Estelle had been her maid for so long that she couldn't imagine moving on to a new life without her.

“Thank you.” She said, her voice laced with faint shakiness.

“Do not thank me, milady. You are saving me. I should be the one filled with gratitude.”

As Juliet opened her mouth to speak, Camilla appeared in the doorway, her eyes sullen.

“Camilla, if you are here to gloat. I'm afraid you haven't found me in the right mood.” Juliet said, catching her in the mirror at first before turning around.

“On the contrary, Juliet.” Camilla said. Juliet frowned. This was out of character for her sister-in-law.

Or shall she say half-sister-in-law?

“May I have a moment to speak with you?” Camilla asked, her eyes darting suspiciously towards Estelle. “Alone?”

Estelle turned to Juliet, her eyes searching hers for permission to exit the room. Juliet cleared her throat.

“Whatever you want to say to me, you can say in front of Estelle. She leaves with me

as well.”

Camilla considered this for a minute before resigning. “Alright.”

Juliet's suspicions continued growing as Camilla moved away from the doorway and further into the room.

“Your father is putting on his waistcoat. He shall come for you any second.” She started.

A wave of amusement settled upon Juliet's face. “Is that what you came to tell me?”

“No.” Camilla responded. “I just wanted to wish you good luck in your new abode. You're going to need it. I hear Lady Beatrice might as well be an incarnate of a fiend.”

Juliet frowned. “Why are you telling me this?”

Camilla shook her head. “Because I don't have any reason to hate you, Juliet. I only pretend to do so for my husband.”

Juliet's eyes darted to Estelle, then back to Camilla. She didn't know a lot about Lady Beatrice herself. Camilla had her ears to the ground more than she did, so she couldn't outrightly disregard her advice.

“Thank you for the warning. I shall do my best to prepare for her.” Juliet finally said.

“I honestly wish you the best, Juliet.” Camilla repeated. A pause ensued between them. At that moment, Camilla contemplated pulling Juliet into a hug, but she restrained herself. Juliet watched her curtsy and slowly make her way out of her room.



“What do you think?” Juliet asked, turning to Estelle once Camilla's footsteps grew faint.

“I am not Lady Camilla's biggest admirer.” Estelle replied. “But it would not hurt to put weight to her words.”

“I was thinking the same too.” Juliet responded. “Do you think the Estfield Manor might have a garden, just like ours?”

Estelle shook her head. “I would not count on it, milady.”

Juliet nodded. “That is fair. Come adjust this corset for me. It is a bit loose around my back.”

“Yes, milady.” Estelle responded, moving towards Juliet.

Soon, she was standing in the middle of her room, her eyes sweeping around as she took in one final look. Her father might perhaps turn it into a study after she was gone. That or Adam might transform it into his personal drawing-room, entertaining his fellow foul-mouthed friends. Juliet shuddered at the thought of her room housing her half-brother's shenanigans. Lord Peter Fairmont arrived in the doorway, fully dressed with a solemn expression fixed on his face.

“We better leave. We shouldn't keep the Edgeworths waiting for much longer.”

Juliet nodded.

With the bottom of her gown gingerly placed in her hands, Juliet walked down the hallway, perhaps for the last time, out the door and into the carriage. Her father climbed in beside her and sat on the other side.

“I take it your maid is coming with you?” Peter asked right before the horseman took off.

Juliet nodded.

“Very well.”

The carriage started to move as thick silence descended in the space between Juliet and her father.

“Father, I am really sorry. I never intended to bring this upon our family.” Juliet said once she couldn't bear the silence anymore.

Peter shrugged. “It doesn't matter what you intended. All that matters is that our house has been permanently tainted because of you.”

A wave of hurt flashed across Juliet's face. “Father—”

“This is not a happy day, Juliet. Your wedding was never meant to be done in shame. But this is what we have to do to protect whatever dignity we have left.”

“But—”

“You already did enough damage. The best thing you can do is sit silently and let everything happen. I cannot bear to hear you speak. At least not yet.”

Juliet nodded and reclined further into her seat.

“It is a good thing your mother is not here to witness this. The shame would've killed her faster than the fever.”

Tears formed behind Juliet's eyes. She reached for a handkerchief and dabbed her face with it. She couldn't bear to cry.

Not now. Not anymore.

Time flew by faster than Juliet wanted, and soon, they arrived at the chapel. She thought of floating through the remainder of the day. If she could dismember her soul from her body and just move through the wedding like a ghost, perhaps the shame wouldn't be so severe.

She climbed down the carriage and took in the chapel's entrance. This was really happening. At first, it had felt like a dream. One she was bound to wake up from anytime soon. But now that she stood before her wedding venue, reality kicked in even stronger.

She was getting married.

To a total stranger.

In the middle of her biggest scandal yet.

Her father stretched out his arm. Juliet stared at it for a while.

“Well?” Peter asked, his voice laced with impatience.

Juliet sighed and slowly slipped her hand into his arm. They began their walk towards the entrance.

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Only one word rang true in the back of Weston's mind as he watched his bride's

father bring her down the aisle with a deathly grip.

Eliza.

Was he betraying her by following through with this disaster of a wedding? Did this mean he was going to forget all about her? Was she looking down at him at this moment, shaking her head at the kerfuffle he managed to get himself into?

Thoughts and more thoughts swam through his head as he fixed his eyes on Juliet.

Why was her dress embroidered with so many roses?

When she got close enough to him, he gave her an understanding nod. She did the same thing. The vicar descended from the pulpit and started to read through the rules of marriage. A lion might as well have been roaring into Weston's ear because he paid no attention. Somehow, the vicar's words only solidified the trouble he had put himself into.

This was real. He was getting married. He stared at Juliet, and just as he suspected, she wasn't paying attention either. Her eyes were fixed on a part of the stained glass windows at the far corner of the chapel. Weston's eyes followed hers. She was watching a spider crawl across the window.

Juliet's eyes remained fixed on the window. It was the only thing she could do to stop tears from falling off her face again. The vicar continued to drone on about the sanctity of their marriage and how Weston's and her fate were now intertwined forever. She must have stared at the spider for a bit too long.

“Lady Juliet?” The vicar's words brought her back to the present.

“What?” She asked, her voice soft.

“Do you take Lord Weston Edgeworth of the Estfield Manor as your lawful husband?”

She could say no. She could rip the veil off her face and run down the aisle to the chapel doors. She could jump into the carriage and ride to nowhere in particular. Perhaps she would go east. She would keep riding and riding until the distance between London and her took months. She would disappear and live the rest of her days as an unknown in a foreign land. She could run free. Her eyes shifted to her father, who stood in a corner, a stony expression on his face.

She could only dream.

“I do.” She finally said.

The ring slipped right onto her finger with ease. Weston had made sure to be as gentle as he could. Juliet did the same thing, and just like that, she stopped being Lady Juliet, an individual.

She was now the Marchioness of Estfield—a completely different person.

After a few more words from the vicar, Weston reached for her hand and led her outside the chapel and towards their decorated carriage.

“After you.” Weston said, helping Juliet climb into the new carriage. He entered right behind her.

Juliet couldn't help but feel her future become solidified as the carriage started to move. Before her was her husband. Weston wore a stony face, but Juliet could tell that behind his cold expression there was hurt and pain, just like hers.

Perhaps even more.

“You shall love Estfield.” Weston managed to say a few minutes into their journey. We have acres and acres of fields perfect for riding horses. Do you ride?”

Juliet nodded affirmatively. “My mother taught me before she—” She trailed off.

“I understand. She must have been an outstanding woman, your mother.”

Juliet managed to wear a slight smile. “That she was.”

Weston nodded, giving in to the awkwardness.

“Tell me, Lord Weston, does Estfield have gardens?”

“It used to.” Weston replied. “But none of the maids knew how to take care of it. It is more or less an abandoned space now.”

“That is going to have to change.” Juliet responded.

Weston nodded. “You're Marchioness now. You can do with the Manor as you wish.”

Juliet wanted to ask about Weston's mother. Perhaps he could tell and was purposely avoiding talking about her.

“Whenever I'm feeling down—” Weston started, cutting into Juliet's thoughts. “I like to lie down and bury my face into a book.”

“You read?” Juliet asked, and her face lit up.

“As often as I can.”

“Me too.” Juliet stated.

Weston wore a weak smile. “We are already finding something in common, wouldn't you say?”

“I would say.” Juliet replied.

Weston reclined into his seat as the carriage jostled on. In a fair and just world, Eliza would be the one on the other side. She would be the one making him laugh and eager to start his new life. He couldn't help but feel unjust towards Juliet as ghosts of his past continued to torment him.

No. He would not let another potential love see past the walls he had built around his heart. He once had true love, and he had to watch it die.

This was only a marriage of convenience. It changed nothing. He would try as much as possible to be a fine husband to Lady Juliet but he would not allow another woman to reach into his heart. No amount of heirs or respectable appearances could change his mind.

Juliet's mind, on the other hand, was flooded with doubt. Questions no one had answers to. What would this marriage lead to? Will she be able to escape this? Was she doomed to this fate for life? Was this her destiny?

Soon, the carriage made an abrupt stop, and Juliet felt her heart jump into her throat.

“Welcome to Estfield, Lady Juliet.” Weston announced, parting the carriage curtains. He climbed down and reached for Juliet's hand, waiting for her to do the same.

Juliet descended from the carriage and felt the new breeze sweep through her hair. Unlike the inner city, the outskirts of London seemed vast and continued to stretch out for miles. Her eyes finally settled on the manor. Her new home, if all went well.

Her new prison if it didn't.

Just like Willowbrook, Estfield was huge and had a lot of windows, most of them overlooking the fields beside it.

“Shall we?” Weston asked, reaching for her hand one more time. Juliet nodded and slipped her hand into his arm. They began their walk towards the entrance, about to start a new chapter. One that was bound to either be the best thing that had ever happened to Juliet Fairmont or ruin her for the rest of her life.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Juliet knew, even as she walked down the cobblestones leading to the entrance of her new home with her new husband, that he was only speaking to her out of duty. So far, all his words to her had been about Estfield and how it would be convenient for her.

Not once had he spoken to her about himself. He didn't ask anything about her. He refused to give up anything personal or ask for it in return. A sigh escaped Juliet's lips. The pressure of this wedding weighed down hard on him, and she could see that. While this had been a wedding intended to cover whatever wounded pride both houses had suffered in the heat of the scandal that had rocked them, she couldn't help but wonder when she would be able to have a talk with Weston.

A full, proper conversation.

She turned back. Estelle was behind, gently walking along the path as well. She threw her a weak smile. Estelle curtsied in response. The doors swung open, and there, in the most sophisticated regalia, was Lady Beatrice, her hands tightly folded against her stomach. Right beside her was a much younger lady who shared a slight resemblance with her.

“My sister. Anne.” Weston replied as Juliet turned to look at him quizzically.

Lady Beatrice's lips slowly widened into a smile when Juliet got close enough to her.

“Welcome to your new home, Lady Juliet.”

Juliet curtsied, her hand still securely around Weston's arm. “Thank you, my lady.”

Silence.

Thick, heavy silence.

Juliet felt Beatrice's eyes slowly sweep through her dress. She could swear Beatrice was counting the roses attached to it.

“Well.” Beatrice said, a few minutes later. “Seeing as you're now a Marchioness, we must have you appropriately outfitted. The dressmaker will be here any moment from now. She shall come to take your measurements.”

Juliet curtsied again. “Thank you, Lady Beatrice.”

Weston remained aloof. His face was drained of any emotion. The silence was slowly beginning to descend again, and it was apparent no one was determined to break it this time around.

“We shouldn't keep you waiting in the sun for long, now, should we?” Anne said, jumping into the line of fire. “Come. We shall have some tea while lunch gets prepared.”

She pushed the doors open even wider and led the newlyweds in. Juliet's eyes darted around as she walked in. The hallway was a bit wider than Willowbrook, and the halls smelled of cinnamon and chicken.

Perhaps the kitchen was only a few steps away.

“Come.” Anne continued, her eyes now squarely on Juliet. “Once we have tea, you can retire into your room. Lunch wouldn't start for a while.”

They all walked into the drawing room and found appropriate places to sit in. The

table was already lined with several ceramic cups filled with hot tea. The cups were paired with some of the finest china Juliet had ever seen, each one gently housing a small portion of bread. Soon, they all dug in and started to eat.

At least the ones who could.

Juliet didn't have the slightest ounce of appetite. All she could do was turn her bread around on her plate while others went about their meal. Her eyes shifted towards Weston, who was sitting right across from her. He was eating the bread, but she could tell he practically forced it down his throat. His moves were mechanical. She watched him stab his bread with the fork and gently cut a part of it away. He might as well not be here at all. Once or twice, he raised his head to stare back at her. In those moments, there was no warmth behind his eyes.

Only cold, stern glares that made Juliet uncomfortable.

“Not in the mood to eat, dear?” Lady Beatrice's voice cut through her melancholy. She returned to the present and wore a tired smile as she turned to look at her mother-in-law.

“I am.” She replied. Beatrice nodded and watched her bite off a piece of her bread. The more time went by, the more it began to dawn on Juliet that life at Estfield might not be as rosy as she thought it would be. Estelle had been led to the maid quarters to get acquainted with others. Juliet wondered what would happen if she tried excusing herself. Would she be in contradiction of her brand new Marchioness rules if she rose from her seat and asked to be led to her room?

Her eyes rested on Weston again, and she couldn't help but feel pity for him. He was tied to a life he didn't want. As a young man, she was sure he had plans for himself. It is not the greatest thing to have one's plans hindered by an unwanted marriage.

“What do you say we walk the halls of Estfield when you're well-rested from your journeys?” Anne asked, a wide grin on her face as she stared at Juliet.

Juliet returned the smile. “I would like that very much. Thank you.”

“Well,” Beatrice started. “There might be no tour if you die from starvation before tomorrow. You've barely touched your food.”

Juliet knew it didn't come from a place of warmth. Beatrice's eyes were blank and unreadable.

“Let her be, mother.” Weston commented. The first word he'd said since they all started to eat.

“I'm just saying.” Beatrice continued. “She's a newlywed. She needs all the strength she can get.”

“Mother.” Anne warned, throwing a hard look at Beatrice.

“It's alright.” Juliet said. “I am only preparing my stomach for lunch. I don't eat much.” Juliet responded.

“Would you look at that?” Beatrice said. “A proper lady.”

Silence followed her words. Nothing could be heard except the sound of spoons clunking against plates and teapots against the table.

Teatime was over just as soon as it had started.

“Come with me.” Anne said. “I hope you like your new room.”

Hand in hand, they both exited the drawing room, leaving Weston and his mother to remain in uncomfortable silence.

“She might be a bit scary sometimes.” Anne said, once they were out of earshot. “But she only wants the best for her son.”

Juliet nodded. The best didn't include a maiden he had to marry out of shame.

“Mother had her eyes fixed on someone else. Lady Helena Waters. At least before everything happened the way it did. So it may look like she has some resentment towards you. It would be best if you do not take them personally.”

“I shall try.” Juliet replied.

“Your dress is the most exquisite, by the way. I could tell a lot of time and effort were put into it.” Anne continued, examining Juliet's gown in admiration as they made their way across Estfield's hallways.

“Thank you.” Juliet replied, smiling loosely.

“Look, I know Weston can seem a bit taciturn and mother might sometimes be—well, mother. If you need anything, do not hesitate to come to me.” Anne said, gently squeezing Juliet's arm.

Juliet nodded.

“It is nice to have a newfound sister. I have been waiting for this moment for a long time. I came close when—” She trailed off.

Juliet frowned. “When what?”

“I cannot tell you.” Anne said, a wary expression on her face. “It has to come from Weston himself. I’m sorry.”

Juliet wanted to tell her that Weston hadn’t said more than a few words to her on their way here. She wanted to tell Anne that she wasn’t sure her husband would ever speak to her except in monosyllables if he couldn’t help it. Instead, she nodded slowly and swallowed hard.

“I shall find out from him.”

Soon, they arrived before an open doorway.

“Here we are.” Anne said, gesturing towards the room. Juliet smiled and walked in slowly. Her feet barely touched the floor. It was like she was wary of what her new room might look like.

One thing was sure. It was twice the size of her room in Willowbrook. The bed was wider since it wouldn’t only be for her anymore. The windows overlooked the windy fields and a giant oak tree. The walls glistened in bright green, and the floors shone from how hard they had been scrubbed.

“It is—magnificent.” Juliet said, her eyes sweeping around.

“I am glad you like it.” Anne continued. “You might want to change into a more convenient attire for lunch. Some dresses have been placed in the cupboard.”

Juliet nodded, the words of Beatrice echoing in the back of her mind.

Seeing as you’re now a Marchioness, we need to have you appropriately outfitted.

“Would you like me to fetch your maid?” Anne asked. Juliet turned away from the

windows to look at her.

“I wouldn't want to be a bother—”

“Nonsense.” Anne responded, waving gingerly. “I shall get her to come to you immediately.”

Juliet threw Anne a grateful smile. Anne returned the smile and exited the room, leaving Juliet to her thoughts.

For a minute, Juliet thought of sinking into the bed. Perhaps she might just lay there forever. She walked to the cupboard and gently pulled the doors open. New dresses hung from a rack. They felt fluffier than her usual wears. More mature.

Juliet sighed. Everything was happening too fast. She wished she could take a pause on life and take it in one at a time.

“Milady?” Estelle's familiar voice sent soothing chills down her spine.

“Estelle.” Juliet whispered, turning to her maid. “These dresses look heavy.”

Estelle moved closer to the cupboard and inspected the gowns as well. “I agree. It doesn't look like you have a choice, though. Lady Beatrice might tear you apart if you refuse to wear them.”

“She does look the sort, doesn't she?” Juliet asked.

“I am certain she does.”

Juliet snickered. “Pray close the door. She might hear you.”

Estelle smiled and headed to the door. She looked around, and when she became sure no one was lurking, gently closed the door behind her.

Juliet shrugged. “What do you think of the room?”

Estelle took a long look around the room. “It's nice.”

“But?” Juliet asked.

“It's too—”

“Green?”

“Precisely. I think it could use more colour.”

“Me too.”

Estelle laughed. “It is astonishing, though. Your matrimonial room.”

Juliet drew a large breath, the word tugging at her heart. Matrimonial .

“I shall draw you a bath.” Estelle said, heading towards the only other door in the room.

“I do not think I have the time for a bath before lunch.”

“You've been on a long journey. A bath is going to soothe you.” Estelle responded, not taking a break in her steps. “The maids at the quarters informed me that it is tradition for one to have a bath before every meal.

“I see.” Juliet responded. This was altogether a new life for her. One she might have



to adjust to incredibly quickly. She looked around her room once again, taking it in slower than before. This was her life now. She would be seeing this room for the rest of her life. She was going to be seeing it with Weston.

Stony, cold-faced, Weston.

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Weston took calculated bites. When the butler announced that the wedding feast was ready, he couldn't help but feel even more dejected. Right before him, separated only by the side tablecloth, was Juliet, who was only prodding at her food as well. Weston wondered if she was being truthful earlier when she said she didn't eat much or if she only said so to avoid eating more than necessary.

Or at all.

Just like in the drawing room, silence had occupied the dining room. While the table was filled with all the kinds of foods one could wish for, the situation at hand didn't warrant any form of excitement. His sister, Anne, wasn't having the same problem. She took appropriate helpings of her food and remained focused on it. So did his mother.

His eyes turned to Juliet one more time. She had cut a part of her chicken and was now fiddling it with her fork. He watched her partly out of curiosity and partly absent-mindedly as she played with her food. Soon, she raised her head, and their eyes met.

He couldn't read her expression as it was as blank as an empty canvas. He hoped she couldn't read him, too. All Weston wanted to do was exit the feast and find solace in his study. That or sleep for as long as possible until he was awoken from this terrible nightmare that had become his life. He didn't have the energy to speak or eat. He

couldn't. He had just been thrown into a life sentence of strife and sadness. His soul couldn't bear any more. He wished Charles was around, but he also had business to attend to. Weston wondered just how busy he had to be for him not to make time for his wedding feast but thought not too much of it. His mind drifted away from the thought almost immediately.

“I hope you found your new room to your liking?” Beatrice asked, breaking the awkward silence, if out of necessity. Juliet turned to her.

“Most definitely, Lady Beatrice.”

Beatrice smiled. “I don't know how you do things back in town, but you can just refer to me as mother-in-law.”

Juliet nodded in response.

“Or mother, if you're more comfortable with that.”

“Alright.” Juliet responded.

“I had the room repainted myself.” Lady Beatrice continued.

Juliet smiled. That explained it.

“I tried to talk her out of it.” Anne chipped in. “I told her no one would ever be comfortable with that shade of green.”

Juliet chuckled slightly. “I think it's marvelous.”

“It is your room, Juliet.” Lady Beatrice continued. “If you do not like the colour, you can always change it.”

“Thank you, Mother.” She said.

Mother.

The word had hit Weston's chest like a drum.

“I know the dresses in the cupboard may not exactly fit you well.” Anne said after drinking from her cup. “That is why we are having the dressmaker over. That way, you can have dresses that are meant for you, but until she arrives, I hope you can make do with the dresses.”

“Absolutely.” Juliet responded.

“And if you are not too busy, you could work on a potion that will unlock your husband's mouth. I'm worried he might have lost his voice.” Beatrice added.

Weston sighed. “There is nothing to say.”

“You could at least comment on the food.” Beatrice said, prodding even further.

Weston started at his plate hard and long. “The feast is wonderful, Mother.”

“Now, was that so hard? I hope you won't remain mute when you're with your wife. A marriage works when the couple talk to each other.” Beatrice said.

“Thank you for the advice, mother.”

Weston felt a wave of tightness clutch his chest. He looked up at Juliet, who was now trying to force some food down her throat. He turned to look at Anne, who looked most compassionately at Juliet. He then finally faced his mother, who was staring back at him most coldly.

It registered right there and then in his mind that he was well and truly trapped.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Juliet sat on the edge of her bed, her hands placed on her legs, watching the doorway intently.

“Are you sure about this, milady?” Estelle asked from the door to the bath, looking through Juliet's worn dresses.

“He should be coming by very soon. I need to speak with him, and this seems to be the only way to do so.”

“What if he is not in the mood?”

Juliet turned to Estelle, the sadness on her face viciously evident. “Well, let's hope he is.”

Then, like clockwork and as predicted by Juliet, Weston's boots started to knock on the floor in the distance. Juliet jumped off the bed and hurried to the mirror.

“Quick, how do I look?”

“You look fine, milady. Just like you did a few moments back.”

“Fine?” Juliet said, her voice on the edge of a screech. “I do not want to look fine. He most probably would not talk to me if I looked just fine.”

Estelle opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came forth.

“Forget it.” Juliet whispered. Weston's footsteps were getting louder. It was only a

matter of time before he crossed her doorway.

“How about my teeth? Do I have anything in it?” Juliet asked.

“Nothing, milady.”

“I wonder if I should eat some fruit for fragrance.” Juliet said to herself, checking her breath.

“Milady—” Estelle started, getting off the floor. “Lord Weston is your husband. You are both bound to each other. Someday, you must speak to him without worrying about fragrance or appearance. He is your husband. He is bound to see you when you look the least attractive.”

“That will happen later. Just not today.”

Weston crossed her doorway, looking ahead.

“Weston!” Juliet called, hurrying towards him. Weston froze in his steps and waited for Juliet to catch up with him.

“Juliet.” He replied once she got close enough. “Is there a problem?” He started to walk again, and Juliet had to keep up.

“Not at all. I was wondering if we could take a stroll around the fields and—well, talk. We haven't done a lot of that since the wedding.”

“I'm afraid the last thing I have the time for is a stroll. Charles is waiting for me at the stables. We are riding into town.”

“Well, we could ride together. I shall fetch a horse and come with you.”

Weston froze again. “No.”

Juliet frowned. “No?”

“No.”

A slight pause ensued between them. The awkwardness had been evident since the wedding day. Now, it continued to feel like it wouldn't stop anytime soon.

“This is an urgent matter, Juliet. It is more effective if Charles and I ride alone. You must understand.”

Juliet nodded. “I know how important matters can be, my lord. I shall wait till you get back.”

Weston reached for her arms and squeezed them gently. “Please save yourself the trouble. I shall not be back until later in the night. I hope you find the manor entertaining before I return.”

Juliet nodded and curtsied. “Goodbye, my lord.”

Weston released her from his grip and turned towards the entrance. Juliet watched him walk away, his steps brisk and fast. She could almost swear that he was walking away from her.

Running away from her.

She turned and started to walk back to her room, paying no mind to the servants that passed her by as she walked. All she wanted to do was get to her room and curl up into a ball of dejectedness.

“Juliet. Is that you?” Her mother-in-law's domineering voice called. Juliet froze in her steps and turned slowly.

“Mother.” She greeted.

“He's off again, isn't he?” Beatrice asked, taking her sweet, gracious time to climb down an adjacent flight of stairs.

“He says he has some urgent meeting in town and that he must hurry with Charles.”

Beatrice sighed. “Sometimes, it is hard to remember that my son got married to you and not to Charles. Those two are closer than anything.”

Juliet said nothing. She could feel Beatrice's heated gaze on her. Her eyes were perhaps sweeping for impediments in her dress.

“This corset is too tight. Ask your handmaid to fix it for you.” Beatrice said.

“Yes, mother. I shall do that.”

“You need to understand that being a Marchioness, you need to shed away some of your ladylike manners. You are now in a more mature position. You require manners that are befitting of a woman of your status.”

Juliet could feel herself shriveling up inside. “Yes mother.”

“I noticed you were strolling around the gardens yesterday. I understood you had one back in Willowbrook.” Lady Beatrice continued.

“Yes.”



“Remember, you came here for one reason and one reason only. To be a good wife to my son and bear him heirs. Your adoration for gardens is one of the ladylike manners you will need to shed. If you must attend gardens, let the time used be short. Am I understood?”

“Clearly, Mother.” Juliet replied, plastering a half-smile on her face even though each word felt like a dagger ripping her heart into shreds.

“Alright. That will be all for now. I shall talk to your husband when he returns. This game of cat and mouse must stop today.”

Juliet nodded in reply and took one more bow. Beatrice acknowledged it and watched her walk to her room.

She closed it behind her, walked towards the bed, and sank into it.

“I assume the conversation with your husband did not go as well as you wanted?” Estelle asked, now arranging some of Juliet's jewels on her dressing table.

“There was barely a conversation.” Juliet replied, her voice muffled by the bedclothes. “He couldn't wait to get to his friend.”

“Lord Charles?”

Juliet narrowed her eyes in surprise and looked up at Estelle. “You're familiar?”

“I have seen him once or twice around the manor. While I haven't conversed with him, he seems harmless enough.”

“Is that what you think about him?”

“I cannot form any thought about Lord Charles, milady. I haven't engaged with him yet.”

Juliet's eyes darted towards the dressing table, watching Estelle arrange her jewels properly. Just like that, at that moment, a grand idea formed in her head.

“Perhaps you could converse with him?”

“Milady—”

“Do not worry. It is nothing serious. You will just talk to him as much as possible, see what kind of man he truly is.”

“I do not think—”

“I would talk to him myself if I could, but Lady Beatrice watches me like a hawk. The last thing I need is to get caught in another scandal, don't you think?”

Estelle paused and let a moment of silence descend between them.

“I will try and talk to him, milady. For you.”

A wide smile appeared on Juliet's face. “Thank you.”

“I heard Lady Beatrice talking to you earlier. Did she mention the corset? Did she think it was too tight?” Estelle asked. Before Juliet could respond, she rose and walked to the bed, nudging her lady to turn her back towards her.

“I miss home, Estelle. I cannot believe those words just exited my mouth, but they are true. I miss the rose garden. I miss having my own room. I miss being able to roam around the house without worrying about someone's discerning glare.”

She felt the corset loosen around her back as Estelle continued to untie the ropes.

“Estfield is awkward. My husband has refused to talk to me ever since the wedding.”

Estelle cleared her throat. “I apologise for being a bit too forward, milady, but I must ask. Has he—”

Juliet frowned. “Has he what?”

“You know—has he touched you?”

“Oh. No. I have been here for three days and three nights. Every night, he would come to bed, turn the other way, and sleep off.”

Estelle untied the last string around Juliet's corset. “Well, at least he is a gentleman.”

“The only kind of cheer I receive here is from Anne. I cannot afford to climb down the staircase anymore while Lady Beatrice examines my dress. I did not know that becoming Marchioness meant I had to lock away parts of myself for life.” Juliet continued. “I barely know anything about my husband. The gardens in the manor are nothing but dry corn fields. This is just another prison, Estelle. Perhaps an even greater one.”

“This is only temporary, milady.” Estelle replied, sitting on the edge of the bed, slightly stroking Juliet's hair. “Things will change soon. You will see.”

“I fear this change everyone speaks about might not meet me alive.”

“Do not say such things.” Estelle replied, her voice rising with each word. “What would Lady Grace say if she were here?”

Juliet's mind fondly traveled to her eccentric aunt. "She would tell me to focus on building a great relationship with Weston."

"Perhaps that is exactly what you need to do." Estelle continued. "Your husband is trying to avoid you. It is your job to make sure he notices you everywhere. I know this was a sad turn of events, and you didn't exactly marry the person you intended."

"It was my biggest fear." Juliet said. "Marrying someone who wouldn't be able to love me for my heart, and I am afraid I have fallen right into that trap."

Estelle's fingers continued to run through Juliet's hair. "All is not lost yet, milady. You just need to try harder. Make him notice you. He is your husband, whether you like it or not. Getting out of this situation is not something you are capable of, but perhaps you may control the situation by moving closer to him."

"And how am I supposed to do that if he would not even spare me a minute of his time?"

"I'm sure you shall think of something, milady. You are one of the most intelligent people I know. Ideas will come. You just need to listen."

Juliet rubbed her forehead furtively.

"You're right. I shall try harder. This is not easy for both of us. The least he could do is listen to me."

"I agree, milady."

"Do not forget about Charles. You shall help me find out what kind of man he is. I want to know if he is the right person to be around Weston."

Estelle smiled and rose from the bed. Juliet watched as she walked back to the dressing table and resumed the arrangement of her jewels.

“I shall do my best, milady.”

Juliet turned her gaze from Estelle to the roof. She was growing sadder by the minute. She hoped these ideas would come to her soon, and she would find ways to talk to Weston and make him listen. At that moment, she wondered what her father and half-brother were doing back home.

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“I am telling you, Charles. I would not put it past her.” Weston said, his voice eagerly firm. He was in the busiest part of town with his friend, and they gently walked among the locals, looking for places to secure their horses. To Weston, this place was less suffocating than back home. For now, here, as he trudged down these dirt paths, he didn't have to endure excruciating dinners. He didn't have to deal with some snide remark from his mother or some cheery comment from his sister.

He didn't have to look at his wife.

He felt the hot afternoon air on his face and relished as much of it as he possibly could. Charles was only a few yards behind him, also casually looking around for a place where they could tie their horses.

“Pardon me, I may get this wrong.” Charles said, feeling the gears of his head turn. “She sneaked out of the hall during the spring masquerade ball and went to sit in the gardens all by herself. You heard her crying. You walked to where she was. You sat with her, and somehow, you think she was happy to be caught up in a scandal with you? Again, I apologise if I made some misconception.”

Weston rolled his eyes at his friend's profound sarcasm. "Not the scandal. The wedding. I cannot help but feel like this whole thing was a plan for her to entrap a gentleman in her snare. This marriage is an unwanted sense of duty. None of us should be enjoying it. I think she is."

"Because she asked to speak with you before leaving the manor for town?" Charles asked, a puzzled expression growing on his face.

"It is not so much as the fact that she asked but rather the tone in which she asked. She was giddy. Excited. I could swear I saw her even smile once."

"God forbid a woman married to you isn't miserable for the rest of her life." Charles sneered.

Weston turned to look at him, his lips pursed. "This is not a joke, Charles."

"It is. And you are making it." Charles replied. They were now on the other end of the busy street. While people still passed them by occasionally, they weren't as numerous as when they were in the midst of it.

"Your wife, in case you have forgotten that, by the way, is obviously only trying to make the best of a bad situation. Do you think, if presented with options, she would pick this? You know Lady Beatrice wasn't exactly welcoming to her. This was a marriage of duty, and she wasn't the one your mother was eyeing for you in the first place."

"Charles—"

"She is lost and alone, Weston."

"I understand that—"

“Clearly, you do not. Three days. She has been in Estfield for three days, and you would rather shoot darts than talk to her. You would rather do anything, really. She is your wife. You are supposed to be the one person she could talk to.”

“I do not know what we are going to talk about.”

“You wanted to talk plenty at the ball that fateful night, didn't you?”

Weston shook his head. Charles was always honest with him. Sometimes, he was too honest that it hurt some part of him. He had brought up the fateful ball that would be the catalyst of Juliet and him getting married, two times now. While he was not exactly wrong in his analysis, he was a bit too blunt for him.”

Perhaps it was what he needed. With the facts laid bare before him, he couldn't believe he thought for a moment that Lady Juliet was secretly reveling in the fact that she got to tie down a gentleman like him. He sighed. Maybe he was trying to find a way out of this marriage by blaming the poor girl. The one also caught up in the same situation as he was.

“She is alone, Weston.” He heard Charles continue. “She has no one to talk to at Estfield. I know she has her handmaid, but there is only so much companionship she could provide because, you know why?”

Weston nodded negatively.

“She is not her husband.” Charles said, his voice solidly firm.

Weston continued to think over his friend's words. Perhaps he had been a bit too hard on his wife. Charles was right. He was going to have to talk to her sooner or later. It was better for him to do it now while she still had a bit of spirit in her. He remembered the slight conversation they had on their way from the chapel. He

remembered the specific words he said to her after they had talked about their interests.

“We are already finding something in common, wouldn't you say?”

He might have judged his wife a bit too harshly.

“You are right.” He muttered out loud for Charles to hear.

“Of course I am. I am smarter than you.”

“Pray, speak no further on the matter.” Weston replied.

As they walked down a now empty path with either side filled with dry, windy fields, he couldn't help but wonder if he was betraying Eliza once more.

He would talk to Lady Juliet, but that would be the height of it. He had known love, and he had lost it. He was not ready to have his heart broken again. Walls of insincerity had been built around his heart. No one could make him fall in love again.

But out of duty and companionship, he would talk with his wife. She didn't ask for any of this, and neither did he. It was unfair, he realized, to leave her alone to herself. He needed to do better. He needed to be a fine husband to his wife, even if their marriage was never born out of love.

“I think we can hoist the horses here.” He heard Charles say. A wave of relief swept through his body. He couldn't bear to keep holding on for longer.



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Breakfast at the Estfield Manor was quiet, moody, and awkward, as usual. Eyes shifted from one face to the other as spoons clinked against plates. Juliet grew more uncomfortable with each second. She could tell that her mother-in-law's eyes were on her.

“You need to start eating more, dear.” Beatrice said, dabbing her lips with a white handkerchief. “If you're going to start considering bearing children, you must be properly nourished.”

Juliet and Weston exchanged subtle looks of terror. Aside from sleeping together in the same bed, Juliet and Weston had never done anything else. Sometimes, Juliet wondered if Weston was only sleeping in the same bed with her out of some bound duty.

“I will ask the cooks to start adding aids to your meal. A lady's clock runs fast. You need to start trying for children by now.”

“Let her enjoy her meal, mother.” Anne cut in, coming to Juliet's rescue. “Your children talk may be the very reason she isn't eating much.”

“I am only trying to look out for the future of the house. We do not want another situation like—”

“Mother!” Anne warned again, her voice higher than before.

“It is the truth. The only reason Weston became a Marquess is because Richard—”

“Mother, please. Can we just get through the breakfast without the incessant talk? We all want a moment of peace.” Weston said, unable to bear it any longer.

Juliet focused solely on her food. The last thing she needed was to cause a rift between family.

“Just think about it.” Beatrice added, her voice sharp. The rest of breakfast was enveloped in sheer silence with tension thicker than before. Juliet felt a slight sigh escape her lips. This was not helping anybody, and it was beginning to weigh down on her. It had been almost four days since she talked to her husband, and he blew her off for a ride with Charles.

“I shall retire into my room now.” She said, slowly rising from her chair. She could feel Beatrice's hot gaze on her as she made her way out of the dining room and into the hallway. As she stepped inside her room, a loud exhale escaped her lips. Throughout the breakfast, she couldn't help but feel like she was being suffocated. Now, there were talks of children? She didn't need to add more pressure to her soul. She wondered if Weston felt the same. Of course, she could always ask him, but he would most likely give her a vague answer, and would add to the awkwardness between them.

Trying so hard to follow Estelle's advice, Juliet had tried her best to find favor with Weston. The previous night, for example, just as Weston sank into bed beside her, she turned to face him.

“I need to talk to you.” She whispered.

Weston opened his eyes. “This is not a good time. I am truly tired.”

“I don't know when to talk to you anymore. You have been avoiding me since I got here.”

“I am not avoiding you.”

“You always try to run away every time I seek to converse with you. Apologies if I can't help but think so.”

“Juliet. I am tired. I have been riding around town all day. I need to rest.”

“Well, I need to talk, so you're going to have to listen.”

“Juliet—”

“I have had enough of you shutting me out, alright? I have been here almost a full week, and you haven't spoken to me for longer than thirty minutes. Until you stop avoiding me—”

“Again, I am not avoiding you.”

“Until you stop avoiding me, I'm afraid we will both be at an impasse.”

Weston drew a loud exhale. “What do you intend to talk about anyway?”

Juliet felt a victorious smile creep on her face. “I was wondering if we could both take a stroll around the fields of Estfield tomorrow. Since fate has decided to place us in this position, the better thing to do will be to get to know each other. Now I was thinking—”

Juliet trailed off. Her speech had been interrupted by Weston's soft snores. Her eyes shifted to his face. He was fast asleep.

Crumbling under the weight of frustration, Juliet moved to her side of the bed and laid on it, feeling tears form behind her eyes.

“Milady.” Estelle's voice interrupted her reminiscence. “Shall I draw you a bath?”

Juliet sighed and waved towards the bathroom. “Why not?”

Estelle frowned in confusion. “Is anything the problem, milady?”

Juliet crashed into her bed in despair. “Lady Beatrice asked me to start preparing for childbearing.”

Estelle shuffled her legs. “Oh.”

“I know.” Juliet replied. “This is happening way too fast. I have only been here a week.”

“What about your husband? Have you been able to speak to him yet?”

“What do you think?”

Estelle sighed. Juliet could tell that she was stumped and short for words. This barely happened to her maid, which meant this was even more serious than she thought.

“How about you? Have you been able to speak to Lord Charles?” Juliet asked.

“I haven't had the opportunity to get him alone.”

“It has been three days, Estelle.”

“This is a delicate matter, milady.” Estelle replied. “One that requires the utmost diligence. I promise I shall get you the answer you need.”

Juliet rose from her bed. “Thank you.”

“Do not thank me yet. We still have work to do.”

As Juliet opened her mouth to speak, a loud knock came from the door. Estelle and Juliet exchanged confused expressions.

“You think it is Lady Beatrice?” Juliet asked.

“I hope not.” Estelle responded and hurried towards the door. She pulled it open, and Lady Anne walked in, a giant smile on her face.

“Anne.” Juliet greeted, returning the smile. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“I was coming to see if you were busy.” Anne asked.

“No. I was only preparing to draw a bath.” Juliet responded.

“The bath can wait.” Anne replied. “I need you to come with me.”

Juliet frowned in confusion. “Come with you?”

“You have been in Estfield for a week. What do you say I give you a proper tour of the manor?”

“Really?” Juliet asked.

“My bone-headed brother should have been the one to do it, but we all know how Weston is.”

Juliet's eyes shifted from Anne to Estelle. Estelle shrugged.

“Come. There are things I would like you to see.” Anne said, reaching for Juliet's

hand.

Estelle watched Anne pull Juliet from the bed, lead her out of the room, and close the door behind them.

“Oh well.” Estelle sighed and retreated to the bathroom one more time.

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Anne threaded her arm with Juliet, and they started to walk down the hallway.

“I take it you haven't seen much of the manor since you got here, have you?” Anne asked.

“Not really.” Juliet replied. “I haven't had the time.”

Anne turned to look at Juliet, an unconvinced grin on her face. “That is not why.”

Juliet said nothing in reply, confirming Anne's suspicions.

“You have been trying to avoid my mother, haven't you?”

Juliet sighed. “I would never do that. She has been nothing but nice to me since I got here.”

Anne squeezed Juliet's arm rather gently. “This may be hard to believe, but I don't spy for my mother. I know she can be a bit overbearing. Between us girls, it's okay for you to admit the same.”

Juliet wanted to. She loved having a friend to chat with apart from her maid. Estelle was great, but there was only so much she could relate to. Anne was the perfect

friend, especially in a time like this. They could grow closer and even become sisters more or less. But that would be saved for later. For now, she didn't want to risk anything getting back to Lady Beatrice.

“I only have great things to say about my mother-in-law, Anne. I promise.”

Anne shrugged. “You know where I am if you change your mind.”

Juliet's eyes swept across the environment. They were in new territory. This area of the manor felt grossly unfamiliar to her. While it

was just like other parts of the manor in terms of architecture, the atmosphere felt different.

“This used to be where the previous Marquess of Estfield held meetings with his friends. Think of it as his own personal drawing room.

Juliet looked around. There were several chairs lining the corners and a giant round table in the middle of the room.

“He was a happy man, Lord Richard.” Anne continued. “He derived joy in the simplest things in life, and he was always contented, even when life dealt him bad cards.”

Juliet looked around the room. While it looked thoroughly cleaned, it felt empty. She didn't need anyone to tell her that no one had used the house in a long time.

“It does feel a little deserted.” She finally decided to comment.

“That is because no one ever comes here. When Weston became Marquess two years ago, he had another part of the house renovated as the new drawing room. Come.”

They both walked out and continued their journey down the unknown path. Juliet continued to look around, taking in every new infrastructure, every centerpiece and tiny statue that rested on some exquisitely designed wooden table. Her eyes also caught a few paintings, some of the manor, some of horses galloping in the wind, and some of unknown faces. One in particular caught her attention.

“Who is that?” She asked, gesturing towards the painting. In it was a beautiful woman with brunette hair and a brilliant smile. Her eyes were light brown and shone as the fragmented rays of sunlight hit them. Juliet felt drawn to the woman.

“Lady Isabella Edgeworth.” Anne replied. “The wife of Lord Richard. They say she used to be the happiest woman alive.”

Juliet looked at the woman's round face, at her pursed lips and bright eyes. “She does look happy.”

“She used to be the one who cared for the gardens on the balcony.” Anne continued. The flowers that bloomed meant everything to her.

Juliet smiled. That explained the instant closeness she felt to Isabella. They were kindred spirits in a way.

“She caught the fever only a few years before Richard died.” Anne explained

“Oh.” Juliet whimpered. She remembered how the fever had gotten her own mother, how she had to suffer gruesomely before finally giving up the ghost. Part of her wondered if Isabella had to go through that, too.

“Mother said Richard was so distraught by his wife's death that he wouldn't come out of his room for months. He drank himself to sleep every night.”



“It must have been a terrible sight to behold.”

“Yes. They had no children, so Richard had no heir. The title had to pass to Weston after his death.” Anne continued.

Juliet sighed. That would explain why Lady Beatrice was talking to her about kids so early in the marriage. She didn't want her son to suffer the same fate as Richard. A shudder ran through her body as dark thoughts crept into her mind like flames in a chimney.

Was she going to suffer the same fate as Lady Isabella? Live through marriage without children. At least Lady Isabella had her husband's love to keep her company. Juliet was stuck in a loveless marriage with a husband who wasn't the least curious to know anything about her. Would she also turn out like the woman in the painting as time went on?

Still feeling emotionally drawn to Lady Isabella, Juliet grew determined to continue her acts of tending the garden. Perhaps this way, she might even feel even more attached to her. She didn't see any reason why Lady Isabella's spirit shouldn't live on around the house.

“I shall fix the garden.” She said aloud, almost like her voice betrayed her. Anne's eyes shot up, and she smiled at Juliet encouragingly.

“I shall fix the garden.” Juliet repeated, now confident in her voice and her decision. This was a great idea, and she shall follow through with it.

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Weston dreaded club meetings even more than breakfasts with his mother. At least back home, he didn't have to control any form of narrative. With his friends, he had to

try and correct them every time they made some irrefutably wrong assumption. He could feel his head pound miserably as his friends continued discussing his marriage.

“So what is the wife like?” Anthony, one of the Earls and a close friend, had asked when Weston settled beside him.

“She is fine. Thank you for asking.” Weston had replied. He wasn't in the mood to talk about his wife. Not now and not ever. He hoped Anthony would take the hint, but he was wrong.

“I bet married life is sweeter now that you have an astonishingly breathtaking maiden by your side.” George, another close friend of his, who overheard the slight conversation, asked, moving closer to Weston.

“I suppose.” Weston replied. His eyes darted to Charles, who was sitting across the round table before him. His eyes pleaded for help. He wanted to leave. Charles seemed to understand the message behind his expressions and, using the same medium asked him to relax. This would all be over soon.

“You know who I thought you were going to get married to in the first place?” Anthony resumed, causing Weston's heart to rumble. “Lady Helena Waters. She was the perfect match for you. You would've had beautiful babies.”

“Do not write off Lady Juliet. If she can maintain her looks during pregnancy, her child may come out as handsome as ever.” George said, waving gently at Anthony.

“They don't always do, though, do they? I remember when my wife, Patricia, got pregnant with my second son. You could hardly distinguish her from a troll at night.”

Weston felt noise pierce the back of his head.

“Lady Juliet is as slim as they come.” George repeated. “If she is going to put on any weight when she gets pregnant, it will not affect her looks too much.”

“Quiet.” Weston muttered to himself. He was trying to say it out loud, but his pride would not let him.

“You never know. Women crave all kinds of food during that time. She may double in size.” Anthony replied, gently tapping George. They shared a knowing smile.

“Quiet.” Weston repeated, his voice still low. He couldn't bear this for much longer.

“Do you remember Elena? She started to fill out her gowns when her pregnancy reached only twenty weeks.”

“Enough!” Weston finally found his voice and used it to the maximum.

George and Anthony exchanged confused expressions as they watched Weston rise from his seat.

“I will not sit here and let you two talk badly about my wife or any other woman in town. You should both be ashamed of yourselves.”

“Weston—” Anthony called.

“No. I am going home, and that is it. I cannot bear this any longer.” Weston replied. He threw a knowing look at Charles, who was also already up from his seat.

“Weston, this was not a serious matter. You do not have to leave just because of a few jokes.” George said in his bid to calm him down.

“Your jokes are not to be made at the expense of my wife.”

Weston felt gazes on him from several parts of the room as he excused himself and exited the building.

“Perhaps you could leave next time without making that much of a spectacle.” Charles said, walking briskly behind him as they walked towards their horses.

“It does not look to me that there will be a next time. If this is how those men talk about women, about my wife, I do not think I would associate with them any longer.”

“So let me get this straight.” Charles said, hastening his steps as their horses appeared in sight. “You will not talk to your wife, yet you will jump at her rescue even when she is not there?”

“You say that like it is a bad thing.” Weston questioned.

“It is not the best thing either.” Charles said. They got to their horses and untied the ropes which were tied around the trees. “If you're going to be a fine husband, let your wife see it as well.”

“One of these days, we will have to stroll through town in carriages. I am getting a bit tired of riding all the time.” Weston said, his voice carefree and casual.

“You are not changing the subject.” Charles said, his voice firm and solid. “If you're going to be a fine husband, be one in and out. Talk to your wife. Get close to her.”

Weston grew silent as they both mounted their horses.

“You cannot stay guarded forever, Weston. Eliza’s death was a tragedy, but it is time you moved on. You have a wife now, and in case you cannot tell, it feels like you keep punishing her for Eliza's death.” Charles continued.

Weston felt a pang in his heart. His walls were still up, and he kept trying as much as possible to remain stoic. He couldn't bear to suffer another kind of heartbreak again.

“I know you think you're betraying her memory, but it has been six years. She would've wanted you to get married, too. She would want you to be happy as well.”

Weston tugged gently at his rope, and his horse started to move. With the wind blowing gently through his hair as he began to gallop through the tired streets, he wondered if his friend had a point after all.

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*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Estelle continued to stare at Juliet in disbelief.

“No.” she said, her voice edged with shock.

“Yes.” Juliet responded, her voice casual and carefree.

“No.” Estelle repeated, staring blandly at her mistress.

“Estelle, it is happening. There is no debate.”

Juliet was back in her room after a long walk around the manor with Anne, her heart brimming with confidence and determination.

“Do you think we could ask some of the other maids for some gardening shears?”

Estelle walked briskly to Juliet and grabbed her hands as if trying to shake her out of a trance. “You cannot take on the gardening by yourself, milady. Not only is the work enormous, but it is also—madness. That is what it is.”

Juliet smiled. “But you did not see her, Estelle. You did not see Lady Isabella. Her face in that painting. She had no children and yet was known to be one of the happiest women in all of London.”

“And you think most of her happiness came from the gardens?”

Anne showed me a painting of the garden before it turned into a giant lump of dried-up leaves. It used to be beautiful. Not only would it be satisfying to bring it back to its

former glory, but it would also give me some kind of purpose. I need to start giving back to the house, and if the garden is how I do it, so be it.”

Estelle sighed. “Have you talked to Lady Beatrice about this?”

Juliet's gaze dropped to the floor. “No. Do you think it that is necessary I do so?”

“Tell her that you plan to restore some garden that has been dead for years? Yes. I think so.” Estelle replied, the disbelief still apparent on her face.

“I mean—she did say the manor belonged to me as it did anyone else. She said I could do anything I wanted with it.”

Estelle shook her head. “So I take it you will not inform her?”

“Precisely.” Juliet replied. She walked to her wardrobe and started to go through her dresses slowly. “Come help me pick a dress. I need to find one light enough to work.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea, milady?” Estelle asked, walking to the wardrobe as well. “Will it not backfire in some way?”

“Perhaps it will, and perhaps it will not. I do not have the time to think about that now. I plan to start work in the evening.”

“Today? Would it do anything if I beg you to wait till the day breaks tomorrow?”

Juliet turned to Estelle, a knowing look on her face. Estelle nodded in understanding.

“That is what I presumed.”

“What do you think about this?” Juliet asked, grabbing a dress from the rack. It was a

deep blue satin dress with lesser weight than the others. It was perfect.

“I suppose that will do.” Estelle replied, begrudgingly.

“Oh, come on. Do not be like that. Are you not tired of me sulking around the halls all day?” Juliet asked, gently pushing Estelle playfully.

Estelle shrugged. “If it makes you happy, I will do my best to support it.”

“I shall change.” Juliet said, throwing the dress on her bed.

“I shall come with you to the garden.” Estelle said as Juliet walked to the bathroom.

“No.” Juliet's voice was brittle.

“No?”

“You know better than to come with me to the gardens, Juliet. I barely let you come with me back in Willowbrook. That hasn't changed till now.”

“But it is merely a cluster of thorns and dirt now. You do not want me to come with you and clear it up a little.”

“The joy is in the work, Estelle.” Juliet responded. I shall do that all by myself. I have found that it is often the most mundane jobs that are the most fulfilling.”

“Here you go.” Estelle said, handing Juliet her dress with both hands and a curtsy. “This does not mean I still do not think this is a bad idea. I wish you would focus on a hobby that isn't so—dangerous.”

“I am not going to the tavern to wrestle with drunk men, Estelle. I am trying to grow



flowers.” Juliet replied.

Estelle helped her wear her dress and tightened the ropes at the back.

“Do you want me to do something with your hair too? So that sand doesn't get in it?” Estelle asked.

“Please.” Juliet responded. Estelle reached for her hair and restyled it as much as she could. She made a huge braid and made sure to tuck it underneath.

“Okay.” Juliet whispered, feeling ready with each minute. “Now, see if you can help me with those shears.”

Estelle was right. What used to be a lovely garden in Estfield was now a giant lump of dirt, thorns, and dried-up leaves. The garden was near the giant walls of the manor. The walls provided the perfect shade for the flowers while allowing them to receive adequate sunlight. Vines tangled all over themselves and right up to the very top wall. Juliet’s eyes followed the vines and sighed. She was going to have to start from the top. Cutting off the vine from there would lessen her work. A wooden ladder had been placed a few yards away from the garden. Still brimming with joy from having to work, she hurried back to where she had seen the ladder, grabbed it, and carried it back to the wall.

As she gently placed the ladder against the wall, she couldn't help but compare the garden to the lives of the former Marquess and his Marchioness. The garden represented the happiness in their lives. Once the Marchioness died, the happiness started to wane, and so did the garden. The more unhappy the Marquess grew, the more the garden suffered.

She balanced her feet on the first rung and gripped the ladder tight. It was steady. Slowly, she started to climb up, the vines on the wall, in her line of sight every step of

the way.”

The garden died with the Marquess, she was sure. And for two years, no one did anything to revive it. This was no longer the case. She was here. She would bring it back to life. She would bring back the happiness that used to exist between Richard and Isabella. Perhaps it will exist between Weston and her as well.

“What exactly do you think you're doing?” Weston's voice had come out of nowhere like wildfire. It had shaken her to her very core and had ruined her balance. She couldn't hold on to the ladder long enough to steady herself.

Life flashed before her eyes as her legs slipped off the top rung. She couldn't even scream as she fell off the ladder, bracing for the harsh, deathly embrace of the dry soil.

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Weston had seen her walk out the balcony with a pair of gardening shears and the most determined expression he had ever seen on her face. He was preparing his shoes to go riding with Charles as usual when she walked out, her eyes tense, and her lips smacked tight against each other.

He wanted to call her. Right from the doorway, he wanted to call her and ask where she was going, but he decided against it. She might try to twist her words if caught this early, so he wanted to watch instead. He watched her walk to the far end of the fields, her dress slightly grazing the dry stems as she moved. He didn't need to watch any further to know where she was going exactly.

The garden.

The abandoned garden near the giant walls that fenced the manor. An amused

expression crept on his face as his wife continued to advance to the fence.

What did she think she was going to do when she got there?

He knew Richard had a designated gardener before he died, and even though he never worked the Estfield Gardens that much since Isabella found pleasure in doing it instead, he remained close. On their wedding day, when they were in the carriage on their way to Estfield, he remembered Juliet had asked if it had a garden, and he replied affirmatively. He had made a mental note back then to call the gardener and have him clear the overgrown hedges, but somehow, with the events of the past few days, the thought had floated away from his mind. Now that he was watching Juliet approach the walls, her grip on the garden shears solid and commanding, he couldn't help but wonder if this was her way of telling him it was taking too long. He decided to not only watch from afar but follow her instead.

Calm and trying as much as possible not to make any noise, he started to trail her. She never turned back, not even once, or she would've caught him immediately. He stopped a few yards away from her when they both got to the wall and started to watch again. Using some of the overgrown hedges as cover, he saw her walk to the vines, her hands firmly around her waist. She watched for a while and then headed to a corner. At first, he thought she had decided to give up. The work was a bit too much. When she came back, dragging a wooden ladder with her, he knew she was serious. He watched her climb the ladder with the shears in hand, ready to cut the vines from above.

That was when he could not bear just to watch her any longer. She grabbed a vine stem and reached to cut it. He interrupted her, oblivious to the consequences it would bring.

“What exactly do you think you're doing?” He called, his voice loud and shrill. He could see the shock on her face as she lost her balance. All the color drained from his

face as he watched her lose her foothold and slip from the ladder.

He did not think. He did not have the time. He did not care for his neat clothing. All he did was jump forward, his left knee digging into the dry soil. He stretched out his arms and let Juliet fall into them.

“Weston.” Juliet called, feeling her cheeks flush and her heart pound. “You saved me.”

Weston said nothing. He calmly let her find her balance one more time and watched her slowly put her feet on the ground. His eyes swept around her clothing as she stood. He examined her face and her neck.

“Let me see them.” Weston gestured to her hands, noticing she had them balled into fists.

“It is not a big—”

“Let me see your hands, Juliet.”

Feeling another wave of hot red swim up her cheeks, she opened her hands and stretched them out to him. He turned to look at them, and his heart dropped.

On her left palm was a giant cut that ran across the entire skin.

“Oh, Lord.” He whispered. Suddenly, memories of Eliza's final moments tore through his mind. Was he about to suffer the same fate again?

“It is only a cut.”

“Come along. I am taking you to see the family's physician.”

“Weston—”

“This is not up for debate. You're coming with me. I shall carry you.” Weston said and tried to reach for her legs.

Juliet stepped back in amusement and embarrassment. “You will do no such thing.”

“This is your life on the line.”

“Again, it is just a cut.”

“It is no matter. You are still coming with me.”

Weston reached for her shoulder and pulled her closer to him. His other hand grabbed her bloodied one. Juliet's heart was pounding so much she couldn't pay any mind to the pain.

“I shall have a carriage brought right across.” Weston whispered to her. She was grateful he couldn't see the tiny smile that crept onto her face after he said that.

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Irene's Apothecary resided only a few minutes away from the Estfield Manor. Weston gently guided Juliet out of the carriage the moment it stopped right in front of the Apothecary.

“I do not think this is necessary for just a cut.” Juliet said as Weston pulled her into the house. It smelt of frankincense and burnt flowers. Juliet couldn't tell if the smell was meant to drive people away or invite them in.

“Irene!” Weston's voice traveled through the entire place, almost echoing.

“There is never any reason to yell.” A voice Juliet presumed to be Irene’s replied, and almost immediately, she appeared. Irene was an older woman whose hair had turned entirely gray. She was in a long brown robe and had her hood pulled down.

“Marquess.” She greeted, showing a slight curtsy. Her eyes traveled to Juliet, and she did the same. “Marchioness.”

“Can you look at her?” Weston asked, gesturing towards Juliet.

“Again. It is just a cut.” Juliet protested.

“One that may fester if left alone. Let Irene treat it.”

“Can I see?” Irene asked, her hand outstretched. Juliet stared at it for a long while, wondering if she needed to resist or not. Without giving it much thought, she put her hand into Irene’s.

“I was trying to cut some vine from the wall. He startled me and made me lose my balance.” Juliet said, her voice slightly accusatorial. Weston said nothing in response.

“Ah, I see.” Irene whispered, her fingers grazing across the cut on Juliet’s palm, causing her to wince and suck in the air through her teeth.

“Are you alright?” Weston called, reaching for her shoulder.

“I am fine. Just like I had been a few moments ago.” Juliet replied. “You do not need to worry.”

Again, Weston said nothing. He didn’t know how to tell her he once had to watch the love of his life fall and die because he wasn’t quick to take her to the apothecary. He didn’t know how to tell her that he would not be able to live with himself if she died

on his watch. Instead, he decided to keep quiet.

A few minutes later, Irene had applied some ointment on Juliet's palm and had offered her some milk to help with the pain.

“Apply this to your palm every night.” Irene said, handing her a vial filled with the ointment she had used. “It should be good as new.”

Juliet smiled appreciatively at Irene and wrapped her good hand tightly around the vial.

On the ride back home, Weston became riddled with thoughts. He had slipped. He has let his walls fall for a weak moment. Seeing Juliet fall from the ladder had caused him to lower his defenses. Now that he was sure she would be alright, they were back up.

Juliet could tell as well. His demeanor had changed entirely towards her in only a matter of minutes. The Weston sitting before her was not the one who had jumped to her rescue at the garden or the one who had attempted to carry her. She felt like she had caught a glimpse of something she adored and didn't get the opportunity to see it fully.

“Why?” Weston asked as the carriage skidded over a rough patch in the street.

“I wanted to fix the garden.” Juliet responded, still clutching the vial Irene had given her rather tightly.

“There are thousands of other hobbies out there you could pick up without putting yourself in harm's way. Painting, the piano—”

“The garden has always been my hobby, Weston. I thought I would do something and

fix this one—”

“Don't do that anymore.” Weston said, cutting her off succinctly.

Her eyes widened in disappointed shock. “What?”

“The gardener, Mr Brown, will be in charge of the horticulture duties from now on.”

“Absolutely not. The garden is supposed to be my thing. I don't want Mr Brown working on it.”

“Look at your hand!? You almost fell today.”

“I have suffered worse injuries tending to the garden back in Willowbrook.”

“That was then. You were your father's responsibility. Now you're mine. I will not sit idly and watch you continue to injure yourself, trying to pursue whatever fantasy you have regarding this garden. Not only is this dangerous for you, but you shall ruin all your dresses in the process.”

“You cannot do that.” Juliet said, her voice shaking with despair. This was not happening to her.

“Watch me.” Weston replied, his voice firm and solid.

Juliet felt her eyes fill with tears as silence returned to the carriage. The garden was supposed to be her safe space. After she was done growing the flowers, she had envisioned that the garden would be the first child of her own making. Now, Weston was about to rip it from her hands. She wasn't going down without a fight. She was going to make sure it all got settled right in the carriage.



“My mother loved the garden back in Willowbrook.” She started. Weston's eyes shifted from the idle scenery to her.

“All of the good memories I had with her before she died involved the garden. I decided to keep working on it because being there made me feel close to her. I don't have that anymore. The closest thing I have to that is the overgrown cluster of bushes near the wall. The one I am trying to clear.”

She paused because she could tell her voice was going to crack if she had kept going. Weston's gaze softened for a minute as he watched her gather the rest of her thoughts. Juliet turned to look at the floor for another minute, doing all she could to push back the tears.

She looked up once again, her eyes squarely on her husband. “I know you think this is some frivolous project I decided to pick up because I was bored, but I assure you, it is not. The garden doesn't just connect me to my mother. It also lets me feel closer to the former Marchioness.”

“Lady Isabella?” Weston asked, frowning.

“Yes.” Juliet replied. Another moment of silence descended into the carriage. Juliet continued to try, even harder to stop herself from breaking down into tears right in front of him. It was the last thing she needed.

“Please.” She finally said, when she found her voice one more time. “Please, do not take this away from me. Between you treating me like I do not exist—”

“Juliet—”

“Between you treating me like I don't exist and your mother already asking me to prepare for childbearing, I have nothing to take my time and keep me from running

mad. Nothing except this garden. I am begging you. Let me do this.”

Weston contemplated his decision as another moment of silence loomed in the carriage. Estfield Manor was already in view, and they would stop anytime soon. Juliet stared at him expectantly as he continued to think.

“I suppose if designing this garden will stop you from finding even more harmful hobbies, you can proceed. I shall refrain from calling Mr Brown.”

A wide grin appeared on Juliet's face. “Thank you.”

“I shall ask the maids to keep watching you. They shall do it from a distance, but you will not be left alone.”

“I can live with that.” Juliet replied.

The carriage finally stopped. While Weston still helped Juliet climb down, his demeanor was now cold and his gaze profoundly serious. The Weston she had seen in the garden was gone.

As they both made their way to the entrance doors, Juliet felt a new stem of hope grow in her heart. Perhaps all was not completely lost after all. She could work on the garden without disturbance from anyone. In her book, that was a small victory.

Perhaps there was a chance, if rather slim, that she could grow to become a happy woman at the end of the day.

## Page 12

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Juliet sucked in harsh air through her teeth, causing Estelle to retreat.

“I haven't even touched it.” Estelle started, finding amusement in the entire situation.

“Just—be careful. It hurts.” Juliet replied, watching Estelle reach for her hand one more time.

It was nightfall and time for Estelle to apply Irene's ointment on the cut across Juliet's palm. Estelle had been trying to get the cloth tied around her hand off for a while, but Juliet wouldn't let her.

“You would think, milady, that of all the injuries I've nursed for you back in Willowbrook, this wouldn't be a challenge.” Estelle said, reaching for the cloth again, wary of Juliet's movement.

“You would think, wouldn't you?” Juliet responded. Her eyes were closely fixed on her maid as she slowly unwrapped her hand.

“And you say he took you to the apothecary.”

“Yes.”

“Him. Lord Weston.”

“You don't think I would recognise my own husband?” Juliet asked.

“I don't think any of us do, if he did as you say. Where did the nobility come from?”

Estelle brought a bowl of clean water closer to Juliet's hand after removing the cloth. Slowly, she lowered her mistress's wounded hand into the bowl and let the water run through it.

"You should have seen his face, Estelle." Juliet continued, ignoring the slight stings the water gave her. "It was pure terror. It was like he thought I was going to die."

"Then he would not have survived seeing you in the garden back home. Do you remember how you got your knee badly scraped while tending to the lilies?"

"Like yesterday." Juliet responded, feeling a wave of memories, both pleasant and unpleasant, swim into her mind. She had finished her daily work and was just about to leave. As she moved towards the garden's exit, a row of unattended flowers caught her eye. She decided to take care of them before she left. As she knelt to touch the flowers, her leg slipped off the rocky pavement, and she fell straight on her face, dangerously bruising her knee in the process.

"Your father was angry. He had almost every physician in town coming over to check you." Estelle said, grabbing the vial from the bedstand after getting rid of the water.

"He was scared I may get caught with the fever." Juliet responded, her voice followed by tense silence. For a minute, she wondered if Weston had the same worry as well. Did he have someone in his past who had died from the fever? Well, apart from the former Marchioness?

"You are one of the strongest persons I know." Estelle said. She was back in front of Juliet and was slowly applying the ointment to her palm. Juliet ground her teeth hard, trying to absorb the sharp, biting pain from the ointment.

"You're doing great, milady." Estelle commended, applying one last dab.

“Perhaps there is a space in Weston's heart for love after all. He may not wish to speak to me, but he saved me today.”

“Ah, yes. The gentleman.” Estelle responded, the mild disdain in her voice immensely palpable.

Juliet shook her head. “Do not be like that, Estelle.”

“Well, is he still the doting man he once was after the injury?”

Juliet grew silent.

Estelle nodded. “That's what I thought. Perhaps a broken arm may cause him to have more time to speak with you next time.”

“Estelle!” Juliet warned with a slight smile on her face. “I know it may not look like it. I didn't even know this until today but he does care for me. In his own aloof, stony way, he truly does.”

“Hm.” Estelle remarked. “There may be a place of warmth in that ice palace known as your husband after all.”

“There may be.” Juliet responded.

Estelle wrapped a fresh sash of cloth around Juliet's hand after letting the ointment sit for a while.

“Will you go to the garden tomorrow, milady?”

Juliet sighed. “Perhaps not. It will be wise to let the wound heal for a while.”

Estelle nodded and rose from the floor. “Very well, milady. I was afraid I would have to douse your food in sleep medicine.”

“Then, I would not have to face Lady Beatrice.” Juliet replied. As Estelle opened her mouth to speak, a knock came from the door.

Juliet exchanged confused glances with her maid. “Lady Beatrice?”

“I do not think so. She does not knock. It is probably Lady Anne.” Estelle replied. She headed to the door and, without wasting time, pulled it open.

Anne appeared in a light green gown and her wavy dark hair down. It was apparent she was gearing up for sleep.

“Anne?”

“How are you feeling?” Anne asked, walking in almost instantly. “I heard Irene gave you some of the hard stuff.”

In response, Juliet raised her wounded hand and bared her teeth in a giant smile.

“You must have been scared, falling off the ladder.” Anne said, lowering herself onto the bed beside Juliet.

“Well, not as scared as my husband was.” Juliet responded, her voice floaty.

“Yes. I heard. He must have been scared that you would end up like—” Anne started and froze halfway.

Juliet frowned in confusion. “End up like who?”

Anne shook her head, regret scrawled all over her face. “Forgive me. I was not supposed to tell you that.”

Juliet's mind traveled to the day she had taken a trip down the Estfield halls with Anne. She had tried to make mention of someone as well but stopped halfway. What couldn't she tell her? What was she hiding? Who was it that made Weston so afraid of seeing her hurt?

“That is not why I am here anyway.” Anne said, breaking into her thoughts. “I have come to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“Yes.” Anne continued, lowering her voice. Her eyes darted to the door. It was shut.

“Mother plans to have a private dinner here tomorrow.”

“A dinner?” Juliet asked.

“Yes. At least that is what she will say to you tomorrow morning. But believe me, it is far from private.”

The confusion on Juliet's face continued to grow. “So it is not private?”

“I heard her ask someone to send word to a certain couple in town. Now, I do not know who, but they are arriving tomorrow. She does not want anyone to know about it beforehand, which means, whoever it is, they are not just coming for the smoked chicken.” Anne continued, hurrying through her words like a thief being chased.

“And you do not know who they are? Does Weston know?”

“I do not believe he does.” Anne replied.

Juliet felt her mind start to crowd. Was this one of the things her sister-in-law had warned her about before she left home?

“I just came to tell you—be prepared.” Anne continued. “Mother may pull some surprises tomorrow, and I don't want you to look clueless.”

Juliet nodded in gratitude, although the question continued to ring true in the back of her head.

Who was coming to dinner?

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Before Juliet could wake up the following day, Weston had slipped out of the room and to the stables. Steadying his feet and ensuring he woke none of the servants, he managed to stalk across the halls and towards the entrance. The calm morning winds blew softly against the window sills and caused them to rattle slowly. He took one last look at his cravat, acknowledging the fact that he was dressed enough to ride into town, and continued to advance to the manor's entrance.

“My lord?” A sharp, firm voice had called, right as he reached for the doorknob. It didn't belong to Juliet. It most definitely wasn't his mother, and Anne would rather lick every crevice of the manor before addressing him properly. He turned slowly and came face to face with the voice's owner.

Estelle.

She was in a long white gown, just like the other maids in the manor. Her hands were gently on each other before her, and she made a slight curtsy.



“Uh—” Weston whispered, freezing. For some reason, he felt like a dog caught with stolen meat in its mouth.

“Is there anything you would like me to help you with?” Estelle asked once a substantial moment of silence had passed between them.

Weston shuffled his feet. “Not at the moment, no.”

Estelle narrowed her eyes. “Shall I fetch Lady Julie—”

“No. God. Please, no.” Weston cut her off. “I am only trying to take a walk around the manor before the day fully breaks. I do not want to be a bother.”

Weston saw it. The judgment in her eyes. The words lying just on the tip of her tongue, ready to be said. She was Juliet's personal handmaid. If Charles was right, Juliet told her everything. As Estelle's sharp green eyes continued to pierce into him, Weston wondered just how much she knew about his married life with Juliet. Did she know about their relationship? Their bedroom activities, or lack of it?

Was she ready to lash at him with scalding words like water on a hot kettle?

“Very well, my Lord.” Estelle replied, curtsying one more time. Weston sighed and turned to the entrance one more time. Still feeling her piercing gaze on the back of his neck, he pulled the doors open and closed them behind him.

Later that evening, he was riding back to Estfield with Charles, narrating all that had happened.

Charles used his free hand to push his brown hair back as the wind continued to trudge through it.

“So, she did nothing to stop you, the maid?” Charles asked.

“No. You would presume that strange, wouldn't you?”

“Or she doesn't have the power to stop you even if she desperately wanted to. You didn't have the gall to face your wife when she woke up, so you snuck out. If she could beat you, she would.” Charles said.

“She is fierce.” Weston continued.

“I have seen Estelle around the halls. She was always meek and gentle. It is nice to know she has a fierce side to her.”

Weston threw Charles a surprised smirk.

“What does that mean?”

“It means we will no longer be discussing this.” Charles replied, his voice solid. Weston smiled and intensified his riding speed.

“Does this mean you're ready to let go of Eliza after all?” Charles asked after a while.

“It is not that easy.” Weston replied.

“I know, but so is life.” Charles said, just as the manor came into view. A few more minutes and they will be washing their hands at the stables.

“Mother is arranging a private dinner tonight. You must attend.”

Weston expected Charles to counter with another proposal or announce that he had another engagement. It shocked him mildly when he agreed.

“Are you sure?” Weston asked, turning to his friend. “The maids do not eat with us, so Estelle won't be there.”

“Keep this up, and you will not have a friend by daybreak.”

Weston stifled a chuckle.

They continued to ride in comfortable and slowed-down silence. The servants got the horses from them as they climbed down and proceeded to the manor.

“Charles is joining us tonight.” Weston announced as he got closer to the drawing room. He could see his mother sitting in the distance, facing two people he couldn't recognize from afar.

“That is wonderful. The more the merrier.” Lady Beatrice replied.

Charles frowned as he got closer. More?

“I thought this was a private dinner, is it not?”

“Well, there isn't much we can do when guests decide to grace us with their presence, now, is there?” Lady Beatrice said again. Weston shifted the remainder of the curtain, blocking his view once he got close enough to do so.

He could see the three guests perfectly now, and the amused intrigue he once had disappeared from his face.

“Weston, I assume you remember the Duke and Duchess of Thornewood?” Lady Beatrice asked, gesturing towards the guests.

Weston comported himself instantly and made a slight bow. The Duke and the

Duchess did the same in response from their seats.

“And, of course, their daughter.” Beatrice continued, gesturing towards the last guest on the edge of the long sofa.

“Lady Helena Waters.”

Weston bowed again and watched Helena do the same.

“You said Charles was joining us for dinner, didn't you? Well, where is he? We shall start soon.”

Weston frowned, the confusion on his face growing by the minute.

What was his mother up to?

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“Will your wife be joining us, my lord?” the Duke asked, watching Weston's feet continue to remain bolted to the floor.

Weston forced a smile. “Absolutely, your Grace”

“She has nothing doing anyway. Unless you count tending to what used to be a garden near the walls.”

Weston felt his heart drop. In that particular moment, it hit him like a heap of bricks. His mother had invited these people to make fun of his wife. He wondered how long he would have to listen to every snide remark and nasty comment before he would break.

A maid stepped into the drawing room and took a slight bow, her eyes fixed on Lady Beatrice.

“Dinner is ready.” She announced.

“Well, shall we?” Lady Beatrice called, rising from her chair. The others followed. As they headed to the dining hall, Helena turned to look at him. She couldn't take her eyes off of him. That would create an even more awkward situation. Instead, he threw her a polite smile. She did the same. He wondered just how much she knew about what was happening this evening. Was she also part of those intending to make jest of his wife? He had not interacted much with Lady Helena. Most of their conversations have either been in ballrooms and dances. She did not appear to him as someone who would do such things. Perhaps he had judged her a bit too quickly.

“Food is not going to eat itself, Weston.”

Weston's eyes darted across the halls. Charles was walking right behind him. He had loosened his waistcoat and had a wary expression on his face.

“Do not indulge them, Weston. No matter what happens at dinner. Do not try to go rogue. It's exactly what your mother wants.”

Weston scoffed. He was not thinking about himself. He just realized he'd not been doing that.

He'd been thinking about Juliet. How this was all going to affect her.

“Do you hear me? Do not try to argue with anyone.” Charles continued.

“It is bad manners to keep the guests waiting like this. They're here to see you.” Beatrice called from the dining hall one more time. Charles gave Weston a reassuring pat on his back as they proceeded to the table. Wearing the strained smile on his face again, Charles acknowledged Lady Helena's parents and went to find his seat.

“Lady Beatrice.” Charles called, pulling a chair. “You look younger with each passing day.”

“Thank you, Charles. Tell Imogene I will ride to see her soon. As you can see, I have been otherwise occupied.”

“Very well.” Charles responded.

“Where's Juliet?” Weston asked, looking around the table. Each person has a portion of food placed on plates before them. Right before him was an empty chair, saved for his wife. Beside the empty chair sat Helena. His mother had made the seating

arrangements. This was deliberate.

“I already asked her maid to fetch her from her chambers. I wonder what is taking her so long. Last I remember, she has no child to attend to.”

Weston swallowed. He could feel Helena's gaze on him even before he turned to her. She had a worried expression on her face.

“You should start thinking of children, Lord Weston. Offspring will alleviate some of the scandal you are currently facing.” The Duke started once spoons started to clink against plates.

“That is true. Having children will probably make your wife gain back some of the respect she has lost.” The Duchess added.

Weston grabbed a fork and squeezed it as tight as he could. “I shall take your words under advisement, your Grace.”

His eyes darted towards Charles. The same wary expression he had given earlier rested on his face.

“Don't.” Charles mouthed.

“This is a lovely feast, Lady Beatrice.” Helena commented, majorly out of necessity.

“I'm glad you're enjoying it.” Lady Beatrice responded.

Weston sighed. This was a desperate attempt by his mother to rile him up, that much was obvious. But did she have to drag Juliet into it? She had been nothing but gentle and strong throughout the situation.

He thought back to Juliet's injury and how he had been there just in time to save her. He wondered if she would have survived the fall were there no one to catch her. Flashbacks of Eliza's fall flickered through his mind.

But then, if he hadn't startled her, her feet wouldn't have slipped from the ladder.

As if his thoughts had summoned her, Juliet appeared with her maid standing right behind her. Her dark hair was nearly packed with a giant clip. She was in a long blue gown embroidered with laces at the bottom. Her hands were covered with elbow gloves of the same color, and they held a large handkerchief rather tightly. Weston felt a slight drop in his heartbeat. She looked stunning. His eyes remained on her as she walked to the other end of the table and pulled a chair.

“I apologise for the tardiness, everyone. I had an urgent matter to attend to.” She said, pulling off her gloves once she had settled down.

Weston's eyes continued to remain on her. He watched her pull her plate closer and grab a spoon.

“So glad you could join us, Juliet.” Lady Beatrice said, her voice cutting through his thoughts like a knife on butter.

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Juliet drew strong and long breaths as her maid tightened her corset, trying to shelve the panic threatening to burst through the seams of her composure.

“Do you need me to tighten it more than this?”

“No it's fine.”



She stared at the long mirror right in front of her, trying hard to draw back the tears forming behind her eyes.

This was a test, and there was no other way to say it. Lady Beatrice had called those people to come see how she was, what she did.

What she did not do.

“Where is Weston?” She asked, freely drawing her palms across her gown. “It looks like he is running late.”

“He should be here soon.” Estelle responded, her voice reassuring. “Now, you need to get out there. Lady Beatrice is probably concocting all forms of stories about you right now.”

Her maid was right. She had been summoned a little over ten minutes ago and had yet to leave her room. If this was a test, she was already failing it.

“Are you sure you do not want me to tighten your corset any harder, milady?”

“It's fine. I need space to breathe when it all becomes too—” Juliet trailed off. Estelle understood. She stood near the mirror herself, and her eyes swept through Juliet's dress through the mirror. It was the most magnificent shade of blue. She had spent a lot of time working on Juliet's hair as well. All circumstances considered, Estelle was satisfied with the outcome.

“I better go.” Juliet said. She took one last look at herself and headed out, with Estelle walking right behind her.

“So, have you spoken to Lord Charles yet?” Juliet asked as they walked down the hallway leading to the dining room

“No, milady. I tried talking to him the other day, but he couldn't stop looking at me. It was quite strange.” Estelle replied

“Is that so?” Juliet asked, a tiny smile flashing across her face. One Estelle couldn't see.

“Yes. I shall keep trying anyway.” Estelle responded. They got to the dining room entrance, and from a distance, Juliet could see the number of people surrounding the table. She could see the guests, all clad in their heavy outfits. She could see Weston. She could see—

“Oh, look. Lord Charles is joining us for dinner after all.”

Estelle didn't reply, and Juliet didn't wait for her to. She stepped into the dining room and instantly felt all eyes land on her as she made her way to her chair.

“I apologise for the tardiness, everyone. I had an urgent matter to attend to.” She said, lowering herself onto her seat.

“So glad you could join us, Juliet.” Lady Beatrice said, her voice breaking through her senses as she grabbed her plate.

Let the games begin.

Juliet's eyes scanned the room one more time. Anne had briefed her a few moments ago that morning, so she knew who everyone was.

The Duke was bald and took a lot of effort in his appearance. His beard was neatly shaped, and his shirt was well-designed. The Duchess, on the other hand, was as simple as they come. Her dress was unremarkable, and her thick brown hair was woven around a green lace headband. Her eyes darted to their daughter, Helena.

Now, she was beautiful. Juliet could admit that. Her hazel eyes gleamed as she spoke quietly to her mother. Her face was shaped in a way reserved for portraits. Her dress was the same as her mother's—a plain green and hair woven around a headband.

Her mother-in-law dressed down for the occasion. Her gown was embroidered with different designs and weighed down rather funnily on her partly frail frame. She did not look at her for long. She didn't want to.

“Say, Bernadette. I heard Lady Henrietta got married to that Lord from Hoskin. Is that true?” Beatrice asked her voice, an indicator of the eerie silence surrounding the table.

“Yes.” The Duchess replied, gently placing her spoon on the table. “I heard from Lady Violet that he had mistakenly ripped off her dress at his father's funeral.”

Juliet felt a shudder run through her body at the mention of Lady Violet's name. She looked up at Weston. He seemed to share the same discomfort. His pale blue eyes were on her as well. She must have been reading way too much into it because she could have sworn they seemed to communicate some form of reassurance.

“Quite unfortunate.” Beatrice responded.

“Not for Henrietta. You know how lonesome she can be. This was a happy accident for her. She wouldn't have gotten a husband otherwise.”

“Really? There seems to be a new strategy among wallflower spinsters, wouldn't you say? They seem to find some scandal to surround them so they can latch on to whatever responsible Lord or Earl comes their way.” Beatrice said.

The food in Juliet's mouth froze.

“Now, who are we to judge?” The Duchess called.

“Just people who got their husbands through the proper channels.”

Bernadette chuckled loudly, grating Juliet's ears even more. The tears had returned to her eyes again. She saw Helena shift in her seat. This was not delightful to her either.

“Mother, is this really necessary?” Anne called, her voice sharp and deliberate.

“You do not speak when grown women are talking, young lady.” The Duke said, throwing her a dirty look. Anne retreated into her shell and turned back to her food. Juliet couldn't bear to look at Weston. She feared she would be able to tell his thoughts just from his face.”

“I wonder how long marriages like that can go on for if the husband and the wife have nothing in common.” Bernadette continued, ignoring the apparent tension sweeping across the table like a plague.

“Children are the saving grace of wives like that. Without children, they are just as useless as crippled maids.” Lady Beatrice continued.

And just like that, Juliet could not stop the tears. They flowed down her face like waterfalls. She tried as much as possible not to let it show, even as she reached into her pocket for a handkerchief. She dabbed her face gently and stifled a sniff. This wasn't right. None of it was.

She stuffed her handkerchief into her pocket and raised her head to look at Weston.

He was already looking at her.

And he was irate. She could tell from how tight he gripped his spoon. She could tell,

from his eyes, that the anger was not meant for her. It was meant for his mother for organizing such a preposterous charade. A slight wave of pride flashed across her heart at the thought.

He was angry.

And it wasn't directed at her. It was for her.

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Thunderous clouds gathered in the sky the following day, casting a cool gloom on the manor and the fields around it. The occasional lightning flash seared into the clouds, and calm winds blew across the drylands, finding their way into Juliet's room.

Estelle tapped the door gently from the outside, announcing her presence before Juliet waved her in, her voice weak and her spirit exhausted. The last thing Estelle expected to see was her mistress lying on her bed with her face turned to the windows. She was still in her blue gown from the previous dinner. Her hair, on the other hand, had been unpacked and her gloves removed.

“Is anything the matter, milady?”

Juliet did not respond. Estelle moved closer.

“Are you alright?”

Again, silence. Estelle walked to the other side of the bed, where Juliet's face came into view. A wave of pity swam up her face once she saw how red Juliet's eyes were.

She had been crying all night.

“I'm a useless wife.” Juliet lamented, her voice on the brink of fading.

Estelle said nothing for a while. This was delicate. She didn't want to say anything that would upset Juliet even more.

“I need to apply the ointment on your hand, milady.” Estelle called. Her eyes darted

to the dresser beside the bed and landed on the tiny vial. “We need your hand to heal as soon as possible.”

“Good. It has to.” Juliet responded, the weakness in her voice still evident. “Because I intend to go to the garden this morning.”

“Milady, I do not think that is—”

“You cannot stop me, Estelle.” Juliet retorted, her voice fully loaded.

A moment of silence passed between them, and Juliet shifted on the bed.

“Let me at least take a look at your hand.” Estelle called.

Juliet drew a long sigh and finally rose. Estelle watched her mistress slowly place her feet on the floor and raise herself from the bed. She studied Juliet's face. Marks of the untidied sheets rested across the right side.

“Lady Beatrice all but called me useless last night.” Juliet started once Estelle made her way to the bath. The ritual was practically ingrained in the back of her brain at this point. Her maid fetched a clean bowl of water, ran her hand through the water, and applied the ointment and a fresh change of cloth. While the pain had significantly reduced, it still stung her from time to time.

“I am so sorry that you had to face that, milady.” Estelle said, starting the ritual.

“Anne said Helena Waters was who Weston was supposed to marry. Lady Beatrice had it all arranged, but Weston was uninterested.”

“Really?”

“And last night was some sort of comeback. Her way of lashing out at me for standing in the way of her son's happiness because of some—scandal.”

Estelle looked over at the other side of the bed. It looked slept in, but she couldn't be too sure.

“Where is Lord Weston?”

“He snuck out before I could wake up this morning. I bet he feels just as bad as I do.”

“Hm. I bet he does.”

The skies continued to darken even more, and gentle thunder rippled across the clouds.

“Are you really sure this is the best idea, milady? Going out in this weather? It might rain soon.”

“If I have to stay in this room longer than necessary, I might cease to breathe. Weston went for a ride before breakfast. I need something to clear my head too.”

Estelle nodded. “Very well.”

Soon, the treatment on Juliet's hand had been completed.

“You are not useless. I hope you know that.” Estelle called, grabbing the bowl. “You are far from it.”

“It's hard not to feel different about that. This whole thing had been a disaster from the start. The marriage, this life, this house. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. You know that.”



Estelle sighed. “And look. You've managed to make the best of a bad situation, at least as much as you could. Do you think that makes you useless? Or anything that comes close to that?”

Estelle turned to look at the fields outside the window. She stared at the dry stems swaying to the gentle winds, at the giant oak tree dancing to the tune of the breeze.

“I need you to alert me whenever Lady Beatrice is ready to come out of her room.”

“Breakfast will be ready soon. It shouldn't take time.”

“Great. I need to make it out of here before then.”

“You won't attend breakfast?”

“I can't—” Juliet froze, choking back hot sobs again. “I can't face her after what she said about me last night. I need time. I need time on my own.”

Estelle stared at Juliet, the pity she once felt for her mistress swimming up to the surface again. Juliet deserved none of this. She had always been a kind-hearted spirit. Seeing Lady Beatrice slowly starting to break it caused a pang in Estelle's heart. She was determined to do whatever it was for Juliet. Whatever was going to make her happy, she would be sure to do it.

“I shall be on the lookout, milady.” she finally said.

Another flash of lightning breezed through the dark clouds, as if adding weight to Estelle's words.

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The thunderous clouds continued to roar even louder as Weston rode into the stables. As usual, a ride around town to clear his head was always in order every morning, this one more than usual. He couldn't bear to look Juliet in the eyes this morning, especially. He felt weak, having sat there the entire dinner, unable to do anything. He had to listen to the duchess and his mother throw snide remarks and antics at his wife throughout. Charles had been the one who had managed to keep him restrained. It would not reflect well on him if he had tried to defend his wife before them the previous night.

He got off his horse and headed towards the manor, yanking his gloves off his hands as he neared the entrance, anger still lingering in the back of his mind.

“My Lord.” Alfred, the footman, greeted as he walked inside. “Welcome back.”

Weston waved in response. “Thank you.”

He walked across the halls and towards his drawing room. Perhaps he could sit in silence for a while and wallow in his misery.

“Weston!” He heard Anne call just as he grabbed the doorknob. “Mother has asked you to appear for breakfast.”

She was standing near the staircase, already in full breakfast wear. Her maid was slightly helping her adjust her hair.

“No.” Weston replied, his voice surprisingly pristine. “I shall eat on my own today. Thank you very much.”

“You have to come eat with us.” Anne called again. Weston could hear the nuanced plea in her voice, but he wasn't determined to give it any audience.

“I do not want to. Not after what happened last night.”

“Weston—” Anne called, moving closer to her brother. Her maid tried following, but she gestured for her to stay back.

“I cannot eat alone with her. Please. You need to appear.”

Weston frowned in surprise. “Juliet is not at the table?”

“Can you blame her? She had to listen to all of that last night. If it were me, I would do the exact same.”

Weston contemplated the idea for a while and shuffled his feet. She was probably in her room, too ashamed to make an appearance. He blamed his mother sorely for everything. The lingering anger he had been carrying with him suddenly started to grow.

“Please.” Anne continued, gently grabbing her brother's arm. “You cannot leave me in there with her.”

“Fine. But only for a few minutes.” Weston responded. Anne wore the most grateful smile on her face and slackened her grip on Weston.

“Thank you. I already asked Estelle to take the food up to Juliet's room. The only thing we can give her now is space.”

Weston exhaled. “I agree.”

He looked at the door to the drawing room, feeling the tiny freedom he thought he would have get pulled away from him, again.

Maybe some other time.

“I shall join you soon.” He said again. Anne nodded and walked away from him. For a while, Weston thought of heading to his room to meet Juliet. Maybe he could go give her some form of comfort. What would that even look like for both of them? He had tried his best not to talk to her too much since her accident. As he headed to the dining room, memories of the fateful day played in his head, how he had reached for her as she fell. How his heart had stopped for a second once he saw the cut on her hand.

How he had let down the walls around his heart and let himself get vulnerable for a tiny moment.

He pulled a chair and lowered himself into it. His mother was sitting adjacent to him, gently cutting off the skin off her chicken with a small knife. Anne was on the other side, slicing a piece of her bread.

Eerie and tense silence dominated the dining room. Aside from the sounds of spoons and knives against plates, nothing could be heard. Weston took several glances at his mother, seeing if he could find some remorse in her expression.

He found nothing of the sort, and it made him even more upset.

“Fine weather today, is it not?”

Lady Beatrice looked up at her daughter. “Are you blind or deaf? You do not see the clouds or hear the thunderstorm?”

Anne swallowed. “I was only meaning to make conversation.”

“Then, be factual. It looks like rain.” Lady Beatrice retorted.

“Well, nothing bad with a little rain.” Anne said.

Silence, again. Weston turned to look at Anne. Her attempt to cut the tension surrounding the table had been futile. He was wondering how long it would take him to remove himself from this setting appropriately. He bit a part of his fruit. Perhaps he could leave a few minutes later.

“I see your wife is unable to attend breakfast.” Lady Beatrice said.

Weston said nothing. He was better off saying nothing. Instead, he continued to eat his fruit.

“I’ve had her food taken to her, so it is no matter.” Anne replied on his behalf. Weston threw his sister a blank stare. She responded with a clueless shrug.

“Is that so?” Lady Beatrice asked, grabbing a cup of water.

“Cease your actions, Mother.” Weston warned, his voice dangerously low. He was not ready to have a repeat of the previous night.

“Cease what? Am I not allowed to find it odd that your wife has refused to come down to eat?”

“Indeed, given the reckless behaviour you exhibited last evening, you can’t really blame her now, can you?” Weston asked, grabbing a cup of coffee.

He could feel the anger in his body swimming to the surface. All it needed was a match. One he was most definitely sure his mother would be willing to provide. The clouds outside continued to rumble.

“It is not my fault that your wife has such a delicate constitution. If her feeble

personality wouldn't allow her to grace us with her appearance, why am I the one getting the blame?" Lady Beatrice said.

And just like that, the match was lit. Weston slammed his cup on the table, causing some of the hot coffee to spill.

"What is this, huh?" He asked.

"Weston—" Anne called.

"Why have you been trying so hard to antagonise Juliet?" Weston's voice drowned out Anne's.

Lady Beatrice turned to look at her son, an expression of contempt written all over her face.

"Are you out of your mind? What makes you think you can speak to me this way?"

Weston's brow furrowed. "Did I stutter, mother? Answer me."

"Can we all just—" Anne tried to break into the conversation one more time.

"I am your mother. You shall cease to speak to me in that manner this instant!" Beatrice said, her voice booming across the halls.

"Not if you keep coming after my wife." Weston replied, his voice unwavering. He was always wary of standing up to his mother. Up till now, he'd always been one to keep quiet and take her remarks. It was the better way to ensure the conversation died quickly without any form of escalation.

Not today.

Today, he would refuse to take any more slanderous accusations against his wife.  
Today, he would stand up to his mother and call her out.

Today, he would speak.

“It is best you return to your food and keep eating, Weston.” Beatrice continued.

“No. I shall not. You have been after her since the wedding.”

“I would not call that disgraceful event a wedding.”

“I do not care! She is my wife. When are you going to understand that you can't just make bad remarks at her or ambush her with horrendous dinner guests.”

“You will transfer your aggression to the Duke and Duchess of Thornewood now?”

“Again, mother, this is not about them. This is about you. You have refused to resign to the fact that I am married, and there is nothing more to do about it.”

“Weston, please—” Anne tried to call again, but her efforts apparently were no help. The conversation was heating up, and someone needed to back down soon enough. She knew it wouldn't be her mother.

“Do not try to play this game with me. You know very well I never intended for you to get yourself attached to a wallflower. Now she walks across the halls of the manor, attaching herself to the most frivolous activities.”

Weston exhaled, his anger expeditiously growing. “Really, Mother? This is about the garden?”

“Among other things, yes.”

Weston pressed his fingers against his forehead. His mother had seen him discussing with Mr. Brown the day after Juliet's injury. She had heard him ask the horticulturist to help deliver the flowers so Juliet could grow them once she cleared it up. He knew she wasn't pleased with his decision, but he didn't think it was enough to warrant the dinner from hell.

“She loves the garden. Why would I deny her the pleasure of tending to it?”

“When has this ever been about Juliet's pleasure? She managed to rope a respectable member of the society into a scandal and got married to him just to protect her dignity. I would say that is enough pleasure for her.”

“So that is why you invited Lady Helena and her parents last night? To sneer and laugh at her?”

Lady Beatrice chuckled, her voice laced with contempt. “You still do not understand, do you? The whole reason I brought Lady Helena here was for you. I needed you to see what you could've had if you hadn't been so stupidly naive and immensely stubborn.”

Anne felt a gasp escape her mouth.

Weston's eyes widened. Of course, the dinner was never meant to ambush Juliet alone. His mother had set a trap for him, too.

“Again, mother. I am not interested in Lady Helena.”

“Oh, but you are interested in the wallflower, is that it?”

Weston froze. He wanted to speak, but the words weren't coming out.



“That's what I thought. At least with Lady Helena, you would've had a wife whose attributes was befitting of a proper Marchioness.”

“Enough!” Weston roared, banging his fists on the table as hard as he could. He could see his mother and sister flinch at the act.

“I will not sit here and listen to you cast vile accusations against my wife just because she wasn't the person you intended for me.”

“Mother. Weston, please—” Anne called, raising her voice slightly higher than before.

“You know, why does it even matter anyway? Ever since Eliza died, you have done all you could to set me up with people you deemed suitable.”

“It is not my fault you couldn't properly connect with these women.”

“Or maybe I just didn't want them. Has that thought ever crossed your mind?”

“You do not know what you want even if it was sitting right in front of you. Yesterday's dinner proved that.”

“I would have you know that Juliet has remained way too patient with you.” Weston railed. “She has shown far more honour and respect than any of those vile creatures you wanted me to be with in the first place.”

“I do not care about her honour and respect. The best match for you would've been Helena if you had listened to me, and last night was a reminder of that.”

Hot blood pumped hard into Weston's brain. A realization came to him in that instant. He didn't have to sit down and take his mother's words. He rose from his chair and

dropped his spoon.

“You are not walking out of here.” Beatrice called.

Weston turned just as he reached the entrance and stretched out his hands. “Watch me!”

He turned and bumped harshly into Alfred, the footman.

“Apologies, my lord.” Alfred pleaded, moving out of the way.

He wanted to apologize, too, but he was too worked up. Instead, he loudly huffed and stalked out of the manor.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

The last person Weston expected to see when he walked out was Juliet. He was still angry and had loosened his cravat so he could breathe a little. He had at first intended to go straight to the stables and grab a horse. It did not matter that he had already gone for a ride the same morning. Another one didn't hurt. He could fetch Charles on the way and tell him all about how he stood up to his mother.

He probably just cost himself some rapport within the society and had injured his frail reputation among friends even more. First, he had been the subject of salacious gossip for weeks. Now, he was the scorned man who had uttered words of damnation on his mother.

He was practically a villain. The man people would warn their sons and daughters about. That fact made him even angrier. He was ready to stomp to the stables or fall on the floor right there.

Until he saw her.

She was unmistakable even from a far distance. She was near the walls of the manor, digging into the soil. He frowned in surprise. He was under the impression that she had been in her room and might have heard his heated words. A wave of relief swept down his body as the realization hit him that Juliet was oblivious to everything. That was good. The last thing he needed was for her to feel like she had come between him and his mother.

Another loud rumble came from the skies. Weston looked up. A cluster of dark clouds continued to gather over Estfield and its environs. Riding might make him escape his thoughts, but for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to walk over to the

stables. Instead, he was walking out into the fields and towards the walls.

He was walking to her.

The cold wind blew through his hair as he proceeded, his eyes intently on her. She was in a dark blue gown, one of her usual gardening garments. The closer he got, the clearer she became to him. Her tongue was slightly out and was fastened to the top of her lip in sheer focus. Her wounded hand stabled her other one as she continued to dig into the ground. Her hair was packed with a giant rose ribbon. A slight chuckle escaped his lips as he thought of her obsession with roses. She loved them, it was obvious.

She had an array of flowers placed gently on the ground beside her. He recognized them as the ones he had asked Mr. Brown to deliver. She didn't notice him as he walked towards her. She never looked up, not even once.

Not even when he stopped right in front of her, watching her dig harder into the ground.

“Juliet?” He called, surprised that the former anger that had been enclosed in his voice had completely disappeared.

Like a shocked deer, Juliet's shovel slipped off her hand. She looked up, her anxiously surprised green eyes meeting his.

“Weston?” She called. Her cheeks flamed scarlet at the thought of her husband seeing her in such a dirty state.

“You seem hard at work.” Weston commended, a smile playing on his face. One he didn't have to wear. Juliet rose from the ground, rubbing dirt off her face with the back of her good hand. He was in his full regalia, a blue cotton buttoned-up jacket

with a white shirt underneath, white pants, and gray boots. Juliet couldn't unfreeze herself fast enough

“I didn't know you were coming. I would've—”

“Please.” Weston interrupted, his voice still soft. “Relax. It is nice to see you in your—natural habitat.”

Juliet laughed. A real one. The kind of laugh he'd seen at the spring masquerade ball. A flush of warmth filled Weston's heart.

“How long have you been out here?”

“A while.”

“Of course.”

His eyes darted to the flowers lying beside her shovel. “Lilies.” He pronounced.

Juliet nodded. “My mother used to say lilies are never too much for a fresh garden. They represented change—or rebirth, whichever was more appropriate.”

Juliet felt her heart pound thunderously. Why was Weston talking to her? Had she done something? Did he have bad news to deliver, and this was his way of cushioning the blow?

“Good thinking not showing up at breakfast this morning.” Weston said, his voice cutting through her thoughts.

Juliet opened her mouth to speak but froze halfway. She had felt a slight wetness on her forehead. It was the first drop of rain.

“I didn't want to do anything to offend Mother this morning, so I just thought I would stay in.”

“I'm glad you did.” Weston replied. He would've done the same if given the opportunity.

Silence. They stood looking at each other, unsure of what to say, waiting for the other to speak. The silence wasn't the tense one she had become accustomed to. It was a comfortable one. The kind they could both drift in—the kind they both needed.

Nature, deciding to act as the icebreaker, jumped into action. The slight raindrops slowly turned into mild drizzles. Juliet looked up at the darkened sky.

“We better get inside.” She said.

Weston scoffed. The last place he wanted to be was in the manor. He would instead let the rain beat him than breathe the same air as his mother. Before he could work all of that into a sentence, thunder cracked across the sky, turning it loose. Then the rain started to fall in torrents.

“I have a better idea.” Weston finally said. He stretched out his hand and waited.

“But we will have to run. Can you do that?” He asked.

Juliet slipped her hand in his. “Yes.”

“Then we run.” Weston said.

He tugged on her arm, and they took off. Harsh droplets of rain hit them in every area as they scampered across the windy fields. Juliet felt a chill, other than the one from the weather, running down her spine as she tightened her grip on Weston's hand.

Weston looked back at her occasionally to see if she was doing alright. The wind had soaked her packed hair and it drooped on both sides of her face. She didn't look terrified or scared. She didn't look anything, really.

He turned away and continued to lead her across the fields, away from the walls and the garden and towards his very own safe space.

The stables.

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Juliet's heart pounded hard as Weston led her towards the stables, his hand wrapped around hers tightly. The fact that the stables smelled like wood mixed with horse droppings did almost nothing to displace her.

"This way." Weston said, leading her further into the shed. She looked around, watching the horses bray in fright as another thunder cracked through the sky.

"Rain." Weston said, staring at Juliet as they explored the stables even further. "It terrifies them."

"I see." Juliet responded.

Rain poured from the sky even more, and it didn't seem like it was going to stop anytime soon.

"Let's stay here." Weston finally said once they got to a slightly warmer part of the stables. Right before them, behind a tiny wooden door, was a white horse. Unlike the other horses, it remained calm and relaxed.

"Well, he's not scared of the rain." Juliet called, gesturing towards the horse.

Weston's eyes followed her hand.

“That belonged to Richard. It was his signature horse.”

Juliet nodded. She had found that men of royalty tended to have horses they grew attached to. One they felt understood them more than others. It was only expected that the former Marquess would have a horse of such as well.

“No one's ever ridden it ever since—” Weston said. While Juliet understood the respect for the Marquess, she couldn't help but wonder how lonely the horse must've gotten, having no one to take it out for the past two years.

“You're cold.” Weston said, his voice sharp and contrasting. Juliet looked down at herself. She didn't realize she had wrapped her arms around her upper body rather tightly. She was only in a thin dress, one suitable for work, not for the harsh and chilly weather.

“It appears so.” Juliet replied, letting out a nervous chuckle.

Weston undid the buttons of his jacket and took it off, revealing his thinly layered white shirt, which stuck to his body.

“The jacket is wet but not too much.” He started, moving closer to Juliet.

“What are you doing? You'll get a cold.” Juliet asked, feeling her cheeks heat up once more.

“Better me than you.” Weston replied. He waited for her to come closer to him so he could wrap the jacket around her body.

“But I do—”



“Take the jacket, Juliet,” Weston said, raising it a bit higher.

Juliet nodded and smiled broadly at him. Was the Weston she had gotten a glimpse of the other day back? She didn't dwell too much on those thoughts. The best thing to do would be to enjoy this as long as possible.

She let Weston wrap the jacket around her gently. This was the first time they had ever been this close. So close she could smell the sharp, dreamy fragrance on his body. She could also see, very clearly, the outlines of his body through the thin vest.

“There.” He whispered, looking into her eyes. “That should keep you warm for a while.

“Thank you.” Juliet whispered in response. The rain splattered across the roof even harder. Weston cupped his hand over his head and tried to look at the entrance where they had come in.

“I do not think this is stopping anytime soon.” He said.

Juliet stared at him, a newfound appreciation creeping out of nowhere through her. No matter how hard he tried not to show it, Weston was a gentleman. He may have married her out of duty, but he didn't inherently despise her. And she liked that. She wanted to see this side of Weston even more. She wished she could.

Weston turned to catch her staring at him. A fresh wave of red swam up her cheek as their eyes met. She turned away almost instantly and shifted her eyes to the only other thing of interest around them—the white horse.

“Do you think the horse might be in some kind of pain? No one's ridden it in years.”

Weston shrugged. “It doesn't take kindly to anyone. The only person allowed to get

close to it was the groomer and the Marquess. I have tried going on it, but it wouldn't let me. Pretty stubborn stallion if you ask me.”

Juliet didn't feel anything but pity for the poor horse. Pity so intense that she didn't know when her feet started to move towards it.

“You did hear me, right?” Weston called, his voice wary. “The horse doesn't take kindly to strangers.”

Juliet moved closer to the horse and stopped right in front of the wooden gate. “It is not an angry horse.”

She stretched out her hand. Weston all but reached for her hands and pulled her closer to him out of fear, but he stopped.

The horse was not reacting negatively to Juliet. In a shocking turn of events, it welcomed her instead. Juliet reached for the horse's neck and let her hand run down. The horse leaned into her touch and blew in satisfaction.

“That is—quite fascinating.” Weston said, his face layered with intrigue and surprise. “The horse likes you.”

“It is not a stubborn horse.” Juliet said, gently petting the happy stallion. “It is only lonely.”

Weston watched his wife continue to connect with the horse, feeling a new wave of warmth flood his heart. One that defied the chill running through his body. At that moment, he could feel impeccably impressed. Seeing her like this, compassionate and gentle, had shifted something in him greatly.

Something he wasn't sure he was ready to entertain.

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*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Juliet stared at her hand the minute Estelle unwrapped it. The cut was practically gone, and while it still stung ever so slightly, she had almost recovered from it.

“Irene is a brilliant woman.” Juliet said to her maid once she disposed of the cloth. “You know. I think it's time I stop wrapping clothes around it, wouldn't you say?”

Estelle stared at Juliet like she had just dropped from the sky. “I agree that most of the wounds have been healed, but you still need a little time.”

Juliet shrugged. “It is beginning to feel like a burden. I think I should be able to go one day without the cloth.”

“Well then, answer me this, milady. Do you intend to go to the garden today?”

Juliet nodded, a wave of enthusiasm flushed in her voice. “Today, I'm planting roses.”

“Then, I'm wrapping your hand.” Estelle responded.

Juliet scoffed. “You know, sometimes I forget you're my maid and not my mother.”

Estelle grabbed a fresh piece of cloth and approached her mistress. “How about you indulge me one more time?” She asked. “Today shall be the last day. Once you take this off your hand, you shall no longer need to wear the cloth anymore.”

Juliet rolled her eyes in resignation. Whenever it came to her health and safety, her maid always went the extra mile, and there was always almost nothing she could do

to stop her.

“Fine. One more day.” she said, stretching out her wounded hand.

It had been two days since rain had poured on the roofs of the Estfield manor. Two days since she got trapped in the stables with her husband. Two days since, she uncovered another layer of Weston Edgeworth. Of course, she had managed to tell Estelle everything and Estelle had been happy for her. Wary but happy.

“He gave you his jacket? Maybe he is more of a gentleman than we thought he was.” Estelle had said that day when Juliet came in, mildly dripping.

“Yes. It was the sweetest thing. I mean, he was running cold himself, but he did not care. All he wanted was to make sure I got some warmth.” Juliet had gushed excitedly.

“That is sweet, I'll admit.” Estelle had replied. “But the question is, will it last? Do you see his chivalry or kind-heartedness happening again, or was it just that once because of the rain?”

“You know, I do not think so.” Juliet had replied. “Because even before the rain, he had come to speak to me in the garden. I mean, it was obvious he wanted to apologise but didn't know how to start. I suppose he would've found a way to apologise if the rain hadn't interrupted.”

“You think there's still a chance?” Estelle had asked.

“Maybe.”

Her mind snapped back to the present, back to Estelle tightening the cloth around her palm.

“Does this mean I do not have to speak to Lord Charles anymore? Trying to get his attention has been exhausting.”

A sneer smile appeared on Juliet's face. “Is that so?”

“Yes. I've only been able to talk to him twice, and it wasn't exactly smooth sailing. He wouldn't stop complimenting the weather whenever we spoke, and he couldn't look me in the eyes too.”

Juliet nodded, quite perplexed at the level of her maid's obliviousness. “You know what I think you should do?”

Estelle frowned, settling on the bed beside Juliet. “What?”

“Talk to him one more time.” Juliet offered. “And if you notice he's refusing to look you in the eye again, confront him about it. Ask him why.”

Estelle frowned. “I do not think that is a good idea. A maid confronting a Lord is a recipe for disaster.”

Juliet reached for Estelle's arm and squeezed it gently. “Do you trust me?”

“Well, not always.” Estelle replied which made Juliet chuckle in response.

“Just ask. Don't make it seem like you are angry.”

Estelle opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by a knock on the door. She exchanged confused expressions with her mistress.

“Who could that be?” Juliet asked. Estelle responded with a shrug and headed to the door. She grabbed the knob and pulled it open. Weston stood on the other end in his

riding outfit. A white shirt coated with a red waistcoat and white pants with white boots. His hair had been completely slicked back.

“Estelle?” He greeted. Estelle curtsied in response and made way for him. He walked in and stood in the middle of the room, right in front of Juliet.

“Good morning.” Juliet felt the need to go first.

“Good morning.” He replied.

“I shall go check on the food.” Estelle said from the door. Juliet threw her a grateful nod and watched her walk out of the room.

“How are you feeling?” Weston asked, gesturing towards her hand.

“Better than ever.” Juliet replied, desperately trying to make sure her anxiety didn't seep into her voice.

“Uh—” He started, moving towards the edge of the bed. “I am supposed to go riding with Charles in a few minutes.”

Juliet watched him lower himself to the bed, beside her.

“I see. Did you want to take something from the room before you go?”

“No. I—” He trailed off again. Juliet continued to watch him intently. “I was wondering if it isn't going to be too much trouble, that I follow you to the garden today.”

Juliet's lips parted. “What?”

“I imagine it would give us some time away from—curious eyes, you know. The garden seems to be the one place you seem to relax. I would like that for myself too. We could talk while I watch you plant the lilies.”

“Roses.” Juliet corrected.

“Weston frowned in confusion. “What?”

“I’m planting roses today.”

He nodded. “Ah.”

“But of course.” Juliet said, the anxiety in her body slowly transitioning into mild excitement. “It would be nice to have someone to talk to while I work today.”

“Splendid.” Weston said, grinning, partly from relief and partly from curiosity. “I shall tell Charles something else has come up. He could ride without me today.”

“Are you sure he is going to take that well?” Juliet asked.

“He will. Do not worry about him.” Weston replied, intensely confident in his decision.

Juliet nodded. “Fine.”

Weston rose from the bed and, without turning to look at her once, exited the room.

She felt several emotions flowing through her at once. Did this mean he wasn't being aloof towards her anymore? Had she managed to get through to his heart? Was this Weston here to stay?

Then, like a bell echoing in a cave, one question rang true in the back of her mind.

How long was all of this going to last?

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“Roses were the flowers my mother and I planted together.” Juliet started, pressing her knees into the soil. Weston sat on the bench a few yards away from her, entirely focused on her words and her actions.

“You know, I have heard a bit about Lady Celia from Anne. She has grown to become friends with some of the women in the high court.”

“Is that so?” Juliet replied, digging further into the ground. A cluster of rose plants was gently laid beside her, ready to be planted.

“They often talked about the wondrous woman who walked the streets of London and held men spellbound with her beauty and intelligence.” Weston continued.

Juliet smiled. That sounded like her mother, alright.

“She was the brightest human I knew. She loved life and always entertained everything it had to offer. She was happy, even on her deathbed, as the fever snatched her life harshly from her.”

Weston's eyes softened when he realized Juliet had stopped digging. “I am sorry. I did not intend to cause you any—”

“It is fine.” Juliet responded. Since her mother died, she hadn't been able to talk about her with anyone except her Aunt Grace. Having to speak to Weston about it was not only freeing, but it also continued to grow the newfound bond between them.



“They're really red. The roses.” Weston commented a while later, gesturing towards the plants beside Juliet.

“We have Mr. Brown to thank for that.” Juliet responded. “He seemed to know what is good and what isn't.”

Weston watched her continue to work. She felt at peace here. Her face shone radiantly in the sun, and her smile had more genuineness to it. He had never seen her this happy before and was beginning to realize just how important the garden was to her. Even in her simple blue gown and packed hair, she remained elegant.

“I should apologise, by the way.” He started. Juliet did not stop working, but he knew she was listening to him. “For the dinner. I did not know she would invite Lady Helena and her parents.”

“You have nothing to apologise for. In another world, she would have been your wife.” Juliet replied.

“No.” Weston said. “I was never interested in her from the start. This was just a whole plan orchestrated by my mother to join Thornewood and Estfield.”

Juliet nodded. “It is not the worst idea. She only wants what is best for you.”

“She doesn't have the faintest idea about what is best for me.” Weston replied. “If she did, she would suffer a shock so great it might kill her.”

“Do not say that.” She said. “No matter what happens, she is still your mother.”

“You should be more upset about this. She brought those people in to make a great mockery of your plight.”

Juliet shrugged. "There is nothing I can do about it." She wiped the sweat off her forehead and grabbed one of the plants. "It's the situation we have found ourselves in."

Weston shifted on the bench. "You are not wrong."

Juliet felt her heart pound at the prospect of his reply to her next question. This could go either way, but she needed to know.

"Does this mean you will no longer sneak out of the room early in the morning so I don't have to see you when I wake up?" She asked, turning to look at him.

An amused expression crept onto his face as his eyes met hers. "You have—" He trailed off, gesturing towards his face. "You have soil on your face."

"Oh." Juliet whispered, flushed. Using the arm of her dress, she tried to wipe it off. She must have done an even worse job because the amused expression on Weston's face transitioned into a slight chuckle.

"What? It is not gone?" She felt frantic and tried to clean her face again. Weston, at that moment, started to laugh fully.

"Tell me where it is!" Juliet said, her voice rising in embarrassment. He was laughing at her.

And for the first time, she didn't mind it.

"Yes. Yes. of course." He said and rose from the bench, his laughter still as bright as ever. He knelt before her and started to wipe the sand off her face. After a few tries, he managed to get most of it off. As he wiped off the last of the soil, their eyes met, and held each other for a while. Weston couldn't help but admire how green Juliet's

eyes were. They were sharp and showed her carefree spirit—one he wasn't used to seeing. Juliet, on the other hand, couldn't help how red her cheeks continued to get.

Weston cleared his throat and rose from the ground.

“I know it is only going to get worse, seeing as you have even more flowers to plant.” He said, rubbing his hands together to get rid of the dust.

“You are not wrong about that.” Juliet responded.

“And—to answer your question. I only wake up early to get a ride in before I could get any work done. Someone once told me an early ride was enough to clear one's head. I am not avoiding you, Juliet.”

Juliet smiled. “Was it the same person who told you masks are but a mockery of who we are?”

Weston gave her an intriguing smile. “Actually, yes. It is.”

Juliet wanted to ask who it was. She knew this person must have been incredibly special to him, but she was afraid he was going to close up. She would ask later when she felt even more comfortable with him.

And part of her knew, deep down, that he was going to tell her.

Juliet wasn't surprised when Weston offered to watch her work in the garden the next day. In fact, she secretly hoped he would ask. His company the previous day had been a healthy distraction for her. For the first time, she felt comfortable in his presence, and she was sure he felt the same, too. It made complete sense, knowing their first meeting had been in a garden like this.

“Not enough.” Juliet whispered, counting the remainder of the rose bulbs she needed to plant. Weston, ever so gently watching her from the bench, frowned in surprise when he saw her mouth moving.

“Did you say something?”

“Yes.” Juliet whispered. She turned to Weston. “The roses. They're not enough. I need more.”

“Oh.” Weston said, reclining further into his bench. “It is no big deal. I shall ask Mr. Brown to deliver a few more.”

Juliet's lips curved in a grateful smile as she continued to work.

“You know, you are going to have to appear to your friends anytime soon. They will begin to wonder if your wife has found a way to ensnare you.”

Weston wanted to say it was possible. Her kindness and compassion had gotten to him. He felt more comfortable with her than he did with his friends, and if he could help it, he would continue to prefer her company over theirs.

“I am sure they will understand.” were the words that left his mouth instead. Memories of the last time he attended the Lord's meeting flowed into his mind. He remembered the unsavory words his friends had said about Juliet and other women in town. Telling Juliet about them will not do any good. It was better he kept it to himself.

“My mother used to say you could learn a lot about a gentleman from the friends he surrounds himself with.” Juliet continued. “I assume, of course, that Lord Charles is a gentleman.”

“That he is.” Weston responded. “I do not know where I would be today without him. He is often the one who talks some sense into me whenever he finds me straying.”

Juliet turned to Weston, letting the shovel slip from her hand. “So he is a wise gentleman.”

“Very much so.” Weston replied.

“Tell me this.” Juliet continued. “And please, pardon me if I go too far, but has he said anything about my maid, Estelle?”

Weston cocked his ears and plastered an intrigued smile on his face. “Not particularly. Has she said anything about him?”

Juliet wore the same mischievous smile as Weston. “Not particularly.”

“So she has?”

“No, but I can tell she admires him from afar.”

“I can tell, too.” Weston said, chuckling slightly. “It is just a shame that any kind of relationship between them will be highly frowned upon.”

Juliet shrugged. “Unions should never be formed based on societal expectations.”

Weston arched an eyebrow. “Like ours?”

“Well—yes. But we are both members of high society. Standards within us fall within the expectations of our families. It is why your mother wants you to marry Lady Helena rather than me.”

“Juliet—”

“No. You do not hear me. Our families may frown at this union because it was created to save whatever dignity we both had left, but if we had gotten married under a much better condition, no one would bat an eyelid.”

“Ah.” Weston whispered, a wave of realization crashing into him.

“Estelle and Charles, family or not, scandal or not, would have to leave town to enjoy a peaceful marriage.”

“Isn't that the dream?” Weston said, shuffling his legs on the bench.

“To run away?”

“Trust me. That is an entirely different story.” Weston replied.

A slight pause ensued between them. Juliet knew he had more to say to that effect but wasn't ready. She wouldn't bother him with more questions. That made it two things she would need to know about him as time passed. Instead, she decided to stay on topic

“Look at us, talking about our friends' marriages like we have a say.” She said, her voice laced with amusement.

“It is nice to create these imaginary scenarios sometimes, don't you think?”

Juliet stifled a chuckle. “My father hates to deal with things revolving around fantasy. He preferred cold, hard facts.”

“I remember his face on the day of the wedding.” Weston said. “He could have

swallowed me whole if he wanted to.”

Juliet threw her head back and let out a light laugh. Weston smiled. She still had it. The very thing that had drawn him to her in the first place.

“He probably would have done the same to me if it makes you feel any better.”

“It does.” Weston said.

Juliet grabbed the last rose bulb and carefully placed it in the new hole she had dug. “And that's the last of the roses.”

“Do not fret. I shall ask Mr. Brown to get the fresh roses delivered as soon as possible.”

Juliet smiled. “I know you will.”

Weston reclined further on the bench and watched Juliet start to cover up the base of the plant. He watched her hair slowly blow through the wind and her previous work. The garden had become a completely different place. She had managed to transform it from the giant heap of thorns and dirt it used to be to a thing of great beauty. He could hear bees slightly buzzing in the background. His eyes were beginning to catch even more color than before. His heart had grown lighter, and smiles were lingering on his face.

Just like the garden, Juliet was beginning to transform him as well.

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*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

When Weston asked to follow her to the garden on the third day, Juliet countered with an idea of her own.

“Is this about the roses? I already sent word to Mr. Brown.” Weston asked, his brows furrowed in worry.

“No.” Juliet responded. They were both sitting beside each other on the bed. Estelle excused herself only a few minutes later after ensuring Juliet's bath was ready. As usual, Weston was in his usual wear, and Juliet was still in one of her inner wears, a shiny green silky gown.

“I thought you were planting lilies today.” Weston asked again, his worry not subsiding.

“The lilies can always wait.” Juliet said, her voice soft and alluring.

Weston nodded, a wave of realization crashing into him like a pile of bricks. “It is me, is it not?”

Juliet cocked her eyebrows in confusion. “What?”

“I have become overbearing.”

“Weston—”

“I knew it would happen soon.”



“Weston—”

“It is fine. I shall leave you to your usual—”

“Weston!” Juliet raised her voice, reaching for his hands. He let her grab them and squeeze them. He could see the reassurance in her eyes.

“I just thought— We were always doing things I liked. We were always in my safe space.”

“I enjoy being in your safe space, Juliet.”

Juliet let out a hearty laugh. “I know that.”

Weston frowned. “So what is the problem?”

“Listen. I was thinking we could both go to your safe space this time. Dynamic activities help people know each other even better. I would like to explore more of your world.”

Weston frowned, confused. “I do not have a safe space.”

“You do.” Juliet responded. A few seconds of silence passed between them, and Juliet realized he hadn't the faintest clue about what she was talking about.

“I want to come riding with you today.” She spelled it out, her voice concise and direct.

Weston's frown faded from his face, leaving it blank. “What?”

“I just thought it was about time.” Juliet replied. Weston remembered the day of their

wedding. Juliet had mentioned that she knew how to ride horses. They had never revisited the subject since then, so it was a bit of a surprise for her to bring it up now.

“Are you—sure?” He asked.

“I am.” She replied. “And I know exactly which horse I intend to ride.”

Juliet watched a wide grin appear on his face.

“Of course.” He replied, now squeezing her hands. “We can always go riding after breakfast.”

Juliet nodded. “Fantastic. I shall get ready.”

The excitement of having something to do with her husband later in the day lingered in her. It was all she could think of when she was taking her bath and as she was getting ready. Even Estelle could tell something was going on because she would not stop smiling at the mirror when she was fixing her corset.

“Riding?” Estelle said when Juliet finished talking to her about it. “You haven't ridden in a long time. What if you fall?”

“Riding is like speaking, Estelle.” Juliet responded, putting on her arm gloves. “Just because you haven't spoken in a while doesn't mean you forget how to do it.”

“I see.” Estelle replied.

“And if it so happens that I do fall, I know Weston will be there to catch me.”

Estelle shared in her mistress's happiness. This was a brand new thing for her. Wherever it could go, she would be with her every step of the way.

“I better hurry down for breakfast. I do not want to upset anyone today. Weston has to meet with some of his friends, so he will not join us.” Juliet said, giving herself one last look in the mirror before heading out.

At the large table spread in the dining hall, Anne could tell she was excited too, but couldn't figure out why. Lady Beatrice, on the other hand, grew nauseated by her tiny smiles real quick.

“What is it that makes you so excited this morning?” She asked, watching Juliet bite into an apple.

“Nothing.” Juliet had replied briefly, but Beatrice knew too well that it wasn't nothing. She didn't push further, though. Instead, she moved the conversation away from her.

“My friend Abigail is celebrating her fifty-seventh anniversary. I shall be holding a ball for her honour.”

Juliet felt her heart clutch her chest.

“Here?” Anne asked.

“No. At the King's palace.” Beatrice responded, her voice laced with sheer sneer. “Of course, here.”

“I wish her a happy anniversary.” Juliet said, finding the words before they completely disappeared from her mouth. Beatrice turned to look at her, the gaze in her eyes piercing.

“I shall need Anne and you to be available as soon as possible so you can welcome guests. Will that be too inconvenient for you?” She asked.

Juliet swallowed. “Not at all, mother.”

“Great. Well, that is settled.” Beatrice said and continued with her food.

Juliet's mind became riddled with tumultuous thoughts. What trap has her mother-in-law set for her this time around? What unexpected surprises was she to expect? Which surprise guest was she going to spring on her? She turned to look at Anne, an inquiring expression on her face. Anne seemed to read her face and reply with a shrug.

She was just as clueless. Whatever this was, Lady Beatrice was playing it close to her chest, which meant it would be harsher than the first.

“How many guests are we expecting?” Anne asked, her words a projection of Juliet’s thoughts.

“It's a ball, Anne. There will be many guests.” Beatrice replied.

“But who are we to expect? What kind of people are coming?”

“Friends of Abigail, friends of mine, other acquaintances from several parts of London. Abigail is quite the socialite.”

Anne shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Why? You think you will be too busy to attend to them one by one?”

Anne rolled her eyes. “You know I didn't mean that, mother.”

“I do not care about whatever it is you mean anyway. The event will be held this week, and you better be available.” Beatrice said and then turned to Juliet one more

time. “Both of you.”

Juliet nodded. “Absolutely, mother.”

Beatrice was definitely hiding something. Juliet wondered who she invited this time around. And if this ball were as grand as she said it would be, it meant whatever ridicule she had planned for Juliet would be just as grand, or worse. Would this be on the scale of the last scandal she had to go through? Would she become a subject of gossip to be pushed around town once again?

But those thoughts were to be shelved for later. She needed to focus on today. Today, she would go for a ride with her husband, and nothing could stop her excitement. Not even her mother-in-law's announcement and most definitely not dastardly thoughts of whatever the future held for her.

Deciding to close the door on these uncertainties once and for all, she grabbed a piece of bread. Today was for her and her husband only, and she would not let anything get in the way of that.

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Weston let her lead the way as they both walked into the stables.

“Picking a horse is like picking a pair of gloves. It has to be a perfect fit. You have to connect rather deeply to it, too.” He explained, nodding subtly at the men taking care of the horses.

“Like a pair of gloves, you say.” Juliet asked, looking around, her eyes darting across the array of horses all neighing in their stalls.

“Yes. That—” Weston continued, gesturing towards a brown mare with a long shiny

mane. “—is Edwina. She's the one I take most of the time.”

Juliet turned to look at Weston, her face clouded with amusement. “Edwina? You name your horse?”

“You have to name your horse.” Weston replied, evidently surprised that this wasn't common knowledge. “It is a rite of passage.”

“I see.” Juliet responded. Her eyes continued to shift from each horse, and they all either felt a bit too high for her or didn't seem like they would entertain her.

“I want that one.” She said, finally, pointing ahead. Weston's eyes followed her hand and landed on a tall, white stallion.

The white stallion. The one that belonged to the former Marquess. The one she had connected to ever so easily when other people had been afraid to even go near it.

“Really? You want that one?”

“It's just like you said, right? The horse has to fit you like a glove? I think he and I made a connection the other day.”

Weston gestured to one of the men and asked him to fetch the horse.

“I'd prefer to do that myself if you don't mind.” Juliet asked. Weston shrugged and watched her untie the horse and lead it out of the cage.

“Are you ready?” He asked, grabbing the rope to Edwina as well.

“Didn't you say I have to give it a name?”

“I mean—it most likely already has one. It belonged to Richard, remember?”

Juliet laughed. That was it.

Richard.

A few moments later, they both rode out of Estfield, side by side, feeling the cloudy air blow on their faces. They raced each other at one point and went slow, sometimes later. Juliet saw, as they rode, what it meant to Weston. She saw him revel in how the wind blew through his hair, how the sunshine made his face look even more radiant, and just how much pleasure he got from having to control the horse. For the first time, she truly believed she was seeing Weston. He had shown her this side of his that he had kept hidden for so long, which was magnificent.

“So? What are your thoughts?” Weston asked a few hours later as they rode slowly back to Estfield.

“I do not think it gets better than this.” Juliet replied. “I cannot believe I missed riding this much.”

“You told me your mother taught you.” Weston asked.

Juliet held tight to her rope. “My mother loved horses a lot. I know this might come as a surprise, but my father never had stables in the first place. Not until he got married to her.”

“She must have been a very impressive woman.” Weston commented.

“That she was.” Juliet replied.

Silence descended between them after that. Comfortable silence. One that conveyed

unspoken understanding. The day was just as wonderful as Juliet had thought it would be. She would not change a thing about it. For a second, she wanted to tell Weston about the ball his mother planned to throw. One look at the happiness on his face and she decided to save it for later. He was in his element here where he could look at the countryside and the vast acres of land that seemed to span on for ages ahead of him.

He was at peace, and it would be terrible of her to take that away from him. She knew how much the pressure of his mother bore down on him. If there was ever a time she could do him a favor, it was now. She would save it again, for later. Now, she would enjoy the sun, the wind, the fields, and everything her senses had to offer with him.

Now, she would drift off in this comfort.

Charles noticed the recent changes in his friend's demeanor. At first, he had chalked it up to the usual random euphoria one wakes up with in the morning. Soon, however, when a farmer in the market joked about his recent produce, and Weston laughed genuinely, he knew it was something completely different.

“You're happier now.” Charles had said when they left the produce corner, more as an accusation than a question.

“What?” Weston asked, turning to him. They were headed back to their horses, ready to ride even further into town. Juliet had asked him to go see his friends this morning when he asked to go with her to the garden once again.

“I do not want to be that kind of wife.” She had said, her voice distinct.

“What are you talking about? What kind of wife?” Weston had asked, confused as they both headed out of the manor.



“You know what kind. The kind that keeps her husband away from his friends. I do not know about you, but I have reached my limit on being a subject of gossip around town.”

“I told you, Charles will understand.”

“Yes. He might, but what about others? Lord Charles cannot possibly be your only friend.”

“He might as well be, at this point.”

“Look,” Juliet had grabbed his hands. “Go out today. I promise there'll be more work to do in the garden when you get back. I also enjoy the garden sessions too, but I don't want you to be miserable.”

“That's why I go with you, Juliet. Being in the garden stops me from being miserable.”

“You say that now, but it's taking time away from your meetings. Just indulge me today and go. I bet Lord Charles and your other friends have some new things to tell you about their recent adventures.”

Weston had sighed. She was right. Of course, she was. He had been taking some time away from Charles, and it was up to him to fix that. Hence the meeting with him later that day, and now, as they both made their way out of the farmer's market, Weston couldn't help but ponder the question Charles had asked him.

“Answer me.” Charles said again, slightly pushing his shoulder. “What is keeping you happy these days? I know it isn't me because we haven't seen each other in a while.”

Weston said nothing. Half of him hoped Charles would drop the subject, while the other half wanted him to figure it out.

“Wait.” Charles whispered, a wave of epiphany crossing his mind. “Is it Juliet?”

Weston felt a tiny smile creep up his face. His friend was right after all. Just the sound of his wife’s name, and he was already giddy.

“Oh. so you have finally decided to—” Charles continued.

“No. Not that.” Weston replied, cutting him off. “But we have grown closer these past few days. I join her in the gardens, and we talk.”

Charles shared in his friend's happiness. Of course, this was all he had ever wanted, for Weston to find a silver lining in the terrible situation he had found himself in. He just didn't think it would happen so fast.

“What do you talk about?” He asked.

Weston shrugged. “Everything. Nothing. That is the best part. We do not have to act up to some moral code or instill any kind of formality. We just sit and talk. Well, that is a bit of an embellishment. I sit and talk while she works.”

“That is quite fascinating. So you have realised you might like her after all.”

Weston raised his hands in defense. “Let us not jump to conclusions here. I have only said I have found her to be a wonderful companion. I never said anything about love or like. Our marriage is still very much duty-bound.”

“Right. So you do not think your relationship will ever move past gardens?”

“And rides.” Weston admitted. Charles frowned at his words in confusion. “We both went for rides yesterday. She took Richard’s horse.”

Charles froze. “She took what?”

“I am aware of how surprising that is, as well.”

“That damn horse almost killed me when I tried to go near it, and what, he did nothing to her?”

“That is basically what happened. They found a connection quickly.”

Charles started to walk again, his arms folded over his chest.

“Interesting. The horse likes her.”

“She gave it a name as well. Richard.”

“After Richard?”

“I will assume so, yes.”

They walked further for a little more, and soon, their tied horses came into view.

“So you went on a ride with her into town yesterday?”

“Yes. I did.” Weston responded.

“And you are still of the opinion that she is only a wonderful companion?”

Weston shrugged. “Yes.”

“Do I really need to spell it out for you, Weston? You're falling in love with her.”

Weston laughed. “I think I would know if I fell in love with someone. Let alone Juliet.”

“Indeed. A few weeks ago, you wouldn't even touch her with a stick if you could help it. Now you're leaving time away to follow her to gardens and take her on rides, and you still think she is nothing but a companion?”

“Precisely.” Weston replied. “She is my source of peace whenever my mother tries to start another war of hers around the house, nothing more.”

Charles reached for Weston's shoulder and squeezed it gently. “I shall let you figure this one out on your own.”

Weston frowned. “There is nothing to figure out. I just told you.”

They began to untie the ropes to their horses.

“And again, I said I shall let you work it out. Do not worry. I shall be here for you when you do.”

Weston shrugged. His friend was wrong. That was the fact. He had found Juliet to be a kind human being who seemed wise and knew how to pick her words. He had learned more about her mother in the past few days and knew how she felt about specific subjects. He liked conversing with her. He should've known that would happen since that was what drew him to her in the first place.

But that was it. He only liked talking to her. She was his escape. He wasn't in love with her. He would know if he was.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Juliet stared at herself in the mirror as her maid continued to fix her dress for her. She was in a lacy silver gown embroidered with several side adornments. It also came with a silky pair of arm gloves and a headdress. This was a new dress, one she had kept hidden in her wardrobe ever since the dressmaker brought it. She had planned to only reserve it for the most special of occasions. Now, one of those occasions had come, and she could almost burst with joy.

“Is she here yet?” Juliet asked, looking through the window.

Estelle moved to Juliet's back, starting to tie her corset. “Even if she were, you wouldn't be able to see her from out there.”

Juliet felt a happy shudder run through her body. “Isn't this exciting, Estelle? I haven't seen her in months.”

“Since you got married. I remember.” Estelle replied. She started to inspect Juliet's hair as well.

“I bet she is going to have a lot of stories to tell. I can't wait to hear all of it.”

“I'm sure she would be expecting the same from you as well, milady.”

“Well—I don't have much to say. I'm only interested in hearing what has been happening back home.”

“Oh, do not sell yourself short. I bet she will be impressed with the improvements you've made to the house.”

“It is no bother. She has never been one to tend to gardens. It may not seem like a lot to her.”

“I trust that it might.” Estelle replied, grabbing her mistress's hand. “As I said, do not sell yourself short.”

A knock from the door interrupted their conversation. Estelle moved to open it. Anne appeared on the other side, a sheer giddiness similar to Juliet's on her face.

“She's here!” Anne announced. A chill ran down Juliet's spine, and for half a second, waves of doubts started to come in.

What if she was disappointed with her progress so far? What if she didn't truly care about the garden like she had said earlier? Her heart skipped a beat as the last thought crawled into her mind.

What if she brought terrible news from home?

“Well, are you coming or not?” Anne called impatiently, oblivious to why Juliet suddenly froze in her steps.

Juliet shook off all negative thoughts and took off. Her feet floated on the marbled floor as she skated down the stairs, past the confused maids and servants, and towards the doorway. Her heart pounded hard in her chest as she reached for the doorknob and pulled the doors open. She could see the familiar carriage right across the cobblestones. She leaped in joy as she watched her slowly descend from the carriage, holding on to one of the footmen who had come with her.

Juliet left the entrance doors and proceeded to meet her, the smile on her face so bright it was hurting her cheek.

“Aunt Grace.” She greeted, her voice high-pitched. “You're here.”

“Juliet. My darling.” Grace replied, instantly reaching for her niece's hands. “You look ravishing.”

Juliet pulled her into a light hug and kissed her on both sides.

“You know, for a moment, I was thinking I was going to have to rain down some serious pain on everyone in this manor if I'd seen the slightest hint of suffering on your body.”

“It is really good to see you.” Juliet said. She had missed her Aunt's antics.

“You too, my dear.” Grace replied and pulled her into another hug.

Juliet pulled away instantly and motioned for Anne to come closer. “This is my sister-in-law. Anne.” She said, introducing her to Grace.

“It is an honour to have you in our home today, Lady Grace.” Anne said, throwing in a slight curtsy into her greeting.

Grace reciprocated. “Likewise. You look really young. Are you married yet?”

“Aunt Grace!?” Juliet called, slight horror crashing into her voice.

“No, it is fine. I do not mind.” Anne replied, reaching for Juliet's shoulder. “No. I am not married yet, I'm afraid.”

“But I bet with a face like this, you have a long line of suitors.”

“Oh, dear lord.” Juliet whispered, feeling a wave of hot scarlet swim up her cheeks.

“You are absolutely correct, Lady Grace.”

Grace reached for Anne's gloved hands. “Little bit of advice, my dear, take your time. It is better you choose a wise husband than one who would cease to respect you in the long run.”

“Thank you for the advice, Lady Grace.” Anne replied, grinning profusely. “Now, we have to actually get you inside. You've had a long day and I bet you must be starving.”

“Well, seeing my beautiful niece look even more so has made me happier than I thought it would. But I am a bit peckish and could do with some food, yes.”

“Well, come on. We hope you find our food to your satisfaction. It is obvious that Juliet has.” Anne said, leading Grace across the way towards the entrance.

“It is really good to see you, Aunt Grace.” Juliet repeated as they got closer to the doors. She knew her Aunt would have a lot to tell her, and she couldn't wait to listen to all of them. It was only a shame Weston wasn't available to see her. He had gone into town to meet with some Dukes and have some discussions with them regarding some political matters. It did not matter anyway. Today, she would relieve some part of her past life through her aunt. As she led her to the dining room, she couldn't help but wonder how much she would be pleased to hear.

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Even with Grace behind her, Juliet could tell she was looking around the interiors of Estfield the moment they all walked in. Juliet scoffed. She was probably examining the quality of the walls, the floors, the painting. She wanted to know if this place was a step up from Willowbrook or a downgrade, a fact Juliet had determined herself on the first day here.



She wouldn't say anything to Grace, though. She would let her decide for herself.

“Come. The maids have been cooking all morning. They made lamb. I know how much you like that.”

“Good to know Willowbrook has not made you forget certain qualities about your loved ones.”

Juliet laughed. “Maybe if I spend a few more years in here, memories of Willowbrook shall vanish from my mind.”

“That would speak to how well you're being cared for, my dear.”

“Let's eat.” Juliet said once they all got to the dining table. The maids pulled their chairs, and they settled comfortably into them.

“Your father sends his regards.” Aunt Grace said. “He said he wishes you the very best in your marriage.”

“Is that all he said?” Juliet asked, a curious frown resting on her face.

“That was not at all what he said.” Aunt Grace replied. “But I would like you to just assume he did. Adam on the other hand, mumbled something about turning your room into his gentleman's lounge.”

Juliet sighed. “Of course he did.”

“You should know, the gossip carriage is beginning to die down. I heard some Lord was caught in a compromising position with a seventy-year-old woman in a tavern. That is all everyone is talking about now.”

Juliet laughed. Her aunt's words did relieve her a little, but she wasn't convinced that stories about her couldn't start up again if somebody wanted them to.

“I don't hear bats screeching around the castle. Where is the matron?” Grace asked, grabbing a bib from the corner of the table.

Juliet felt a gasp escape her lips. “Aunt Grace!”

“I approve of the jest. Let her be.” Anne interrupted, laughing heartily at Grace's joke.

“See?” Grace said, gesturing towards Anne. “The daughter found it funny.”

Juliet shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Conversations like this were best reserved when she was alone with Grace. She had grown to like Anne because she had been a constant source of cheer even when overwhelming forces in the house would try to bring her down. She wasn't worried about her getting offended, but there were only so many jokes you could make about a person's mother in their presence before they could adversely react.

“So tell me, where is the husband? I assume he isn't home?” Grace asked, slowly chewing a piece of chicken.

“Yes. He is out.” Juliet replied, grabbing her fork.

“Not drinking himself to death, I hope.” Grace asked.

“No.” Juliet replied, laughing. “He is in a meeting with some other members of the high society. It is apparently a very confidential one because he would not even tell me about it.”

“So he tells you about things? Is that what I gather?”

Juliet shrugged. “The things he can.”

Grace narrowed her eyes. “Alright. I want to hear everything.”

Juliet frowned in confusion. “About what?”

“Do not play games with me, young lady. I know when you are desperate to spill some words. Remember Farmer Harrison?”

Anne shook her head, trying to register Grace's words. “Who is Farmer Harrison?”

“Someone not worth mentioning.” Juliet’s voice had jumped an octave, and her cheeks reddened.

“Really? Something about your demeanour tells me that is not the case.” Anne said.

“Very much not the case.” Aunt Grace added, throwing a mischievous wink at Anne.

“Alright. I shall tell you.” Juliet felt the words force themselves out of her mouth. She grabbed her cup of water and sipped from it. “Weston and I have grown to become great friends. At first, I was worried he would remain this aloof and extremely guarded throughout our marriage. I couldn't bear the thought of marrying someone I don't know.”

“How long was he like that for?” Grace asked.

Juliet shook her head. “A really long time. It worried me a lot, Aunt Grace. But everything changed the day I started to work on the garden.”

“They have a garden?” Grace asked.

“Well, they do now.” Juliet replied.

Grace reached for her niece's hands and squeezed them tight, grateful that she had found something to occupy her time just like she did back home. “I must see it before I leave.”

“I shall take you to it.” Juliet replied, mirroring her aunt's grateful smile. She then went on to explain her injury and how he had taken her to the apothecary, worried she might bleed herself to death. She explained the rain and how it had strengthened the bond between them. She described their little talks in the garden. How he sits and talk to her while she works. She told her Aunt how sensitive and warm she had found Weston to be and how he took the utmost joy in little things life had to offer. She talked about how he had to, at first, act like a guarded man but was now reclaiming his boyish wonder.

“Well.” Grace whispered, reclining further into her chair after Juliet had finished speaking. “That explains the glow.”

Juliet's brow furrowed. “What glow?”

Aunt Grace scoffed. “The one you have on your face at the moment.”

Juliet folded her arms in playful defense. “I do not know what you speak of.”

“Juliet, not once did you stop smiling when you started to talk about him. If that doesn't say this man has captured your heart completely, I do not know what does.” Aunt Grace said, dabbing her mouth with a towel.

“That is not true. Have we grown closer than before? Yes, but it is a bit presumptuous

to think I am speaking like I am in love with him. This is a marriage of duty, remember?"

"Sometimes, my dear, when we are with the person we're meant to be with, the lines of duty can blur out rather quickly."

"He is only a worthy companion. Nothing more." Juliet said as if making a proclamation.

"I must agree with Aunt Grace on this one, Juliet." Anne added, dropping her spoon. "I have seen how you both walk together across the halls whenever you're going to the gardens. I see the way you look at him and the way he does, too."

Juliet's eyes shifted from Aunt Grace's to Anne's. Were they truly speaking the truth? Indeed, she, of all people, would know if she loved Weston, wouldn't she?

In all the moments they had spent together, she had found him to be a completely different person when vulnerable. He was full of joy, wonder, and life. He also matched her wit and sense of humor. He knew her heart. As the maids cleared the plates and the cups, she couldn't help but let the question linger in her head.

Was she falling in love with Weston Edgeworth?

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Weston returned home later that evening and had listened to Juliet tell him all about her aunt when they were alone in their room. He had an uneventful day and didn't want to bore Juliet with it when she asked. He was more than happy, on the other hand, to hear about hers.

"You should have seen it, Weston. It was the most marvelous thing ever. She even

asked me to show her the garden.” Juliet said, her voice coated in palpable and contagious euphoria.

“I assume you did?” Weston asked, loosening his cravat and waistcoat. Juliet sat on the bed and talked, the excitement from the afternoon still lingering in her voice.

“Of course. She was happy to see it.”

Weston smiled. He knew how much the garden meant to Juliet, and with the work she had done on it so far, he knew she was proud of it. She would talk about it to anyone who even showed the slightest interest.

“Is she married, your aunt? I assume she would come with her husband.”

“Oh.” Juliet said, the smile slightly fading from her face. “She isn’t. Her husband died a few years back. She lost him to the fever.”

“Oh. That must have been terrible.” Weston whispered. He untucked his shirt, walked to the bed, and sat beside her. “I can’t imagine what she must’ve gone through.”

“You know, he died the same year my mother did, too, so the sadness was overwhelming for her. She lost her husband and her sister in the same period.”

Weston watched Juliet’s countenance. Usually, when matters regarding her mother came up, she would retreat into her mind a little and let the sadness take over her. He could feel her grow slightly quiet this time around at the mention of her mother but she didn’t fully go into recluse like usual.

She must be slowly moving on.

“So she lives alone?” He asked, in a lazy tone to move on from the subject.

“Yes.” Juliet replied. “She is living the dream of true freedom.”

Weston scoffed. “The dream indeed.”

At that moment, memories of a particular conversation she'd had earlier crept into her mind, and it caused her to remember one of the questions she'd meant to ask him. She remembered his exact words when she had broached the subject of running away from societal pressures.

Isn't that the dream?

“Have you ever thought of dropping everything? Leave everything behind and retire into some farmhouse outside London?”

Weston frowned. “Why do you ask?”

“Uh—” Juliet trailed off, fearing he would clam up and refuse to say anything or, worse, refuse to talk to her throughout the night. “You have called it a dream twice now. I was just wondering if you ever thought about it.”

Weston sighed. He might as well tell her about his fantasies before he got married to her.

“I did more than think about it. I acted on it.”

“What are you talking about?”

Weston's eyes shifted to the door. It was locked. He lowered his voice nonetheless. “You cannot tell anyone about this. Promise me.”

“I promise.” Juliet's response was honest. Weston believed her. There was something

about the way she said it that reassured him.

“I have bought a cottage along the Scottish border. Now, except Charles and me and, well, now you, no one else knows about this.”

“Really? No one?”

“Not even Anne.”

Juliet felt a satisfactory laugh creep onto her face. Her husband had trusted her enough to tell her about this. She was not only grateful for it, but she also felt obliged to back him up on his innermost thoughts.

“I agree that the sophistication and politics can be overbearing. Sometimes, I secretly yearn for a life where things are simple and quiet.”

Weston smiled, feeling even more reassured. “The cottage is near a small river that runs down a valley. At night, you can hear the river run, the crickets chirp, and the wind blow gently. It is the most beautiful thing ever.

Juliet reached for Weston's hands and squeezed them gently. Weston reciprocated as well, and at that moment, all that didn't need to be said was effortlessly conveyed. It was them, alone in the room, alone in the world, fully with each other.

Weston felt like a weighty stone had been lifted off his chest. Knowing he could share these thoughts with Juliet made him adore her even more. Perhaps one day, if he could get her out of the manor without having his mother's piercing glare follow them, he would take her to the cottage and show her. He would show her what life could look like if he didn't have society breathing down his shoulders like a thirsty dog impatiently lapping at his patience and sanity.



Juliet, on the other hand, couldn't wait to see where her relationship with Weston goes. Since Grace had mentioned that what she felt for him might be more than friendship, she couldn't get the thought out of her mind. She knew, deep down within her, that the days that would follow would fully define her feelings towards Weston. She would know where she truly stood with him and vice versa. Whether it would come in the form of a sign from nature or an act of man itself, something would manifest and make her feelings concrete.

One way or the other, she would know if she was indeed in love with her husband or not.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Juliet knew, even as she woke up a few mornings later, that something catastrophic would happen. She couldn't exactly point her finger on it, but she had this nasty feeling growing down her spine. As she took her bath, her heart would not stop beating. The tension surrounding her was palpable. At some point, Estelle took notice of it.

“Is anything the matter, milady? You seem a bit tense today.” She had asked, her voice laced with concern.

“I don't know.” Juliet replied, the cluelessness catching her off guard. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that the ball Lady Beatrice was throwing for Abigail's anniversary was happening today.

It couldn't be that could it? Why was she so uncomfortable all of a sudden? Yes, maybe she wasn't the most confident of all maidens out there, but she had attended her fair share of balls and parties. None of them had ever made her feel this way. Something sinister was happening.

Something sinister was going to happen.

“Do you want me to fetch you some water to drink?” Estelle asked, the worry in her voice now growing. She was helping Juliet put on one of her dresses. Since she already promised Beatrice that she would attend to all the members planning to grace the party, she couldn't sneak away as usual and find solace in her garden. Some part of her was convinced that if she could do so, she would be able to rid herself of the tense nervousness clouding her body all of a sudden.

“Should I fetch Lord Weston? Perhaps he might be able to calm you down?”

Juliet scoffed. “No. Leave him alone. I do not want to bother him.”

Juliet stared at herself in the mirror as Estelle continued to adjust the edges of her dress. She wore a dull brown gown adorned with lacy ropes and shiny flowers. This was not her typical day-to-day wear, but since it was a party, she didn't mind dressing up for the occasion. She tried to shrug off the feeling of impending doom and decided to focus on the day instead. Beatrice had informed her that the guests would be in a line, and it would be up to her and Anne to properly welcome them into the manor individually.

When Estelle finished adorning her mistress, she turned her head towards the door.

“Should I come with you?” Estelle asked. She didn't want to leave Juliet like this, so inherently uncomfortable. If she couldn't figure out what was going on with her mistress, the least she could do was stay by her side until she knew what it was.

“No.” Juliet responded, her voice crisp. “I am sure you will find some work to do in the kitchen. Go help them there. Do not worry. I will be fine.”

Lie.

She was far from fine, but she hoped her words were convincing enough for Estelle to take them.

Estelle nodded and watched Juliet head out of the room and gently close the door behind her.

Meanwhile, Juliet, on the other hand, skirted peacefully down the Estfield halls. The buzz was a bit louder than usual as maids flooded the rooms, scrubbing and mopping

the floors. Weston had gone for a ride earlier than usual because he was also bound to attend the ball. The guests were beginning to arrive, and soon, she would have to start attending to them.

“My grandmother can scrub that floor harder than you. And she's already dead!” She could hear Lady Beatrice screech at some helpless maid. Juliet shook her head and moved to the staircase after the drawing room. Lady Beatrice was standing next to the railing, watching the servants work. Her eyes landed on Juliet the moment she appeared in her field of view.

“Well, don't you look ravishing.” Lady Beatrice called, throwing a slight smile at her. Confused and taken aback by this compliment, Juliet curtsied.

“Do you need my help with anything, Mother?” She asked, dangerously hoping she didn't.

“The guests are arriving already. I can hear their carriages from here. Do what I already asked you to do in the first place. Or will that be too much for you?”

There it was. The mother-in-law she was used to.

“Not at all, mother.” Juliet replied, remaining as polite as possible.

“Good. Go stand by the doors. Anne is going to join you soon.”

Juliet nodded and did as she was told. The harrowing feeling she had shelved away earlier started to resurface the closer she got to the door, its effect almost twice as harsh.

What was happening? This was an odd feeling for her, and she did not like it at all.

The line before her had stretched out past the cobblestones already. It was time to get to work.

She started to welcome the guests, most of them women who have either deemed themselves as Beatrice's friends when she didn't even know their names or acquaintances she had met at one event or the other. Thanks to the footman assigned to assist her, she didn't have to worry about not knowing their names or the names of their houses. Her eyes spotted the Duke and Duchess of Thornewood as they joined the line in the distance. She looked away almost immediately. She didn't want to be perceived by them until she absolutely had to. Soon, Anne joined her, and the lines started to move a bit faster. Juliet continued to plaster the biggest smile on her face and laugh off every genuine or backhanded compliment she received.

“It is great to see you have managed to turn your life around.” One of the women had said as Juliet held her hands in greeting. “We thought you would become so depressed in your marriage that you would begin to throw yourself to drunk men in taverns.”

Again, Juliet laughed as much as she could. It was all she could do. Saying anything else would cause even more unnecessary drama and she did not want that.

She had ushered in a few more Dukes and Madams when her eyes landed on it.

A familiar carriage that caused her heart to drop.

Her eyes followed it till it finally stopped near the other carriages. The harrowing feeling in her body became even more magnified, and at that moment, she knew why.

It bore her family's insignia. Willowbrook's insignia.

“Oh, dear Lord.” She whispered, feeling the blood drain from her face.

Like the ultimate confirmation of her fears, she watched her father, Lord Peter Fairmont, slowly descend from the carriage, aided by a footman. He was followed by Adam and Camilla, who remained stuck together as they all walked towards the line.

Juliet felt her heart start to pound mercilessly. That was the source of the feeling of doom. That was why she wouldn't stop thinking something catastrophic would happen to her.

The catastrophe just landed before her new home, and she couldn't move her feet off the floor.

Her father had lost a little weight. Not enough to raise any kind of concern. He looked mightily sharp in his green waistcoat and shirt. Adam was in the same outfit except in red. His hair had grown fuller, and she could see a few wrinkles around his eyes. Camilla, on the other hand, was in a giant light blue dress. One that covered her entire feet and dragged off the floor.

The closer they got, the harder it became for her to breathe. She wasn't ready to hear whatever they had to say to her. She wasn't even ready to talk to them about anything. This was all sudden and had disoriented her. Soon, she started to suffocate even harder.

“Come with me.” Anne had silently called behind her. She did not argue. They headed away from the doors and the guests.

“But the guests—” Juliet felt herself say in between labored breathing.

“If mother has a problem, she shall take it up with me. Do not worry about that.”

Anne led Juliet to her room, throwing nasty glares at the servants who stopped to watch them go. Juliet rested on her bed and clutched her chest.

“I can't— I can't—” She whispered. Anne rushed out of the room and in a few minutes, returned with Weston.

“Juliet.” Weston called, rushing to her side, his face laced with the utmost worry. “What is wrong with her?” Weston asked, turning to Anne, who rested gently on the doorway.

“My father.” Juliet managed to say. “He is out there with my family. With Adam and Camilla.”

“What? This was an anniversary. They didn't need to be invited. Why would they—” Weston called but froze halfway, feeling a twist of epiphany crash into him.

“Mother.” Anne said, lending a voice to the thoughts in his head.

Weston turned to his wife and grabbed her gloved hands. “Juliet.”

“I can't breathe. The room.”

“Are the windows open? I cannot breathe.”

“Juliet—”

“Why can't I breathe?”

“Juliet!” Weston raised his voice. “Listen to me.”

Juliet turned to him, her eyes looking earnestly into his.

“I need you to take deep breaths. I think you're just suffering from sheer panic. Take deep breaths.”

At first, it did not work. The more she breathed, the harder it became. Weston, noticing this, pulled her closer to him.

“Deep breaths, Juliet.” He whispered, placing her head gently against his shoulder. “Deep breaths.”

The panic started to slowly dissipate. Weston turned to look at Anne, a desperate question in his eyes. Anne seemed to understand and bowed slightly before excusing herself.

“They are not supposed to be here.” Juliet said, her voice slow as she breathed into Weston's chest.

“I know. This is one of my mother's games.” He replied, wrapping his hands around her even tighter.

“Why would she invite them? This party had nothing to do with them whatsoever.”

“Why does mother do anything, really?”

Weston felt her starting to slowly shake. He bit back his tongue in anger. She was sobbing.

“I cannot face them, Weston. I cannot talk to them. Not Father, not Adam, and most definitely not Camilla.” Juliet said, amidst quiet sniffles.

“You have to. Or Mother wins. You have to show her this didn't get you as much as she thought it would.”

Juliet raised her head and looked her husband in the eyes. “How am I going to do that?”



“By going back to the door and becoming the best version of yourself.” Weston continued. “The one I’ve grown to like over the past few weeks. You’re a kind and intelligent woman, Juliet. You’ve learned to interact with your family for almost a quarter of your life. Today wouldn’t be any different. Today, you will have me by your side.”

Juliet wiped the tears off her face with the back of her hand. “Really?”

“Yes.” Weston replied. “You are going to talk to them and they are going to see how well you’re doing and choke back whatever nasty remarks they thought they were going to deliver to you.”

Juliet nodded.

“And then, we’re going to dance.” Weston continued.

“What?”

“Yes.” Weston replied. “We’re going to dance. And they’re going to watch.”

Juliet shook her head in utter disbelief. “But we’ve never danced together before.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” Weston replied. He reached for Juliet’s hands and held them gently, his next words offering her the ultimate reassurance.

“And we’re going to make it count.”

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“Oh, there you are.” Anne gasped when her sights landed on Juliet. She swam past the crowd and headed straight to her. Before Juliet could vocalize a reply, Anne had

threaded her arm with hers. The hall was filled with people in their heavy gowns and thick boots, all talking, clinking drinks, and laughing rather loudly.

“There is a certain gentleman who has been eyeing me in the drawing room since I got back.”

“Why? Are the maids not enough to fulfill his errands?” Juliet asked, momentarily taken out of her own world.

“You do not understand.” Anne replied, leading Juliet towards the drawing room. “I think he is looking to dance with me.”

Juliet shrugged. “Well, do you want to dance with him?”

Anne said nothing, giving Juliet all the confirmation she needed.

“You should give it a try.”

“I don't know, Juliet.” Anne replied. “Mother probably would not want him for me.”

Juliet held Anne tighter as they crossed the foyer into the drawing room, feeling a few eyes dart towards them.

“Do you really want to have a dance with someone your mother picked? If you like this man and he seems responsible enough, I would advise you to ask him instead.”

“Ask him?!” Anne asked, bringing her right hand over her mouth. “That is just pure madness.”

“Madness that works.” Juliet replied.

“I do not know, Juliet. There he is.” Anne replied, gesturing towards a tall and relatively attractive young man sitting in a corner, gently drinking wine from his cup. He was in a dark jacket and pants, and his sleeves were outlined in white.

“Usually, the fact that they are alone should be a warning, but he looks harmless enough.”

“So you think I should ask him to dance?”

“Yes.” Juliet said. “But the instant his presence starts to affect you strangely, you should leave him immediately.”

Anne stared gratefully into Juliet's eyes. “Thank you.”

Juliet smiled. Anne had taught her, over the past few months, what it would have felt like if she had a little sister. One she could confide in and tell jokes to. In another world, Anne would've been that person, but she was grateful nonetheless for the relationship they had now.

“Go. And come back to tell me everything.” Juliet whispered. “And do not run. You do not want to seem desperate.”

Anne nodded, taking in every bit of Juliet's advice before she headed into the room. Like clockwork, his eyes landed on her almost immediately, and Juliet saw a smile appear on his face.

Harmless enough.

“There you are!” Adam's voice called behind her, causing severe coldness to run down her spine. “I was beginning to wonder if you'd taken the tunnels out of town just so you wouldn't see us.”

Juliet turned slowly to come face to face with them. With a closer inspection, she could tell the wrinkles on Adam's face were even more defined than she thought. Camilla rested on his shoulder, giving Juliet a helpless smile.

“Hello, Juliet.”

“Adam.” She said, steadying her voice. “It is nice to see that you managed to leave the tavern so you could be here. That must have taken a lot of effort.”

“Careful, young lady. Just because you're in your husband's house doesn't mean I can't still knock some senses into you.” Adam retorted. His breath smelled of beer, and for a few seconds, Juliet wondered just how much he had taken.

“You know, if you're not careful, you may end up leaving with a horse, thinking it is your wife if you keep up the drinking.”

Camilla stifled a chuckle, and Juliet threw her a mischievous wink. Adam started to slowly grow red. “How dare you speak to me this way?”

“Does Father know you've colonised the brewery to yourself? I'd be careful if I were him.”

Adam huffed. “You lowlife snake! Wait till Father hears about this. He will have your head for breakfast!”

Before Juliet could come up with another brilliant retort, her husband's voice interrupted the heated conversation.

“Is everything alright over here?” Weston asked, appearing like a guardian angel, his hands on his back and a courteous smile on his face.

“Restrain your woman, or I will have to do it for you!” Adam croaked, evident venom in his voice.

Weston took a step back. “Sir, you seem drunk. Am I going to have to ask the guards to escort you out of the manor?”

“What?”

“Drunk, sir. Disoriented.” Weston continued, the smile slowly disappearing from his face. “Drunk men like you are powder kegs around parties like this. I do not want any form of nuisance on my watch, so I will ask again. Will I have to ask the guards to drag you out of my house?” His voice was now firm and commanding.

“The—” Adam's eyes darted from Juliet to Weston in confused horror.

“Great. If you don't mind, it is time for the first dance, and I would like to have it with my woman. As you have so eloquently put it.”

As Adam continued to find words that wouldn't come, Weston stretched out his hand towards Juliet. The quartet had started playing, and men were beginning to take places with their women partners.

“Would you do me the honour, Lady Juliet?”

Juliet laughed. He hadn't called her “Lady” in so long. The word felt strange yet comforting in his mouth.

“Most definitely.” She finally responded and gingerly placed her hand in his.

He pulled her closer to him and placed his other hand firmly around her waist. They began to sway to the music like the other people in the ballroom. Weston stared into

Juliet's eyes as they danced as if freezing every moment for posterity. He could feel the wondrous wave of euphoria that flowed through him as he danced with her. They continued to twirl around the hall until every other person faded from Weston's view. All he could see was Juliet. Her green eyes, rich with wisdom and care. Her hearty laugh, as she almost slipped off her gown, her thick, shiny hair under her well-made headgear.

He knew, even before the dance ended that he was seeing her, truly seeing her for the first time. As the day continued to darken, a brand new feeling started to sink into his chest. He was dancing with her. His wife. The one he had grown to like.

The one he had fallen in love with.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Breakfast the morning after Lady Beatrice's grand ball was the equivalent of an eerie calm after the storm. Thick silence prevailed as spoons clinked against plates and cups against teapots. It was apparent there was a lot to be said, but no one was going to throw the first stone. Weston sat opposite Juliet, stealing furtive glances at her every chance he could get. Now that he had started to see her in a new light, he couldn't take his eyes off her for long. Juliet, on the other hand, kept trying to relive the memories in her head over and over again. Her dance with Weston had been the highlight of her day. He had held her with such grace and firmness that she had felt her stomach flutter. He had made her feel like she was the only woman in the room with his eyes. He had been so intimate and so telling with his eyes. She never wanted the night to end, but like all good things, nay, like magnificent things, it had to.

“Anne.” Beatrice called breaking into Juliet's thoughts like fragile glass. “I noticed you were dancing with a certain gentleman last night. Do I know him?”

Anne frowned. “No. I do not think you do.”

“Well, we're going to have to change that, aren't we? If I don't know him, that means he couldn't possibly be up to any good.”

“Or, you just don't know him because he didn't want to be known?”

“Somehow, that is even worse. Did you at least get his name?”

“Ferdinand.” Anne replied. “He's an Earl in South London.”

“Hm.” Beatrice replied, the obvious caution still laid in her voice. “Whatever

happens, I need you to be careful. Do not get married to a lowlife or a wallflower. It would be a shame if that was all we could nail in this house.”

Juliet swallowed. She knew it was only a matter of time before the conversation became about her in one way or another.

“Men can't be wallflowers.” Weston said, his mouth full.

“You sound incredibly ignorant.” Anne replied.

“That reminds me.” Beatrice said, turning to look at Juliet. “Your father and his son left earlier than usual last night. Do you happen to have a reason for that?”

Juliet tightened her grip on her spoon. She had a myriad of reasons, of course, the most significant one being the fact that her husband had come to her defense with Adam. She was not ready to let Beatrice know that, though. It would be a fact she would be able to secretly relish with Weston.

“I am afraid I haven't the faintest idea. They most likely needed to retire for the night.”

“Really. That is it?” Beatrice asked. “No other reason?”

Weston raised his head to look at her. She was beginning to grow inconvenient by his mother's questions, he could tell.

Juliet shrugged. “I do not know.”

Flashes of her slight encounter with her father after her dance with Weston floated through her brain. He said nothing to her apart from “I hope you're well.” Juliet could tell her father was still sore about the wedding and how it had happened. She could



tell he was hurting from how much she had tainted his and the house's reputation. She didn't admit to herself just how much of a relief it had been to watch her father climb back into the carriage and ride back to Willowbrook until now.

"That is quite unfortunate," Beatrice said. "I was hoping they could stay just a little bit longer so I could talk to them even more."

"Mother, what are you doing?" Weston said, his voice overpowering Beatrice's as he placed his cup on the table.

Beatrice feigned ignorance. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, mother. First, you taunt Juliet by springing her family on her out of nowhere. Then you make her face them with no preparation whatsoever."

"I did not know I needed to ask for her permission before inviting guests to my party."

"Those guests are her family. The ones who were not happy with her because of what happened. You can't possibly be so cruel, mother."

"Enough of that!" Beatrice said, shrinking her son with a withering look. "You shall cease to speak to me in this manner."

"I shall give you the respect you deserve once you start to do the same to Juliet." Weston said, his voice floaty.

"I give her the respect she deserves." Beatrice said, turning to look at Juliet, utter contempt written on her face.

Juliet felt all the blood drain from her face just with that one look from Beatrice. She turned back to her food and continued to stab her meat with the fork. Weston noticed almost instantly.

“If you think the respect she deserves is what you give her, you and I have nothing more to discuss.”

Beatrice turned to her son, who was already beginning to turn red from anger. “I am your mother, Weston.”

“And I am the head of this house!” Weston proclaimed, slamming his coffee cup on the table. It shattered almost instantly, causing every other woman around him to flinch, including Juliet. “You always seem to forget that somehow.”

“Weston—”

“I shall take this no longer. The judgment, the meddling, all of it stops now. Today.”

“You're bleeding.” Anne announced, her voice a convenient break into the tense argument. Juliet's eyes shifted towards Weston's hand. Blood was slightly seeping down from a cut around his right knuckle.

“Let us find something for that.” Juliet said, springing into action almost instantly. The shattered coffee cup continued to rest on the table as she grabbed his wounded hand.

“Juliet, it is no big deal—”

“You're wounded. We'll find something for it. Come now.”

With Beatrice's discerning gaze continuing to rest on them, Juliet held on to Weston

and quietly led him out of the dining room.

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*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

“Sit there.” Juliet said, gesturing towards the only chair in their bedroom. “I’m sure Estelle kept some of the medicine Irene used for my hand. Let me just search for it.”

“Juliet, you do not need to—”

“Worry?” She asked, turning to him. “This is me not worried. I promise you.”

Weston looked up at her and nodded. “Fine.”

“After that, we shall engage in a discourse on the art of maintaining composure whilst conversing with your mother, so as to avoid undue fervour.” She continued, looking through every top cabinet in her dresser.

“I know. She brings out the worst in me.” Weston replied, holding his wounded hand gingerly.

“No. She tries to do that, and you always let it work.”

“I am not built like you, Juliet. I do not have the patience you have.”

Juliet knelt on the floor to look through her dresser's bottom cabinet.

“Patience is not predominantly built into people, Weston. It is taught over and over again. I grew up with a father who spewed venom whenever I tried to tell him my preferences in a man and a brother who thought I was as useless as the highest fruit on a tree. I had to learn patience, or I would've been in a worse situation than this.”

Her lips slightly parted as she pulled the last set of drawers. She was sure Estelle kept it somewhere.

“And what happens when patience alone isn't enough?” Weston asked.

Juliet rose from the floor and moved to her dressing table.

“We have not gotten to that stage yet. I will know.”

Her eyes scanned the contents on the table and soon, caught the vial. She grabbed it and threw it across the floor to the bed.

“Let me get some water.” She said and headed into her bath.

“You are doing fantastic so far, by the way.” She heard Weston say behind her. A smile crept onto her face as she filled a bowl with water.

“We need to wash the wound first.” She said once she got back to Weston. She knelt on the floor before him and reached for his hand.

Like someone would handle a delicate flower, Juliet grabbed Weston's hand and placed it into the bowl. His knuckles stung as the water ran through it, but he almost didn't feel the pain. Juliet holding his hand had somehow made him not to. His eyes were fixed on her as she worked, carefully cleaning the blood off his hand. He watched as she grabbed the vial and opened it. She pulled his hand out of the water and cleaned it with a dry piece of cloth.

“This may hurt a little.” Juliet warned. Before Weston could protest, she sprinkled some of the ointment around the wounded area. Weston grunted in pain and tried to retrieve his hand from Juliet's stubborn grip.

“Oh please.” She laughed, watching her husband react to the pain. “I am sure Anne would've taken that with no reaction at all.”

“You had to apply that to your hand for almost a week?” Weston asked, surprised at how brave his wife had been, only adding more detail to his conviction.

“Yes. But then, I am not a baby like you, so it did not hurt.” Juliet replied, planting a kind smile on her face. Weston watched her, carefully and firmly, attach the dry piece of clothing to his wound and wrap it right around his hand.

“Since it is only a small cut, it should disappear before daybreak.”

Weston narrowed his eyes. “So I cannot ride today?”

“Unless you think you can push through the pain, no.” Juliet replied. “Looks like it is just me and you today.”

Weston's heart jumped at the idea. Nothing else mattered as long as he got to spend time with Juliet. Not even his hand.

“Would you like to escort me to the garden? I need to check on the plants and see how they're coming along.”

As Juliet slowly rose from the floor, he couldn't help but wonder how he had been so blind the past few days. He had been so focused on finding happiness in freedom that he didn't think it was possible to find one in captivity. Juliet was the newest good thing in his life, and he wasn't ready to let her go. The more he watched her move around the room, the harder he fell for her, a feat he didn't even think was possible. He couldn't see himself living the rest of his life without her, and it started to grow paramount that he needed to tell her about his feelings. How he was going to do so was still a thing to be considered.

“Weston?” Juliet said, staring at her husband and breaking into his thoughts. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes.” Weston replied, slightly rubbing the cloth around his hand. “Yes, I shall follow you.”

Juliet wore a broad smile on her face. “Fascinating. I just need to change into a lighter dress.”

She headed to her wardrobe and grabbed a deep blue silky gown, one he had seen her wear over and over. She headed behind the wardrobe and started to dress up.

Weston smiled. Juliet was a gift from fate, and he would cherish her for as long as he could. He was doing himself no good by shielding his feelings away from her. A slight laugh escaped him as he thought of Charles and what he would do with this situation. Charles would probably laugh hard at him first before anything because Weston had vehemently denied being in love with Juliet when he asked. Now that he was sure of his feelings, he needed the advice of his best friend regarding telling her. Where was the best place? What was the best time? How would he even voice it out to her?

“Are you ready?” Juliet asked, walking back out, now in her garden wear. Weston nodded and rose slowly from the chair.

Along with the slight head rush, the idea also hit him hard. Of course.

The garden.

It was the most special place to her. To both of them. What better place would make this even more monumental? They both headed into the garden.

“Since the roses still aren't here yet because for some reason, Mr. Brown seems to be taking his time, all I have to do today is inspect the lilies and check for weeds.”

“Alright.” Weston replied. He walked over to his usual bench and lowered himself into it, pondering on the best way to begin his speech.

“I don't know if you remember this, but I told you, perhaps the first day we met or our wedding day, that I once had a betrothed. The woman I was initially supposed to marry.”

He was grateful Juliet didn't stop what she was doing to respond to him. It showed how casual she had found their talks to be, and it was lifting some pressure off of him as he spoke.

“Yes. You said you were not ready to talk about it.” Juliet replied.

She knew something had happened to Weston in the past. She remembered the tour around the house with Anne, who had mentioned something along the lines as well. Of course, she imagined that pushing him to tell her anything before he was ready would not yield any good, so she decided to wait. It looked like he was finally ready to tell her about her and she didn't want to come on too strong so she decided to continue her work, while paying rapt attention.

“Her name was Eliza.” Weston continued. “I met her when I was only nineteen. She was the love of my life. She was filled with light, joy, and just—pure happiness. She was also wise like you. We had our life planned together. I was so sure we were both going to get married and head into some part of town where we won't be weighed down by facetious politics and the shackles of society.”

Juliet nodded. “Because you didn't know you would be a Marquess before then?”



“Precisely.” Weston continued. “Everything was on track until, well, suddenly, it wasn't.”

He was telling this story with slightly less difficulty. Usually, remembering Eliza alone would send tears forming behind his eyes or cause him to act out towards other people in some other way. This time, he was relaxed. Juliet had truly healed him, and she did not even know it.

“What happened?” Juliet asked. She knew whatever Weston said next would cause her to stop her work and go sit next to him. And that, it did.

“She fell from a horse one stormy night.” Weston proclaimed.

“Oh, Lord.” Juliet whispered. Now was the time to drop the casualness. She headed to the bench and lowered herself next to him.

“We couldn't get to the physician on time. The rain did not help. She had suffered a major bleed, and the blood wouldn't stop, no matter how hard I tried.”

Juliet looked down and noticed his hands were slightly shaking, perhaps from grief. She grabbed them and squeezed them with hers, giving her husband a reassuring smile.

“She died in my hands, Juliet.” Weston proclaimed.

“That must have been a traumatic thing to go through.” Juliet said.

“It was six years ago.” Weston continued. “Life changed drastically after she died. Everything turned into a giant pile of dull gray.”

Juliet nodded, the feeling familiar to her as well, at least to a point. After her mother

had died, she had thought life would no longer be worth living as well. The garden back at Willowbrook was the only thing that had kept her going because when everything felt cold and harsh, it had always provided warmth. Juliet fully believed her mother's spirit resided in the garden like the beautiful flowers she had planted.

"Then, Richard died a while later. He did not have an heir, so I had no choice but to step in and take over."

Juliet nodded. "Sometimes, the price for freedom is not always easy to provide. We start to wonder if the things we have to sacrifice will override the pleasures we are going to enjoy."

Weston smiled. "Right as always."

This was it. The perfect time to tell her. His hands were still intertwined in hers, and they were alone in the garden. His eyes searched hers to see if his words would have the desired effect. Did she feel the same way he did? Would this all have been for nothing? His eyes traveled to her hands. Despite her affinity for gardening, her hands were soft and gentle. They sent chills down his spine the more he looked at them.

No. He was wasting time, and he needed to stop that.

"Juliet, there is something I need to tell you." He finally started.

Juliet frowned in worried surprise. "What is it?"

Weston opened his mouth to speak but froze halfway. They had been interrupted. At first, it had started as distant footsteps laced with the crunching of dried leaves. And soon, the owner of those footsteps arrived, holding a small box.

"Mr. Brown?" Juliet whispered, her excitement growing. "You're here!"

“Apologies for the delay, my lady. We just had to make sure the roses were the best of the best.”

Juliet's eyes traveled to the box. “Are those—”

“Yes.” Mr Brown replied.

An excited squeal escaped her mouth as she jumped off the bench and hurried to the box. He opened it, and she looked closer, feeling the fresh fragrance from the roses hit her nose rather pleasantly.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Brown. Thank you.”

Mr. Brown smiled and handed her the box. Before he left, he bowed, acknowledging Weston. Weston waved at him.

“Would you look at that?! They're finally here?!” Juliet said, her voice a few pitches higher than usual. Weston enjoyed every minute of it. He loved seeing her this happy and was grateful the roses had done the trick.

“Oh. Right.” Juliet whispered, placing the box against her left side and holding it in place with her arm. She walked back to Weston and made to sit on the bench.

“You said you had something to tell me. I am sorry I got carried away.”

Weston stared at her, at the lingering smile on her face and the light in her eyes. He stared at the box and how she held onto it like one would hold a cherished item. He decided, at that moment, to let her enjoy her brand-new excitement.

“It can wait.” He finally said.

Juliet's eyebrows furrowed. "Are you sure?"

"Most definitely." Weston replied, nodding slightly.

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Weston stepped back into the manor, leaving Juliet to enjoy her flowers for the time being. He headed up to his room, looking to have a change of clothes and go for a ride later in the afternoon. As he stalked across the halls and walked past the drawing room, he heard his mother's rather recognizable laughter.

“I did not have the heart to tell her. That dress was outrageous.” He heard his mother say as he moved closer to the door.

“She would have to find another dressmaker, I'm sure.” Anne's gentle voice floated through the room as well.

Weston twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open, coming face to face with his mother and his sister, engaged in a casual conversation.

“I need to speak with Mother.” He said, stepping inside completely.

Anne and Beatrice exchanged confused expressions. Weston turned impatiently to his sister.

“Alone, Anne.” He said. Anne nodded and rose from her seat, floated past them, and headed out the door.

“Juliet just got her roses.” Weston said the minute his sister exited the room.

“What?” Beatrice asked, completely oblivious.

“I asked Mr Brown to deliver some roses to her for the garden. She just got them this

afternoon.”

“I did not know she was expecting roses in the first place. That is good for her, I suppose.”

“You need to have seen her face when she saw them, mother. It was like she had been blessed with life itself. She loved it so much she had to scream out of joy. Did you hear me? Scream.”

“It is good to know something as frivolous and patronising as flowers makes your wife as happy as that.”

“No. No. You do not get me.” Weston said. He moved closer and placed his hands on the chair opposite Beatrice, the one Anne had to vacate. “She was that excited over roses because she is a light soul. She doesn't harbour grudges. She is kind, full of light, peace, and integrity. She is a walking example of a perfect human being. And that is the person you choose to continuously belittle and mock at every turn.”

“You're raising your voice again, Weston. I told you I would not take that anymore.”

“I am tired of this, mother.” Weston continued. “I am tired of having to listen to you criticise my wife constantly. It stops today. Do you hear me? Everything stops.”

“She is only your wife because she had to be.” Beatrice said, her words a slap across Weston's heart. “There is nothing between the two of you except the great sense of duty and the shame we needed to cover.”

“It is more than that now. I am in love with her now, and I would not listen to you disparage her anymore.”

Beatrice rose from her chair, her sharp features twisting in both surprise and

contempt. “You do not mean that.”

“Believe me. I mean it more than anything. And if you continue to make my wife feel bad about herself, I shall take action and leave.”

Beatrice blanked. “What?”

He told his mother, at that moment, of his house out of town. He told her about the coziness of the cottage and the peace he would get if he moved there, ignoring the shock that only continued to increase on his mother's face as he spoke.

“You wouldn't dare.” Beatrice retorted, her voice low with anger. “You wouldn't dare leave your position and try to abandon the season.”

Weston tightened his grip on the chair and leaned closer to an irate Beatrice. “Try me.”

Beatrice recoiled in surprise. Her son had never been this adamant. He had never spoken back to her before. He had always received her words with calmness. She could only come to one conclusion as to why he was being this way.

“She has poisoned you against me.” Her words grated Weston's ears. “She has found a way to make you into this—this unrecognisable man standing before me. Why does it not surprise me that not only is she an incompetent Marchioness, she is also a witch?!”

Weston blanched. “What did you just say?”

“Of course, it all makes sense. Everything started to go the wrong way when she got here. Under that supposed good nature of hers, I knew she was a deadly snake. Tending to gardens was only her cover.”

“Are you listening to yourself, mother?” Weston asked, pressing his fingers against his forehead in sheer disbelief.

“Her and that maid of hers. I knew they were up to no good.”

“Really? You're going to include the maid as well.”

“Did she plant this idea of leaving in your head? What next? She tries to turn Anne against me, too? Is that her grand plan?”

“Enough!” Weston said.

“No. You listen to me. You are not going anywhere. Do you hear me? That girl is destroying you, and I will do something about that. You are a Marquess. You are bound to lead this manor.”

Weston sighed. This was going to take longer than he thought.

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Ecstatic couldn't begin to describe the feeling running through Juliet's veins. While she did not exactly know what Weston was going to tell her, she had an idea, and if it was what she was thinking, not only would she become the happiest woman on earth, but she would also begin to work towards becoming a mother. As soon as she finished working on the garden, she walked back into the manor, almost skipping in happiness. The bright smile on her face was noticed by maids and servants alike. It was so broad that she did not think anything could make it disappear so quickly.

Until she overheard them.

At first, it had started as low murmurs. One she was curious to understand. She knew



the commotion was coming from the drawing room, so she moved closer, holding her dress to avoid being seen. Her eyes searched her surroundings, hoping no one could see her as she placed her ears to the door.

The first sentence she heard caused her heart to skip a beat.

“For the last time, mother. I am telling you. Juliet is not a witch.” She heard Weston say.

“I do not know why you continue to defend her. It is evident she had ensnared you from the beginning. Oh! how have I been so blind?” Beatrice's unmistakable voice retorted. Juliet frowned in confusion. What could possibly be the reason for their argument this time around.

“Stop calling my wife a witch, for heaven's sake!”

“Right there from the beginning, at the spring masquerade ball. She had lured you to her. This was all a well-orchestrated plan for her to finally have the home she had been yearning for, and you fell right into her trap like an oblivious mouse!”

Her words stung Juliet's ears. She was used to her mother-in-law's antics by now, but this one, for some reason, affected her way more than she thought it would. Perhaps it was because Beatrice didn't know she would hear.

“She knew having you around her would set things in motion. All she had to do was stay in a corner and cry like a helpless maid when she had been the mastermind behind this immense catastrophe all along.”

Juliet blinked back tears. She wasn't sure how much of this she could listen to anymore. Each word Beatrice uttered felt like a dagger slashing across her heart.

“Mother—”

“And you dare come in here and tell me she is excited about roses? Did she show you this house you plan to escape to? I bet it looks as lowlife as her!”

“Listen to me!” Weston said.

“Does she know?”

“Know what?”

“About the woman you would not stop grieving for?”

Juliet frowned. Eliza?

“Yes. I told her about Eliza. We are clear on the front.”

“Well, did she know you were using her as a placeholder for the dead girl?”

Juliet clamped her hands tight over her mouth to avoid her gasp from being heard. What?

“What are you talking about?”

“Do not give me that look, Weston. We both know you only started to pay attention to her because you desperately want her to fill the hole Eliza left in your heart. You know that is all she will be. That is all she will ever be good for.”

“That is not true.”

“You may think you're in love with her now, but deep down, you know this is only

because you see she resembles Eliza in her personality.”

Juliet's ears stilled. This was staggeringly unbelievable.

“Buy her all the roses in the world, have long talks in the garden with her all you want, but know this. She will always, always be a replacement.”

Silence so thick that it bothered Juliet slowly descended. Why wasn't he saying anything? Why wasn't he denying the gross allegations his mother was making against her? Was that really what he thought of her? A replacement? Her knees began to grow weak from shock and disappointment.

“I am done with this conversation.” She heard Weston finally say.

That wasn't a denial.

“At least, you would have found a more worthy replacement in Lady Helena. She was interested in you, too, and I had practically handed her to you on a silver platter. All you had to do was say yes, and she would have been yours. You would've been a husband to her instead of the conspiring wallflower that haunts the garden like an evil spirit.”

Juliet began to step back slowly. She had heard enough. It could not get any worse than this. Even if it did, she didn't want to witness it. She was beginning to grow overwhelmed. Her presence had always been a source of discomfort to her mother-in-law. That much was evident. She couldn't do anything to change it, no matter how hard she tried. That fact was slowly beginning to dawn on her.

“Even if she wears the most expensive dresses in the world and tries to interact with people so she can seem human, you and I both know she will never match up to Helena. She would never be half the Marchioness Helena would've been.”

And that was it. The last straw. The nail in the coffin. An exasperated groan escaped her mouth. One Weston immediately heard. She could hear his footsteps frantically grow louder. She could have left then. She could have even disappeared as the doorknob began to twist, but for some reason, her feet remained bolted to the floor.

She watched with sheer shock as Weston pulled the door open and caught her right before him. She watched the confusion on his face slowly grow to surprise, then to shock as the realization hit him.

“Juliet—” Weston called, unable to push more words out of his mouth.

Juliet swallowed hard, staring intensely at her husband.

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Weston couldn't begin to speak. Nothing came forth. Nothing that could justify all Juliet had heard.

“Am I a replacement?” Juliet asked, afraid of whatever her husband was going to say.

“Of course not. This is only a lame attempt from my mother to get into my head.”

Juliet said nothing. She wanted to believe him. She desperately wanted to.

“Juliet, please.” Weston called and tried to reach for her hands. She stepped back. He froze, staring at her.

“I am never going to be good enough, am I?”

“What are you talking about?”

“At first, I had presumed she would warm up to me down the line, but she won't.”

“She will. I will give her no choice.”

Suddenly, a glaring weariness crashed into her. She had grown tired. All of it was beginning to exhaust her. She was tired of having to remain silent as her mother-in-law lashed the worst of insults at her, of having to put on a straight face whenever she got ambushed. She was tired of having to retire to the garden every time she needed to breathe, having to change her dresses because Beatrice didn't like them. It all became clear to her, just how much she'd had to endure.

She wasn't going to do that anymore.

“I can't.” The words had come out of her mouth in a horrid whisper.

“Juliet—” Weston called and tried to reach for her again. She recoiled even further.

“I cannot do this anymore.” Her voice was clear like glass. She did not wait for Weston to reply before heading up to her room. She needed a break. An escape. She needed more solace than the garden could provide her. Estelle turned to look at her in surprise as she pushed her bedroom door open and closed it behind her.

“Milady?” Estelle called, watching her slowly slide down to the floor, hot tears cascading down her cheeks.

“What happened?” Estelle asked, growing worried. She joined her mistress on the floor and held her shoulder. Juliet started to sob quietly, letting the tears flow freely.

“Milady.” Estelle called again. Juliet said nothing. She remained in that state, staring into space. Slowly, an idea formed.

“Go ask one of the footmen to get a carriage ready.”

“Where are you going?” Estelle asked.

“Away from here. I cannot bear to stay here any longer. I need to leave.”

Estelle curtsied and headed out of the room. She knew better than to ask Juliet any questions. Whatever happened to her must have been great for it to warrant leaving the manor. Juliet remained behind the door, contemplating her choices. Even as Weston came to knock over and over, asking her to let him in, she remained there.

“Look, I know I owe you an explanation, and I can do that if you just let me in.” He had said from the door. Juliet had refused to answer. He waited a few more minutes, and it wasn't until Juliet could hear his footsteps disappear from the door that she rose from the floor and headed to her wardrobe. She started to take out some of her dresses. She couldn't go home. Lord knows she would be subjected to even more ridicule. As she laid her gowns on her bed, she continued thinking long and hard about where she would head. Soon, it hit her.

Her Aunt Grace's.

Estelle returned a few moments later with news that the carriage was ready.

“I am leaving for my Aunt Grace. Will you come with me?”

“Without question.” Estelle replied. There was nothing for her at Estfield if Juliet left. She hurried to her corner and packed a few of her clothes as well. Soon, they were both out of the manor, in the carriage, and on their way into town.

Memories of the past few hours continued to haunt Juliet's mind. She had never been enough.

“Hey! Slow down the horses. This is a rough patch.” Estelle had yelled to the footman driving the horses. The carriage continued to skip over hard stones and broken tree branches. Soon, Estfield became a giant speck on the horizon. The farther Juliet got from it, the lighter her heart became. She exhaled loudly as the horses brayed, almost in response.

“Control your horses. I am warning you.” Estelle yelled again.

Juliet reached for her maid's hand. “You do not need to do that.”

“He is being reckless.” Estelle replied. Juliet smiled. The one thing she had always counted on throughout her tumultuous journey was her maid's loyalty. She was grateful for it way more than Estelle would ever realize.

“Thank you.” She said, not knowing what to say after. She had a lot of things to be grateful for, and naming them would only seem rather strange. Estelle gave her an encouraging nod.

“Why did we have to leave? What exactly happened?” Estelle asked again.

Juliet exhaled. She had no idea where to start. Was it the betrayal? The disdain Beatrice felt for her? The pain she felt as she listened to her husband's conversation with his mother? The fact that all of this happened only an hour after she received her long-awaited roses from Mr Brown? For a second, she wondered what her mother would think if she was alive. Would she be mad that her daughter was succumbing to pressure and escaping the house?

Milady? Estelle called again, looking into Juliet's eyes. “What happened?”

Juliet shook the damning thoughts out of her mind. She might as well start somewhere. As she opened her mouth to speak, immensely loud braying from the horses permeated the atmosphere. Estelle frowned in confusion.

“What is happening?” Juliet asked. Like a shockingly unfortunate answer to her question, the carriage started to shake vehemently. Juliet tried hard to find something to hold onto. Estelle, on the other hand, tried to hold her weight. Juliet looked outside through the shielded window. The horses had steered off course, and they were now headed straight for the woods. The carriage descended further, hitting almost every tall tree in its way.

Like a nightmare moment, time began to slow down for Juliet. Every chipped wood



around the carriage started to disappear. She saw it, in the corner of her eye, even before she could fully register it, that they were headed for a giant tree, and the horses didn't seem like they were ready to stop. Splinters of wood flew past her face as her lips slowly parted. Before she could find the energy to scream, the tree had stopped the carriage in its tracks, crushing it on impact. Juliet was thrown against the tree as the last of the carriage scattered across the crunchy leaves. She slammed her head against the hard bark, and before her body could hit the ground, her consciousness had disappeared, and everything had utterly gone blank.

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Weston couldn't believe his ears when he heard his wife had left the manor.

“And what? You just let her leave?” He screamed, confronting one of the footmen at the entrance. “You were supposed to keep her in here!”

“We—we didn't know that, my lord.” The frightened footman replied, his face draining of color.

Weston sighed. He wasn't wrong. There never was any order to stop Juliet from leaving whenever she wanted. He did not know this would be the thing that sent her away from him. He thought of returning to the drawing room to confront his mother instead. This was all her fault. If she hadn't been perpetually disdainful towards his wife, she would still be here. He headed to their bedroom, mouthing a prayer as his feet sped across the hallway's shiny floors. If this were what he was thinking, he would have a bigger problem on his hands. He pushed the doors open, and the state of the room not only confirmed his fears but made his heart drop in shock. All of Juliet's dresses were gone from the wardrobe. Only a few heavier ones lay on the bed. Her jewels were gone from her dresser as well. He walked in, feeling dejection slowly take over his body. He was never going to recover from this. How long had she been gone? Did she go back to Willowbrook? Was she ever planning on coming back? He knelt on the floor and felt his eyes heat up with tears. He had managed to live through the past six years guarded and aloof. No one had managed to penetrate the walls around his heart.

Except her. She managed to not only break through the walls but also obliterate them. She owned his heart now, despite his failed attempts to keep it from happening.

Now she was gone, and he was again back to his roots. The second time he had to open his heart to someone, he had gotten disappointed again.

He rose from the floor and wiped the tears from his eyes. He would know where she was at the very least a day later. He just needed to wait. He walked out of the bedroom, down the stairs, across the halls, and towards the doors. His feet seemed to be leading him for some reason. It didn't surprise him when he realized they were leading him to the walls, towards the garden. It was the only place he could feel connected to her, even if she wasn't around him.

The fragrance of the roses attached itself to his nose the instant he stepped into the garden. He could feel her presence in here. It was like she was in every rose, every lily, and every freshly cut leaf around. His hands grazed past the flowers, memories of all the conversations they'd had filling his brain. How she had laughed whenever he had made jest of someone, how she had gently admonished him regarding other matters. The more he remembered, the more he realized he couldn't live without her.

“My lord?” A frantic male voice called from the entrance.

He frowned. The servants knew better than to get this close to the garden. Whatever he had to say had to be important. Weston appeared before the servant, who had the most worried expression fixed on his face.

“What is the matter?” Weston asked, the same quizzical look still lingering on his face.

“It's terrible.” The servant replied. “It is Lady Juliet.”

“What happened to her? Has she been found already?”

“Yes.” The servant replied, the fervent worry lacing his voice now more than ever. “It

appears she might have gotten in an accident on her way into town.”

Weston's heart skipped a beat. “What?”

“They say her carriage crashed in the woods. They do not know if she is alive or not.”

Weston swallowed hard in fear, feeling his knees almost betray him.

“Get my horse.” He struggled hard to prevent his voice from shaking.

“My lord—”

“I said, Get my horse!”

Without hesitation, the servant headed towards the stables at full speed. Weston stepped out of the garden, feeling utter coldness swim down his body. He started to mumble another prayer, one stronger than the previous one. He hoped to death that the news wasn't accurate. He hoped this wasn't happening again. He hoped the love of his life was not about to lose her life.

Not again.

He rode with volition. This was the first time he was riding without feeling at peace. His hands trembled on the saddle as the horse galloped across the rough pathways. He continued to hope the worst wouldn't have happened before he got there. Flashes of Eliza falling off her horse disrupted his brain as he continued to speed through the rocky road. The memories began to grow even more vivid that they messed with his line of vision. He had to shut his eyes tight and open them to eliminate the disturbing reminiscence. His heart pounded hard in his chest as he tightened his grip on his horse. He wanted to get there as soon as possible. He wanted to have her in his hands and feel her hot breath against his knuckles. He wanted to see her live.

The servant who had delivered the news to him was not far behind, galloping along on a black stallion as well. Soon, they crossed over into the woods, leaving slight civilization behind. Weston pushed the horse to go even faster, and soon, he started to skip across dead logs and dried leaves. The fallen carriage appeared ahead of him. He could see the horses with their sides on the floor. The carriage had been completely dismantled. He could see a figure lying on the floor and another one leaning against a tree, breathing heavily. The closer he got, the clearer the figures became. Estelle held on to a low-hanging branch, breathing for her life. He could see her hand smeared with blood, and his heart pumped even faster in fear. He did not doubt it anymore that Juliet was the one on the floor, unmoving. Lifeless.

He could not stop his horse fast enough. He jumped down and raced to his wife. He fell to the ground and wrapped his arms around her.

“Juliet.” He called, softly, feeling his eyes start to burn again. “Juliet please—” His voice cracked. He held her face and inspected it. Her eyes were closed, and her forehead had a stretched-out cut on it. The blood on the cut had been smeared across her entire forehead. He looked back at Estelle and the blood on her hands.

It must have been Juliet's blood.

“Juliet. Please.” He called again, ignoring how vulnerable he looked. “Please. Look at me. Just open your eyes and look—” He trailed off, feeling his tears cut off his voice. He rested his head on her chest and sobbed, a huge weight of guilt descending on him.

He looked up a few minutes later and got up, lifting Juliet off the floor. He turned to his servant, using his other hand to wipe his face.

“Go get Irene. Run. Beat the horse if you have to. Bring her to the manor and ask her to bring her things.”

The servant nodded, climbing back on his horse.

“Run like your life depends on it. Do you hear me? Because it does. Now go. Go!”

The servant turned his horse back towards the direction they had come from and started to gallop ahead, leaving a giant trail of dust in his wake. Weston turned to a weak and tear-filled Estelle.

“We need to get back. Now.”

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When Weston rode into the manor with an unconscious Juliet, the mood turned gray almost instantly. Beatrice and Anne stood near the door, their hands clamped over their mouths as Weston carried his wife across the cobblestones and past them.

“Weston—” Lady Beatrice called, trying to reach for her son as he walked through the doors.

“Do not touch me, Mother.” Weston replied. His voice was low but laced with immense anger. Beatrice withdrew almost immediately.

“This would not have happened if you—” Weston started to say but froze again as his voice began to croak.

“Leave me be. Please.”

He carried Juliet to their bedroom and laid her to bed as gently as possible. Even unconscious, she looked incredibly elegant. Weston pushed stray strands of her hair away from her face and gently cradled it. Fate had to be playing with him to cause him a tragedy this big.

Irene arrived a few moments later, her right hand tightly holding onto a small pouch of items. She was in a grey cloak this time around, one without a hood. Her silver hair shone bright as she moved across the foyer and into the drawing room. Weston led her to the bedroom. He watched her kneel beside Juliet and start to examine her.

“You have to leave, my lord.” Irene said a few minutes later, looking up at Weston, who paced relentlessly across the doorway.

“No. I am not leaving her side.”

“She is not going to wake up with you doing that. Looking at her like this is only going to keep hurting you. Please. Go out and let me do my work properly.”

Weston swallowed. He wanted to contest again, but he started to see the sense in Irene's words. It wouldn't help him or Juliet if he remained in the room. He ran his hand through his hair, not minding the fact that it would become disheveled.

“Alright. I shall remain outside.” He said. He moved closer to Irene, a desperate earnestness in his eyes. “Please. Do all you can. She is all I have. She can't die. I don't know what I'm going to do if she does. She can't—”

“I will do all I can, my lord. I promise.”

Weston nodded and headed outside, not bothering to look back for once. He walked down the stairs, ignoring his mother's anticipatory looks of worry. He walked to the drawing room and lowered himself onto the chair nearest to the entrance. He untucked his shirt and sank into the chair, shutting his eyes hard.

He would not survive it if Juliet died. It would break him harder than anything ever did. He opened his eyes again and saw his mother and sister both gently trail in. He did not look at them. He stared into space instead. Beatrice and Anne also found their

seats on other chairs. No one said anything to the other. No one knew what to say.

At that moment, an understandably solemn silence settled between them. They all remained in that position for hours. When the sun began to dip into the sky, Weston heard the doors to Juliet's room creak open. His sleepy eyes widened almost instantly, and he rose from the chair like a shocked cat. He left the drawing room and walked towards their bedroom, watching Irene approach him.

“She isn't dead.” Irene started, her words acting like Weston’s closest source of comfort. From the corner of his eye, he could see Beatrice and Anne approach him as well, their eyes sullen and their lips pursed with anxiety.

“But she isn't alive yet either.” Irene continued. “I have done all I can, but the rest is left to her. She has to wake up on her own. All we can do is wait.”

Weston ran his hand through his hair again. “There's nothing else?”

“I'm afraid not.” Irene replied. “I am deeply sorry for the pain you are going through right now, my lord. All we can do is keep an eye on her. The next few days will determine if she will wake up from this slumber or not.”

Weston swallowed and nodded. “Thank you, Irene.”

Irene walked past Weston and reached for Beatrice's gloved hands. “Accept my greetings too, my lady. It is not easy going through this.”

Beatrice stared hard into Irene’s eyes, her face coated with immense regret. When she realized the physician wouldn't leave her alone until she replied, she nodded subtly.

Weston threw his mother a stern glare as Irene headed towards the doors.



“This is all your fault.” He whispered. “I hope you can live with yourself if she dies.”

Before Beatrice could mouth a reply, he turned away from her and headed to Juliet's room. She was in the same position as he had left her, her hands placed gently on her abdomen, her eyes shut gently. He could not bear to see her in that state for longer, so he closed the door behind him.

“Weston—” Beatrice called as he walked past her to the doors.

He could tell his mother was filled with regrets because she hadn't made a snarky retort since he returned with his wife in his arms. He just wasn't ready to give her the audience. He walked out of the manor and towards the walls. The garden would become his only source of comfort until Juliet woke up. He realized, as he entered the garden, that it smelled exactly like his wife. He didn't know whether it was Juliet who smelled like the garden or the other way round, but he didn't waste time trying to decide. He found his familiar bench and sank into it, letting the several fragrances slowly take over his senses. He slowly drifted off in the garden's warm embrace, feeling Juliet's presence in every part of his memories. He could feel her soft hands whenever they touched, her naturally curious eyes whenever he spoke about his past or his experience of the day, her loud, cheery laugh whenever he said a funny sentence, and her sympathetic voice whenever she tried to reassure him.

“Weston?” His mother's gentle voice broke into his memories, causing them to disappear. He opened his eyes and found his mother staring down at him. Her eyes were filled with the utmost sadness, and her hands held each other tightly.

“Can I?” She asked, gesturing towards the empty space on the bench beside him. The space Juliet would always occupy whenever she stopped working. He nodded and watched his mother make her way to his side. For a moment, nothing could be heard except their shallow, anxious breaths.

“You love her, don't you?” Beatrice asked. Weston gave no reply, but Beatrice continued to speak nonetheless.

“At first, I thought you were only trying to fulfill your duty. Up until this morning, I thought that was what you did. But I must have missed it, when you grew closer and your union turned into friendship and then love.”

Again, Weston said nothing.

“It was right there in my face but I was too busy trying to get you to see that you could've gotten married to someone else, to notice.”

The tears started to slowly form again behind Weston's eyes. Even he didn't know how much he had fallen in love with Juliet until the accident.

“I am deeply— deeply sorry, son. I have been trying to open your heart to other women ever since Eliza. I didn't know Juliet managed to do it, and I continued to make her uncomfortable at every turn.”

The tears filled his eyes even more than before.

“I should have known when my son truly fell in love with someone else. A mother always knows these things, and I would've if I'd just watched. I don't know if you can ever forgive me for all I've done to you and her.”

Weston turned to look at his mother, the anger in his eyes completely gone. All that remained was fear. Fear and tears.

“I haven't even told her about how I felt. She has no idea.”

It was Beatrice's turn to say nothing.

“She still thinks I'm being her husband out of duty.”

Beatrice nodded.

“She cannot die, mother.”

“I know.”

“I do not know what I am going to do with myself if she dies. This cannot happen again.” His voice cracked.

Beatrice moved closer and pulled him to herself. Weston leaned against his mother's chest and let the tears and the screams flow freely. Beatrice wrapped her arms tight together, wishing she could pull away some of his pain just like that.

“I cannot lose Juliet.” He said, amidst the sobs.

Beatrice patted her son's back gently, letting him release all his pent-up emotions. The last time he had cried like this was the day Eliza died. She couldn't afford to see him in this state. She shut her eyes tightly and also started to mouth a prayer.

Juliet had to survive this. She had to pull through.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Minutes turned into hours and into days, and Juliet's dark lashes still hadn't fluttered open. Weston had refused to leave her side throughout the entire period. Sometimes, on days when he wasn't drained of his appetite, he asked that his food be brought to the room so he could watch his wife as he ate. The experience had completely shifted him and changed the dynamic between him and his mother. While he was grateful for that, he desperately wanted Juliet to wake up. He wanted her to hear him confess his love and tell him she felt the same way. He wanted to tell her about their future home, his little cottage on the Scottish border. He wanted to tell her everything at each passing second. All she had to do was open her eyes.

Irene had returned early that morning to administer some new medicine to Juliet.

“She is fighting.” Irene had announced, taking the hood off her head. “She just needs to fight a little harder and she will win. For now, we keep waiting.”

“For how long?” Weston had asked.

Irene had exhaled loudly. “For as long as possible.”

He had remained by his wife's side for the entirety of that morning, telling her about the garden and how he had made sure no one went near it. He talked to her about nothing and everything at the same time. The sun rose fully into the sky, and its rays hit the bedroom rafters, causing them to appear slightly on Juliet's face.

He reached for her hands a little later and gently rubbed her knuckles with his thumb.

“I wish I had the courage to tell you that I was in love with you before everything

happened. Perhaps if I had done so, we would not be in this position. I knew I loved you wholeheartedly, that day in the rain. The days that followed were just excuses that piled on top of each other so I could keep talking to you. I had so much time to talk to you about my feelings, but I kept prolonging them.”

He swallowed, watching Juliet's gentle face shine ever so slightly in the afternoon light. “I had let my cowardice get in the way of my judgment. Charles told me, but I had been too adamant to see it properly.” He laughed at the thought of his friend telling him the truth and him denying it ever so vehemently.

“I wanted to tell you the night of the ball too. I had come out to talk to you after mother had lashed at you with her scalding words as usual. I had again the chance when we were in the garden. I should've said something, but then Mr. Brown arrived with the flowers. I have never seen you look so happy before. Attempting to ruin it by telling you then felt cruel because if you didn't feel the same way, not only would I have ruined our friendship, I also would have destroyed your mood for nothing.”

He felt her hand twitch, and a lump grew in his throat. He swallowed in disbelief. Had he imagined that?

“Juliet?” He called, waiting. Watching.

Nothing.

“Juliet, can you hear me?”

Silence. He wrapped his hand tighter around hers, hoping it would trigger another movement, but nothing came forth. He began to grow unsure whether it happened in the first place.

He sighed and leaned back against his chair.

“My mind is beginning to play tricks on me.” He whispered. This happened with Eliza, too, on the day she was meant to be buried. He could have sworn he saw her eyes slightly flutter, but it had all been in his head.

“I suppose the reason I was so terrified to tell you how I feel was because of Eliza and my father. I had been so mentally bruised as a kid that I did not think anything, or anyone, could ever heal it. Until you came around.” Weston let out another light laugh. “Sometimes I wonder if the spring masquerade ball didn't happen, would I still have fallen in love with you? If we had never gotten caught in the garden that day, would our conversation have blossomed more? Would I have grown in love with you like I did now? I suppose sometimes, even catastrophic situations have silver linings. Apparently, so do damaged men.”

He reached for his wife's hand once more, feeling her soft skin around his palm. “You are my silver lining, Juliet. You are my hope. You are the new source of light in my life. So please, fight this. Push through it and wake up. Wake up so I can finally tell you just how much I had fallen for you. If we can get through this, I would never let anything come between us ever again. Not my mother, not the desperate townspeople and the royals in need of some salacious gossip to fill their time. Not even society's straining expectations and boundaries.”

The door creaked open slowly, and Anne appeared in the doorway, her face plastered with solemn sympathy.

“Mother asks to tell you to come down for lunch.”

“I am not hungry.” Weston's voice was flat.

“You haven't eaten in a long time, Weston. Do you want her to wake up and find that you've malnourished yourself because of her?”

“I do not care about that, Anne.”

Anne held onto the doorknob and let silence have its way between them for almost a minute.

“I miss her dearly too, you know.” She continued. “Before she came along, I did not know how joyful it felt to have a sister. One I could share giddy girly secrets with. One I could talk to about men of the court and which one was bound to end up on the steps of the tavern every night after marriage.”

Weston laughed. He couldn't imagine Juliet having that sort of discussion with anyone, not to talk of having it with his sister.

“My point is, I have grown to love her so much, too. I do not want to lose her too. But you have to come down and have your meal. I don't want to have to worry about you, too.”

Before Weston could mouth a reply, he saw Juliet's left hand twitch again.

“Did you see that?” He asked, his voice soft and shaky, like if he were any louder, her hand would stop twitching. “Her hand.”

“See what?” Anne asked, moving closer to the bed to inspect Juliet.

“Her hand. It moved.” Weston repeated, and like an order, her left hand twitched one more time. And this time, Anne saw it.

“Oh heavens!” She exclaimed. “She's waking up. Weston, she's waking up!”

“Go fetch mother. And tell one of the footmen to go tell Irene.”

Anne nodded and hurried out of the room, her sharp, brisk footsteps matching Weston's heartbeat. Weston watched fervently as Juliet's legs began to move as well. Soon, her eyes began to move underneath her eyelids. Weston held her hand and moved the hair away from her face. As he moved the last strand, Juliet's eyes fluttered open.

Weston laughed in joyous relief, watching his wife's eyes open ever so gently.

"You're awake." He whispered. He leaned down to kiss her hand gently and brought his head back to her face. "You're awake."

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The bright afternoon light penetrated through Juliet's eyes the first time she opened her eyes. She shut them back immediately, feeling the almost blinding effect.

"Is it the windows?" She heard Weston say and leave her side almost immediately. A few seconds later, she could hear the curtains getting closed. She opened her eyes again. Light still filtered into the room, but not as much as before. Weston had tried his best to close the windows.

"Am I—" Her voice trailed off as a cough overtook her. "Am I dead?"

"No. You are far from that." Weston replied. His eyes reflected a mix of joy and immense relief.

"Oh, Thank heavens." Juliet whispered. "For a while there, I thought I was."

"You're not." Weston replied, holding onto his wife's hands tightly. "You're alive. You're here. With me."



A weak smile covered Juliet's face. She was not dead after all. Soon, her countenance changed almost immediately, and she started to look around.

“Estelle. Where is Estelle?” Her hoarse voice asked.

“She is fine. She was also waiting for you to wake up from your slumber. She will be glad to know you're up.”

“Well, I would hope so.” Juliet replied. She looked down at Weston and the entire room in general. The room looked tidied up and felt too neat, almost like it's been untouched for days. Her eyes returned to Weston, and she studied him carefully. His hair was messy, and it looked evident that he did not care about it. He had wrinkles underneath his eyes, an apparent sign that he had not been sleeping at all.

“How long was I unconscious for?” She asked gently.

Weston laughed again. “That is not important now. All that matters is that you're awake.”

Juliet sighed. “I heard you.”

Weston frowned in confusion. “What?”

“Everything you said. I do not know if it was some strange magic, but I heard everything you said. I wanted to hold back your hand and tell you everything would be alright, but I couldn't. I wanted to tell you not to blame yourself anymore and that nothing required forgiveness.”

“No. I should've done better in defending you. I let the disdain go on for too long.” Weston continued.

“I forgive you, Weston. Even though there's nothing to forgive.” Juliet continued. “And yes. I love you, too. I had fallen in love with you the day you caught me as I fell from the ladder. The day I saw who you truly were behind your mask. Masks are but a mockery of who we are. You told me that, remember?”

Weston nodded, the grin on his face wider than ever. “Yes. I do.”

“I saw you for who you are. A kind, impressive, witty, and intelligent man. While the circumstances that brought us together were not the best, I am glad that I walked out of the spring ball that night and met you.”

“Me too.” Weston replied.

“I also do not see the rest of my life unfolding without you in it. You have brought out the best in me, and I would never have had it any other way. I love you, Weston Edgeworth, and I hope, deep in your heart, that you love me just as much.”

“So it's a yes?” Weston asked, the anticipation on his face laced with joy and happiness.

Juliet laughed heartily. “It is a yes.”

Weston leaned closer to her bed, stroked her cheeks gently, and pulled her in for a kiss. A deep, satisfying, and cathartic kiss.

And in that moment, a new chapter of their life began. One filled with laughs, joy, happiness, warmth, care, and most importantly, love. Beatrice, Anne, and Estelle walked in, their faces covered in joy. The malice Beatrice once shared with Juliet had utterly disappeared. Seeing her alive and genuinely in love with her son had manifested her in a new light. Juliet would perhaps be the daughter-in-law that she had always asked for.

“You look thin.” Beatrice said, studying Juliet who still lay on the bed, her hands weakly placed over her stomach. “I’ll ask the maids to bring you some food. After which, you can tell them exactly what you want to eat.”

Juliet's eyes widened in surprise. She turned to look at her husband and pulled him closer.

“Are you sure I did not die and wake up in another world?”

Weston laughed and shook his head negatively.

“Welcome back, Juliet.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Irene alighted from her horse and led it towards a nearby tree. Usually, she would be worried about bandits and children pranksters, but this environment was different. It was quiet and distant from the town itself. Nothing could be heard for miles except a babbling brook nearby and chirping birds. Her eyes searched the area even more properly after letting her horse graze on the nearby pasture. A cottage stood only a few steps ahead of her. The entrance was lined with stones washed white, and each side was decorated with blooming flowers. While the sound of the river running in the background grew clearer as she moved closer, she couldn't see it. She removed her hood to reveal her shiny silver hair and let the fresh breeze run through it. She shut her eyes tight for a few seconds to take in the atmosphere. This place was different. It was quaint cozy. It was comforting.

She walked towards the cottage, her grip tight on her bag of supplies as usual. She got close to the door and knocked gently. As she awaited a reply, her eyes swept the surrounding one more time. The cottage was not too big or too small. For a family of just two, it seemed just perfect.

The door creaked open, and Weston's worried face appeared.

"Thank you for coming."

"I might have to charge you extra, my lord." Irene replied, a smile playing on her face. "Where is she?"

"She's in the bedroom. I do not know what happened, but she might be able to explain better to you."

Irene nodded and walked in, the smell of fresh flowers penetrating her nostrils with each step. Weston led her to the bedroom, and there, on the bed, was Juliet, her eyes narrowed and her hands placed on her sides.

“I told him this was only a fever. It will pass.” Juliet said, her eyes widening as Irene walked in.

“He was right to have called me. You never know these days.” Irene replied. She sat on the bed beside Juliet and started to feel her body's warmth.

“Tell me exactly what happened. Do not leave anything out.” Irene said, the back of her right hand traveling from Juliet's forehead to her neck.

Juliet sighed. “Is that really necessary?”

“Do what the woman says, Juliet. She is here for you.” Weston called from the doorway, his hands folded against his chest.

Juliet rolled her eyes in retort. Sometimes, her husband doted on her just a little too much. “Fine.” She turned to look at Irene.

I was out this morning, looking over my flowers as usual—”

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It had been almost six months since Juliet and Weston decided to leave behind the manor and the politics that came with it and retire to Weston's cottage on the Scottish border. Of course, Beatrice had a giant problem with it.

“Who will become the Marquess in your absence? This is unprecedented. There is no male heir.” She had asked her son after he'd informed her of his plans.

Weston had turned to Anne, who stood in the corner. "She can do it."

"Don't be ridiculous. She's a woman." Beatrice had commented almost immediately.

"A woman who happens to be my sister. Do not underestimate Anne. She is as brilliant as they come. She can become a Marchioness and hold down the fort for the next male heir to come along. That is if she decides not to get married."

"Of course, she will get married." Beatrice had retorted. "Are you sure about this decision? You are going to be leaving the manor forever."

"Well, not exactly forever. I will still come back here with Juliet occasionally. I just do not want the responsibility anymore. I never have." Weston had explained.

Beatrice wasn't the happiest with this piece of information, but there was only so little she could do.

When Juliet told Estelle about her plans to leave as well, Estelle had planned to come with her, just as usual, but Juliet had refused.

"What are you talking about?" Estelle had asked, staring anxiously at Juliet when she said no to her offer.

"You've spent too much time with me, Estelle, and I am grateful for that. You are one of the main reasons I am still alive today, and I want you to know that."

"So let me come with you so I can keep saving you."

Juliet had reached for her maid's hands. "I do not want you to keep serving me."

Estelle had grown confused. "Why?"

“Because you deserve better. I know you have had your eye on Lord Charles for a while now.”

“Milady—”

“And I know for a fact that he likes you too. I need to set you free so you can explore other parts of your life. We will remain friends, and you can always come to visit me. But I have to walk the next phase of this journey alone. You and I have come so far. It is time you find your own journey, too.”

Estelle had stared at her own hands, the idea of her newfound freedom scaring her to her core. “What am I to do now?”

“Go and talk to Lord Charles. I know it is the norm to wait for the man to make the first move, but it is important you do this. Perhaps this will put an end to the unspoken words between you two.”

Estelle had stared at Juliet in dazed confusion. Was her mistress going insane?

A few weeks later, Juliet and Weston left the manor fully for their newfound life on the border. The cottage was everything Juliet could have hoped for. It tied her to nature and everything it had to offer. They both started their blossoming marriage in the cottage, enjoying life one after the other. Weston still went to his meetings with friends, but now, he was freer. Juliet visited her Aunt Grace occasionally, and Aunt Grace returned the favor. She started to grow flowers around the house, loving the sense of control it gave her overall. For the next six months, they would make the house into their own personal haven and grow into it like the happy couple they were originally meant to be.

At least until that morning. Juliet had woken up and had gone about her duty, tending to the flowers and the new budding trees she was getting to grow. She had leaned

down to grab a piece of fruit when her eyes darkened, and she grew dizzy. She stood back up and shook it off, thinking it was only a mild head rush. However, on her way to the house, the dizziness had reappeared, this time even more overwhelming. Juliet did not know when her fruit basket slipped off her hands as she felt herself crash into the ground, going unconscious.

Weston had found her a while later and had grown terribly worried. His worry did not wane when she woke up either, and before she could stop him, he had sent word to the only good physician he knew and trusted—Irene.

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Irene nodded gently, her eyes narrowed. “And that was all that happened? You are not leaving anything out?”

Juliet nodded. “Yes.”

Irene examined Juliet's forehead once again. Juliet wondered what she was searching for but didn't bother about it for long. Irene's eyes traveled to Juliet's hands. She inspected her fingernails and knuckles. Her eyes finally settled on Juliet's tummy, and a broad smile appeared on her face.

“It looks like you might need to send word to your dressmaker. These ones will not fit you anymore.”

Juliet's face was drained of color. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you remember the last time you got your monthly visitor?”

“What?”



“Your period, my lady.”

And then the wave of understanding hit her. Her eyes widened, and she turned to look at Weston, then Irene.

“Are you saying I am—”

“It looks like it.” Irene explained. “Of course, there are now things you need to start eating more of and less of. I shall explain all of that in a moment.

Juliet turned to her husband, the expression on her face instinctively turning to elation. “Do you hear, Weston? She says I'm pregnant!?”

Weston stared at her in shock. “What?”

“You are going to be a father.”

He rushed to Juliet's bedside and wrapped her in a warm hug. Irene smiled.

“Immense congratulations are in order, Lord Weston.”

Weston turned to Irene, his grateful eyes returning her smile. “Thank you Irene.”

Irene nodded. “Now about the fee—”

Intense laughter seared from every corner of the room, with Irene joining in as well.

The End

The Thorneshire Estate, 1806

His cheeks hurt.

It struck Calum suddenly, the realization that he had never smiled this hard in his nine-and-twenty years on earth. This level of happiness, this zest for his future. He'd meandered through his days lazily, happy only to be able to open his eyes each morning. There was never anything that gave him true, unending pleasure.

Now, the subject of all his happiness stood across the room bearing a smile just as broad.

Calum could not hear what was being said. He only saw her, his eyes tracing the outline of her face as if he hadn't spent the past year committing her to his memory. He could close his eyes and imagine the gentle curve of her cheeks, her upturned nose, the exact hue of her honey-blond hair currently styled in those lovely curls he adored on her. Calum had a lifetime ahead of him to admire every inch of her, watching her change throughout the years they would spend together. He intended to start right now.

He couldn't believe that Lady Violet Henderson was now his wife.

"Wouldn't you say, Your Grace?"

"Certainly," Calum murmured absently. He didn't know who he was talking to or what about. He didn't care. He watched as Violet tilted her head to the side and nodded to whatever her friend was saying to her. But her eyes trailed as well, as if she

could not focus either. Eventually, they landed on Calum and her smile widened.

Calum straightened. After a year of courtship, his heart still skipped a beat when she looked at him. Her eyes narrowed a little with that mischievous glint that always excited him. It took everything in him not to leap out of his chair and go to her side.

They would have plenty of time together later, after all. Tomorrow, after the wedding breakfast was over, they would be heading to Scotland for their honeymoon. Alone with each other, they would have all the time in the world for private smiles and loving embraces.

Violet turned slightly to face him and suddenly, no one else existed. Calum ran his hand down his face, shifting in his chair as he watched her slowly lift her glass of wine to her lips. She always knew how to taunt him.

This wedding breakfast could not be over quickly enough.

With a wink, Violet turned her attention back to her friend and Calum tried to do the same today. He realized with a start that it was Stephen by his side, his cousin and estate steward, who did not seem to notice Calum's absent-mindedness. He focused once more on the conversation and tried to keep his eyes off his wife. Which was easier said than done.

Calum counted the seconds, the minutes, the hours until they were finally alone. At last, the wedding breakfast came to an end. By that time, the sun was slowly giving way to darkness as evening came upon them. Violet went upstairs to change out of her wedding dress while Calum remained in the parlor with his third glass of wine in his hand.

That was when he heard the scream.

At first, he froze, unable to come to terms with what he'd heard. Then realization sank like cold stones in the pit of his stomach. He dropped his wine, hardly hearing the crash of glass as he raced out of the room.

Hallways flew past him in a blur. He didn't think it possible for him to move so fast but, within what felt like seconds, he burst through the door of their bedchamber. Calum swallowed past the lump in his throat, his heart hammering.

Violet lay lifelessly on the bed.

"What happened?" He heard the words come from his lips even though he didn't realize that he'd spoken. His limbs seemed to turn to mush as he made his way to her side. "What happened to her?"

"I don't know, Your Grace." Mrs. Dawson, the housekeeper, sounded as distraught as he felt. He could hear the tears in her voice. She shifted out of his way but she kept her hands in Violet's legs, shaking her gently. "I stepped out of the room for a second and when I returned..."

"The physician." Calum's voice was raw, hardly audible. But she nodded as if she knew exactly what he wanted.

"Yes, Your Grace." In a flash, Mrs. Dawson was out the door, leaving him alone with his wife's lifeless body.

She was ashen. Her beautiful lips were white, her body cold to the touch. Calum pulled her into his arms, blinking away the tears that blurred his vision. The truth of the situation settled in the back of his mind but he refused to acknowledge it. He would wait. He wouldn't dare to acknowledge the possibility.

Calum didn't know how long he spent there with her in his arms but all of a sudden,

the room was full. Mrs. Dawson and Stephen were there, and Dr. Percival Marsh was gently taking Violet from his arms. Calum made a groan of protest but he knew he couldn't do anything. Stephen was already by his side, pulling him out of the room.

“He needs space and time, Calum,” Stephen was saying. “She will be all right.”

Calum shook his head and wiped his tears. He didn't dare to acknowledge the truth lingering in the back of his head but it settled in his heart.

By the time the physician emerged from the bedchamber, Calum took one look at his face and the fragile pieces left of his heart crumbled into dust.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:09 am*

Thorneshire Estate, London Countryside, 1811

She stared at him with betrayal in her eyes. That was the first thing he noticed. Not the blood running from her eyes, staining her cheeks and lips red. Not the way she shivered, her wet hair plastered to her neck as if she had been dunked into a pool of water. Not the manner in which her hands flexed at her sides—open and close, open and close, open and close.

It was the raw pain of hurt that shone in those once-beautiful eyes that tore him to shreds.

“You did this,” Violet said. “You did not save me.”

“I tried to.” His words would not reach her. Even as they echoed around him, he could tell she heard nothing.

Her hands closed again. She was in her nightgown, he realized suddenly, the same thing she had been in when she’d passed away. And they were...they were in that room again.

“You should have been there,” she said softly. Not soft enough though to keep from slicing through him. “You should have stopped this from happening.”

“Violet—”

“No!” Her screech sent him careening to the other side of the room.

“Violet, please!”

“You should have helped me!” she wailed. “You should have—”

Calum shot upright, heaving. Sweat clung to his skin, his heart racing. Another night enduring the same dream. This time, it had taken every strength he possessed to force himself out of it.

Her presence lingered though, as it always did. Night after night, she visited him. And each time, he either suffered through the guilt and pain or forced himself awake when it became too much. Either way, his days were destined to be long and lonesome.

He raked his fingers through his damp hair, trying to calm his breathing. At least he’d slept through the night this time. Most times, he woke in the middle of the night with no hope of resting again. Sunlight peaked through his heavy drapes and the sight was enough to darken his mood. If he had any strength he would pull the drapes fully closed and stew in the darkness.

Violet’s pained eyes flashed in his mind again. Calum pulled himself out of the bed, staggering over to the chamber pot. Every step he took filled him with the familiar wave of anger.

Violet was right. He should have been there. If he had been fast enough, if only he hadn’t allowed her to leave his side, she would still be here. It was his fault.

With a roar of frustration, he picked up the chamber pot and threw it across the room. The resounding crash gave him a small bit of satisfaction, it wasn’t enough though to distract him from the gaping hole in the middle of his chest.

The door burst open and a stocky man with graying hair raced in, panting. His valet, never too far at this hour of the day, looked terrified. “Your Grace? Your Grace!”

“Stop the shouting,” Calum grumbled. “I’m right here.”

Relief and worry washed over the valet’s face the moment he spotted Calum standing near the far corner of the room. He took a tentative step in Calum’s direction. “Are you all right, Your Grace? I heard a loud crash and—”

“I am fine.” He stared at the mess he’d caused at the other end of the room. “Leave me be.”

“But, Your Grace—”

“I said, leave me be!” Calum roared. He whirled on the man, feeling another bite of satisfaction when the concern on his face melted into true fear. “I have no patience for your pity nor do I wish to be in the presence of a bumbling man who can hardly get his words out! Do not let me repeat myself!”

His valet nodded hastily and scrambled out of the room, leaving Calum alone again. Just the way he liked it. He didn’t need anyone’s empathy when he could hardly muster up any for himself. If he could spend his days alone in his manor, lurking in the darkness with nothing but whiskey as company, it would be a fitting punishment.

But the Duke of Thorneshire had duties. Duties he was content to ignore until they became pressing.

He dressed alone, dragging himself through the motions. He had little urge to leave his chambers but being here only brought back memories of that day with a vengeance. So the next best thing would be to drink his sorrows away until he could remember nothing at all.

Without his valet’s help, it took him nearly an hour to don suitable clothing for the day. By the time he was ready to leave his chambers, none of his anger had abated.



He marched down the hallway, heading in the direction of his study where he could lock himself away without a soul to bother him.

He had no such luck. The first soul that happened upon him came in the form of kind eyes and homely features.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Mrs. Dawson greeted with a slight curtsy.

Calum forced his scowl into submission. Something about the way she looked at him made him think he didn’t do a very good job. “Good morning, Mrs. Dawson.”

“How did you sleep?” she asked like she always did. Every day for the past five years now.

“Good,” he responded, like he always would even though they both knew that he was lying.

They delved into brief seconds of silence that spoke far too loudly. Calum knew what Mrs. Dawson was thinking. She’d been the manor’s housekeeper since he was an infant and understood him far better than he would like. He didn’t have to say that he was still in mourning. And she didn’t have to say that she prayed day and night for him to be better one day. He didn’t like the pity in her eyes any more than he liked it in anyone else’s, but Mrs. Dawson was the only servant in the manor he wouldn’t dare shout at.

After a long while, she said, “Your breakfast is ready in your study, Your Grace. Should I open the drapes?”

“No.” He stalked by her and she fell in step with him, just slightly behind. Calum gritted his teeth.

“It is a lovely morning,” she insisted. “Perhaps it shall brighten your mood.”

Calum stopped to look at her, barely holding back his scowl.

“Or perhaps it shall not,” she said calmly. She clasped her hands in front of her. “I hope you enjoy your meal and your morning nonetheless.”

They both knew that was impossible. Calum hadn’t enjoyed a single thing since the day Violet died.

But his only response was a curt nod before continuing on his way, grateful that she didn’t continue to follow him. He hoped to continue his usual practice of wallowing in his pain alone. Later in the morning, Stephen would find him, he knew. And Calum would have to pretend to listen to everything his cousin said even though they both knew that Stephen would be taking care of his ducal matters anyhow.

For now, he was alone.

For now, he could honor Violet’s memory by refusing to live.

The food tasted like ash but Calum barreled through it since it had been a day since he’d eaten a proper meal. His hands moved without thinking, falling back into his old practice of eating anything put in front of him. While his mind and heart lacked an appetite for food, his body still yearned for it.

He finished it quickly and was already heading to the sideboard to pour himself his first glass of whiskey, even though it was still morning. The proper hours to drink did not matter to him any longer.

“Your Grace?” Without waiting for a response, the door opened and his butler stepped in.

“What do you want?” Calum snapped, annoyed.

Unlike the other servants, his butler had mastered the art of hiding his expressions. But Calum knew he feared him. “You have a visitor, Your Grace.”

“Are you out of your mind? I am in no mood for company. Send them away.”

“I told them, Your Grace, but...” He trailed off, a look of uncertainty cracking his usually placid expression.

Calum glowered at him. “But what?”

“But he knows better than to send me away, that’s what.” A petite lady breezed past the threshold, stopping in the center of the study. She gave Calum a broad smile. “How lovely to see you up, my dear. Have you had breakfast yet?”

Calum sighed. His godmother, Lady Eleanor Gardner of Yulebridge, was not someone his butler could simply send away. Calum could only imagine how terrible such a conversation would go.

He waved a hand, silently sending his butler away. Then he poured himself his drink, knowing that he would need it in order to get through the conversation he was about to have.

“Why are you here, Eleanor?” he asked wearily.

Eleanor regarded him calmly, saying nothing about the drink in his hand, though he knew she wanted to. She waited until he sank into the chair behind his desk before saying, “I came to check on you. It has been a while, hasn’t it?”

“I suppose.” He hardly paid attention to the passage of time any longer. The days

blended together endlessly.

“A week, I believe,” she went on. She began to walk back and forth, her hands folded in front of her. Though a widow and sister to his late father, Eleanor looked half her age, with dark hair barely touched with gray and a nearly wrinkle free face. “It has been so long that I nearly forgot that you are a paramour of liquor.”

Calum regarded his aunt with thinly veiled annoyance. He was in no mood for her dramatics today. “Is there a reason you’ve paid me a visit so early?”

“Yes,” she answered simply. “But can’t I ask you how you are feeling first?”

“Right now? I am a bit irritated.”

“That is a pity.” Her bottom lip popped out in a pout. “I believe what I am about to say will only irritate you further.”

Calum braced himself. That didn’t sound good.

She continued to walk back and forth in silence. Calum watched her, sipping his whiskey as he tried to wait it out.

At last, she said, “Very well, I shall simply be direct and speak my mind. I have come to invite you to attend my annual spring ball next week.”

“No.”

His response came so quickly that she started, blinking at him. “Perhaps you should give it a bit of thought before you answer, Calum.”

“There is no need to. I cannot think of anything I would hate more than to attend a

ball.”

“It is not as bad as you think,” she insisted. She finally sat in one of the armchairs facing the desk, looking distressed. “You once enjoyed them, if you can recall.”

There were many things Calum once enjoyed. Now he hardly tolerated opening his eyes in the mornings. “I will not be attending the ball, Eleanor.”

“Well, I will not be taking no for an answer,” she insisted. “Need I remind you that you are the Duke of Thorneshire? You have duties to fulfill and right now, the most important duty is securing the dukedom by producing an heir.”

“An heir?” Calum echoed, incredulous. How could she suggest such a thing after what happened five years ago?

She nodded, lips pulled into a tight line of determination. “Yes, an heir.” Then she reached across the table to touch his hand gently. “I understand your pain, Calum. I do. Losing someone you love so suddenly takes something from you than cannot easily be recovered.”

Calum said nothing, fighting the urge to tell her that no one could possibly understand him. He’d been there when Eleanor’s husband died. Since she’d been quite young when she married, and her husband had been a wealthy but elderly viscount, one would think she would be relieved when he finally passed. But Calum knew Eleanor had grown to love her late husband. And the loss of his absence was void not easily filled.

But he died peacefully in his sleep, at an age that would be deemed easy to accept by those who loved him. Violet had been young. They’d just begun their life together. One minute she was there and the next she was gone.

Calum didn't need to say the words, he realized, because Eleanor looked at him as if she knew what he did not speak aloud. Even so, she continued, "Your father would want you to carry on your name, Calum. The Hawthorn legacy and the Thorneshire dukedom cannot end with you."

She just knew to strike him where it hurt. Calum avoided her eyes, finishing the rest of his drink. "It's too soon," he pushed out.

"It's been five years," she countered. "If left to yourself, you will mourn her forever."

"There is nothing wrong with that," he snapped without thinking.

Eleanor didn't draw back. Instead, she curled her fingers around his, eyes softening. "I don't want you to lose who you are by the end of it, Calum. You must remember your duties. And perhaps finding someone to share your company may bring some sunlight to your dark days."

That he sincerely doubted. There was no brightening his days. He was destined to mourn Violet for as long as he lived, giving up pieces of himself if that was what it took to atone for his sins.

But he didn't dare to voice such morose thoughts to his aunt. He knew she worried about him enough already.

"Just attend the ball," she urged again. "That is all I ask. And then we can take it from there."

Calum heaved a sigh. She was right. Even though he hated to admit it, he would be doing a disservice to his late father if he let their name die with him. The duties he had been running from all this time were finally catching up to him.

“Just the ball then,” he conceded at last.

Eleanor’s face lit up with pleasure. “Marvelous! You shall not regret it, I assure you.”

Calum sincerely doubted that. He said nothing though as he stood to get his next drink. This time, he brought the decanter back to the desk, ignoring Eleanor’s look of disapproval.

Even though she’d succeeded in what she had come here to do, Eleanor did not seem to be in any urgency to leave. Calum sat back and listened as she talked about trivial nonsense like conversations she’d had with her friends or upcoming events she was excited about. He knew what she was trying to do—filling the emptiness with lively chatter. Perhaps she hoped that he would not feel too lonely. Calum left her be and at one point, he fell so deeply into his thoughts that he hardly heard a word she said.

After a while, there was a knock on the door. “Calum?” came Stephen’s low baritone.

“Oh, Stephen, come!” Eleanor responded before Calum got the chance.

Stephen slipped into the room bearing the account books in one hand. He pushed his spectacles up his nose, looking mildly surprised at Eleanor’s presence. “Aunt Eleanor, I am surprised to see you here.”

“Yes, well, I had something important to speak with Calum about,” she explained, rising. “But I shall take my leave now. I see that you two are about to talk about more important things than my silly gossip.”

It occurred to Calum that he should walk her to the front door. It was the gentlemanly thing to do, the way he was raised by his upright parents. But he stayed seated, like the heavy hand of lingering sorrow was keeping him in his seat.

Eleanor flashed Calum a smile that was laced with her own sorrow. He could only imagine how difficult it was for her to see him this way, but he didn't allow himself to linger on it. This was who he was now. A shell of his former self without Violet.

Stephen straightened as Eleanor drew closer. "Allow me to—"

"Don't you worry," she said, laying a hand on his chest as she went by. "I am confident in my ability to navigate my way out. Don't forget I have been wandering these hallways far before you boys were born."

Stephen was polite enough to offer up a laugh for that. Calum was not. Thankfully, his aunt did not stay any longer, leaving him alone with his cousin.

He sighed heavily. He supposed his lonely morning was not going to be as lonely as he hoped.

Stephen turned to him and Calum didn't have to look at his face to know he wore a quizzical expression. "What was that about?"

Calum heaved another sigh. "Eleanor thought it fit to invite me to her upcoming spring ball."

"Ball?" Stephen sounded incredulous. He drew nearer, sinking into the same armchair Eleanor had just vacated. "Why would she do that?"

"She believes that it is time for me to bear an heir." Saying it aloud sounded like a betrayal. How could he even think about tying himself to another lady?

"Hm." Stephen said nothing and they lapsed into silence as he laid out the account books. Calum ignored him. He knew what that sound meant. Either he disapproved of the idea or was waiting for the right moment to voice his opinion. He hoped it was the



former—that way, Stephen would keep it to himself.

So Calum felt a bite of surprise when Stephen said, “I do not think that is a good idea.”

Calum frowned a little. “You do not?”

Stephen shook his head, pushing his spectacles back up his nose. Calum couldn’t understand why he didn’t buy a smaller pair since those were clearly too big. Or had his face just gotten slimmer? Stephen had always been quite lanky with slim features, from the slant of his nose to the jut of his chin to his bony limbs.

“Allow me to be precise,” Stephen said, which was odd since he was nothing but precise. “What I mean to say is that such a thing makes me a bit trepidant. Reemerging in society amongst the gossip that spreads like wildfire about you may only harm your reputation further rather than aid it.”

Calum’s frown only deepened at that. “Not that it matters to me but I do not care about my reputation. You know that.”

“I know.” Stephen regarded him evenly. “But such gossip hinges on your late wife’s name. Whispers will begin once more regarding her mysterious death.”

“There was nothing mysterious about it,” Calum pushed through gritted teeth. This conversation was quickly going into territory that he could not handle. “She died of natural causes”, he said, even though in his mind he could feel that the cause of her death was inexplicable.

“I know that,” Stephen stated calmly. “But the ton cares not about the truth. Only about what sounds more interesting.”

“Enough,” Calum snapped. “I do not want to talk about this.”

“Very well. But consider my words, cousin. I only speak in your best interest.”

Calum didn't grace that with a response and Stephen didn't seem to care about receiving one. Ever the diligent one, he began the task of reviewing the account books, clearly unperturbed by Calum's lack of interest in what he was doing. Calum would not have been able to participate even if he wanted to. Not when the only thing he could think about was Violet. Her memory, her death. They warred together in his head, driving him to drink more.

They were both right. Deep down, he knew it. If he dared to step out into society, rumors will rise once more about how his wife died. If he continued to hide away in his manor, he may lose the chance to bear an heir and pass on his name.

Calum finished his drink and poured himself another. All of a sudden, the full decanter of whiskey didn't seem nearly enough.

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The dress was three years old and hopelessly out of fashion. Clarissa smoothed her hand down the front of it, narrowing her eyes at any suspicious area that might need mending. She didn't like it. It was too small for her now, the color did not complement her complexion, and worse of all, it was old-fashioned. But it was one of the only dresses she had left.

Slowly, she raised her eyes to her face. And sighed. She missed her earrings. She missed wearing that small locket around her neck no matter what time of day it was. She missed the lovely headdresses she would don on special days, sitting prettily between her silky, dark brown hair. There were so many things about her old life that she wanted back. Things she would never get again.

For one, she was no longer in her own bedchamber. Clarissa couldn't even remember how it looked. It had been two years since she'd left their London townhouse to stay with her aunt and uncle and the lovely bedchamber they had put her in looked nothing like her own. She was yet to make it her own, as empty of character as she felt.

She didn't sigh. She was tired of sighing. It had been two years so this was her life now. It was about time she got used to it.

Clarissa ran her fingers through her hair in an idle manner as she turned and left her room. She hadn't bothered to style it the way she usually did. Rather than intricate curls, she twisted the top of her hair into a chignon while the rest tumbled down her back. It comforted her to touch her hair, the only thing that remained truly hers.

“You look lovely, Clarissa!”

Clarissa came to a halt, smiling at her sister emerging from her own chambers. Again she was struck by how mature Louisa looked, now at ten-and-five years old. It was like looking at her younger self. Louisa was still so full of life that it was hard to believe she'd been there when their lives had been turned upside down two years ago. She endured everything with a smile while Clarissa constantly remained in the past.

“As do you, Louisa,” Clarissa said, slipping her arm through hers. Even though Louisa's dress was also out of fashion, it fit her far better. She'd styled her hair, the same dark brown as Clarissa's though much shorter. “And I see that you are in a good mood.”

“Because it is a lovely day,” Louisa chirped. “Can you blame me?”

Clarissa's laugh came easily, surprisingly so. “No, I suppose I cannot. Then I take it you intend on spending it outdoors?”

Louisa pouted in thought. Together, they turned and continued along their way down the hallway. “I am not sure. Do you think Uncle will be willing to let me go horse riding today?”

“I do not see why not,” Clarissa said honestly. “Uncle falls prey to your charm like everyone else. If you ask, I doubt that he will deny you.”

Louisa laughed, the sound instantly lifting her spirits. If she let her mind wander too far, she would begin to wonder when Louisa would lose her spark, if she would become as fearful of the future as Clarissa was. But she didn't dare let that train of thought take hold. As the eldest, Clarissa would do anything to save her sister from worrying about a single thing.

“Let us see then, shall we?” Louisa said, a spark of challenge in her eyes.

They made it down to the drawing room and the moment they walked through the

door, Clarissa's mood plummeted to the floor. Her mother sat in her usual spot by the window, gazing out with that blank look on her face. She looked hastily dressed, as if she had barely given much thought into what she was wearing. Her hair seemed unbrushed. And she sat so still that Clarissa was almost afraid to draw closer, lest she startled her.

The Dowager Baroness of Quelshire had once been a proud woman. Her shell sat there now, nothing but a husk without a soul. After everything that happened two years ago, Lady Olivia Wyndham fell into a deep melancholy and never recovered.

"Good morning, Mother!" Louisa chirped, letting go of Clarissa's arm to flock to their mother's side.

Clarissa warily drew nearer, sitting next to Louisa. She studied Olivia's face, searching for signs of life like she usually did. And as usual, disappointment came swiftly when she saw nothing shining back at her.

Louisa barreled on, as if unperturbed by her mother's state. "Don't you think it is a lovely day? I have not gone horse-riding in quite some time so I am hoping to ask Uncle if he will allow me to have one of the horses for the afternoon."

Olivia did not answer. Clarissa couldn't remember the last time Olivia spoke. The shock of her husband's death and the state he had left them in seemed to have settled far too deeply in her mind and she was yet to recover.

A part of Clarissa couldn't blame her. She'd only been ten-and-nine when the Baron of Quelshire passed away. The death of her father had been sad enough, but the trauma that came with learning of his horrible financial decisions nearly broke her. In a matter of a month, their comfortable life had been turned upside down. Debt was far too simple a word for the destitution they'd found themselves in. And with it came such a horrible mark on their reputation as a family that Clarissa had lost all hope of finding a husband.

Clarissa had lost more than one parent in the span of a month. And with it came the constantly distressing worry about how they would survive. Their lacking reputation and no dowry meant the chances of Louisa and her getting married were slim. And she did not want to be dependent on her aunt and uncle for any longer than was necessary, though she saw no way out of it right now.

Louisa chattered on. Clarissa bit her tongue, wanting to tell Louisa to stop. But the sound of her voice was comforting. If she tried hard enough, Clarissa could pretend that nothing bad had happened at all.

Before long, two maids entered the room bearing trays, cutlery, and pots of tea. Behind them was Lord Robert Miller, the Earl of Santbury and his wife, Martha. Robert's eyes instantly fell on Olivia. As her older brother, Clarissa could only imagine how distressing it had to be for him to see his younger sister in such a state.

"Good morning, Uncle!" Louisa chirped. "Good morning, Aunt."

"Louisa, darling, you seem to be in a lovely mood," Martha observed as she came to sit with them. "It makes me wonder if you know of our news already."

"News?" Clarissa spoke up, frowning.

Robert claimed the spot next to his wife. He rested a hand on her rotund belly, clearly without thought. They were a lovely couple, Clarissa thought again. Though he was far older than Olivia, he'd married much later. Now, after four years of trying, Martha was finally with child.

"Goodness, Martha," he said lovingly. "And here I thought you wanted to create suspense before telling them."

"I cannot help myself," Martha giggled. She leaned into her husband's loving touch and Clarissa had to fight the pang of envy at the sight. "I am so excited that I can

hardly contain it.”

“Excited about what?” Louisa asked. “What are you talking about?”

The earl and countess exchanged looks. Clarissa squirmed uncertainly. What if they intended to put them out? They had been dependent on Robert and Martha for almost two years now, contributing very little to their household. And at her age of one-and-twenty, with no wealth at all, she had no hopes of marrying. Were they going to tell them to leave to fend for themselves?

She’d been dreading this moment. Even though their happy smiles told her that perhaps her pessimistic thoughts were only that, Clarissa knew that it was only a matter of time before her uncle grew tired of their presence. Family or no, they were burdens. Her mother was like a raggedy, lifeless doll. Her sister was far too young to be of any help to anyone. And Clarissa was quickly nearing spinsterhood with no suitable matches. They were doomed.

No one noticed her guard building up around her as Robert said, “I have decided to fund a dowry for Clarissa to attend the upcoming season.”

“I understand,” Clarissa began. She swallowed past the lump in her throat, her gaze fixed on her lap in the hopes that no one would see her tears. “We shall begin packing our things.”

“Clarissa, didn’t you hear?” Louisa nudged her excitedly. “Uncle said he would fund your dowry! You will be attending the Season!”

“Yes, I heard—” She broke off, looking sharply at her sister. “I am what?”

Martha’s laughter drew Clarissa’s attention. “I told you that she would be too stunned to speak. Oh just thinking about it brings me back to when I debuted at my first Season. I can only imagine how excited you are, Clarissa”

Excited? No, not at all. Stunned and in a debilitating state of disbelief. Quite so.

“I don’t understand,” she managed to say. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Robert countered as if the answer was obvious. “You are my niece. And after all that has happened to you, I think it rather sad that you are unable to step into society the way you should have by now. If I remember correctly, you were to debut before Edward passed, correct?”

Clarissa could only manage a nod. Louisa was buzzing with elation next to her.

“And once you found out the truth of his management, you were unable to.” Robert shook his head as if he was sincerely saddened by the thought. “Business has been going quite well as of late so it will not harm us to contribute to your launch into society. It is about time you marry, don’t you think?”

Clarissa didn’t know what to say. Her mind was a whirlwind, uncertainty and hope warring in her heart. Thankfully, Louisa easily filled the silence.

“How exciting!” she gushed. “I’ve always wanted to attend balls during the Season. What about Clarissa’s wardrobe? Surely she shouldn’t attend a single event in such old-fashioned garments.”

“I am grateful to be attending at all,” Clarissa said quickly, shooting her sister a warning glance.

Martha laughed again. “Not to worry. I shall oversee the improvement of all your wardrobes. Yours as well, Olivia.”

There was a brief moment of silence as they waited for Olivia to acknowledge what was being said. Of course, she said nothing, hardly moving.



Robert went on as if they hadn't paused at all. "And, to make this news even more exciting, we have already received our first invitation to a ball."

"Oh, tell us!" Louisa squealed. Clarissa found herself leaning over slightly in anticipation.

"The Dowager Viscountess of Yulebridge will be hosting her spring ball in the coming week and wishes for all to be in attendance. Which means there is quite a lot of preparation to be done before then. I hope you two are ready."

"We are," Clarissa and Louisa said in unison, Louisa in her usual excitable manner and Clarissa with firm determination. Her own enthusiasm lingered underneath the trepidation she felt at this sudden turn of events. After losing hope of their future, slowly beginning to believe that their ruined reputation would be the end of them, she was being given another chance.

And she couldn't squander it. She would take this opportunity by the horns and emerge at the other end in a secured marriage. One where she could take care of her mother and sister and secure Louisa's own future one day.

"Marry?"

All eyes turned to Olivia. Stunned silence settled around them.

Olivia's eyes fluttered and Clarissa realized she had not been mistaken. Her mother had spoken. "You will marry?" Olivia whispered. Painstakingly slow, she turned and locked eyes with Clarissa. Something shadowed her expression, the sight of it making Clarissa's tongue grow thick in her mouth.

Before anyone could attempt to respond, Olivia's eyes rolled to the back of her head. Robert caught her before she could hit the ground.

“Quickly, call the butler!” he barked to no one in particular but Louisa was already on her feet, rushing out the door. Clarissa didn’t know what Martha did. Her attention was on her mother, already sinking to her knees to come face to face with her.

“Mother,” she called desperately, patting her cheek. She swallowed the bile of fear that rushed up her throat, realizing that her mother’s face was hot to the touch. As hot as her father’s had been days before his death. “Mother, open your eyes, please.”

That day came rushing back to her. It was her father laying limp before her instead, breathing so heavily that she had been afraid to touch him. Fear tore at her insides as she tried her best to remain calm, as she tried not to think that she might be losing another parent all over again.

And then the door opened and the butler came rushing in with Louisa on his heels. He sank to Olivia’s side, popping open a bottle of smelling salt and putting it under her chin. They all waited with bated breaths for her to stir.

At least she did. It began as another flutter of her eyelids and Louisa let out a sob. Clarissa put her hand over her mouth, holding back her own silent cries of relief when her mother’s eyes opened.

“Bring her up to her room,” Robert ordered, even though he didn’t have to. Clarissa was already moving to her mother’s side, guiding her to a stand. Louisa quickly claimed her other side and, together, they helped her out of the room with the butler trailing behind, smelling salt still in hand.

As they went on, Olivia seemed to regain more of her consciousness. She hardly helped herself walk, dragging herself along and weighing them down. Clarissa didn’t complain though. It had been so long since she’d heard her mother speak that she couldn’t help the sparkle of hope that her health was beginning to improve. Right now she could handle a little dead weight if it meant that her mother’s mind might be returning.

“Lay her down gently,” Clarissa said softly upon reaching Olivia’s room. With Louisa’s help, they laid her on the bed. Olivia immediately curled onto her side, tucked her arm under her head, and stared at the wall.

The butler returned to his duties shortly after, but not before leaving the bottle of smelling salts by her bedside. After a moment, Louisa did as well, claiming that she needed a bit of sunshine and fresh air. Clarissa stood there for far too long, staring down at her mother and wondering when things would begin to feel normal again.

The last time she’d felt anything close to normalcy had been a facade designed by her father. They’d been living a false life without knowing it—every frivolous purchase they made, every platter of food on their table, only making things worse. And with her mother in the state she was in now, the responsibility rested on Clarissa to save her family. A responsibility that did nothing but distress her every day since she hadn’t a clue how to go about it.

Now she was being given a chance. She would not let it slip through her fingers.

After a long while, she left her mother alone and went to the only room that brought her solace—the library. Clarissa quickly found the writing desk tucked between two bookshelves in the corner of the room and pulled free clean sheets of paper.

Her poems were the only thing of the past she had, the only way of expressing the deep waves of conflicting emotions that plagued her day by day. She could spend hours writing, pouring her heart into the words that would never be seen by another soul. Some days were more despondent than others. But her poetry today sang a different tune.

They spoke of hope and longing, and a perfect night at Lady Yulebridge’s ball.