



Unmask Me My Love (The Matchmaker's Ball #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: He'll do anything for the woman he loves...except tell the truth.

Gabriella d'Aventure is a young woman on a mission. She has come to England as a lady's maid in single-minded pursuit of the Duke of Rother. When she meets Horace Carpenter, valet to a marquess, she is delighted to enlist his aid in gaining her heart's desire: a meeting with the duke. But will her growing feelings for the handsome valet interfere with her plans for Rother?

The eccentric Marquess of Halford, Hal to his friends, is fed up with the demands of Society, especially his father's decree that he marry this Season. To that end, Hal hides out at Lady Hamilton's ball, refusing to choose a bride. However, when a breathtaking young woman intrudes on his solitude, Hal is instantly captivated and rashly introduces himself as his valet and offers his help. Despite his growing fear about the true motive behind Gabriella's quest to meet the duke, Hal devises a plan to help her gain an audience with him, all the while praying his deception won't ruin his chances of winning her love.

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Jonathan George Horatio Arturus Black, Marquess of Halford—Hal to his friends—sat in his shirtsleeves, cross-legged on the hard floor of the tiny balcony overlooking Lady Hamilton’s ballroom, hand on his chin, gaze resting on the twirling dancers below. He yawned and shook his head, trying to stave off drowsiness. The dancing, the parties, the whole damn Season—which had only just begun—bored him to distraction.

The couples, engaged in a quadrille, flowed back and forth as they met, balanced, circled, and leaped about. All well and good to engage in a spritely dance when one had hopes of a particular young lady. Torture when one had none. He’d looked over this year’s crop of damsels, freshly out in Society, and wouldn’t have given a farthing for the lot of them, much less made an offer to one. So, of course, this would be the year Father got a bee in his bonnet about him marrying. Didn’t he realize eight-and-twenty was the prime age for bachelorhood?

The orchestra paused to change sets. Hal leaned forward, scrutinizing the brightly bedecked figures once more, hoping for a new face in the inevitable crowd. Not one.

Sighing, he shifted his head from his left hand to his right.

“Oh.”

The breathy voice made him whirl around. A lovely woman in a fetching white gown

stared at him, her brows knitted in a delightful frown.

“Halford, what are you doing up here?” Lady Celinda Grantham, a distant relation of his mother’s family, came toward him, her displeasure transforming into a sweet smile. She shook her head, setting her golden ringlets bouncing.

“Hiding. What about you?” He turned completely around to address her. Celinda had always been a favorite “cousin” of his. She could be exceptionally odd at times, which probably explained the attraction. Like would seek like.

“Oh, I didn’t particularly want to dance this set,” she said, gesturing over the balcony rail. “But neither did I wish to endure the company of Bertie Symmons the entire time.” She wrinkled her nose. “I had thought to matchmake him with my cousin, Kate, but she’d probably have my guts for garters.”

He cocked his head. “Do I know her?”

“I don’t know. She’s Miss Locke, Lord Ainsley’s sister.”

“Hmmm.” He had met her two seasons ago and dismissed her as too strong a personality to deal with. Perhaps, given his father’s decree, he should reconsider. “I could meet your cousin instead. Do you think she would fancy me?” From what he remembered of her, he wouldn’t be bored.

“Huh. She’d have your guts for garters and wear them to the next ball.” Celinda laughed and moved closer to the railing, peering down at the ballroom floor. She scanned the room quickly then her attention seemed to focus on one particular set of dancers.

“Who are you watching?” Hal rose to stand beside her. Who was causing that bright pink blush on her cheeks, making her look like the perfect English rose?

“Kate. She’s dancing with Lord Finley, who’s just now returned from America.” Her cheeks deepened to rose. She flipped open her fan and plied it so vigorously her curls flew back from her face. “It is much hotter up here than I expected.”

“Indeed.” He gazed at her, seeing her truly for the first time in years. She’d changed since her come-out a year ago. Golden curls, flawless creamy skin, a lively personality, and very kissable coral lips. Why had he never considered her as a candidate for his marchioness? Had the answer to his dilemma been under his nose all along?

“Is that why you’re in shirtsleeves?” The color in her cheeks subsided a trifle. “Really, Halford, you are a scandal. You’ll be in such trouble if Lady Hamilton finds you thus—or anyone else other than me, for that matter. Put your jacket on, please.”

“It doesn’t fit.” He sighed. Unfortunate, but so true.

“That seems a matter to take up with your valet, or your tailor.” She turned once again to stare at the dancers below.

“Perhaps it is better said that I don’t fit it, Celinda.”

“What do you mean?” She regarded him with a puzzled smile.

“This.” He waved his hand at the glittering ballroom. “I’m tired of living by the ton’s rules, dictating what I can and cannot do. Why can I not sit in my shirtsleeves without creating a scandal? It’s as if the walls close round me each time I set foot in a ballroom. Neither am I comfortable with all the dancing and flirting—”

“Even though you do it extremely well, from what I’ve observed.” She batted her fan at his arm, her eyelids closing to mere slits, like a cat waiting at a mouse’s hole.

“As do you, my lady.” He took her hand, so petite in his large one, and gazed into her angelic face. “I wonder if you can save me from another season of balls and parties and the eternal flirting and courting of ladies I have no interest in.” A gentle squeeze of her soft skin set his pulse snapping. “I need a sweet, beautiful, intelligent woman like you, cousin, to help me find my way.”

“What are you talking about?” She pulled her hand from his, her blue eyes wide and wary. “You are up to something, Halford, as usual. Remember, I have known you since I was in leading strings.” She stepped back, fan raised to ward him off.

He laughed. Celinda had never been one to fall for a handsome face or flattering line. “My father has decreed that his heir must produce an heir before he cocks up his toes.” Hal backed away from the railing. One never knew how far a voice might travel.

She followed him, still holding the fan en garde . After a fleeting glance at the dancing couples, she turned her attention to him. “Is he ill?”

“Not that he’s said. He certainly looks robust enough to achieve his century.” Hal wouldn’t mind that. His father had always done well by him, and he’d grown rather fond of having him around, except for his latest lunacy. “I suspect it is either a strange whim, born of some chance article in the Times , or else his cronies at his club have been talking about their heirs having been leg-shackled and setting up their nurseries.” He shuddered. Marriage might be palatable, but offspring while he was still in his prime didn’t sit well at all.

“Can you not simply tell him you haven’t found the right woman?” Celinda’s sympathetic tone encouraged him.

“Unfortunately, no. He’s like a horse with the bit in his teeth. I’ve been given the ultimatum of finding a bride by the end of the Season, or he will arrange a marriage

for me.” To even speak the words made his blood run cold. His father was the last person on earth he wanted choosing his wife.

“And you want to marry me?”

He wasn’t sure how to take the strained incredulity in her voice. “I think we would suit better than most couples. We’ve known each other all our lives, as you pointed out. Our families would quite likely declare a national holiday. Or try to.”

She giggled at that. So much the better.

“We do get on well. You have to agree. And you take my eccentricities in your stride.” He gestured to his shirt and smiled. “That alone makes me want to marry you.”

She averted her eyes, her mouth puckering.

Was she about to laugh or cry? He leaned toward her and grasped her hand, determined to press his suit. “Lady Celinda, will you do me the very great honor of becoming my wife?”

After one stricken, blue-eyed glance, she burst out laughing. She turned away, and her white-clad shoulders trembled as she got herself under control.

Not the response he’d hoped for, certainly, but he wouldn’t let it dampen his spirits. It had been a spur of the moment gamble and would’ve been a convenient answer to a worrisome problem. He hoped the music masked Celinda’s hysterics. It wouldn’t do for them to be discovered thus, especially as she’d now rejected him.

“Halford, I’m sorry.” She faced him, biting her bottom lip. Her eyes, bright with tears of laughter, also held a trace of sadness. “Truly I am.”

“It’s quite all right,” he said, assuming an injured air. Let her feel guilty, for a moment, at least. “I’m used to ladies laughing in my face when I propose.” Actually, he’d never proposed to anyone before, but she couldn’t know that.

“Can you forgive me?” She laid her hand on his arm and drew him to a bench set against the balcony wall. “I simply did not expect such a declaration from you, of all people.”

“Well, I trust you do not respond so to every man who asks for your hand.” He tried to look sternly at her, but it kept wanting to turn into a lopsided grin. Apparently, he couldn’t be harsh to Celinda.

“As you have the distinction of being the first man ever to do so, I have to answer yes.” She smiled and squeezed his arm. “Halford,” she said as they sat, moving a little away from him and withdrawing her hand. “I am not unaware of the great honor you’ve done me by asking me to be your wife. And I hold you in the highest regard. You are handsome, witty, kind. Everything a woman would want in a husband. However, I need to have a passionate regard for the gentleman I choose to spend my life with, not merely friendship.”

“That is the fashion, I understand.” Several of his friends who’d married recently had expressed the same sentiment about their wives. “Could passion not grow between us? You are a devilishly attractive woman, Celinda.” He gave her his most charming smile and snared her fingers. “You might grow fond of me, and I’m sure I could grow quite fond of you.” He lifted her hand and placed an ardent kiss upon it.

“I am certain you would, Lord Halford.” She snatched her hand back and rose so abruptly he had to grab the bench to keep from sprawling across it. “I, however, want to know that passion exists before I say yes.” She paced the small balcony in short, sharp strides. “I want to love a man so desperately I’d do anything to be able to marry him.” Her eyes flashed darkly, and the bright spots of color rose in her cheeks once

more.

Hal sighed. Tempting as this avenue to marriage had seemed, it appeared a dead end. “Have you found this great passion then?”

She stopped and cut her eyes toward the railing. “Perhaps.” A shake of her head, and she resumed her pacing. “I’m not quite sure. I’ve thought so before and been disappointed. This time, however, I intend to brook no interference from Papa.”

“Parents have that annoying habit, don’t they? I wonder if it is part of their sworn duties?” His father seemed to think so.

She grasped his arm, her smile warm again. “I’m sure I will never so impede my children’s happiness.” Her hand was firm and comforting. “I am truly honored, Halford, that you would make me your marchioness.”

He grinned at her and patted her hand. “Call me Hal. My friends do. And since you’ve turned me down, we’re at least that.” He inclined his head. One last little temptation. “You’d be my duchess in due time as well, don’t forget.”

She nodded. “I know. I somehow think I would not be the best duchess.”

“You will be the best at whatever you choose to be, cousin.” He meant that. Celinda was one of the dearest women of his acquaintance. She would be brilliant no matter if she married a cook or king.

“You are quite the sweetest man.” She darted forward and brushed a kiss across his cheek. “A true Roi Charmant . I cannot wait for you to find your princess.”

“You mean duchess, don’t you?” Either way—princess or duchess—she was right that life with a woman for whom he’d do something desperate would be more than

exciting. Like the fairy-tale endings.

“I mean, I want you to find your own true love.” Celinda stilled, her head cocked toward the balcony. “The music has stopped. I must go down.”

To find her own true love, he’d wager. “Yes, your cousin will be looking for you.”

“Kate?” She frowned, the name seeming a puzzle to her, then her eyebrows rose. “Yes, yes, Kate will want to tell me all about Lord Finley’s dance.” The feverish color had returned to her face. Blushes certainly became Lady Celinda.

“And I suspect you will want to hear every last detail, my lady.” He rose and kissed her hand again, not with passion but a great deal of affection. “Go find your prince, Celinda.”

With a fleeting squeeze of his hand and a flash of a smile, she ran through the doorway.

Hal smiled, moved back to his spot in front of the balcony rail, and settled on the floor once more. Best steel himself to go down and do his duty by all the young ladies. When had his life become so filled with obligation?

“Ah.”

Hal shook his head. “What have you forgott—” He twisted his head toward the doorway and froze.

The young lady who stood before him was definitely not Lady Celinda Grantham. Medium height, with golden brown hair, a face fresh as cream, and perfectly bowed lips, she would’ve been exceptional even without the startling glass-green eyes. Attired in an unremarkable brown dress, she could not be one of Lady Hamilton’s

guests, although, with her beauty, she certainly should've been.

“Oh, pardonnez-moi , monsieur .”

What was this woman doing here?

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“ Bonsoir , mademoiselle ,” Hal said, rising from the floor to bow. He hoped she would speak again. Her lilting, vibrant voice would haunt his dreams.

“ Bonsoir, monsieur .” She wrinkled her petite nose. “You are English, oui ?”

“I am. My French is abominable, but I hoped to impress you with what I remember of it.” Hal smiled. He’d never got the hang of languages other than his own.

The girl laughed, tossing her head. “You have a good accent for an Englishman.”

“Thank you.”

She glanced from the balcony rail to the doorway and bit her lip.

“Is there some way I may be of service to you, Mademoiselle...?” He must know the name of this beautiful creature.

“D’Aventure,” she said, with a small but graceful curtsy. “Gabriella Veronique Marie d’Aventure. Mais, non . I am fine, monsieur .” Again, she slid her gaze toward the balcony railing.

Well, he had a name, at least. Better than complete ignorance. “Have you come, perhaps, to watch the dancing?”

She nodded, keeping her attention on him. “Yes, my lady does not require me at the moment, so I thought it would be nice to see how the English dance.” Her smile quite took his breath away. “May I?”

“Please.” Hal stepped back and motioned her in front of him.

She moved like air on water, seeming to glide without touching the planked floor. When she reached the railing, she studied the dancers, now engaged in a country dance. “They are very beautiful, the English ladies, in their best gowns.” A glance at him, and her smile broadened. “Not as beautiful as the great French ladies of the royal court, of course, but their gowns are well made.” She giggled. “Perhaps they have a French modiste.”

“I suspect many of them do.” Unable to help himself, Hal stared at the charming girl.

Fortunately, the dancers held her interest so she missed this lapse in manners.

Entranced, she peered over the rail, her gaze darting from one couple to another, her hand beating time on the rail. Then she frowned and shook her head. “ Non, non. C’est impossible .”

“What is impossible, mademoiselle ?” She was obviously looking for someone. But who?

“It is nothing. I...I was told there would be a duke here tonight. He is a very powerful man, an English duke, non ? I thought I might recognize him from his clothing. He must be magnifique .” She looked closer at the dancing figures.

“Oh, but they do not appear in their ducal robes unless they’re in Parliament or there is a coronation.” He bit back a laugh. Damned strange if they all had to wear them every day. “At a ball or dinner party, they look just like anyone else.”

Her face fell, and she nibbled on her bottom lip as she continued to stare into the ballroom. Abruptly, she turned eyes that blazed green fire on him, and his heart lurched. “Do you know which one is the duke?”

“Yes, yes, I do.” Hal gulped and motioned to the couples milling on the floor, between sets. “Actually, there are two dukes here this evening.” He drew closer to her, and the faint but delightful flowery fragrance of hyacinth wafted over him. “You see that gentleman there,” he said, pointing to the Duke of Carlisle, “the one with the very wide side whiskers?”

“ Qu’est-ce que c’est ?”

“Whiskers.” Hal stroked his smooth cheeks, side whiskers being one of fashion’s affectations he particularly disliked.

“Ah, c’est lui .” She nodded then peered at the duke and frowned. “He is very old, n’est-il pas ?”

Hal laughed softly. “Dukes have a habit of doing that.” His own father was still hearty at fifty-five. “Some are much younger.” He scanned the crowd. “There, the man in the black coat and white breeches?”

“Which one?” She stared at the groups, searching. “There are so many.”

Damn. How to describe a man dressed like every other one? “He’s wearing quite a large, jeweled pin in his cravat. A diamond. It’s sparkling.”

“The very handsome one, next to the lady in the dark pink stripes?”

“Exactly.” Hal stepped back, still unwilling to be seen. “Well, he is also a duke. The Duke of Rother.”

“Oh!” Gabriella clutched the railing and leaned over. “That is he? He is très beau .”

“Whoa.” Hal grabbed her about the waist and pulled her back. “You don’t want them

to see you, do you?"

"Non ." She gazed longingly at the duke then stepped back from the railing. " Le duc de Rother ." When she finally turned to Hal, her eyes sparkled as brightly as the duke's jewel.

" Merci, merci beaucoup, monsieur ...my pardon, what is your name?"

The young man flushed, and Gabriella smiled to herself. He was likely a servant she'd caught taking his ease from his duties. It meant nothing to her, of course. She was doing the same thing, although la comtesse , who she'd seen dancing below, would not need her for some time, if she were lucky. The English, however, always seemed embarrassed about taking time to rest. Ah, well, she would feel no such thing. Such a difficult race, l'Anglais .

"Can you tell me your name, monsieur ? I would like to thank you properly." She batted her eyelashes at the handsome man. Flirting always broke the ice.

"H...Horace, mademoiselle . Horace Carpenter. I am valet to the Marquess of Halford." He glanced down at his feet.

Ah, as she'd suspected. Of course, the man should not be here any more than she. That could be the cause for his shyness. "Then merci beaucoup , Monsieur Carpenter. You have been most kind to me." She smiled, sincerely this time. Such a very attractive man. And she was grateful for his help. If she were lucky, he could further aid her in her quest. The assistance of someone in society would be necessary to carry out her plan, and this man worked for a powerful man—a marquess, no less.

Like a gift from a beneficent God sent to her.

She laid a hand on his arm, drawing him back to the railing. “You have shown me the Duke of Rother, so you or your master must know him, non ?”

“Uh, oui . Yes. My master, the marquess, knows him very well. That is how I knew him...to point him out to you.” Monsieur Carpenter started and struggled, as if he did not quite know how to speak English himself.

Had her flirting affected him so badly? She had not meant to fluster the man so much that he could not speak. Still, Maman had always told her she would make the men mad with passion.

Ah, well, she would cease her little dalliance, and hope he would still be of help to her.

“I wonder, monsieur , since you know very well the ways of the English aristocracy, if there is a way for me to meet this duke?”

His arm beneath her hand stiffened. “Why would you want to meet a duke?”

“Oh, it would be très excitant , to meet so powerful a man, ne serait-il ?” She squeezed his arm and gave a little laugh. If he could help her, she would truly be grateful; however, she did not want him to displease his master.

“Perhaps, although he may prove more tedious than you think.” He furrowed his brows almost comically. “Wouldn’t a marquess be just as exciting? I am sure I could arrange a meeting between you and my master.”

Gabriella sighed. She had a specific reason for wanting to meet this particular duke, which she could not divulge to this stranger, no matter how nice he seemed. But how to put that delicately?

“I am certain your marquess is a man redoutable, monsieur . Mais , I have set my heart on meeting a duke.” She smiled up at him again and clasped his arm tighter. “You will think it is just the silly whim of a young, foolish girl.”

“Tell me.” His eyes searched her face, and she met their gaze without hesitation. She would tell him as much of the truth as possible.

“From the time I was a very small girl, I have had one particular dream. To meet a duke. An English duke, in fact. My mother met such a man once. She told me all about it, how it changed her life. Ever since then, I have hoped and prayed for this to happen.” She glanced at the man again, now laughing with a lady in blue. “I am so close to attaining this happiness. Can you not help me?”

“A duke.” Monsieur Carpenter put a hand to his head, rubbing his temple as though struck with a pain. “Can it be any duke?”

Gabriella held her breath. The young valet obviously wanted to help her. A nudge in the correct place, and he might be tempted enough. “I have heard my mistress speak of this Duke of Rother.” She pointed to the handsome man, who quite took her breath away. Never had she dreamed he would be so dashing. “She says he is the most distinguished and commanding of men. Now I see him for myself, I know she did not lie. Il est très beau , non ? And since I have seen this duke, this is the one I wish to meet.” She stared at him, daring him to dispute her words. “Is there any other English duke so attractive? So splendid? So noble?”

“I grant you, the duke is a fine specimen of an English nobleman.” Monsieur Carpenter’s face had paled. “However, this may prove more difficult than I first believed.”

“Will you help me, monsieur ?” Artifice gone, Gabriella spoke from her heart.

He closed his eyes and nodded. "I will speak to my master about it. If anyone can arrange it, he can." A long pause, and the valet opened his deep brown eyes and sighed.

"Oh, monsieur . Merci, merci ." She flung her arms around him. At last, she would meet the Duke of Rother. Before she thought, her mouth found his in a kiss of pure jubilation.

Then everything changed. His soft, insistent lips sent a thrill through her she'd not experienced before. Relaxing against him, she gave herself over to pure pleasure as their mouths dissolved into one another. A delightful heat sizzled in her veins. She should not have been enjoying this, yet the tingles he caused to skitter up and down her spine could not be denied.

At last, he broke the kiss and stepped back. "That was the loveliest thank you I've ever received."

Gabriella came slowly back to the balcony, the music, and thanked God for the dimness of the candles, half burned out in their sconces on the wall. Heat seared her cheeks, and she danced back from this stranger. "I beg your pardon, Monsieur Carpenter. You made me forget myself."

"You can forget yourself with me any time you like, Mademoiselle d'Aventure." He grinned and lifted her chin so she had no choice but to look him in the face. "How may I contact you?"

She jerked her chin away. "Oh, non , monsieur ." Gabriella retreated until her back hit the wall behind her. Wax flew, and the candle flame sputtered. She must put an immediate end to any romantic notions this valet had about her. Nothing must come between her and her goal.

“You have been very kind, but do not think that because of that one kiss—”

“I will need to contact you, Mademoiselle d’Aventure, to inform you of my master’s progress with your request to meet the duke.” The insufferable man’s face twitched with laughter. He at least had the good manners not to laugh in her face. “Where may I send you word?” His brown eyes glinted with amusement still.

Gabriella sniffed. So what if he thought her a fool? The one thing that mattered was arranging the meeting with the duke. “Ah, oui .” She raised her head as though nothing had occurred. “ La comtesse is staying here with Lady Hamilton, a connection of her late husband, the Earl of Chalgrove. You may send a note to her servants’ quarters, and I shall get it.” She would alert the housekeeper that she was expecting a letter. The woman was stern but had been civil to her so far.

“Do you know if your mistress will attend Lady Atherton’s musical evening, day after tomorrow?” His tone and eyes were eager.

“I believe that she has accepted that invitation. Why?”

“Can you manage to accompany her there?”

Gabriella frowned. “There is nothing to arrange. Lady Chalgrove insists I attend all functions with her, in case there is an emergency with her toilette.” She shook her head, laughing. “Once, she told me, she attended a ball without her maid and during the first dance her partner tore her gown. The lady’s maid of the household could not repair the tear and la comtesse was forced to leave the ball early. Since that day, she insists on her maid accompanying her to every entertainment. I grew up in a modiste’s shop, so I can repair anything.” She arched her neck. Monsieur need not look down on her skills. She’d wager herself more proficient in personal care than he.

“Excellent. I will see you there and bring word of my progress in gaining an audience

with Rother.”

Something in his request didn't ring true. Gabriella cocked her head. “Why ask for my lodging if you plan to meet me elsewhere?”

The valet grinned, all trace of shyness gone. “Because I realized if we meet, I'll be able to see you again.”

“You also accompany your master to parties and balls?” She accepted that the countess required her services almost constantly but hadn't thought this usual. “I did not think English gentlemen so fussy in their costumes that they must have constant attention.”

Monsieur Carpenter cleared his throat. “The marquess styles himself a follower of Beau Brummell. He too requires me always at hand to see to his appearance.” He made a sharp gesture toward the balcony. “That is why I am cooling my heels here. I can keep an eye on his lordship through the railing. If he leaves the ballroom, I can hurry downstairs to see if he requires anything.”

Gabriella had heard of Monsieur Brummell's fastidious fashion and the men who tried to emulate him. She sighed. “The English can be quite excentrique , ne peuvent-ils ?” Excentricité also explained Monsieur Carpenter's very informal dress. Never had she seen a valet without a proper jacket.

He grinned and nodded. “Indeed they can, mademoiselle .” The warm look in his big brown eyes sent a warning signal.

“I must go back to la comtesse 's chamber. If she should return, and I am not there...” She threw up her hands. “She will have many unkind words for me.” The woman had been furious the last time that had happened. Gabriella had feared she would strike her.

“I don’t see how anyone could be harsh with you, Mademoiselle d’Aventure.” The valet raised his hand toward her face, and she skipped away from him.

What a shame Monsieur Carpenter was such an attractive man. The sable brown hair and piercing dark eyes sent shivers all through her. The memory of his strong arms and warm kiss promised exceptional delights, but she could not let herself be distracted from her quest to meet the Duke of Rother.

Gabriella curtsied and, picking up her skirts, hurried from the room. She raced past the staircase, the uncanny feeling that she was being pursued pushing her to greater speed than was safe. No time for dalliances with a valet when the duke was so close at hand.

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Hal stared at the doorway, his head spinning with that whirlwind conversation. What a web of lies he'd just constructed, as glibly as any charlatan on the street corner. The flow of falsehoods that had seemed to come out of his mouth of their own accord amazed him. He'd been so delighted with the beautiful mademoiselle he would've said almost anything to help her. What the devil he was to do now, though, he had no idea. He could simply introduce her to Rother, whom he knew quite well, although only as the Marquess of Halford. Unfortunately, that bit of information he would rather keep to himself for now.

He'd not declared himself the marquess for fear she would run away from him. To have found a nobleman in shirtsleeves would've been enough to send any respectable woman scurrying away, scandalized. Celinda had been right about that. And the moment he'd seen Miss d'Aventure, he'd decided he must meet the lovely creature, have one conversation without the ton dictating his behavior. Have her meet the man, rather than the blasted title so many women sought.

He hadn't imagined he'd want to continue the acquaintance, yet now he could not countenance the idea of not seeing her again. He'd been so disillusioned with the young ladies he'd met so far this Season. Most were exactly what one would expect an English maiden of good family to be like: skilled in dancing, singing, drawing, and playing the pianoforte, but not a jot of interesting conversation in their heads. Young ladies his father would love him to marry. Yet he wanted at least a little something more. The wit of a Celinda or the contrariness of a Miss Locke, although that lady had a bit too much spirit for him. Now this lady's maid had come along and turned his head.

He liked Mademoiselle d'Aventure—God, even her name set his pulse to

pounding—on a level much deeper than he'd have thought possible in the fifteen minutes they'd been together. Smart, funny, beautiful. Stubborn. That he liked most of all. That she could become his mistress had crossed his mind more than once. Their kiss and her lovely figure pressed close to him had incited a riot in every part of his body.

If only she weren't a lady's maid, he could make her his marchioness.

Now that was a sobering thought. Of course, men took all manner of women to wife, from prostitutes to princesses these days. The ton was full of such tales. It loved nothing more. And he'd wager his inheritance she could hold her own in any drawing room in London. His father, on the other hand, detested scandal. Hal's scrapes in the past had been enough of a disgrace to elicit the threat of being cut off without a farthing. Not a pleasant prospect when his father had the constitution of a horse. The man might live another twenty years or more.

Was the game worth the candle? He'd only just met the woman. She might not be at all what she seemed. But when compared to the ladies from whom he was supposed to choose a wife, she towered above even the best of them. Perhaps he needed to make himself better acquainted with the little demoiselle. See if she'd captured more than just his fancy.

Which might be a tricky proposition. He couldn't very well reveal himself as the Marquess of Halford now without making her terribly angry about his deception. She'd find out eventually, of course. No one who knew him would ever mistake him for his valet, the real Horace Carpenter. But if he was careful, he might be able to woo her and win her regard before she discovered his deception. By that time, quite likely, she'd be more than willing to forgive his subterfuge.

Especially if he'd been able to give her the one thing her heart desired: an introduction to the Duke of Rother. So how could he accomplish it? He swung around

and strode to the railing, staring out at the dancing figures. Who could he get to help him?

Below, Celinda stood beside a young lady in blue. Ah, that must be Miss Locke. Their heads drew together in deep conversation, most likely about the newly come Lord Finley. Hal had yet to meet the man, but if level-headed Lady Celinda Grantham was taken with him, he'd better take his measure and quickly. Of course, her father would...

The flicker of a memory, a connection to the Granthams surfaced in his giddy mind. He needed to go to Celinda now, before she left or did something rash, like compromise herself with his lordship. Hal grabbed his jacket from behind a potted palm and slung it on. At the very least she'd have another partner out on the dance floor if he didn't move quickly. The black superfine material settled uncomfortably over his shoulders—it always felt too confining, no matter what his tailor did to it. He adjusted it as best he could and rushed out the door and down the stairs.

His height proved a boon, as usual. He spied Lady Celinda and Miss Locke in conversation on the other side of the ballroom. He skirted the dance floor as swiftly as he dared without being rude to the guests who stopped him, wishing to chat or introduce him to their daughters. The very reason he hated these affairs.

He made each conversation as quick as he could, but by the time he finally reached Celinda, she was deeply engaged with a man he didn't recognize—obviously the excellent Lord Finley. She would not be pleased with him for interrupting, but, still, he was not inclined to wait.

“Lady Celinda, Miss Locke. How do you do? So lovely to see you this evening.” He bowed to them then raised his eyebrows while staring pointedly at the well-dressed gentleman beside them.

“Good evening, Lord Halford.” Miss Locke dropped a curtsy.

“Good evening, my lord.” Celinda pursed her lips and curtsied as well. Her eyes shot daggers at him, but she smiled and nodded to the man on her right. “May I present Lord Finley, my lord? He is just returned to London from America. Lord Finley, my very distant cousin, Lord Halford.”

“My lord.” Hal bowed, taking the man’s measure at a glance. Tall, with a rugged build and sharply defined face, the man was surely a gentleman, although with an indefinable edginess to him. Hal scented danger, though he couldn’t quite put his finger on what gave him that impression. He would make inquiries. Not that Celinda’s father wouldn’t do the same; Lord Ivor was no fool where his daughter was concerned. Still, Hal liked her enough that even had they not been related, he would’ve been loath to see her hurt.

“Lady Celinda, I believe you are promised to me for the next set.” He stared at her, willing her to understand his silent plea.

She glanced from Miss Locke to Lord Finley then smiled at him though she clutched her fan so tightly the ribs creaked. “Yes, I believe I am, my lord.” Celinda turned to the others. “Will you excuse us?”

He bowed to Lord Finley, who nodded and moved closer to Miss Locke. That lady’s eyes had widened, and her smile reached almost the width of her face, as though someone had given her a delightful present.

Hal led Celinda to the floor as a waltz started.

“You had better have an excellent reason for this, Hal.” Celinda squeezed his hand unmercifully. “I had almost secured another dance with Lord Finley when you snatched me away. Now he’ll likely ask Kate, and who knows where that will lead.”

Her mouth was set in pleasant lines, though her tone was anything but.

“It is of the utmost importance to my happiness, in fact.”

“Please tell me you’re not going to propose again.” The pressure on his hand increased.

“No, but I do need your help.” His gaze swept the ballroom and the balcony above. No enchanting French damoiselle, thank goodness. He didn’t think Mademoiselle d’Aventure would recognize him if she saw him like this, but he didn’t want to take a chance. “Can you arrange a meeting with the Duke of Rother?” Hal started them around the room without waiting for Celinda to answer.

“Rother?”

“Don’t I remember he’s your godfather?”

Celinda’s brows had puckered. “Yes, although sending a silver cup for my christening was apparently the extent of his godfatherly duties.” Her frown deepened. “Are you telling me you’re not acquainted with him? I can’t believe you’ve not been introduced. But he’s here tonight.” She peered into the crowd. “I’d be happy to—”

“It’s not for me.” He kept scanning the crowd as well but not for the duke.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The introduction is not for me. I am well acquainted with the duke.” He glimpsed a brown skirt and spun Celinda around to shield him.

“What are you doing?” She wobbled, off balance.

“Nothing.” Hal grabbed her tighter to keep her from falling. Ah, thank goodness, it was Lady Carlisle in brown beside the chair there, not the little damoiselle .

“Let me go.” She hissed. “People are going to stare. And if you compromise me, I’ll make sure I’m a widow not long after I’m a wife.”

“Don’t get your feathers ruffled. I don’t want to marry you.” He maneuvered them around a group of dancers who seemed to be all but standing still. “Furthest thing from my mind.”

“Then slow down, for pity’s sake.” She stepped on his foot, and pain shot up his shin.

“Ouch. Behave, and I will also.” Easier said than done. Once he started a waltz, the lovely rhythm made him want to fly around the room. Still, he managed to lessen their speed to a tempo more in keeping with the rest of the dancers.

“So, who is seeking an introduction to the duke?” Celinda eyed him as they paused in a balance step.

“A lady.”

“What?” Celinda tried to halt, her mouth slightly agape, but he urged her on around the room.

“After you left the balcony, someone else appeared. Another young woman.”

“Indeed.” Her eyebrows arched, her tone a trifle cool. “How fortunate for you, Hal.”

“It truly was.” The thought of the beautiful French woman set his heart on fire.

“You’re smiling like an idiot.”

“I know. I can’t stop.” He picked up their pace again. His feet had wings tonight because of the damoiselle .

Abruptly, Celinda grasped his hand and pulled him off the dance floor. They’d come full circle, back to the far end of the room where he’d found her. Miss Locke and Lord Finley were nowhere to be seen. With a groan, Celinda made for the French doors that let onto the rear terraces, Hal in tow.

“What are you doing?” He didn’t protest much. It would be easier to convince her to help if he could talk to her face to face.

“Trying to get some sense out of you without making a spectacle of ourselves.” She drew him toward a more secluded corner.

A dangerous place. If anyone found them here, they would have no choice but to marry.

Hal held his breath, listening for others who might also have availed themselves of the garden’s sanctuary. Only the peaceful night sounds of crickets and the faint snorting of horses in the stables filled the air. “Celinda, we must be brief. If we are discovered here—”

“Oh, mark me, we will not be. So talk fast. You met a young woman on the balcony who wishes to meet my godfather?” She spoke low and slowly.

“Yes.”

“And you have developed a *tendre* for this girl in the half hour since I left you?” This question came sharp and crisp, with a knowing smirk in her voice.

“Why would you say that?” He took a step backward into the shadows. It might be

too dark for her to see him clearly, but he wouldn't chance it.

"The look on your face just now, when I said you were smiling like an idiot. I knew." Her voice grew harsh with disapproval.

"And how long did it take you, pray tell, to form an attachment to Lord Finley?" Hal shot back. "You met him only this evening as well."

"That is totally different." Her defensive tone confirmed all his suspicions about her regard for Finley.

"Somehow, I doubt that. Come, Celinda," he said, drawing close enough to her that she was more than just a faint outline and voice. "Please help me."

"Who is this young lady? Do I know her?" She lowered her voice to a whisper. "You haven't proposed to her as well, have you?"

He chuckled and shook his head. Knowing him as she did, she would think to ask that. "No, you do not know her, and no, I have only proposed to you this evening—so far."

"Hal!"

"Quiet." He peered around the yard, but nothing stirred. "For pity's sake, Celinda. You will get us leg-shackled yet."

"I'm sorry, but you can be rash." In the faint light, she smoothed her gown and seemed to calm a bit.

"I was jesting. I met her for perhaps ten minutes, too short an acquaintance to form any meaningful attachment, even for me. Although..." He paused, haunted by a

sudden whiff of hyacinth that brought with it the memory of Mademoiselle d'Aventure's beauty, charm, and soft lips.

"Hal." Celinda's voice reached him, returning him to the darkened garden. "This young lady has bewitched you, it seems."

"You may be correct, cuz." She'd cast a spell on him, to be sure. All he could think of was seeing her once more. "So will you help me?"

"You haven't told me yet who she is, why she wants to meet Lord Rother, or why you can't simply introduce her." Celinda tapped an impatient toe.

"Well..." Damn. He couldn't put her off any longer. She had to know the truth. Whether that would make any difference in the end was up to Celinda and her sense of romance. "Her name is Gabriella d'Aventure—there are a few other names between that I forget—lately from France."

"Miss d'Aventure? I certainly would've noted such an unusual name. My forte, you may remember." Celinda rolled her eyes.

Hal did recall how much she disliked her curious name.

"Why have I not met Miss d'Aventure? Who is her chaperone?"

Inwardly, Hal groaned. He'd rather not have to deal with these questions at the moment, but if he must... "She is with Lady Chalgrove."

"Lady Chalgrove?" The suspicious look on his cousin's face told him he must stop trying to hedge the subject. "Lady Chalgrove has no daughters. Is she a niece?"

"She is her ladyship's lady's maid."

Celinda blew out an exasperated breath that threatened to ruffle his cravat. “Come, Hal. Enough of games. Tell me.”

“That is the truth.” He crossed his heart. “Word of honor.”

“Hal!”

“Shhh.” He froze. Footsteps approached from the direction of the French doors. Hal pushed Celinda behind him, further into the shadow of the veranda’s overhanging roof. If he could hide her, they might think he was waiting for an assignation rather than in the middle of one. Suddenly, marriage to his cousin, so attractive a short time ago, had become unimaginable. He held his breath, and the footsteps retreated. His lungs burned, but he refused to breathe until he’d counted to thirty then gulped in air and stepped aside.

“I’m sorry.” She grasped his arm, her hand soft and warm. “Well, then, please tell me everything.”

Thank the good Lord. He launched into his tale, leaving out only a few bits, like that spellbinding kiss. Some things Celinda simply did not need to know.

“So I’m to rendezvous with her at Lady Atherton’s and tell her if all is arranged for her to meet the duke. You will be attending the musicale, won’t you?” He’d relaxed as his cousin had become more and more entranced by his tale.

“Of course. Mamma and Lady Atherton are bosom bows. But all you want me to do is introduce Miss d’Aventure to the duke?” She narrowed her eyes. “Why can’t you simply introduce her yourself?”

“Uh...I must have left out a bit... She thinks I’m Carpenter.”

“Your valet!” Celinda’s mouth dropped.

“For God’s sake, keep your voice down.” Hal glanced around frantically. “Have you always been so noisy, and I simply haven’t noticed?” He ventured out to stick his head around the corner of the house. No one else stirred in the crisp air of the early May night. “Yes, I told her I was my valet so as not to startle her when she first came upon me. I was in shirtsleeves, if you remember. And his was the only name I could think of.”

“So you are your valet and she is a lady’s maid.” Even the dim light couldn’t disguise Celinda’s dismay. “How am I to introduce a lady’s maid to the duke?”

“Simply as a young lady of your acquaintance?” he asked hopefully. Celinda had never failed him before. Pray God she did not now.

“There is something going on here, Hal.” She shook her head. “Something you’re not telling me or something she’s not telling you.” Celinda rubbed her arms, and Hal shivered in the cool air. “Let us go back inside before I catch a chill and Mamma has an attack of the vapors.” Moving out from behind Hal, she headed for the French door. “Tell me again why she’s so set on meeting a duke? And Rother in particular?”

“Some girlish dream, she said. Her mother met a duke when she was a girl. I suppose she told the story to Gabriella so many times it made an impression on her. Now she wants to meet an English duke as well.” He peered into her face, pale in the half-moon light. “Do you still have girlish dreams, Celinda?”

“I dream of a handsome man marrying me before I’m an ape leader, but I’ve had no luck convincing Father to approve the men I find interesting. Now that I’ve found another one, you’ve dragged me off into your scheme and left him with Kate. She’ll either have cowed or conquered him by the time I find them again.” She sighed, a sadness in her eyes. “I’ll send word as soon as I’ve written to Lord Rother. When can

we arrange for them to meet?"

"Bless you, Celinda." He breathed deeply once more. "I will ask Miss d'Aventure what day she can manage." He took Celinda's arm and escorted her back to the ballroom.

"You do think that is her real reason for wanting to meet the duke, don't you, Hal? A childhood dream?" A trickle of doubt colored her words as they passed over the threshold.

"What else could it be?" Hal only half-listened, checking the crowd for his lady's maid and anticipating his next meeting with her. With Gabriella. Her name tasted like a delicate pastry in his mouth.

"I don't know. Extortion, perhaps?"

Hal stopped, a smile frozen on his face.

Celinda dipped a curtsy and continued toward the side of the ballroom where Miss Locke stood alone, peering about.

With a low curse, Hal strode toward the main part of the house in search of a much-needed brandy.

By the time Gabriella reached the guest chamber assigned to her mistress, she knew she was too late.

La comtesse's raised voice sounded through the thick, oak-paneled door. "Where is Gabriella?"

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Where have you been, you stupid girl?” The countess’s screeching made Gabriella flinch. “I told you specifically to stay here so I could find you if I needed you.” She pointed to the skirt of her deep green gauze gown. The bottom row of ruffled flounces had come loose, drooping almost until it touched the floor. “You must fix this immediately. When you are finished, you are not to stir from this room until the ball is over. Do you understand?” She glared at Gabriella, who dropped her gaze to the floor.

“Oui , madame .” She ran to the dressing room and grabbed her sewing chest. “If you will stand still, madame , I will fix it tout de suite .” Gabriella sat on the floor at her mistress’s feet. Bad luck that the repair must be done in the front of the gown. She must sew with the tiniest stitches so they would not show. This would take more time, during which la comtesse would undoubtedly voice her displeasure. She knotted the silk thread and began. “Has madame enjoyed herself so far this evening?”

“I would be there enjoying myself this minute had you been here when I arrived.” The countess stamped her foot, jerking the fabric out of Gabriella’s hands.

“Please, madame . You must remain still if you wish me to be quick.” She gathered the green gauze once more and started to stitch again. “So you have danced much? Only a woman of your grace and beauty could have secured so many partners in a room filled to bursting with ladies.”

“How do you know how full the ballroom is?” Lady Chalgrove pounced as quickly as a striking snake.

“I went down the corridor to the small balcony that overlooks the ballroom. I wanted to see the English lords and ladies.” Gabriella poked the needle through the layers of soft fabric, unconcerned. “I particularly wanted to see what the English ladies are

wearing this season. You have bought that printed silk and asked me to make it up for your trip to Vauxhall Gardens next week. I wished to look at the newest fashions, so I may make certain madame is très jolie for her outing.”

“Well, I suppose that is a reasonable excuse.” Lady Chalgrove sniffed and looked over at her toilette table. “But I hope you saw something that will suit me, because you must remain here for the rest of the evening. I pray that wretched Mr. Calhoun does not come near me again. He is the one who stepped on my gown and pulled the flounce loose.” Her mistress moved toward the table, pulling the fabric out of Gabriella’s hands once more.

“Madame !”

The countess shrugged and dabbed perfume behind her ears and down her décolletage

.

Quel dommage there was not more there to work with.

Gabriella ran her hands across the carpet, searching for the needle. “If you wish to return to the ballroom in haste, madame , you must allow me to do my work.” She found the needle, threaded it, and began the repair again.

“Can you not hurry?” Lady Chalgrove picked up the hand mirror, turning it back and forth, preening while Gabriella finished mending the flounce. “I am to dance again with the Duke of Rother, and I will not keep him waiting.”

“Ouch.” Gabriella stuck the needle into her finger, drawing a bright drop of blood.

“Stupid girl. Do not smear blood on my gown.” The countess continued to gaze at herself in the mirror, smiling first one way then another.

“ Oui, madame .” Gabriella stuck her finger in her mouth then continued with the gown.

“His Grace is now searching for a bride, so say the latest on-dits .” She laughed into the mirror, looking like nothing so much as a monkey in a menagerie. “With a little luck, he may choose me, if I can only capture his attention. Are you finished?”

“ Oui, madame .”

The countess stormed out of the chamber without a backward glance.

Gabriella remained on the floor, trying to fit this newest information into her plan. She must accomplish her goal before Lady Chalgrove could snare the man. She shuddered to think what madame would do if she discovered her maid had a scheme of her own regarding the Duke of Rother.

She sent a swift prayer to St. Christopher, patron saint of pilgrims, to speed her on her way to a successful completion of her journey.

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Next morning, Gabriella, after assisting la comtesse with her toilette for the day, sat beside the window yawning and re-hemming the green gown from last night. Her mistress would most likely never wear it again, but she'd given strict instructions to remove and reattach the offending flounce. Gabriella shook her head but continued to sew. Madame had very peculiar notions about her maid's duties, but as she had provided passage to England and promised to pay her wages on time, Gabriella would not complain.

She bit through the last thread, hung the gown up in madame's dressing room, and was cleaning up her sewing things when Lady Chalgrove burst into the room.

"Gabriella, my best carriage dress. The blue with the embroidered silk flower medallions." La comtesse pulled at her clothing, throwing the fichu on the floor and plucking at the shoulders of her muslin morning gown.

"Madame, un moment . Allow me." Gabriella rushed to her mistress and began unbuttoning her before the woman could tear the clothes from her body. "What is wrong, madame?"

"Nothing is wrong. Everything is very, very right." Lady Chalgrove stripped the gloves from her hands. "Or everything will be right, if only you hurry."

Gabriella finished unfastening her mistress's gown and drew it over her head before she tore this one as well. "What has happened, madame?"

Lady Chalgrove breathed deeply, pushing out what little bosom she possessed. "He is here. The Duke of Rother came to call not ten minutes ago."

Stunned into silence, Gabriella stopped. The duke was here. Her hands trembled so hard she dropped the gown and had to bend to pick it up. He was in the same house as she, just downstairs. Could she run down now and seek an audience? She clutched the discarded dress to her chest and headed to the door.

“Where are you going?” Lady Chalgrove’s shrill voice pierced her ears, snapping her out of her trance.

Dear Lord, she actually had her hand on the latch. Turning back, she straightened her shoulders, hoping to play this off as she would a game of whist. “I am sorry, madame . I thought to go soak this small stain before it sets.” She pointed to a fortunate grease stain, about the size of a farthing, on the bodice. Thank God for providing such a wonderful excuse.

“Idiot. I tell you I need to change this instant, and you set off to wash a spot?” Lady Chalgrove’s face had turned an unbecoming shade of red. “Come back here and help me on with this dress.”

“ Oui, madame .” Gabriella laid the one gown on the bed and caught up the blue sarcenet, fresh from being pressed this morning. “Raise your arms.” She carefully slid the gown over her mistress’s head.

Lady Chalgrove’s hair emerged unscathed, save for a few dark black wisps that had stubbornly broken free. She must remember to attend to them before the whole coiffure collapsed.

“Hurry. I must not keep His Grace waiting. How fortunate the weather is fine. I suggested he show me his horses, and he offered a curricule ride instead. Quick, bring the Pear’s. I must be in looks, today of all days.”

Gabriella finished buttoning the blue gown then hurried back to the dressing room,

scrambling to find madame 's cosmetics case. How could she turn this encounter to her advantage? At last, she spied the tortoiseshell box under a large crate that held la comtesse 's shoes.

“Hurry up, Gabriella!” The strident voice would’ve shattered crystal had there been any about.

Gabriella winced, grabbed the case, and backed out of the cramped room.

“Stupid girl. Were you going to let me go downstairs with my hair looking like birds had roosted in it?” The countess dabbed on more perfume, dribbling it down her neck. The room reeked of the cloying musk she always used. Her eyes flashed jet black and her brows dipped so low they seemed to sit upon her nose. She had pursed her mouth, displeasure written over her white lips and scowling brows.

“Of course not, madame.” The woman reminded Gabriella of the hideous gorgon she’d seen in a picture in the Louvre when she was small. The sight had given her nightmares for a week. Now the nightmare had come to life. “I intended to apply the Pear’s then attend to your coiffure. However did it manage to come loose?” Gabriella soothed the wretched woman, sitting her down at the table, brushing and coaxing her hair to behave, speaking to her in the tone she reserved for petulant children and barking dogs.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” the countess snapped, jerking her head to and fro to get a better look in the mirror in her hand. “It didn’t look that way when I left this room. Your pins must have fallen out.” She turned an accusatory eye on Gabriella. “This hair had best not move no matter how fast the duke drives.”

“Fear not, madame . I will secure it so that even the briskest breeze will not ruffle a single hair,” Gabriella said, opening the pot of hair pomade. With practiced fingers, she dabbed here and there, ignoring the unpleasant greasy sensation, smoothing and

fastening the hairs with the sticky pomatum that smelled of roses. Then, to make sure the strands wouldn't move even if a whirlwind overtook the curricule, she stuck in a half-dozen hairpins as well. She would have the devil's own time combing out the gummy mess tonight, but such was her lot. At least it was not yet time to wash the hair—an ordeal akin to preparations for a sea battle.

She worked quickly, sculpting the hair into waves and curls, then stepped back. “Voila, madame .”

Lady Chalgrove eyed the coiffure critically then nodded. “Very well. Where is the Pear's?”

Gabriella dug through the pots of creams, lotions, and cosmetics searching for the rouge and lip salve. A generous application, and Lady Chalgrove looked like a blooming rose, at least on her cheeks and lips.

“Is madame pleased?” She held the mirror up for her mistress's inspection. Once done, could she perhaps race below and steal a moment of the duke's time?

“It will do.” The countess glanced into the mirror and nodded as she pulled on her gloves. “See that you clean up this mess,” she swept a hand over the pots and jars strewn over the toilette table, “then make sure my gold muslin is ready for tonight's dinner. I'm not certain the duke will be there, but I need to look my best just in case.” She motioned for her gray silk Spencer, and Gabriella tugged the garment into place and fastened the four large buttons in front. “Don't forget to add the rosettes to the overlay on the rose lutestring for tomorrow. Oh, and my pink and green slippers are in sad shape from last night. See to them as well.”

“Oui , all has been accomplished already, madame .” Gabriella at last pinned the countess's best black velvet carriage hat in place, tied the wide ribbons under her left ear, and breathed a sigh of relief. “I believe you are complete, madame . Vous etes

très ravissante .”

The countess grunted, grabbed her reticule, and flounced out the door.

Gabriella sank down on the bench before the toilette table, head in hand. So much for catching even a glimpse of the duke, much less speaking with him. Horses snorted from the driveway outside. She jumped up and flew to the window.

A shiny black curricule with the ducal crest emblazoned on the side gleamed in the sunlight. Yellow wheels and the tiger on the back in blue and gold livery completed the glittering picture. The townhouse door opened, and Lady Chalgrove strutted forth on the arm of a tall man in blue and buff. The countess laughed and squeezed his arm as he handed her up into the curricule. He jumped into the seat beside her and took the ribbons then, with a touch of the whip, started the horses at a trot, and the carriage sped off down the street.

Gabriella waited until they were out of sight then turned back into the room, determined to speak with Monsieur Carpenter as soon as possible. The last thing she'd expected was the duke actually wooing her employer. Whether this development would impede her plans she couldn't tell; men were so unpredictable. However, she doubted it would help her in any way. She must therefore press Monsieur Carpenter to arrange the meeting with the duke before he became enamored of Lady Chalgrove. There was too much at stake to leave anything to chance now.

* * * *

Hal stood in front of his father's gaudy black lacquer Chinese desk—decorated with gold figures, pagodas, and landscapes—as he'd done countless times in his life, thinking that his first act as Duke of Brixham would be to resign this monstrosity to the uppermost floor of the house, family heirloom or not, and bespeak a solid mahogany desk from Gillows. This one dredged up too many unpleasant memories

every time he saw it.

Today's visit had no sinister implication, however. He'd come to Black Hall this afternoon of his own accord, rather than being summoned as usual, to spy out the lay of the land, so to speak, regarding how his father might take the news his son wished to marry a woman who was not their social equal. Not that he'd made his mind up about Miss d'Aventure. No, he still wanted to become better acquainted with her. However, he'd spent the night tossing and turning, haunted by the memory of Gabriella's body pressed close to his, her warm lips, and charming manner. No other woman had affected him this way. He'd risen at dawn and gone riding in the hopes that fresh air and the dew-speckled grass in Hyde Park would break the spell the little maid had cast upon him, but hope had melted like ice in a furnace as the sun climbed the sky. He could not get his thoughts of Gabriella to abate. Hence, his desperate call on his father. At least he would know how deep the malice toward him would extend should he do the unthinkable and marry a lady's maid.

Hal gazed longingly at the decanter in his father's hand. The man never stinted on the quality of his liquor.

"What brings you here this time of day, Halford? Or here at all, I should say. You've not darkened my door since the year began." The Duke of Brixham, a tall, distinguished man, poured a measured splash of French brandy into a tumbler and handed it to his son. "I hope this means you are acceding to my request that you marry and set up your nursery in the next year." His father poured a rather more sizeable portion of the spirit into his own glass and motioned for Hal to sit. "I wouldn't think it too arduous a task for a young man in your circumstances."

"Not too arduous, Father." Hal sipped the brandy, savoring the rich flavor as much as the surprised expression on his sire's face. "I have been seriously thinking about it."

"Splendid." The duke had raised his eyebrows but nodded. "I appreciate your

willingness to indulge me in this matter. Eight-and-twenty may seem young to some to find a wife, but mark me, Halford, if the fates align against you, you will be happy you secured the succession in a timely manner.”

Hal understood that quite well. His mother had died giving birth to him. His father’s second wife had remained barren for many years and when she had conceived, had miscarried.

The doctors told them another pregnancy would likely be the end of her. He’d loved his stepmother, Frances, for she’d been kind to him all during his boyhood and had remained fond of him during his years away at school.

In recent years, however, she’d become more aloof, remaining in the country year-round. In one of her rare letters, she’d confided to him that she believed the ton whispered about her shortcomings as a wife. Her solution, therefore, was to remove the topic from view and hopefully lessen the fodder for the gossips. Hal doubted the situation was so dire but didn’t press the issue. Her presence at the London house might’ve created a whole new set of tensions. As he’d never been able to fathom how his father felt about her, he let the subject strictly alone.

Hal raised his glass, unsure how to broach the issue of Gabriella.

“Who is she?”

He stopped, brandy untasted. “I beg your pardon?”

“The girl. Who is this girl you’ve come to ask my blessing for?” The duke chuckled and poured another round into his glass. “That has to be the reason for this visit. I know you better than to believe this a purely social call.”

Damn, the old man wasn’t going to make this easy. Best go slowly. “Well, I haven’t

actually found the proper lady yet, Father.”

An immediate frown darkened the duke’s face. “What exactly do you mean ‘the proper lady,’ Halford? You haven’t gone and proposed to the wrong lady, have you? Some ballet dancer, perhaps?”

“Oh, no.” Hal shook his head. A lady’s maid might be more respectable than a dancer, but neither would be an acceptable bride according to his father.

“Good.” His father’s stern face relaxed.

“The only woman I’ve proposed to is Lady Celinda Grantham.” Damn. The words were out before he thought.

“Lady Celinda?” The duke sat up, face abeam with smiles. “Old Ivor’s daughter? Oh, well done, Halford.” The old man’s eyes held a predatory gleam. “She’ll come with at least thirty thousand.” The pleased expression looked odd on the usually stern visage. “Why would you not think her a proper lady?”

Hal peered at the floor, wanting to look at anything other than his father’s face. He should have known better than to speak without thinking. Now he’d gotten his father’s hopes up, it would be twice as hard to give him the truth. Never disappoint a duke.

“The thing is, Father...” He stalled, rubbing the back of his neck. “The thing is she turned me down.”

“Turned you down?” The duke rose, his glass clinking on the polished surface of the desk. “She turned you down? You’re the Marquess of Halford. You will one day be Duke of Brixham. And she refused your suit?”

“Afraid so.” Hal set his empty glass down, wishing it would fill itself magically. “She’d just met a chap, a Lord Finley, who’s lately returned from America. She’s got a tendre for him at the moment, it seems.” He shrugged. Perhaps he could play this off to his advantage. “That’s what you hear these days. Love reigns with all the ladies. With the fellows as well. Both Jamison and Pettigrew told me not a week ago that they’d married for love.”

The duke sat back in his chair, his eyes narrowed.

Hal forged on. “That’s why I think it best that I take my time to find a love match. Like you and my mother.”

“What gave you the idea my marriage to your mother was a love match?” Father’s gaze didn’t waver from Hal’s face. He tapped the tips of his fingers together.

“Well, I just assumed...”

“I was fond of your mother, make no mistake about that. I am fond of your stepmother as well. But I have never allowed my feelings to have any weight when it came to choosing my duchess.” His father’s eyes bored into him. “I suggest you do the same, Halford. You look at the lady’s breeding, her family connections, and what financial incentives she can bring to the marriage. Those are the only things you need concern yourself with.” Father leaned forward, unblinking. “Perhaps I need to take a hand in arranging your marriage myself.”

Hal’s stomach dropped as though he’d jumped from the cliffs of Dover. Not only were his father’s ideas on marriage diametrically opposed to his own, but the idea that he’d actually arrange a marriage for him without giving him any say in the matter at all was appalling beyond belief. This was a devil of a predicament from which he needed to extricate himself immediately. “I don’t think that’s necessary at this time, Father. The Season is just begun, and there are many young ladies who should meet

your standards.”

“Who is out this year?” Father leaned back in his chair, sipping his drink. “Perhaps I can arrange some introductions if you’re being squeamish about it. I cannot think any father would be anything but thrilled to have his daughter marry you.” He shook his head. “I should have spoken to Ivor sooner. That would have solved all our problems.”

Hal suppressed a shudder. The thought of being married to Celinda would have been palatable a mere twenty-four hours ago. Now, however, with his desire for Gabriella raging, he couldn’t imagine having any other woman in his bed. How unfortunate Gabriella had no proper lineage. Of course, he didn’t know that for certain. She could have come from French nobility who’d lost everything a generation ago during the Terror. He’d not had a chance to ask her.

“Now I think of it, there is one young lady who might suit me down to the ground. She hasn’t got notions about love, as far as I can tell. At least, she’s not looking all doe-eyed. Very straightforward and sensible, I’d say.” That was the truth about Gabriella as he saw it.

The duke leaned forward. “But you haven’t proposed to her?”

“No. We only met last evening, at Lady Hamilton’s ball. I wasn’t going to mention it because there is the possibility of a small impediment.”

“Spit it out, Halford. Stop this infernal shillyshallying.” He banged his fist on the desk like a gavel.

“She’s...French.” Hal blew out the breath he’d been holding.

“French! God in heaven.” The duke sank back in his chair and reached for his glass,

only to find it empty. “All the best English ladies to choose from and you take a fancy to a French girl? Who is her family?”

“D’Aventure.” Hal closed his eyes and prayed. His father’s interest in anything French, other than spirits, wouldn’t fill a thimble. If luck was with him, the name would mean nothing.

Fingers laced together, the duke ruminated, his brows wiggling up and down, his lips pursed. Finally, he shook his head. “D’Aventure? I cannot place it. Was her father a soldier promoted by Boney? That was all the rage ten years ago.” He leaned back in his chair. “Of course, there could always be land involved with the settlements. Who is her father?”

“I don’t exactly know, Your Grace. I scarcely had time to talk to her. We spoke of other things than families.” Speaking had been the least of it.

“I take that to mean you spent the time you should have been gathering her particulars making love to her instead.” His father poured them another libation. “First things first, my boy.”

“If you mean courting her, Father, then yes. I thought making a good impression with her the best way to begin. I could hardly blurt out, ‘Who is your father and what is his rank?’” Hal tossed down his drink. It was a decent enough question, however. If Gabriella had sufficient lineage that the leap from maid to marchioness wouldn’t be a strenuous one, he’d be more than happy to make her his bride. “This is why I wished to have more time, to find out more about her family, her lineage.” He gave his father a long look. “Her financial situation. So, if you have no objection...?” He let the question linger in the air. Let his father take the bait.

“Oh, I’m positive I will have objections of some sort. But if the lady is gently born, we may see our way clear to an agreement.” The duke held the decanter out to Hal.

“No, thank you, Father.” He rose and donned his hat. “I must find Miss d’Aventure, or, more specifically, her father. I will keep you apprised of my progress.” With a bow, he turned and walked sedately from the interview, although jumping with wild glee on the inside. If he could persuade his father to allow him to marry Gabriella, he’d be the happiest of men. Not only would he have done his duty to his father and his family, but he’d also have assuaged his own desires in a very satisfactory way.

Tomorrow night’s appointment with Gabriella would be even more crucial now. Not only must he arrange her meeting with the duke, he must ferret out her father while making her none the wiser. A tall order for a man not particularly given to intrigues. He hoped for his sake he was up to the challenge.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

The clock in Lady Atherton's servants' hall ticked at an annoyingly loud, steady rate. Gabriella had been staring at it for the past hour while the Atherton servants ran to and fro in a frenzy of activity. Platters of savories, trays crowded with champagne glasses, pots of tea and coffee were whisked up and down the stairs by more footmen than she could count. After she'd inadvertently almost tripped one carrying a towering bowl of sherry trifle, she'd been relegated—by a very angry housekeeper—to the cramped chamber where the shoes were shined and the silver polished.

When the pungent smells of lampblack and Bath brick became intolerable, she crept to the doorway seeking fresher air. The kitchen was steamy, the stove blazing as Cook turned out batch after batch of gooseberry tarts and meringues destined for the supper room. Gabriella's stomach growled. There'd been no time for dinner after working for three hours on Lady Chalgrove's toilette—her coiffure hadn't wanted to cooperate, taking twice as long as usual. She'd even needed to start over once. Gabriella looked longingly at the parade of dishes headed upstairs and prayed there would be something left over.

Stephen, the young footman she'd almost tripped, appeared from upstairs, a plate of crumbs and two tarts with broken crusts in his hands. Gabriella eyed the flaky pastry, her mouth watering, then sent him a soulful look. The gawky boy must've caught it, for he turned his back to her, deftly juggling the plate until it came to rest behind him, right in front of her and shielded from the remaining staff. She grabbed the tarts, thankful she'd learned to flirt at a very early age, whispered, “*Merci , mon ami ,*” and sprinted out the rear door.

The cool night breeze refreshed her after the close atmosphere of the kitchen, and she

settled onto a stone bench in what appeared to be a small kitchen garden. The first bite exploded in her mouth, the tart gooseberries tempered by the sweetness of the sugar and cinnamon. Cook certainly had a light hand with pastry. She'd not tasted anything this good since she left Paris. The first tart disappeared with alarming speed. Best savor the other one. She broke it in two and nibbled the flaky crust, licked some of the sweet filling, and sighed. A good sauterne would complement it nicely. She missed Papa's wine shop so much. *Bien sûr*, she must be in England if she was to continue her quest for the duke. She licked one sticky finger after another, determined not to waste a drop.

“Mademoiselle d'Aventure.”

She spun around, almost dropping the other half of the tart.

Monsieur Carpenter, once more in shirtsleeves, beckoned to her from behind the bush enclosing the garden. His face lay in shadows, the faint light of the half-moon doing nothing to dispel them.

Excitement coiled within her.

“What are you doing here?” She wiped her fingers on the hem of her petticoat and got to her feet.

“I told you I'd meet you here.” He grinned, showing very white teeth in the dark, as he stalked toward her like a lynx. “I am a man of my word.”

“I see you are.” She could not hold back a smile. Why was she so pleased to see him? Much as she wanted to believe it was merely for the introduction she hoped he'd arranged, the rush of her heart said differently. That didn't bear thinking about. She needed no distractions to deter her from her quest. And Monsieur Carpenter might prove a dangerous one.

“You look beautiful this evening. Très belle .”

“You cannot even see me in the darkness.” She tossed her head, though his words sent an alarming thrill through her.

“I can see enough.”

“You are very bold for a valet who has stolen away from his master.” She certainly didn’t want him to be dismissed on her account. “Shouldn’t you be cleaning the marquess’s boots?”

He laughed and motioned her back toward the bench. “They are already taken care of. My master doesn’t mind if I step out once my duties are finished. But it’s sweet of you to be concerned about me.”

“I would hate to think I caused you to get the sack.” She clutched the slats of the bench to keep from fidgeting. Lord, he made her want to fly to pieces.

“Thank you, but I will be fine.” He relaxed against the back of the bench, his presence hulking, and dangerous, and exciting. “Are you well?”

“ Oui . As well as one may be with madame calling for me every moment she is not eating, sleeping, or paying calls. Tant pis . It is my lot.” As soon as she met the duke, however, all of that would change, Dieu merci .

“You must be very skilled that she relies so heavily on you.” He never took his gaze off her, which should have made her uncomfortable but did not. Not even when it seemed to linger on her mouth.

“She is overly concerned with how the people of the ton think of her. Possibly in the past they have been unkind, and she is now determined to be above reproach in her

appearance.” She shrugged. “Lady Chalgrove annoys me at times, but she has served her purpose in getting me to England.” Now it was up to her, and perhaps Monsieur Carpenter, to meet the duke.

“So, have you managed to see the Duke of Rother yet?” He shifted, and the faint moonlight blazed in his eyes.

“Non . Yesterday, madame went for a drive with the duke, and I thought it might be my chance, but I caught a glimpse of him only.” She fisted her hands in her lap. Mon Dieu , why was a simple introduction so difficult? “I suppose you have not been able to arrange a meeting either, Monsieur Carpenter?”

He freed her hand from the folds of her gown, his grin broadening. “As a matter of fact, mademoiselle , I have.”

“What?” She squeezed his hand, shock making her grip him tighter than she should have. Her quest was at an end. Her dream would come true at last. “Why did you not tell me immédiatement ? This is wonderful.” She threw her arms around him, unable to contain the joy within her. “Oh, merci. Merci beaucoup .”

Her lips met his, and suddenly nothing else mattered. The world disappeared as she clung to him, her anchor in a turbulent sea. When, at last, loud laughter from the house brought her back to herself, she thought she might die of shame. She twisted away, her face hot as though she’d stood too close to a fire. Indeed, she had scorched herself in his flames. “ Mille pardons , Monsieur Carpenter. I should not have done that.”

“I didn’t mind, Gabriella.” He smiled, rubbing his finger over his lips. “And having done it, I insist you call me Horace.”

Her whole body like a lit match, realizing too that he had called her Gabriella, she

jumped up and stumbled away from the bench. “I do not think that is wise, Monsieur Carpenter.”

“Horace,” he said firmly, following her.

“And how am I to meet the duke?” She turned to him, infusing her words with determination, willing him to allow them to continue as they had before.

“How am I to meet the duke...Horace?” His grin assumed her defeat.

Wretched man to leave her no choice. “Horace.” Having said the name, she grew warm again, from the inside out.

He took her hand, tucked it in the crook of his elbow, and led her back to the bench. “My master has a distant relation, Lady Celinda Grantham, who also happens to be the duke’s goddaughter. I once did her a kindness, so in return she has agreed to introduce you to the Duke of Rother.”

Ah, that explained it. She had wondered how a valet had managed such a thing.

He sat, not relinquishing her hand, and patted the seat beside him. “Sit. I promise not to bite.”

“I am fine to stand, merci .” She tugged and, reluctantly, he let her go. Lord, so difficult to remain true to her goal. More than anything, she would have loved to sit beside Horace, to feel his lips on hers once more. Non , she must not allow herself to be distracted. “When will Lady Celinda arrange the meeting?” She scowled. “It will not be easy to steal away from madame .”

“I will speak with her shortly and tell her when you can meet her.” He cocked his head. “Is there some impediment?”

Gabriella bit her lip. This might be the most difficult part yet. Lady Chalgrove led such an active social life, she might call upon Gabriella almost any time of the day or night to assist her. Her afternoon off moved at her mistress's whim. Unfortunately, if she asked for a particular day off, madame might ask why. Or simply refuse. She sighed. "My time is seldom my own."

"There is your half day on Sunday."

" Pardon ?" Frowning, Gabriella glanced around to assure herself they were alone. " Qu'est-ce qu'un demi-journée ?"

"What? A half-day?" Monsieur Carpenter cocked his head. "The Sunday afternoon you have off each week or the evening during the week. When you are allowed to go out and shop for yourself, or go to an entertainment or a park?"

She gazed at him, uncomprehending.

Horace frowned. "Do you not have time to yourself at all?"

Gabriella shrugged. " Mais non , monsieur . I work for Lady Chalgrove every day." Her brows rose. "Does your master, the marquess, give you this half day off?"

He nodded, and her eyes widened.

"Each and every week?"

"Every servant in the marquess's household gets a half day each Sunday, one evening off each week, and one whole day once a month."

"Your master is très généreux ." Her voice held a sense of awe.

“Gabriella, most servants receive this time off. As well as two weeks of leave once a year.” He spoke in a soft voice. “It is an accepted thing in England.”

Shock froze her to the seat. The miserable ogress had cheated Gabriella ever since she’d been employed by her. “So madame has been false with me.” She gritted her teeth, her mouth screwed into a pucker. “Femme horrible !”

“Lady Chalgrove does seem to have taken advantage of you. But perhaps we can find a way to turn the tables on her.” Monsieur Carpenter’s face had a sly smile on it. “Let me see if I can prevail on Lady Celinda’s generous nature a bit more to help you. If Lady Chalgrove allows it, will you meet me in St. James’s Park on Sunday afternoon around three o’clock?”

Angry and confused, Gabriella shook her head. “Why would I need to meet with you, monsieur ? Would I not be meeting with Lady Celinda and the duke?”

“Lady Celinda hasn’t contacted the duke yet. As soon as she does, I will send word to you at Lady Hamilton’s so we can make the proper arrangements.”

“Then why do you wish to meet me on Sunday?” This meeting seemed to have nothing to do with her plight and everything to do with Monsieur Carpenter’s apparent interest in her. Of course, if she didn’t have the duke to think of, she’d actually welcome the valet’s interest. Horace Carpenter was a very kind, very handsome man.

“Because I would like to get to know you better, mademoiselle .” Horace grinned at her. “That seems like the best way for me to do so. And it will give you somewhere to go on your first half-day off.”

Gabriella’s cheeks heated under the valet’s steady gaze. She really should decline the offer. She needed to continue to plan her meeting with the duke. But the man looked

so hopeful. And he was doing her an immense favor. What harm would a short meeting do? She wouldn't mind spending a little time with the attractive servant. "Very well, monsieur . If you can arrange for me to have Sunday afternoon off, I will be happy to meet you."

Horace beamed at her. "I will consult with Lady Celinda and send a note to you to arrange the outing. Now, what day does your lady receive callers?" He rose to stand beside her.

"Thursdays, the same as Lady Hamilton."

"Then I believe Lady Celinda and her mother will be paying them a call this Thursday to set in motion your freedom on Sunday." He smiled, though his eyes searched hers. "Lady Celinda asked me why you wished to meet the duke. I told her about your mother's experience when she was young and that that has made you eager to meet one as well." He took both her hands then thrust his head forward, peering at her so intently that she looked away. "You are simply meeting the duke to fulfill your lifelong dream, true?"

"Why would it not be true?" She couldn't bear his scrutiny and dropped her gaze to the ground. "For a poor girl like me to meet such a great man should be the dream of a lifetime, vous ne pensez pas ?" His close presence distracted her thoughts.

When his arms slid around her, she stiffened, fighting the longing she couldn't deny then gave in and relaxed against him. She had dreamed of him last night and awakened to find her pillow damp with tears of longing. Why would she feel so about a valet she had just met when nothing could come of it? After she spoke to the duke, she could no longer dally with this man.

"Horace, we should not—"

“Shhh.” He turned her in his arms. “Why not? You are a very beautiful woman, Gabriella, more beautiful than any woman I have ever seen.” He smoothed a strand of hair behind her ear, and she shivered with desire.

“ Merci, mon ami .” She cupped his face, so handsome and strong. Why would fate tempt her with him at this moment? “ Vous êtes très beau, et très cher .” She swept her lips across his, a fleeting kiss that thrilled even as it tortured. “I must go , mon cher . I dare not stay here longer.” She broke through his grip, though his touch still lingered.

“You but trifle with me.” The bitterness in his voice smote her heart. “If I were instead my master, the marquess, you would not run from me.”

“ Oui, non, oh sacrebleu . You cannot understand,” she wailed then dropped her voice.

They must not be discovered.

He grabbed her hand. “Then tell me.” He twined his fingers with hers, and her willpower failed. “I would swear you feel something for me beyond your little flirting smiles. When we kiss, there is something wonderful between us, I will swear to it.” He pulled her back down onto the bench. “Do you deny it?”

“I...I...” Mon Dieu , but she wanted, non , needed to deny it, to tell him instead she flirted only and felt nothing.

He gazed at her, his sharply shadowed face yearning toward her. “Gabriella, please.”

Madness seized her. She grasped his face and pressed her mouth to his, tingling from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Before she knew it, she had her arms around him, pulling him closer, never wanting to let him go.

He put his arms around her, his warmth like a blessing, and she reveled in it. Too soon, however, he broke the kiss to rest his forehead against hers, a touch almost as intimate. “Does that mean I’m right?”

“ Oui , you are correct, mon chéri .” She sighed and leaned back. “Much as I wish to deny it, I cannot.”

He drew her back to him, leaning her head onto his broad shoulder, capturing her hand in his. He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles, each stroke a whisper of a caress. “Why would you wish to deny your feelings for me, Gabriella? Do I displease you in some way? Are you ashamed of me?”

“ Non, non , that is not it at all.” She stopped his mouth with her hand. “Never think that, Horace.” She blushed, the heat in her cheeks as hot as the burn in her breast. “It is not you, mon chéri .”

“Then what is it, my love?”

She thrilled at the word. If only it could be true. They had known each other a matter of days, yet something in this man called to her as no other ever had. Even had he not been handsome as sin, the kindness in his nature would have drawn her to him. Such kindness was rare in the world, rarer still in the highest echelons of the English ton they served. Perhaps that made the difference, although servants in other grand houses, of lower rank than herself, had snubbed her because she was French. To find a man so different verged on a miracle; that she must reject him seemed too cruel a fate. She would wait until she spoke to the duke before rejecting this kind man. Slowly, she sat up. “I mean that we have only just met, Horace. It is très difficile to persuade myself that you could care for me so quickly. Perhaps we need to see one another, talk to one another more, before deciding there is... quelque chose de spécial between us.”

“Then we will walk in the park together on Sunday, Gabriella.” Gazing into her face, he took her hand. “And we will learn everything there is to know about each other.”

Gabriella swallowed hard. There were things she knew she could not tell Horace, but she would let them have this Sunday afternoon at least. After she met the duke, what she felt for Horace would not matter quite so much, perhaps. She was not in the habit of lying to herself, but in this instance, she would indulge herself just a bit. Monsieur Carpenter had made much more of an impression on her than she would like to admit.

“It will be as you say, mon cher .” She rose quickly. “But now I must return inside to be ready if madame needs my assistance.” Smiling, she blew him a kiss. “I will send you a note if I am able to meet you on Sunday. Au revoir .”

Deliberately turning her back on Horace, Gabriella scurried through the kitchen doorway, half convinced that everything would go as Horace had planned and on Sunday, she would meet him for another rendezvous. Something about the valet’s determined mien told her he had some canny trick up his sleeve to pull on madame . She only prayed it would work as well as his charms had worked on her.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

Sighing, Hal watched the lithe figure dart back into the house. He'd hoped his infatuation with the French damoiselle would have abated somewhat during this second meeting; however, nothing could have been further from the truth. Traces of the fiery kiss she'd branded him with still lingered on his lips, making his imagination run riot with images of what they might do to him if he could manage to make her his bride.

That would only be possible if he could speak with Gabriella for some length of time. Certainly more time than she could steal away from her employer during a ton event. He must find a way to make Lady Chalgrove allow her maid her half-day off. He'd never heard of a master or mistress withholding that right from any servant. The lady was obviously taking advantage of a French girl who didn't know what should be expected in an English work contract. He needed to put his head together with Celinda and come up with a plan.

After rescuing his jacket from under the bush and giving it a brief brushing to dislodge the damp leaves that clung to the fine material, he shrugged it on, at once thankful for its warmth. Playing the part of a valet had grave disadvantages. Looking once more like a guest rather than a servant, he strode around to the front of the house.

The brightness of the foyer blinded him after the dark night, and he blinked as he peered around the elegant townhouse. Strains of a lively Scottish air, sung by a sweet soprano voice, wafted through the house. He enjoyed a good musical performance, but he had business to attend to tonight.

A footman approached him. "May I show you to the music room, my lord?"

Hal shook his head and searched his pockets. “Ask Lady Celinda Grantham to meet me in the library, please,” he said, handing over a small white calling card.

“Very good, my lord.” The man disappeared with cat-like stealth.

Hal made for Lord Atherton’s library, keeping an eye peeled for Gabriella, although he doubted she’d be allowed upstairs. Still, he wouldn’t put it past the strongminded woman to take her fate into her own hands once again and try to seek out the duke here. He found the library and sank gratefully into a most comfortable, deep-buttoned leather chair. A quick look around revealed massive bookcases but no convenient decanter or glasses. Lord Atherton must rarely visit this room.

“Why have you summoned me?”

He jumped up at the sound of Celinda’s displeased voice.

She stood just inside the doorway, attired in a delightful green silk frock that complemented her creamy skin to perfection. The sour look on her face, however, would threaten to curdle milk. “Do you know where I was? What I was doing?”

“In the music room? Listening to an exquisite rendition of ‘Loch Lomond,’ if my ears can be believed.” He grinned at her, hoping to dispel this mood, and indicated the seat across from his.

Her eyes narrowed, and he tried to gauge the distance between him and the safe haven behind the brown, high-backed chair.

“I’ll have you know I was sitting next to Lord Finley, eternally grateful he’d chosen to sit beside me rather than any of the other ladies present tonight, including my cousin Kate. She ended up sitting with Lord Haversham, so I know she’s ready to chew nails.” She moved toward him, and he slid behind the chair.

Better safe than sorry.

“I believe Lord Finley was about to ask me to accompany him into the refreshment room at intermission, when your card arrived. Are you trying to ruin my life?”

“No, of course not. But you did promise to help me, and this seemed the best opportunity.”

“Wretch. You couldn’t simply call on me at home, like normal people do?” She hit his arm with her furred fan. “Who knows who’s on Lord Finley’s arm this very moment, staring up into his blue eyes and making him feel like he’s the most wonderful man in the world?”

“Is that what you would have done?” He cocked his head at her. Ladies were infernally hard to understand, so anything he could glean from Celinda about the workings of their minds would be a boon.

“That’s what any woman would do to try to secure a man’s affections.” She flounced over to the chair he’d offered and sank down onto it, her brows lowered, her mouth pouting. “So what is it you wanted to speak to me about that couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

“Something quite important.” Hal stepped swiftly to the door and closed it almost three quarters of the way. “That should preserve your honor and afford us a bit of privacy as well.”

“You think my courtship with Lord Finley isn’t important?” She glared at him. “Good evening, Lord Halford.” She gathered her shawl and pulled it over her shoulders, preparing to rise from the chair.

“I think it is just as important, but not quite as pressing at the moment, as my

dilemma.” He returned and put a hand out to stay her. “Why do you and every other person living call me by my title when they are annoyed with me? Can you not muster anger while calling me Hal?”

“I suppose formality is its own form of censure.” Celinda relaxed into the chair and sighed. “So why have you called me here?”

“I discovered something shocking about Lady Chalgrove.”

At once Celinda leaned toward him. “Is it that she uses cosmetics and dyes her hair? Because I’ve heard rumors and I’ve seen her cheeks looking like a Gallica rose in bloom, but—”

“No, I have no knowledge whatsoever of whether her looks are natural or artificial.” Hal rolled his eyes. The inconsequential things ladies thought were important baffled him. “I do know, however, that she does not give her lady’s maid a single day or even half-day off.”

Celinda’s mouth puckered unbecomingly. “You’ve seen Miss D’Aventure again, I assume.” She shook her head. “I have not yet been able to contact Lord Rother to arrange a meeting. I’m sorry, but I’ve been rather busy trying to catch my own husband. That is what I’m supposed to be doing during the Season, not helping you with your amorous pursuits.”

“And I appreciate all your efforts, Celinda. But I have no one else I can turn to. No one else will be willing to help me because they do not understand me as you do.” He smiled, trying to beguile her in his most charming manner. “Anyone else would dismiss my plight as simple lunacy. A marquess masquerading as a valet to pursue a lady’s maid.”

“That, I grant you, is the truth.” She smiled unexpectedly. “You are uncommonly

odd, Hal. And rash, as everyone will point out. But I do understand that not everyone is as stodgy as our fathers. I have been known to have my own viewpoint about certain things—like the gentleman I wish to marry—that is not in accord with what others would wish for me. Very well.” She sat up, looking at him expectantly. “What can I do to help?”

“Thank you, my dear.” Hal relaxed at last. He desperately needed Celinda as an ally. “I need you to help me come up with a way to goad lady Chalgrove into letting Gabriella have her Sunday afternoon off. I need to meet her in Hyde Park so I can attempt to ascertain who her father is and what her antecedents might be. If she’s got some type of proper lineage, my father can possibly be persuaded to agree to the marriage.”

Cocking her head, Celinda raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you have any idea that Miss D’Aventure wants to marry you?”

The memory of that last kiss—hot passion erupting every moment her lips touched his—made him shudder and shift in his seat. “I do, my dear. Although I have not proposed, we shared a closeness that tells me her affections are engaged. Something she did not deny.”

“Very well, then.” Celinda furrowed her brows. “What would convince a woman like Lady Chalgrove that she should do something generous, such as let her maid have some time off?”

“Is there a way to make her think it would be to her advantage to do so?” Hal had no idea what that argument might be.

“Well, it might make people think her mean spirited if they knew the poor girl hadn’t had a day off in months.” Celinda looked at him, hopeful. “Social censure might be enough to change her mind.”

“But enough to make her act? And it would take too much time to work.” He needed to talk to Gabriella as soon as possible. What would make Lady Chalgrove insist on Gabriella having her Sunday afternoon free? “What about financial ruin?”

“I think that would be an excellent motivator.” Celinda shook her head. “But how would it ruin her to deny her maid time off?”

A broad smile spread across Hal’s face. “Can you tell a lie convincingly, Celinda?”

His cousin sat up straight, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “So convincingly that Mama still doesn’t know who broke the hideous Chinese vase in the library.”

“Excellent.” Hal motioned her closer. “Can you ask your mother if you and she can pay a call on Lady Hamilton and Lady Chalgrove this week?”

Celinda nodded, her smile widening. “And then what?”

“And then you need to find a way to tell the woman this...”

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

Sunday afternoon, promptly at three o'clock, Gabriella stood at the end of the Chinese Bridge in St. James's Park, dressed in her best gown of blue striped muslin that she'd made for herself before she'd left France for England. She'd thought it would be the gown she wore when she met the duke, but she'd nothing else pretty enough to wear to see Horace today and so had donned it this afternoon after Lady Chalgrove had quite unexpectedly given her leave to go. What had Lady Celinda said to make madame give her the entire afternoon off? She'd have to ask Horace when he arrived.

She lifted her face, enjoying the warmth of the sun. Such a long time since she'd been free to do as she pleased. And today it pleased her very much to spend time with Horace. Thoughts of the handsome valet had been spinning around her head ever since she'd agreed to meet him today. Ever since she'd met him, to be truthful. Their kisses had touched her to her very soul. Not something that had ever happened to her before. But if things went well when she met with the Duke of Rother, all her dreaming about Horace must come to an end. She sighed. Almost she hoped Lady Celinda wouldn't be able to arrange the introduction to the duke.

Almost.

"Good afternoon, Mademoiselle D'Aventure."

She turned to find Monsieur Carpenter striding toward her, looking very handsome in his brown superfine suit and bowler hat. Her sharp eyes, always discerning when it involved clothing, took in the excellent cut of the coat, the richness of the fabric, and the jeweled pin tucked in his cravat. Horace was dressed more along the lines of his master than a valet. "Good afternoon, Monsieur Carpenter. Do I see that you have

raided the marquess's dressing room?"

Horace grinned at her and held his arms out. "It looks that way, does it not? However, the truth is that, as I told you, my master is a follower of Beau Brummel. As such, he seldom wears a suit more than two or three times. Then he gives the clothing to me or to another servant so they can sell them and use the money as extra income." His eyes twinkled. "Fortunately for me, my master and I are about the same size, so I have managed to accumulate quite a wardrobe of my own."

"You are the fortunate one." Gabriella smiled at him. Some people were certainly more blessed than others when it came to their masters. "Lady Chalgrove wears her clothing many times then has me remake them into new gowns. I doubt she will give them away until they are little more than rags."

Not that she would wear any of madame's gowns. Her figure was fine, except for her bosoms, but Gabriella would never wish to wear the woman's cast-off clothing. Her taste in fabrics was questionable at best—some of the garish colors made Gabriella wince as she dressed Madame.

"Then I assume this beautiful gown is one of your own?" His admiring gaze made Gabriella's cheeks heat.

"Oui . I made it myself before I left France." She cut a glance at him. "For just such an occasion as this."

Horace beamed at her and offered his arm. "Shall we stroll across the bridge and down the canal?"

She looped her hand through his elbow, and they mounted the stairs leading onto the curious wooden bridge painted a bright yellow. "A Chinese bridge is a strange thing to have in an English park, n'est-ce pas ?"

“Oh, the English are famous for loving the odd and unusual.” Horace chuckled. “We must go to Vauxhall Gardens sometime, and you can see the Turkish Tent, the Chinese Temples, the Cascades, the Orchestra, and so many more oddities.”

They ambled over the bridge, one couple among the throng of people enjoying the excellent weather. As they reached the middle of the bridge, Horace gestured upward. “Until a few years ago, there was a seven story Chinese pagoda built in the center of the bridge.”

Gabriella peered up, but there was nothing to be seen but the cloudless sky. “What happened to it?”

“There was a grand fireworks display in August of 1814 that caught the pagoda on fire, and it went up in flames.” He walked over to the side of the bridge. “If you look over here at the side of the bridge, you can still see streaks of soot ingrained into the wood.”

Gabriella peered over the railing and, bien sur , there were the dark lines snaking alongside the wooden panels. “ Mon Dieu! Comme c’est tragique .” She turned to Horace. “Were there lives lost in this fire?”

He nodded and started them toward the far end of the bridge. “Two carpenters were killed. But it could have been much worse.”

They reached the opposite bank and turned to the right, threading through the crowds, Gabriella brooding over the tragedy. But she didn’t wish this day to turn gloomy. Her first free day should be celebrated. At the very least, it required her thanks. “I must thank you for persuading Lady Chalgrove to allow me to come here today.” She gazed up at him, her curiosity sharp. “How on earth did you manage it?”

He chuckled. “As I said, Lady Celinda is very indebted to me for a service I did for

her. So I asked her to bring Lady Chalgrove's attention to a little-known law that says any time off a servant is entitled to but does not receive must be paid the equivalent in cash when the servant leaves their employ."

Gabriella's brows rose. "This is the English law?"

"Well," Horace leaned down and whispered, "perhaps it should be."

"Lady Celinda lied to Madame?" Gabriella's mouth fell open. "C'est incroyable !"

"The lady was incensed when I told her what your mistress was doing to you. She had no compunction about telling a small lie to help you." Horace chuckled again. "I think she enjoyed it."

"I must thank her when I meet her." Gabriella smiled. Horace wasn't the only kind person in England. "Has she said yet when I am to meet the duke?"

Horace shook his head. "She hasn't spoken with Rother yet, but as soon as she informs me that she has, I will let you know. Hopefully, she can arrange it for next Sunday. That way we know you will be free."

"You truly believe Madame will allow me to have every Sunday afternoon off?" Given her knowledge of the woman, Gabriella would not wager a sou on that.

"Trust me. I wouldn't be surprised if you begin to have full days off each month, my dear." Horace led them to a bench strategically placed in front of a particularly picturesque spot on the canal. "Why don't we sit here for a few minutes and admire the view?"

Gabriella nodded and sank down gratefully. The sun was warmer than she'd anticipated. "It is beautiful here, n'est-ce pas ?"

“Yes, it certainly is.” The valet’s gaze, however, was trained on her, not the water.

Cheeks glowing with warmth, and not due to the sun, Gabriella glanced away, wishing for a fan.

“I wanted to meet you today to find out more about you. I feel that I know you quite well, but truly I know very little, save that you are from France and are a lady’s maid.” He took her hand. “Can you tell me more about you, about your family?”

“You wish to know about my family?” She stared at him curiously.

“Of course I do. Where you grew up in France, your brothers and sisters.” He gazed earnestly into her eyes. “I told you the other night I wished to know everything about you.”

Somewhat mollified, Gabriella began. “I grew up in Paris, in the house of a wine merchant. It was a small shop, but it was always home.”

“You must know a great deal about wine then.”

“ Bien sur .” She raised her chin. “I know everything there is to know about French wine.”

Horace’s eyes twinkled. “That will come in handy when we dine. Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“ Non . It has always just been me.”

“I too was an only child.” He cocked his head. “Were you lonely?”

Gabriella shrugged. She’d never thought much about being lonely when she was

young. “ Non , not particularly. I always helped my mother in the shop and played with children in the neighborhood. It was a good life.” She looked at him inquiringly. “Were you lonely growing up?”

“Sometimes.” He looked out over the water, his brows knitted into a frown. “My father saw to it that I wanted for nothing. But sometimes, yes, I was lonely.” With a sigh, Horace seemed to try to shake off his melancholy. He turned back to her, his gaze intense. “And it was your father’s shop you helped in? Your father was a wine merchant?”

“ Oui . He was a friend of my grandfather’s, le père de ma mère , who was also a wine merchant.” She frowned. “Why do you ask that?”

“I wondered if he might have been a soldier in the wars with England.”

Never had she thought Horace, always so kind to her, would be contre les Francais . She began to bristle. “That would make a difference to you?”

“No. Well, only so far as it might hinder my suit.” The valet sighed. “He may not wish for his daughter to marry an Englishman.”

“Oh.” Gabriella sat up, her heart beating fiercely. Monsieur Carpenter was contemplating asking Papa for her hand in marriage. The situation was spinning out of her control. “You don’t truly intend to ask to marry me, do you, Horace?”

He sent her the smile that made her knees weak. “I certainly do, my dear. When the time is right.”

She must put a stop to this. It was her fault, for she’d wanted to spend time with Horace, but she couldn’t let him continue to think she would be able to marry him. “Horace, do you remember the other night when I told you I wanted to deny that I felt

something special between us when we kissed?”

“Of course.” He took her hand and laced their fingers together. “But now we are getting to know one another, just as I promised.”

“Yes, we are. But there...there was another reason I wished to deny that feeling. Something that has to do with the Duke of Rother and why I must meet him.” Gabriella squeezed his hand then let it go. She had confessed this to no one. “You were correct that my longing to see the duke is not merely a child’s dream, although it truly has been my desire all my life.” Oh, but he would hate her for this. “I am sorry I misled you, Horace. I did not wish to tell you half-truths. I want you to trust me, but it was necessary for me to lie to gain your help.”

“You didn’t think I would help you if you told me...what?” Horace looked at her with a trace of alarm.

Gabriella breathed slowly and stared into his beautiful eyes. “That the Duke of Rother is my father.”

Hal’s mouth dropped open. Of the many things he’d imagined behind Gabriella’s desire to meet the duke—wish, secret lover, bribery—this one had never occurred to him. He cleared his throat. “The Duke of Rother is your father?” The statement was simply too preposterous to be true. “But you’re French.”

“I am also half English. I am certain it seems a wild tale to you, yet it is true.” She sat with her head bowed, the breeze blowing the sleeves of her gown. “You do not believe me.”

He waited, marshalling his thoughts before opening his mouth and ruining whatever

chance he had of preserving her trust. Could her outrageous statement actually be true? He must tread softly. “Putting my beliefs aside for the moment, why do you believe this is true?”

“My mother has told me the story since I was a little girl.”

Hal fought to retain control of his face. He could show nothing but interest and confidence, or she would likely storm off and refuse ever to see him again. “What story, my dear?”

“The tale of an English duke who came to her village when she was sixteen years old.” Gabriella kneaded the folds of her skirt, her hands rustling the fabric. “I suppose if you do not believe me, I have no hope of the duke doing so either.”

In that, she was likely correct. Rother might’ve had numerous affairs in his youth, any one of them producing a child. To suppose he would remember a single night’s pleasure out of all his escapades took greater faith than Hal possessed. Yet who was he to deny anyone their belief? He took her hand back in his and leaned closer, shielding her from the strengthening wind. “Tell me.”

She sighed and nodded, gazing out at the water that was beginning to churn. “In 1800, a stranger who said he was a French nobleman overturned his carriage outside the town of Angouleme. One of the wheels came off, and the carriage, which was going quite fast, went into a ditch. The nobleman survived, as did his valet. His coachman, however, was killed. The nobleman sent the valet into Angouleme for help, and he returned with the wine merchant, Monsieur Jacque Dubois. The merchant invited the man, who said his name was le Comte du Maine, into his home for the night, until a new carriage and coachman could be found.”

“Did he stay only the one night?” Hal had gotten caught up in the story despite himself.

Gabriella shook her head. “ Non , because that night at dinner, the daughter of the house, Veronique Dubois, served the comte . Only sixteen years old, with long blond hair and a will of her own, she was determined to draw his interest.” Gabriella paused, a wistful smile creeping over her face. “She said he was the most beautiful man she’d ever seen, tall and straight, with broad shoulders and long, dark hair. The moment she saw him she knew he was the man of her dreams. They flirted with their eyes during dinner and laughed together over the wine and dessert before she was sent to bed. Her father had seen their glances and feared the worst. He was a very astute man who knew his daughter—and the ways of men—well.”

She shrugged and spread her hands. “In the end, it did no good. His daughter had been overcome with a mad passion for the handsome young comte .” Gabriella looked up at him, a tight little smile on her lips. “I believe you may know something of this feeling?”

Hal nodded and clasped both her hands in his. Yes, he knew that passion well.

“That night, the daughter went to the comte ’s bed, and every night for the week that he lingered there. In the darkness of his room, they shared many things. One night he told her he was in truth an English marquess and would one day become the Duke of Rother. When she asked how he had come to be in Angouleme, he spoke of his travels, how he had been mad to take his Grand Tour, even though wars raged on the continent. Still, he had journeyed to Italy, Egypt, and Greece. When he wished to return to England, he decided to go through France.”

“But in 1800, England and France were at war.” Hal had to point this out, despite how engrossed he’d become in the tale.

Gabriella shrugged. “The war had lasted long, and the marquess was an impatient man. He disguised himself and began his passage home.”

Hal had to admit it certainly sounded like Rother, bold as brass. He'd known the man for years, although they didn't run in the same circles. Still, this particular story had never surfaced in the ton .

“The marquess also told her he was betrothed to an English lady, daughter of another marquess, and therefore could not marry her, though now he wished it with all his heart.” She laughed softly. “She told me she smiled to herself when he said that, for she knew he would not have married the daughter of a French wine merchant in any case. Still, it was noble of him to say this. When he left at the end of the week, on a boat heading for Bordeaux, she cried, but swore she regretted nothing.” Gabriella stopped and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

Hal slipped his arm around her shoulders. Rother had indeed married the daughter of a marquess in the early years of the century. Uncanny how the stories matched, although he assumed the tale was not yet done. “There is one more piece to the story, I suspect?”

“ Oui . One more.” She leaned back against his shoulder. “Soon after her lover left, she realized she was with child, as she had hoped. She had wanted to keep something of the man she had fallen in love with, and what better than his child? Her father had expected as much and arranged a marriage for her with another wine merchant in Paris, one of his good friends, Maurice d’Aventure.” Gabriella shrugged. “He was a good man, who knew everything from the beginning. He was very kind to my mother, and after I was born, he raised me as his own daughter, especially when there were no children to follow me. He indulged us in anything, even when my mother insisted I learn to sew well enough to become a modiste and support myself without the necessity of marriage.”

“Why did you not become a dressmaker, then?”

“Oh, I did, for a time. That is how I met Lady Chalgrove. But I do not like sewing,”

she said, grimacing at the word. “As we sewed in our rooms above the wine shop, my mother would tell me stories. One of them was of the marquess and her precious time with him. I vowed to myself that I would find him one day, tell him who I was and see to it he remembered my mother.” Gabriella ducked her head. “She said if he agreed to acknowledge me, I could become one of the ladies at the English court.”

Hal peered at her, heart racing. “Is that what you desire, my dear? To become a lady such as your mistress?”

She raised her head, eyes bright with tears. “Non , not exactly. I thought I would spend time with my real father, come to know him as my mother had described him. And that, eventually, he might arrange for me to meet a fine gentleman who would marry me, either here in England or in France. But now...”

“But now?” He forced himself to remain calm, even though he longed to seize her in his arms and tell her everything.

“I have met you.” She brushed at a tear as it trickled down her cheek. “I still wish to meet my father, but if he acknowledges me, we can never be together. A duke would never allow his daughter to marry so far beneath his station.” She gripped his hand, her brows lifting. “I could instead simply meet him, tell him I am his daughter but ask for no more.” Her face filled with excitement. “Then we could be together, Horace.”

Inwardly, Hal groaned. They must persuade the duke to acknowledge her or his own father would never allow them to marry. Would it be better to tell her his identity now, or wait until the duke recognized her as his child? If His Grace refused, his ruse would come to light when he explained why they could not wed. If the duke agreed, the revelation of Hal’s subterfuge might make her hate him so much she would never accept him. What a devilish muddle.

“Horace?” Her wide-eyed alarm brought him back to the present.

He opened his mouth to tell her the truth. “I...uh, of course, Gabriella,” he said, automatically rubbing her hand. God, but he was a coward. He simply couldn’t bear to tell her. Not yet. Not until he knew what Rother would do. So how could they convince him? A wild hope sprang up that somehow there’d been a secret wedding, or that somewhere there were letters between the duke and her mother in which the duke admitted that Gabriella must be his daughter. “Did your mother have any proof of this story? Papers of some sort?”

She frowned and pulled her hand from his. “Papers? What papers? You think my mother would have stolen the duke’s papers?”

Hal groaned and scrubbed his hand down his face. “No, Gabriella, darling, I didn’t mean that. I just wondered if it was written somewhere that your mother had this affair with Rother. Did he ever write to her, either as the marquess or later, when he became the duke?”

Gabriella rose from the bench like an avenging angel, lacking only a fiery sword to smite him. “You think my mother has lied to me all these years? How dare you suggest such a thing? She is an honorable woman, who has loved me since before I was born. She would never lie to me!”

“No, of course not, Gabriella.” He scrambled up, his gaze darting around to be sure no one was near enough to hear them. “I didn’t mean—”

“I am Mademoiselle d’Aventure to you, monsieur . Or better yet, do not address me at all if you think so ill of my mother and of me.” She straightened and drew her hand back.

The crack of skin on skin sounded appallingly loud in the quiet night air. He rubbed at the sting on his cheek then moved his jaw to assure himself it still worked.

“ Br?le en enfer !” With that incomprehensible phrase, she whirled around, skirts flying, and stomped away.

“Damn.” Hal dropped back onto the bench, massaging his still-smarting face.

His hopes for a straightforward courtship with Gabriella lay dashed on the cold ground. If Rother turned out to be her father, and if he agreed to acknowledge her, Hal might be a step closer to making her his marchioness. Once acknowledged, she might be considered an eligible parti even by his conservative parent.

If she turned out not to be the duke’s by-blow—despite the plausible tale, it could very well be a tempest in a teapot—or if the duke was not moved to admit his past indiscretion in light of his current search for a wife, Hal was in an even worse position regarding his father’s decree. Asking to marry the illegitimate granddaughter of a French wine merchant might make a ballet dancer seem respectable in his father’s estimation.

Of course, if Gabriella wouldn’t forgive him his doubts, there would be no problem to solve other than where to store the pieces of his broken heart.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

The Earl of Ivor's butler showed Hal into a small receiving room, decorated fancifully in a pink, yellow, and green color scheme to resemble a garden filled with flowers that seemed to leap from the walls. Celinda's mother's handiwork, he must assume. Assuredly that was where his cousin got her eccentric streak. Hal meandered over to look more closely at the jonquils that made one wish to reach out and touch them.

"Good afternoon, Hal." Celinda bounced into the room, her smile stretching from ear to ear. "What brings you here to call on me?"

"You do, cuz." He bowed low to her. "After you berated me for taking you away from your amour at the last entertainment, I dared not repeat that means to speak to you. You instructed me to call upon you, 'like normal people do.' And voila ," he spread his arms out wide, "I am here."

"Well, it's good to know some old dogs can learn new tricks." She giggled and gestured to a pair of chairs drawn up before the fireplace. "Will you sit down, Hal?" She perched on one, and he sank into the other. "So what really brings you here?"

"I have some rather startling news about Mademoiselle d'Aventure."

Celinda inclined her head toward him, a sudden gleam of interest in her eyes. "Will this astound me, Hal?"

"Oh, I believe it will."

As he related Gabriella's tale, Celinda alternately leaned forward and reared back,

gasped, and clutched his arm.

“I told you she had another reason for wanting to meet His Grace,” she said, gathering her shawl around her once more when he had finished. “‘Childhood dream’ indeed.” She tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair. “Do you think it’s true?”

“It’s certainly possible. The part about him being impatient and donning a disguise smacks very much of Rother, although I confess I’ve never heard anything like this tale from him. Then again, we do not belong to the same clubs.” Hal sighed. “Do you know of anyone who might be able to verify it? Would he have told no one?”

“I will say the timing seems correct.” Celinda settled herself, a pensive frown on her face. “According to my mother, the duke, then Marquess of Poole, spent the years 1798 through 1800 on his Grand Tour.” She shook her head. “My mother said his wildness made a March hare seem tame when he was a young man.”

“How does your mother know all this?” He’d no idea Lady Ivor would be such a fount of knowledge.

“She keeps a journal with information on all the eligible gentlemen on her special ‘marriage list’ for me and my sisters.”

“And Rother is on that list? But he’s your godfather.” Were such things done? It sounded scandalous.

She raised one gracefully arched eyebrow. “He’s less blood relation than you and I, and you proposed to me.”

“That was a spur of the moment decision. Do you know if I am on that list?”

Celinda merely laughed and continued. “Where was I? Oh, yes, he married Lady Jane

Fallow, daughter of the Marquess of Buckland, in the spring of 1801. They'd had no children when she died of smallpox in 1810. He remarried two years later and now has two sons, however, his second wife died shortly after the second was born, so he's searching for another wife this Season." She paused, tapping her fan once more. "I wonder if Mamma has heard a rumor about an affair with a French girl. I shall have to use my best wheedling in the next day or so."

"I have every confidence in your talents, my dear." If her mother knew anything, Celinda would find it out. "Have you heard from Rother?" Hal was more and more concerned about this meeting now the stakes were so incredibly high.

"Yes." Celinda sighed and shook her head. "Unfortunately, he can only meet me here on Thursday afternoon."

"Thursday? Why the dickens can't he meet you on Sunday?" Hal's nerves had stretched tight at her words.

"I have no idea, Hal. And I didn't think it proper or wise to try to dictate to a duke, even if he is my godfather." Celinda slumped in her chair. "What can we do to make this work?"

Hal sat lost in thought. How could he get Gabriella out of the house in the middle of the week? "Lady Chalgrove's at home day is Thursday, isn't it?"

Celinda nodded. "That's when I spoke to her last week."

"Did she summon Gabriella at any point during that time?"

"No. She was too busy talking, sipping tea, and eating cakes."

"Excellent. Did the duke give you a time to meet?"

“He said he would be here at half past one.” Celinda cocked her head. “What are you thinking, Hal?”

“That Gabriella will not be missed between one and two o’clock. That is when you must act.”

Celinda’s eyes widened until the blue circles swam in a sea of white. “What do you want me to do?”

Hal looked at her sheepishly. “You will have to do double duty, I’m afraid. First, you will need to enlist your mother and some of your friends to create a subterfuge to mask the meeting.”

Her eyebrows swooped up alarmingly. “I am to do double duty for you?” She poked her lips out in a pout. “Then it is only fair that you assist me in my pursuit of Lord Finley. Quid pro quo , and all that.” Celinda straightened her shoulders and looked at him innocently, all big blue eyes and cherubic smile.

“Done.” He grabbed her hand and kissed it. “I shall do everything within my power to help you in the leg-shackling of the Viscount Finley.” He drew a cross over his chest. “So help me, God.”

“Very well. So, what role will you play in all this?”

“Unfortunately, none whatsoever.” Hal groaned when her frown returned. “It cannot be helped, my dear. Miss d’Aventure still believes me to be my valet. I can hardly then be present at the meeting. Rother knows me.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” Celinda stared at him, her narrowed eyes indicating her displeasure. “What does my mother have to do with this?”

“We need Lady Chalgrove to have so many callers that they distract her from wanting Gabriella for anything. If your mother and perhaps some of her friends stayed a bit longer than the normal fifteen minutes, it would keep the lady occupied until you and Gabriella can meet Rother and return. It will also keep your mother out of the house so she won’t wonder what’s going on between Rother and a lady’s maid.”

“How do you propose we travel to our house? We cannot take Mama’s carriage. And neither can we sprout wings and fly.” Celinda was looking at him quite skeptically.

Why did women never have any faith in him? Well, most women. Gabriella seemed to be the only woman who believed he would prove good as his word. “I will hire a carriage to pick you two up at one o’clock. So you and your mother must arrive no later than five minutes to one.” Hal paused, trying to think what else might need to be done. “Once your mother has begun her call, sneak upstairs and whisk Gabriella out to the carriage.”

She patted his hand. “You are sorely out of your element, aren’t you, Hal? Don’t worry. Once you have a wife, she will take care of everything for you.”

“Can you promise me that?”

Celinda laughed and shook her head. “Oh, no. But the odds are in your favor. Now, tell me about this subterfuge. What do you have in mind?”

Hal stood once more in front of the dreadful chinoiserie desk in his father’s study, dressed in a manner that would’ve done Brummell proud. Hands clasped behind his back, he stood stiffly, his plea to his father chasing round and round his head. Hopefully, his appearance and sober mien would impress upon the duke how seriously he took his request.

“So have you found this young woman’s family at last, Halford?” His father held several sheets of paper, staring at one through his monocle then abruptly tossing it onto the table and perusing the next. “You seem quite engaged in finding her antecedents. Didn’t I see you less than a week ago? Never known you to be so bullish about a woman.”

“I love her, Father. I want to marry her.” Hal put every ounce of determination into his voice. No doubt, no wavering, only strength and determination. His father would respect that.

“That may be. However, if she’s not of good family, you won’t be marrying her in my lifetime.” He dropped the monocle to stare at Hal with glassy blue eyes. “And I mean to remain above ground for a very, very long time to come.”

“Fortunately, her parentage is not an issue. As it turns out, she’s the daughter of a duke.”

The look of surprise on his father’s face would’ve been comical had Hal’s guts not been gripped by an iron fist.

“Is she indeed? A French duke, I take it.” The old man nodded, though his countenance didn’t soften. “They’re scarce as hen’s teeth since the revolution.”

“An English duke, Your Grace.” Hal stared straight at his father. If he showed weakness now, he and Gabriella would be lost.

“Ah, an English duke. Even better.” His father continued to peruse the documents in his hands in a maddeningly slow fashion.

Drops of sweat trickled down the back of Hal’s neck, but he held his pose. Let his father make the opening move.

“You are aware that I am conversant with the progeny of every duke in the Peerages of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Great Britain?” At last, his father raised his gaze to Hal’s. “As I turn over the names of marriageable young women of the correct age whose fathers are, in fact, dukes, I find the list extremely short. Two females only come to mind. Lady Margaret Seaton, the Duke of Starkland’s daughter, who is actually six months older than you, and Lady Anne Kerwick, the Duke of Polden’s daughter.”

Hal knew both ladies, although he’d not seen Lady Margaret for some years as she’d ceased to show herself during the Season. She was more taken with gardening in Cumberland. Lady Anne he’d seen last at Lady Hairston’s ball a week ago, in the arms of the Marquess of Canterbury. He’d wager his father knew these facts as well. “Neither of these ladies has caught my eye, Father. I’m certain you know that.”

“I do. Indeed, I do, Halford. When last we spoke, you astounded me with the statement that your bride-to-be was French. The only way either of those ladies have French blood is if it came over with William the Conqueror.” The duke’s voice rose, rattling the glasses beside the crystal decanter. “What the devil are you playing at?”

“Believe me, Your Grace, I do not play. My future bride is Gabriella d’Aventure—daughter of the Duke of Rother.” He stared at his parent evenly, awaiting the firestorm.

“Halford, I have given you too much leniency in your short life. You will cease these games and give me a straightforward answer.” The vein in the duke’s forehead popped up like a thin, purple snake.

“I am sorry to make this hard for you, Father, but I have given you the truth. I have good reason to believe that Miss d’Aventure is indeed the daughter of the Duke of Rother and his paramour Veronique Dubois. Mademoiselle Dubois subsequently married a wine merchant and Miss d’Aventure was raised as his daughter in France.

Rother knows nothing of this—yet.”

The Duke of Brixham sat back in his chair, twirling the monocle by its chain. “Why do you believe this girl’s story? Does she have proof? Does she resemble Rother?”

“Not a bit. She must take after her mother. And she has no proof, per se , but her information about where and when the affair took place is consistent with Rother’s movements that year. Have you heard him speak of a carriage accident during his Grand Tour? Or that he spent time in the Aquitaine during the summer of 1800?”

The duke shook his head. “Rother’s much younger than I. We’ve met socially and in Parliament, of course, but rarely otherwise.” The duke’s stare rested on him so long that he shifted in his highly polished boots and looked away. At last, his father leaned forward. “You didn’t say why you were inclined to believe her.”

“I did, Father. The facts, such as they are, seem to confirm her mother’s tale. The date of Gabriella’s birth matches, Rother’s supposed actions certainly match his character. And Miss d’Aventure tells the story convincingly. I don’t just want to believe her. I do believe her.”

“Because you want to marry her.” The duke chuckled, a grating sound. “I have never seen you so determined about anything, Halford. If I give credit to the girl for nothing else, I will give her that. She’s managed to make you take something seriously for the first time in your life, and that is quite an accomplishment.”

“Does that mean—” Hope fluttered in his heart.

“It does not.” The duke sat back in his chair, arms crossed.

Hal slumped. He should have known better than to believe for one instant that this wily fox would agree to the marriage simply based on Gabriella’s influence on his

actions.

“You say Rother has no idea of this young woman’s claim. When will he know?”

“Soon. Lady Celinda is arranging a meeting for Miss d’Aventure with him.” He shrugged. “We will see what the duke has to say then.”

“Do you think he will acknowledge her?”

Again, Hal shrugged. “I suppose it depends on whether or not he believes she is his.”

His father rose and stretched, tossing his monocle onto the papers on the desk and reaching for the decanter. “Then we shall all wait and see what Rother has to say. If he acknowledges her, I will give my consent to your marriage. If he does not, I will not. As simple as that.”

Hal nodded. He’d expected nothing less. “Thank you, Your Grace. I will inform you in either case.” He bowed and grabbed his hat.

“Very good.” The duke poured himself a cognac, reseated himself, and picked up the papers.

With a sigh, Hal turned to the door.

“Halford.”

Hal stopped at the threshold.

“Should Rother deny Miss d’Aventure, I will still require you to marry and produce your heir in the next year.”

“I suspected as much, Father.” Hal rounded on the old man, shooting him a piercing look. “I suppose then you’d better pray to God that Rother accepts her. I should hate like hell to disappoint you, but if Gabriella cannot be my bride, I’ll have none. Cut me off, disinherit me if you like. I won’t live without her.” He strode from the room, the image of the duke’s bulging eyes and slack jaw following him down the corridor and out to his waiting carriage.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

Gabriella sighed for the hundredth time as she smoothed down the lace she was using to trim Lady Chalgrove's new lutestring gown. The delicate material kept sliding out of her unsteady grasp. Her meeting with the Duke of Rother was now less than an hour away.

She put the garment aside and paced to the window, looking for a specific carriage to arrive. Horace's note yesterday had given her detailed instructions about what was to occur today. She was to wait for Lady Celinda to call on Lady Hamilton during her at home on Thursday. Lady Celinda would then arrange to take Gabriella to her house where the duke would meet them.

He made it sound so simple, although it must be anything but. Apparently, the duke could only meet with her on Thursday afternoon, a day when Gabriella had little hope of being free. But the note had assured her that Horace and Lady Celinda would get her to the meeting without fail.

Gabriella ducked her head, now very ashamed of how she'd treated Horace on Sunday. Her handsome valet had been true to his word and secured her an interview with the duke, despite their spat and her stinging slap. She had tried to remain angry at him but found it impossible even before he'd made good on his promise. Her thoughts had constantly wandered to him, and she'd relived each moment they'd shared, each kiss. She touched her lips, wanting to feel his there once more. Was this love? If so, it was an unsettling feeling.

The clock over the mantel chimed one.

Gabriella trembled, her gaze glued to the door. She could not stand still. Back and

forth, she strode. If Lady Celinda did not appear soon, she would wear a pathway in the carpet. Mon Dieu , what if the lady did not come? She could not bear to go through this waiting again.

Back to the window, and she stopped. A huge open carriage, pulled by a set of matched black horses, had drawn up in front of Lady Hamilton's townhouse. A gentleman jumped out then assisted a lady to the ground. Callers for Lady Hamilton's at home day. Which meant her waiting was over. She must be ready to leave as soon as Lady Celinda arrived.

Her bonnet lay on the chair there, her reticule beside it. She had dressed in her best gown, the blue muslin with fine lace medallions of tambour work she'd worn on Sunday. For Horace.

A faint knock at the door sent Gabriella flying across the room, her heart choking her.

"Yes?" she called, her breath ragged.

"Miss d'Aventure? It is Lady Celinda."

Gabriella dragged the door open. A slim girl stood before her, her blond hair glinting from beneath a pale bonnet, while her white gown, with a very small print and three rows of ruffles, seemed to glow in the streaming sunlight. Gabriella curtsied and opened the door wide.

The lovely young woman sped inside, and Gabriella carefully closed the door with a quiet click. She stared at the woman, too overcome to make a sound. Her long-cherished dream was about to come true.

"How do you do, Miss d'Aventure? I am Lady Celinda Grantham, come to fetch you to the duke." Lady Celinda paused then giggled. "Rather the duke is to come to us at

my father's house in St. James square. Ha—Horace and I thought it best for you to receive him there, as we cannot go to his home. My father will be in residence as chaperone to us while the duke is present. Even though Papa will know nothing about it.” She laughed once more and took Gabriella's hand. “That should preserve the proprieties and still allow you a more private conversation with the duke when you meet for the first time.”

“I cannot thank you enough, Lady Celinda. Or Monsieur Carpenter.” Heat blazed in her cheeks every time she even whispered his name. “He is not here today?”

“No, his master, the marquess, has need of him this afternoon, but he asked me to tell you that he is very proud of you for attempting such a feat. Most young women of your circumstances would not. He wishes you bon chance .”

Gabriella dashed a tear from her eye. No matter how this afternoon ended, she would not allow Horace Carpenter to leave her life. She nodded and gathered her shawl, hat, and reticule and raised her chin. “Shall we go, my lady?”

The lady peered out the window, a frown puckering her brow. “We must wait for our carriage to arrive. Horace ordered it for one o'clock.”

And the clock's hands stood at quarter past the hour.

“It should be any moment now, my dear,” Lady Celinda said, leaning out the window to stare down the street. “Any minute.”

* * * *

Hal perched on Lady Hamilton's sofa, sipping tea, acutely aware that as Lady Chalgrove chatted to Lady Carmichael about ball gowns, on the next floor, her maid was in the process of fleeing the house to keep an assignation with the Duke of

Rother. He gulped his tea and stared at the lady, attempting to feign interest in the merits of gold muslin over silver.

Their plan had gone well so far. He and Celinda had arrived on time. To divert attention, he'd engaged Lady Hamilton with a bit of a scandalous on-dit he'd prepared on the way over. Not a lie, exactly, but an exaggeration of a conversation he'd heard at his club last evening. Still, the subject of the gossip was a gentleman whose reputation could use a bit more tarnish to make him truly interesting to the ladies, so no harm done. Meanwhile, Celinda had sped up the stairs after Hal distracted the butler by dropping his walking stick not once but twice while trying to hand it to him.

"I have not had the pleasure, Lady Chalgrove, of being your partner at whist." Hal changed the subject from fashions and fabrics as soon as he deemed it polite. Fashion interested him not at all, and as a result he knew not one thing about it. Devilishly hard to maintain a conversation when you could say nothing intelligent.

"Then I insist we be partners at dear Lady Hamilton's upcoming card party, my lord." Lady Chalgrove arched her neck and smiled at him from beneath lowered lashes.

"I would be delighted, my lady." Best watch out for this one. Her claws were poised to sink themselves into whatever unsuspecting prey crossed her path. "I suspect your hostess and the rest of her guests will be disappointed when they find we are not to be beaten the entire night." Hal flashed his brightest grin, while surreptitiously listening for movement in the foyer.

"You may be correct, Lord Halford." She tapped him gaily on the arm. "I have yet to find a partner who understands the strategy of the game as well as I. But from what I have gathered about you and cards," she simpered and sipped her tea, "we will make brilliant partners. We will play to win at any cost. Am I correct, my lord?"

“Absolutely correct, my lady.” Hal raised his teacup and caught movement past the door to the drawing room. He sighed and savored his tea. His ladies had made their escape. So far, so good. Twenty minutes past one o’clock. They were a trifle late, but still should arrive at Grantham House within five minutes. He’d give Lady Chalgrove another few minutes then make his adieux, his part in the operation almost complete.

“I fear I must beg to take my leave of you, Lady Chalgrove, Lady Hamilton. I am promised to Lord Haversham for dinner and am on my way now to Fribourg & Treyer’s for a special brand of snuff he particularly prefers.” Hal rose, smiling warmly at his hostess. He bowed to Lady Chalgrove, who beamed at him. Thank goodness, he could shortly announce his betrothal and put an end to the lady’s maneuverings regarding him.

“Lady Ivor, Miss Euphemia Grantham, Miss Uriania Grantham.”

Hal turned to greet them, snagging the edge of his coat on something. He tugged, and it came free. A crash and clatter arose behind him.

“Oh, no!”

The shriek spun him around. Lady Chalgrove sat almost as he’d left her thirty seconds before, except now the front of her pink-and-silver gown had turned a ditch-water brown. The lady’s teacup lay on its side in the saucer, the contents still dripping onto her lap.

“Do not be alarmed, my dear.” Lady Hamilton rose, her legendary calm in full operation. “James,” she called to the nearest footman, “run and fetch Gabriella to assist Lady Chalgrove. Thomas,” she turned to the other hovering footman, “napkins, please.”

The footmen both nodded and fled, one heading upstairs, one down.

Hal closed his eyes and cursed under his breath. He prayed all would go well with Gabriella and the duke. If it did not, the situation she would return to did not bear thinking about.

“Lady Chalgrove, I do beg your pardon. That was insufferably clumsy of me.” Damn it to hell. “Please allow me to retire, ladies.” Having done as much damage as possible, he bowed and backed toward the doorway. “Thank you, Lady Hamilton. I will see you next for cards on the sixteenth.” Head spinning like a top, he headed for the door, waiting impatiently for the return of his stick and hat as upraised voices in the drawing room spilled into the foyer. He headed down the stairs, slowing with each step.

The space where his carriage should’ve been waiting loomed vast and empty on the busy street.

What the devil was going on?

He peered up and down the street, around the corner. The landau was nowhere to be found.

Robbins would get the sack for this.

Should he hail a hack or walk back to his house? He could inquire if Lady Hamilton’s butler knew where the carriage had gone, but he’d be damned if he’d go back into that house where all hell was erupting because of him.

“My lord.” Tate, the butler, had appeared on the steps.

Damn. Too late. “Yes?”

“Lady Hamilton would like a moment of your time, if you will.”

With a sense of dire foreboding, Hal dragged his feet up the stairs.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

“Are you certain, Lady Celinda, that the marquess will not mind us taking his carriage?” Gabriella had been astounded when the lady had urged her down the front steps and into the sleek landau with a large crest emblazoned on the side. “I would not wish to get Horace... Monsieur Carpenter, rather, in any trouble with his master. He did instigate this outing.”

“Do not worry yourself, Miss d’Aventure,” Lady Celinda said with a strangled laugh and an odd twinkle in her bright blue eyes. “The marquess would insist upon it if he knew of our need. And he would certainly curse the hack that did not appear as promised.” She screwed her mouth into a pout then shook her head and relaxed into the luxurious, black leather seat. “We can send a footman with a note when we reach the house. It is quite near Lady Hamilton’s. Just there.” She nodded as they turned a corner onto a fashionable square of streets, with a magnificent garden in bloom at their center. A large statue of a man on a horse graced the middle of the square.

Gabriella nodded and leaned back, trying to relax despite the nerves that had been singing in her veins since dawn. Her breath quickened, and her mind raced ahead to the meeting she’d imagined a thousand times. How would the duke look up close? Would he remember her mother? And more important, would he believe her story? With answers so temptingly close, Gabriella could fix her mind on nothing for more than a few seconds. She squeezed her hands together as the clop, clop of the horses’ hooves on the stone pavement slowed to a stop.

“See?” Celinda smiled at her and patted her arm. “We are here already,” she said, as the footman handed them down. “And in good time, it seems. Has the Duke of Rother arrived, Albert?”

“No, my lady.” The footman kept his eyes on Gabriella as he helped her from the carriage. The servant’s solicitude pleased her very much. She must be careful not to tear or dirty her dress now.

“Very good.” Lady Celinda paused in the foyer to scribble a note. “Albert, run this to the Marquess of Halford. He is at Lady Hamilton’s. You know the direction?”

“Yes, my lady.” The tall footman bowed, took the note Lady Celinda thrust at him, and left at a trot.

“Come.” Lady Celinda beckoned her up the stairs. “We have a moment until the duke arrives. Would you like me to order tea?” They had reached the landing of the first floor, and the lady cast a critical eye over her.

Gabriella stopped then shook her head. “I do not think I could take a sip of anything at this moment, my lady.”

“I think you are worried for nothing.” Lady Celinda smiled, nodding her approval. “May I ask who created such a beautiful gown, Miss d’Aventure? It is quite the loveliest creation I’ve seen this Season.”

Relief mixed with pride made Gabriella smile and smooth her skirts. “I made it myself, my lady. I knew this day would come and so have worked toward making it perfect. I want my appearance to be a credit to the duke.”

“I think you succeeded admirably, Miss d’Aventure. Should you ever decide to open a modiste’s shop, I promise to be your first and best customer.” Lady Celinda laughed, and they continued down the corridor. “Just here on the right.” She indicated a stout door slightly ajar. “Although I suspect if all goes well today, your days of sewing will be quite at an end.” The lady led Gabriella into a spacious room, furnished with delicate white-and-gilt chairs and sofa, with walls covered in pale

paper striped pink and green.

“Lady Celinda, will you now tell me what this clandestine meeting is all about?”

Gabriella jumped and almost ran into Lady Celinda’s back. The deep, masculine voice boomed from the far end of the room. She peeped around the lady, trembling in earnest now.

“I...I... Good afternoon, Your Grace.” Lady Celinda curtsied and started forward, leaving Gabriella exposed like a fish out of water.

The Duke of Rother stood before the cold fireplace, tall as a giant in Gabriella’s mind. Dressed impeccably, in elegant blue jacket and buff leather breeches that fit his lean form excellently, the man she’d dreamed of all her life finally stood before her, like a fairy story come true. Dark hair curled at his neck, and brilliant blue eyes—eyes she saw every day when she looked in a mirror—now watched Lady Celinda from beneath vexed brows.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace. The footman told me you had not arrived, else our entrance would not have been so informal.” Lady Celinda motioned to Gabriella, but her feet seemed stuck to the plush carpet. The lady reached back and hauled her forward.

Gabriella plodded toward the duke, her heart pounding unevenly, her hands icy at her sides.

“It was such a brilliant day, I elected to ride rather than take the carriage. Never pass up the opportunity to—” He glanced past Lady Celinda to Gabriella. His mouth opened, slack-jawed, and his eyes grew wide. His face paled as though he’d seen a ghost. “Veronique?”

The utterance of her mother's name broke the spell.

Gabriella sailed forward and swept a low curtsy before him. “ Non , Your Grace.” She rose and stared straight into the shocked face. “Gabriella Veronique Marie d’Aventure. I am Veronique’s daughter.” Summoning all her courage, she swallowed and said, “I am your daughter, Your Grace.”

The duke stared at her, taking in her form from top to toe as the color slowly seeped back into his face. “Veronique’s daughter.” The amazement in his voice calmed her.

“ Oui , Your Grace. My mother has told me much about you...about your journey to Angouleme, where you met her twenty years ago.”

“Veronique.” He closed his eyes, a smile touching his lips. “My God. Has it been twenty years?” His face changed, alarm furrowing his brow, and his eyes flew open. “Is your mother...?”

“She is well, Your Grace.” How wonderful that he remembered her, seemed concerned about her welfare after so long. A thrill of hope shot down her spine. “She has returned to her father’s home in Angouleme after the death of her husband last year.”

“Husband? She married?” As if a veil dropped across his face, the soft light extinguished from his intense gaze.

Alarmed by this drastic and unaccountable change in his demeanor, Gabriella rushed to explain. “ Oui , Your Grace. After...after you left, when she knew I would be born, she married a wine merchant of Paris, a friend of my grand-père , a Monsieur d’Aventure.”

“I thank you for giving me this news of her after so many years.” He gazed over

Gabriella's head, unseeing. "I had not heard her name in a very long time." With a sigh, he recalled himself and looked at Gabriella once more, the planes of his face hardened. "Please give her my regards when next you see her." Then to Lady Celinda, "Thank you, my dear. It was kind of you to think I would be interested in news of an old acquaintance." He retrieved his hat from the sofa. "If your father is home, I shall call on him while I am here."

The dismissal stung like a slap to Gabriella's face. How dare he reject her with less interest than he would have for a dish that displeased him at dinner?

"Your Grace," she spoke loudly enough that he could not ignore her. "You remember my mother well, and I hope with a fondness equal to what she has always felt for you."

The duke turned wary eyes on her, the rim of his hat crushed in his hand. "Indeed, I do remember her well, Miss d'Aventure."

"I have waited many years to come to England, to find you, to tell you that you have a daughter."

His gaze narrowed, his frigid manner now complete. "I sincerely doubt that, Miss d'Aventure. Despite what your mother may have told you, I suggest you are indeed Miss d'Aventure, the daughter of a wine merchant."

Icy fingers of rage touched the back of Gabriella's neck. "You would accuse my mother of lying to me?"

The duke shrugged. "She would not be the first woman to do so. I will admit that I knew your mother when she was a young girl, and we spent a week together in her home. But after I left her, I heard nothing whatsoever from her."

Gabriella's anger rose to a white-hot flame. He had offered no hope, had told her mother they could not marry. What had he expected from her then?

"In twenty years, I have not heard one word." His face had darkened, his thick brows almost touching his nose. "I made her swear to me that if she discovered she was with child, she would tell me. I was betrothed to another woman, but I would have broken with her if Veronique had told me there was a child. I waited..." He threw up his hand. "It makes no difference now. The past is past. I am sorry, mademoiselle, but you are not my daughter." The duke strode past her, muttering, "I cannot think why she would have told you such a thing and sent you to find me." He whirled toward Gabriella, sneering. "Does she need money now her husband is dead?"

Stunned by the cruelty of his words, Gabriella drew herself up as tall as possible, stared him in the face, and narrowed her eyes. "Non. My mother wants for nothing. She does not know I am here. I did not tell her because I did not think she would allow me to come."

"You are likely correct." Rother bowed, chilly as a winter's night. "Good day, Miss d'Aventure. Lady Celinda." With a fierce scowl, he marched out of the room.

Gabriella swayed. The room turned black at the edges. Then she was seated on one of the dainty gilt chairs, Lady Celinda pressing a cool glass into her hand.

"Drink this. It tastes nasty, but it will help."

Gabriella raised the glass to her nose, inhaling the sweet aroma of French cognac, like a breath of home. She tilted the glass, allowing the rich liquor to burn all the way into her stomach. It would take many tumblers of this excellent vintage to erase the humiliation the Duke of Rother had heaped upon her and her family today.

"Oh, Miss d'Aventure." Lady Celinda plucked the almost-empty glass from her

fingers. "I am attempting to keep you from fainting, not trying to make you foxed."

Gabriella continued to hold her hand out. "Apparently, I am the daughter of a wine merchant. Perhaps that explains my affinity." She nodded toward the glass.

With a sigh, Lady Celinda poured another dollop of the amber spirit into Gabriella's glass and handed it to her. "Do you believe the duke?"

Gabriella stared into the swirling liquid. "My mother has never told me anything other than that the duke is my father. But she never told me he made her swear to contact him if she found herself with child. Why would she not write to him? Unless..." Unless she were in truth not the duke's daughter. It did not bear thinking about. She took another comforting sip, the burn now melting into a glow. "I must remember to apologize to Horace. He asked me for proof as well. No wonder there is none."

"But there is proof, Miss d'Aventure, if only anyone would look to see it." Lady Celinda set the decanter back on the sideboard and pressed the stopper in with a vengeance.

"Please call me Gabriella, my lady." She sipped again, and her tension ebbed. "What proof can there be?"

Lady Celinda seated herself across from Gabriella. "The proof I saw with my own eyes. Anyone could see it just by looking at you and His Grace together."

"What do you mean? Other than the color of our eyes, we do not resemble one another at all."

"Au contraire," Lady Celinda said, a secretive smile on her lips. "Just now, when you were both talking," she motioned to the empty carpet, "it was as though I

watched a person arguing with themselves. It is true you do not resemble the duke in either features or coloring, other than your eyes. However, the way you stand, the set of your shoulders, the determination in your jaw.” She shook her head. “If you appeared in public together, the gossip would spread so quickly you couldn’t poke your head out of the house the next day.”

“He will never see it, my lady. And even if it is true, why did my mother not write to him?” Mon Dieu , what a mess she’d made of her life coming to England. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

Lady Celinda shrugged. “You will have to ask her, but I assume she had good reasons.” She cocked her head. “What will you do now?”

“Return to Lady Chalgrove. I have no other choice at the moment. But,” she wiped her face with the back of her hand, “I still have Horace.” She smiled, imagining his happiness when she told him there would be no impediment to their marriage now. “We wish to marry, you see. I suppose I could open a modiste’s shop here in London. If he could continue to work as a valet for the marquess, we could build a life of our own. I had worried the duke would insist on my marrying a man of the nobility, but that is no longer a concern.”

Lady Celinda opened her mouth then abruptly shut it and smiled. “Love will always find a way, won’t it? Come, we must get you back to Lady Hamilton’s before you are missed. That would truly be the topping on the cake.”

The quiet carriage ride back to Lady Hamilton’s gave Gabriella time to plan. Without the duke’s acknowledgment of her and the hope of him being a part of her life, the possible pathways to a happy life were few. The overwhelming choice would be marriage to Horace. In time, she’d write her mother and ask about the duke’s claim that she swore to write him if she were with child. Meanwhile, she would look to Horace for her happiness.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of Lady Hamilton's. Now to steal back up to Lady Chalgrove's chamber as if none of this had occurred. "I should go up the servant's stairs, my lady."

Lady Celinda nodded. "Allow me to go in first. I will get rid of the butler and give you a chance to steal down to the servant's hall." She marched up the steps to the front door, hand raised to the knocker, when the door jerked open.

Tate looked past Lady Celinda to Gabriella. His eyes narrowed, making her catch her breath. He pursed his lips in disapproval. "At last."

Lady Celinda sent her a stricken look but plastered a smile on her face and stepped over the threshold.

Dread descended on Gabriella like a suffocating cloak. She swallowed hard, her mouth drying under Tate's unfriendly glare. Something must have happened, and her absence discovered. Her luck was certainly out today. Nothing to do but go forward, however.

Resolutely, she followed Lady Celinda into the house.

"She is here, my lady." The butler's disapproving tone sounded like a nail in her coffin.

Unsure whether the man meant her or Lady Celinda, Gabriella sped past the butler, praying she could reach the stairs.

Tate immediately blocked her way. "Lady Hamilton and Lady Chalgrove require your presence, Miss d'Aventure."

The sinking feeling she'd ignored earlier returned, and her stomach rolled. Better to

have drunk herself into oblivion at Lady Celinda's home than fall victim to what would certainly be a very public disgrace here at Lady Hamilton's. Squaring her shoulders, she nodded and turned toward the crowded drawing room.

At first glance, the room appeared to contain every lady in London. When her vision cleared, however, there were only five. A lady she did not know was seated on the sofa beside two younger ladies who favored her greatly, all three pairs of eyes wide and staring at her. Then the two women in companion wing-backed chairs: Lady Hamilton, gracefully calm, and Lady Chalgrove, glowering directly at her. A gentleman stood at the sideboard, his back to her, thank goodness.

"Where have you been, Gabriella?" Lady Chalgrove's shrill voice shattered the hushed silence.

"I asked her to accompany me, my lady." Lady Celinda spoke up quickly.

God bless the lady. Speech seemed beyond Gabriella.

"There was an emergency with one of my gowns, the one I am to wear tonight." Lady Celinda spoke with such conviction that Gabriella would have believed her had she not known the truth. "I knew of Miss d'Aventure's excellent sewing skills from a conversation with Lady Chalgrove, so I thought she would be able to help me."

"What kind of emergency, Lady Celinda?"

"Uh, there was a rip in my gown that would've ruined it, had not Miss d'Aventure used all her talents to mend it." Lady Celinda cut her gaze to Gabriella, but she could think of nothing to help bolster the story.

"Then why did you not ask me for the loan of my maid?" Lady Chalgrove's voice stabbed like icicles in the too-quiet room.

“I...I...” Lady Celinda cast her gaze at her mother, but that lady simply shrugged.

“Why did you change your gown, madame ?” Gabriella spoke as much to create a distraction as from a wish to know what on earth had happened while she was gone. Her ladyship had been wearing a cream-and-pink checked gown when she went down to receive callers. Now she sat in her blue taffeta, the sleeves mashed slightly and her coiffure straggling from beneath her cap.

“So kind of you to ask, Gabriella. Especially when I needed you to help me with a true emergency. Lord Halford spilled tea on my gown, and you were nowhere to be found.”

“Forgive me, madame . I did not think I would be needed.” Gabriella kept her gaze firmly on the floor. If she prayed very hard, perhaps all would be forgiven.

“In that you are correct. I require the services of a maid I can depend upon. Not a lazy girl who gallivants about town willy-nilly. Therefore,” Lady Chalgrove lifted her chin, triumph in her flaring nose, “I no longer require your services, Miss d’Aventure.” The woman’s smile would have curdled cream. “You may leave, without reference and without pay.”

Gabriella couldn’t breathe. Little as she liked working for the comtesse , the position had kept her employed for months. She’d been housed, clothed, and fed more or less comfortably, but her quarterly salary had not yet come due, and she’d spent the last of her money on the materials to make this lustrous gown. Now she would have nothing.

“Hal,” Lady Celinda called to the gentleman standing at the sideboard.

His back stiffened, but he did not turn around.

“Hal, you must do something.” The lady went to him, plucked at his arm. “You must explain.”

“I do not see that this is any of Lord Halford’s business, Lady Celinda,” Lady Chalgrove snapped.

“Actually, it is my business, Lady Chalgrove.” The man turned toward her.

Gabriella shook her head and blinked. The man looked just like... “Horace?” Was this some mad waking dream brought on by too much cognac? But there he stood, Horace, resplendent in the elegant dress of a nobleman. And they were calling him Lord Halford.

He opened his mouth then darted toward her as the edges of her vision became gray and then inexplicably black.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

Gabriella opened her eyes, squinting at the bright sunlight streaming through the window of a room she couldn't place. She sat up, thoroughly confused. The tall bed, expensive oak with four posters and a canopy of white ruffled material, was softer than any she'd lain on in her life. Darker furniture stood out against delicate pink walls, all totally unfamiliar. Even the white gown she wore—long sleeves edged in expensive Cluny lace—was not her own....because all her belongings had likely been tossed into the street. In a rush the events of yesterday came back to her with a suddenness that made her queasy.

The door opened, admitting a petite, dark-haired maid bearing a tray. "Good morning, miss." She set the tray on the dressing table and bobbed a curtsy. "Shall I pour your tea?"

"Who are you? Where am I?" Panic sat at the edge of her mind, ready to run rampant through her.

"I'm Ann, miss, the upstairs maid. This is Holly House." Ann poured tea into a cup.

That's right . Lady Celinda had brought her to her own home after the horrible scene at Lady Hamilton's house.

"Sugar or milk?"

"What?" Confusion and fear made her voice sharper than it should have been. She was sorry for that, but she was scarcely able to concentrate on where she was, much less have to answer so many questions.

“For your tea, miss. Shall I tell Lady Celinda you’re awake? They’ve all been in a state since yesterday.” The maid handed her the teacup, and Gabriella drank it automatically, scarcely noting the lack of sweetness.

Yesterday.

The disastrous interview with the duke, her public dismissal, the discovery that Horace was not Horace at all but a marquess came rushing back to her. She shuddered, chills running up and down her arms. She thrust the tea back at the maid, afraid she’d cast up her accounts should she drink more. Life was a *bête noire*, and that beast had seized her in its teeth to carry her away from everything she’d known. She flung herself back onto the pillows, tears springing from her eyes. Her life, once so perfect in France, was now *un enfer*.

Even through her tears, the scurry of the maid leaving the room penetrated the fog of despair. She must control herself. She was at the mercy of strangers, although Lady Celinda, at least, was her friend. Still, she must cease this pity and make plans. She must think only of the future. Not of Horace.

Pain ripped through her heart. Who was he? Why had he lied to her? What did he want from her? Fresh grief at the loss of her love brought on more tears, so hot in her throat they scalded her inside and out. If she could die right here and now, it would be a great kindness from *le Bon Dieu*.

“Gabriella?”

She sat up, rubbing at the tears.

Lady Celinda stood at the side of the bed. “My dear, I’m so glad to see you’re— But what is wrong?”

Gabriella burst into renewed tears. Oh, the kindness of this lady hurt as badly as the scorn of Lady Chalgrove.

“Shhh.” Lady Celinda gathered her into her arms, and Gabriella wailed like a child who had lost its mother. “It will be all right, Gabriella.” The sweet sympathy and warm embrace only made her cry harder, grief for everything she’d lost billowing out against Lady Celinda’s small shoulder.

“It cannot be all...all right. Nothing is right now. I have nothing and no one to help me.” She hitched in a breath then another, trying to calm herself.

“You do have someone. You have my friendship and the friendship and protection of my family.” Lady Celinda patted her arm and drew back, looking into her face.

Her sweetly concerned blue eyes made Gabriella take a deep breath and shake off the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. The tears receded.

“Do not fret about anything for the moment. You’re here as my particular friend and will remain so until we’ve sorted everything out.” She smiled so brightly that for a fleeting moment Gabriella believed her, believed that the shattered fragments of her life could be made right again.

Then the horror of yesterday settled on her again. “That will never happen.”

She fell back onto the bed, suddenly bereft of spirit. What did it matter? She no longer had a mission in her life. Both the men who’d had so much promise had deserted her. Nothing remained save to return to France and live out her life without her love or her dream.

“Come, you have more spirit than that, Gabriella.” A warm touch on her shoulder only made her feel worse. “I witnessed it yesterday before the duke. We can make

this right if you have faith in me, and in Lord Halford.”

“Lord Halford! Oh, do not speak to me of that wretch.” Gabriella bounced up in the bed. “Who is he? And why did he lie?”

“He is Jonathan George...and several more names I can’t even remember. His title is Marquess of Halford, though I mostly call him Hal. We are distant cousins.” Lady Celinda stood over her, lips firm. “And he is very much in love with you.”

“How can you say such a thing?” Anger was better than tears. “He has lied to me from the moment we met, saying he is a valet. His own valet.” She peered at her ladyship. “Does he even have a valet?”

Lady Celinda smiled and straightened the covers. “Yes, Horace Carpenter does exist. He is Hal’s manservant.” She laughed. “But not nearly as tall or handsome as Hal and quite a bit older.” Lady Celinda gazed at Gabriella and moistened her lips. “Hal would like to speak to you, Gabriella.”

“Oh, so he can tell me more lies?” Gabriella gathered the covers over her and shook her head. “Non . Please tell him I will not see him, my lady. I have no words for him.”

“Please call me Celinda. You are my guest here, so it’s only right.” She looked longingly at Gabriella. “I beg you to reconsider. Hal’s been sending notes every hour, it seems, asking if you’ve awakened, how you slept, if he may call upon you. He truly loves you, Gabriella.”

“He cannot love me if all his words are lies.” Her memories of him were tainted now—how could she distinguish the lies from the truth?

“Not everything has been a lie, you know.” Celinda sat on the bed at her feet. “He

only said he was a valet because he wanted to talk to you without all the trappings of his title. He hates society parties, society ladies. He thought if you knew he was a marquess you might run away, or worse, see him only as a marquess.” Celinda shook her head. “Hal does odd or outrageous things sometimes. It’s in his nature, as much as being stubborn is in yours.”

“I am not—”

“I beg to differ, mademoiselle .” Her new friend held out her hand to stop her comment. “You are almost as stubborn as Hal, although not nearly as much as the Duke of Rother.” Celinda smiled and took her friend’s hands. “I wasn’t shocked that Hal pretended to be someone else. It’s part of Hal, who he is. He’s never liked the life of a society dandy and has done some rather eccentric things to keep from being part of it. Saying that he was his valet is quite tame in comparison to some of his antics.”

“It is not right, Celinda, for him to have lied to me.”

“Sauce for the goose, my dear.” She released her grip and sat back.

“ Qu’est-ce que ca veut dire ? What is this goose you speak of?”

Her companion laughed. “I mean, yes, he lied to you, but you did the same, did you not?” Celinda cocked her head, a devious smile on her lips. “You didn’t tell him the duke was your father until much later. Until he had already fallen in love with you.”

“He made me fall in love with someone who is not as he seems.” What if he changed his story again, after they married? How could she ever trust him?

“I think Hal is exactly as he has ever been, whether marquess or valet.” Celinda rose. “So let him come and speak for himself. You will see he is the very same man you fell in love with.” Celinda took her hand. “He will do anything within his power,

Gabriella, to regain your affection and trust. But you must give him the chance.” She glanced at the tea tray. “Your tea is cold. I shall tell Ann to bring you another, with some warm scones and jam.” She smiled and patted Gabriella’s hand. “You must keep your strength up.” She paused at the door. “May I tell him you will receive him? He’s not going away until you tell him to go to his face.”

Gabriella sighed and cursed to herself. Celinda was likely right. Her Horace—not hers anymore—would not have taken no for an answer either. Better to get this unpleasantness over with so she could look forward to the future, bleak though it might be. “Oui, I will see him this afternoon if it is convenient for you.”

Celinda’s face lit up like a blazing log, and she clapped her hands. “Thank goodness! I believe one more refusal would have seen him camped out on the stoop.” Laughing, she closed the door, leaving Gabriella to brood over how painful it would be to say goodbye to the love she was going to lose.

* * * *

Gabriella sat in the Grantham’s drawing room, smoothing her skirt, rubbing her arms, doing anything she could to keep from thinking about the impending interview with Horace...no, Lord Halford. Dressed in her blue lutestring, she fingered the folds of the gown once more. Opening a modiste’s shop might not be a terrible idea. She hated sewing, but she’d also hated serving Lady Chalgrove, and she’d done that for months. Her own shop, however, might not be so bad. With Celinda’s patronage and that of her friends, she could make money against the day she could return to France and pour out the tale to her mother and grandfather.

The door opened, making Gabriella sit up straighter, every nerve on edge. Celinda entered, followed closely by Lord Halford, very elegantly attired in a dark brown jacket with white trousers and wearing a tall D’Orsay hat. Her heart pounded so hard her body shook.

“Gabriella.” Celinda motioned for her to rise. “Miss d’Aventure, may I present Lord Halford, a cousin of mine who has long desired to make your acquaintance.”

Lord Halford bowed, not taking his gaze off her. As though he’d never seen her before, he perused her head to toe, much as the duke had done. “Miss d’Aventure.” He smiled as he straightened.

The man would not charm her, no matter what. She set her jaw and steadied herself. He was just a man, and one she did not know. She rose and curtsied. “Lady Celinda, you should not indulge in such games,” she said, glaring at the marquess.

“I do not, Miss d’Aventure. You have never met the Marquess of Halford, am I correct?” Celinda’s face betrayed not a jot of levity. Rather, her mouth was pinched in annoyance.

“Non . We have not met officially.” She stared into his lordship’s smiling face. “Although he knows me much better than I know him.”

“Gabriella—” The marquess stepped forward, hands outstretched.

“Hal.” Celinda raised a warning finger at him. “I told you the rules for this meeting. She is Miss d’Aventure until she gives you leave to call her something else. You agreed.”

The anger in her tone made Gabriella’s ears perk up. Perhaps Celinda was still on her side.

“You may begin, Miss d’Aventure.” Celinda sat abruptly on the sofa, her lips in a thin, straight line.

Trying to buy time to think, Gabriella ambled toward the fireplace. What did she wish

to say? Nothing. She wanted an accounting from the erstwhile Horace. “His Lordship requested this meeting. I will hear what he has to say.” Let him try to explain his behavior to her.

“Are you well, Miss d’Aventure?” Lord Halford ducked his head, though she could see the eagerness in his face.

“I am standing before you, monsieur .” Would he always be so irritating? “You see I am well.”

“I am very glad to hear it, mademoiselle . It’s just that when you swooned yesterday, I didn’t know what to think.” He took a step toward her, his hand stealing out before he dropped it to his side. “I was frightened, Gab—Miss d’Aventure. I thought you might have died from the shock.”

“I might as well have.” She stared at him, anger and misery warring within her. “I have no employment, no family, nor any friends save one.” She moved to stand behind Celinda. “My father does not believe I am his daughter. The man I loved has disappeared, changed into a nobleman I do not know.”

“You do know me, Miss d’Aventure.” He stepped toward her. “I am the same man you met on the balcony, the same one who met you in the garden, the one who kissed you.” He slipped her hand into his. “The same man who wants to marry you.”

“Then why did you lie to me?” The touch of his hand warmed her, sent a tingle up her arm. No, she would not be persuaded by that. She pulled her hand away.

He shifted his gaze to the floor, rubbing his neck. “The night on the balcony, I was in my shirtsleeves because I didn’t want to be Lord Halford. I’ve done that before.” He looked up. “Celinda can tell you. I’d just told her that night that a formal coat, formal clothes,” he held his arms out, “did not fit me, or rather I didn’t fit them. When I saw

you, I wanted you to meet the true man, not the title. Although I'm Hal, not Horace, I'm still more him than I will ever be Lord Halford. If you came to have affection for Horace then it was for me, not for his lordship, the marquess."

Gabriella breathed carefully, schooling her face. It would be so easy to believe him. Still, he'd lied to her. Could she be sure he didn't lie now?

"I love you. Do you doubt it?" He seized her hand again, kissing it with a warmth that made her whole body burn. "Do not deny me, love." His eyes were liquid blue as he gently coaxed her toward him then slid his arms around her.

"I'm still in the room, Hal." Celinda spoke up from the sofa. "A good thing too, I see." Lady Celinda arose, grabbed Gabriella's hand, and pulled her to the opposite side of the room.

"I will remember this, Celinda. Quid pro quo , and all that." Lord Halford glared at her sternly.

She laughed and linked her arm with Gabriella's. "I think you should tell Miss d'Aventure where you went this morning. It may help dispel the rest of her fears about your intentions."

Gabriella shot a glance at him, wary once more.

"Ah, yes." He cleared his throat. "In light of what Celinda told me about your meeting with the duke yesterday, I called upon him this morning and presented myself as a suitor for your hand."

"What?" Gabriella's legs turned to water, and she sat down hard on the sofa. If he'd done that, gone to her father to ask for her hand, surely that meant... "What did he say?" If a powerful man, a marquess, was willing to marry her, would that not argue

that his lordship believed her story? Her heart beat frantically, impossible hope rising once more.

Lord Halford shot a look at Celinda then shifted from foot to foot. “Rother still does not believe you are his daughter. Until such time as he does, he will not acknowledge you.” He took her hands, his eyes shining bright as the sky. “But I believe you, Gabriella. Together, we will find a way to convince Rother. We must.” He buried his face in their linked hands. “I would marry you this instant, save for my father’s decree.”

“Your father?” His hands were soft and warm, but the chill of his words settled on her heart.

“My father knows of you, knows I wish to wed you, and that you are the duke’s daughter.” Lord Halford raised his head. “He will allow our marriage only if the duke acknowledges you.” He closed his eyes and squeezed her hands. “If I marry you without his blessing, he will cut off my living. I’ll have no income save a small inheritance from my mother, until I inherit the dukedom.”

“You will one day be a duke?” Gabriella stared at him, uncomprehending. Her valet was to be a duke?

At that, he laughed and rose, keeping hold of her. “And you will be my duchess.” He kissed her hands, and her heart melted. “If I have to move heaven or go through hell, I will make sure we marry.”

“But how? The duke won’t acknowledge me without some sort of proof, and there is none.” Nothing had changed, save she was more inclined to forgive Lord Halford his transgressions. Each time he kissed her hands, a little more indignation dissolved away. But the Duke of Rother stood firm, an insurmountable wall. “What can we do?”

“Well, if the duke requires proof then proof he will get.” Lord Halford kissed her fingers once more than loosed her.

“There is no way to prove my story at all.” Gabriella shook her head. What on earth was the man smiling about?

“Leave that to me, my dear,” he said and strode from the room, a jaunty lilt to his footsteps on the polished floor.

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“Here, try this one. I think the color is much better for you.” Gabriella held a delicate pink muslin with tiny white flowers next to Celinda’s face. The exact hue of her lips, the shell-like color made her skin seem to blush with health.

“I do believe you are correct.” Celinda turned her head this way and that, staring into the mirror the shopkeeper had provided. “My goodness, I could scarcely tell the difference between the two colors, but this one is much prettier.”

“It is lighter, which works best with the color of your skin. We will take six yards, s’il vous pla?t .” Gabriella handed the material to the man. “Our next stop is the haberdasher to purchase a satin ribbon for trimming and for ties to match.” She grinned at her friend. “Lord Finley will not take his eyes from you if I have anything to say about it.”

Celinda turned a deeper shade of pink than their purchase. She nodded to the linen-drafter’s assistant, who cut and packaged her purchase. “I can only hope you are correct about that, my dear.”

During the past two weeks, Gabriella had found unofficial employment as personal modiste to Celinda. She and Celinda had been shopping for dress goods almost every day. Once the outfits were all finished, Celinda’s dressing room would be overflowing with ensembles created by Gabriella and specifically intended to catch the eye of Lord Finley. Judging by the extravagant compliments of the ton ladies over the two gowns she’d finished, if she chose to open a dressmaker’s shop, she would have a stream of steady customers.

Gabriella’s plans had changed, however. Soon, she would have enough money saved

for passage back to France. Once home, perhaps, she would open a shop with her mother's help. As popular as she might have been in London, the city held only sadness for her.

After his declaration two weeks before, Lord Halford had called upon Gabriella, telling her enigmatically only that he was attempting to find proof of her birthright. One searing kiss, well-chaperoned by Celinda, and he'd gone. She'd had no word of him since. Bereft once more, with no one else to turn to, she began making plans to return to France, over Celinda's vigorous protests.

"How will I ever find another modiste as skilled and creative as you to design a stunning trousseau for my wedding?" Celinda asked as they emerged from the linen-draper's, the footman following with their purchases. She peered at the long afternoon shadows reaching the edge of the sidewalk. "Shall we go home for tea and venture out tomorrow for the ribbons?"

Gabriella nodded. "We have, perhaps, done enough for one day." She climbed in after Celinda, and the carriage started them home. "How many clothes could you possibly need for your trousseau? We have chosen fabrics enough for ten gowns."

"Don't forget the wedding gown itself, and all the undergarments, and accessories. Lady Mary Burford, now Lady Carstairs, had sixteen trunks of clothes sent to her new establishment when she married. Of course, she wed an earl from the north country, so I suppose she had to lay in a large supply of clothing in case they didn't return to London for a year or two."

She would miss her friend sorely once she left. "I believe what we have planned so far will almost be sufficient save for your wedding dress itself." Gabriella smiled ruefully at Celinda. "However, it must be bad luck to make the wedding gown before the gentleman has even proposed."

“Well, I suppose there is something in that.” Celinda made a moue, but then the carriage hit a bump and both ladies squealed.

“You will see Lord Finley tonight?”

“I hope he will be at Almack’s, although he was not last week.” Celinda’s brow knitted into an unbecoming knot. “I have not seen him for nearly a week.”

“It is très difficile , the waiting, n’est-ce pas ?” Gabriella patted her arm. She wished Celinda’s dreams of the handsome viscount would come true. She’d all but given up on her own.

“Terrible,” Celinda agreed. “I did see him at Mrs. Beaton’s rout, but only managed a brief conversation before he was quite carried away by his friends.” She scowled. “Some gentlemen do not know when to desist in their revelry.”

“Some men do not know how to communicate at all.” Gabriella had ceased asking about the post each morning. The perpetual “No, miss,” almost brought her to tears. She had been steeling herself for the possibility that she would never see Lord Halford again. “I despair of hearing from him.” She prayed nothing bad had befallen him.

Of all her dreams, he had been the hardest to give up. At last, she had decided that when the time came, she would leave a note for him, thanking him for everything he had done for her and forgiving him for jilting her.

“I don’t think you should give up on Hal quite yet, Gabriella. He is eccentric in the way he thinks. He will focus on a problem and ignore the whole world until he solves it.”

“Unless you have knowledge I do not, I fear he has simply grown tired of me and my

problems. His father refuses to allow us to wed, so he has moved on to another woman who is not objectionable to the Duke of Brixham.” Gabriella clamped her teeth together. The thought of Lord Halford—she could not quite bring herself to call him Hal—courting another woman set her whole body on edge. Should she see him with another lady, she feared the ton would have much to talk about the next morning.

Celinda shook her head, a serene smile on her face. “You have too little faith, my dear. Hal hasn’t been seen anywhere in public these two weeks. He is off hunting down proof you are the Duke of Rother’s daughter. If anyone can find it, he’s the one. Just you wait and see.”

The carriage pulled to a stop, and they disembarked slowly. “Please put the packages in my room, Thomas,” Celinda said, stripping off her gloves as they entered the foyer.

“This came while you were out, my lady.” The butler held out a note on a silver tray.

“Thank you, Tillby.” Celinda picked it up and turned it over. “Oh, gracious, Gabriella. It’s from Hal.”

The strength went out of Gabriella’s legs with the suddenness of a lightning strike. She dropped the reticule she’d been setting on the table. The coins fell out, hitting the floor with a clatter she barely heard. She clutched Celinda’s arm. “What does it say?”

Her friend had already broken the seal and unfolded the note, which contained a brief two lines, scrawled in a hurried hand. “Please bring Gabriella to the Duke of Rother’s house at four o’clock today. Hal.”

Gabriella read the words over and over, seized with happiness that he had resurfaced, but filled with foreboding at the message. What did it portend? Had he actually found

some sort of proof of her birth? She looked around for the clock. “What time is it?”

Celinda tugged on her gloves again. “Time to leave. George,” she called to a passing footman. “Tell Connors to bring the carriage back around front.” She arched her eyebrows at Gabriella before they hurried down the steps. “See what I mean?”

* * * *

The Duke of Rother’s house reminded Gabriella of an island, set off from the other houses on the square by wide expanses of manicured lawn all around it—almost like a moat, seeking to isolate the duke from the rest of the world. Still, it was the largest and most beautiful house in Mayfair. They swept up the front steps and were admitted by a stern, gray-haired butler. Gabriella held her breath, trying not to stare at the foyer that was larger than her grandfather’s entire wine shop. Stone-tiled floors, gleaming walnut molding, and exquisite paintings on the walls spoke of the opulence afforded by the duke.

Gabriella hurried behind Celinda as the butler led them deeper into the labyrinth of corridors and rooms. They walked forever, it seemed, her hands trembling even when she clutched them together or held the folds of her pelisse. What would the duke say to her this time?

At last, the wizened little butler showed them into a rather small room lined with books, a library with a gleaming table at one end, behind which sat the duke, frowning.

“Lady Celinda, Miss d’Aventure.” He rose, although his scowling countenance didn’t change. “Do you know the meaning of this?” He thrust a note, on the exact notepaper Celinda had received, out to them.

“No, Your Grace.” Celinda curtsied.

Gabriella, following her lead, curtsied a little late. She could not think past the duke's forbidding presence.

"I received a similar note from Lord Halford not a quarter of an hour ago," Celinda continued, "requesting me to bring Miss d'Aventure to your house. Is he not here?" She managed a smile, but Gabriella could tell she was rattled by Halford's absence as well.

Gabriella couldn't summon the courage to look the duke in the eyes. She stared instead at the polished table before him, a starred pattern inlaid in the wood. Why had Halford brought them here? And where was he?

"No, Halford has not put in an appearance, and I demand to know what this is about." Rother banged his fist on the table, making Gabriella jump.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked so slowly, she wished it would stop. Time crawled by, and any second, she expected another explosion from the duke. If something didn't happen soon, she'd turn and run as fast as she could back to the carriage, assuming she could find her way out of the house. Anything to escape the duke's ominous expression.

At last, he came from behind the table, his tall form seeming to tower over them as he stalked closer. "Ladies, I am a busy man. I do not know what Halford is playing at, but you must excuse me—"

"I beg your pardon, Your Grace." Hal's voice boomed as he entered the library.

Suddenly, she couldn't breathe. Neither could she take her eyes off the dashing figure he made, like a fashion plate come to life in a blue jacket, buff pantaloons, shiny Hessians, and, of course, his tall D'Orsay hat. And coming to her rescue at the most necessary moment.

“I apologize for my tardiness, but traffic was slower coming from the docks than I’d expected when I sent the notes.” Hal didn’t slow until he stood directly before the duke.

“The docks?” Rother gave him a puzzled frown.

“Yes, we arrived only this afternoon.” He glanced back at the open door.

Gabriella craned her neck and froze, a gasp trapped in her throat.

A small woman walked forward, dark hair piled under a stylish hat. Dressed in a gray silk gown and Spencer, she carried her head regally until she stood before the duke. Her gaze never wavered from his face.

“Veronique.” The duke’s face drained of color, his lips alone keeping a pink tinge.

“Maman,” Gabriella whispered.

“Your Grace.” Veronique d’Aventure curtsied and returned her gaze to him. “Lord Halford informs me you have a question to ask me.”

Gabriella caught her breath. Would her mother dare to provoke the duke? She started forward. Somehow, she must help.

Hal grabbed her arm. “Let them work this out between them, my dear.”

Very well, she would see this scene played out to the end. She nodded, and he released her.

“Veronique, my God.” The duke came toward her, stealing out his hand, as though afraid to try to touch her. “Is it really you? You are still so beautiful.” Finally, he

caressed her cheek. “Just as I remember you.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Her mother’s tone was gentle; her eyes were not. “The years have been kind to me.” She seemed to see him for the first time, and her face softened. “To us both.” She straightened and raised her chin. “You have a question for me concerning Gabriella?”

Color flooded back into his cheeks. “Because you did not contact me.” He glared at her, piercing her with his intense blue eyes. “You promised me, swore upon the cross, if you found yourself increasing, you would tell me.”

“You were betrothed.” She laughed mirthlessly, as cold as his eyes. “We both knew you could do nothing. Consequences of a broken betrothal are not light in English society. I did not wish to burden you with the knowledge of a child you would never know.”

“But I would have—”

“Would have what? Thrown away your reputation and married a French woman?” Her mother’s eyes flashed. “Our countries were at war. How could you have explained your marriage to the enemy?”

“I would have sent for you. I postponed the wedding for months, praying for word that you were carrying my child. I could have made the argument that I must do the honorable thing and marry you.” The sadness in Rother’s face sent a shiver of sympathy through Gabriella. “Especially when it was the thing I desired most.”

“And I would not have let you make such a sacrifice of yourself. The scandal would have ruined us both. One of us needed to be strong, Gabriel.” She cupped his cheek. “Even if you were the one I desired most as well.”

“Gabriel?” Gabriella stared hard at Hal and Celinda. “Why did you not tell me his Christian name? I was named for him?”

“I have only ever known him as Rother.” Hal shrugged apologetically. “I may have known it at some time growing up, but I certainly did not remember it.”

Celinda patted her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Can you swear to me that Gabriella is my daughter and not Monsieur d’Aventure’s?” The duke clutched her hands, squeezing them until they turned white.

Veronique eased his grip and gave a little laugh. “I do not need to swear, mon chéri .” She glanced over her shoulder. “Gabriella. Venez ici .”

Gabriella inched forward, as if she were young once more and found with the pastries in her hand. “Oui, maman .”

“Stand still, ma chérie .” Her mother pulled her right sleeve down, baring her shoulder.

“Maman !” What was she doing?

“Fais ce que je dis .” Veronique turned her, so the duke could see her back.

“Ahh.” Rother sucked in a breath and his eyes widened.

“You know that star-shaped mark quite well, I believe, although yours is in a somewhat more interesting place.” She pulled Gabriella’s sleeve back up. “If you needed proof, there it is.” She glanced from Rother to Gabriella. “However, anyone with an eye can see it.” She took his hand. “Believe me, Gabriel. She is your daughter.”

Stunned, the duke looked from one woman to the other then nodded slowly. “Yes, she is.” He stared at Gabriella so long, she suddenly wished herself back across the room beside Hal.

At last, he put his arms around her and drew her close. “Gabriella. Oh, my child.”

She slid her arms around him in return, a careful embrace that eased into a true one as tears started from her eyes.

He released her, only to grasp her mother around the shoulders, hugging her, then grab her head and kiss her. Lips firmly pressed to hers, he cradled her to him.

“Uhh, Your Grace?” Hal appeared by her side. “If you remember the question I put to you two weeks ago? May I please have your daughter’s hand in marriage?”

The duke released Veronique, though he kept hold of her arm. His face was flushed, his eyes dark as night. He stared at Hal then Gabriella.

Best make sure he knew her choice. She gazed up at Hal, anchoring herself to his arm.

Just try to part them now.

“I have just this minute found her, Halford. I should make you wait at least as long as it takes to read the banns.”

“I will agree to that, Your Grace, if you will write to my father with your acknowledgement of Gabriella today.” Hal laid his hand on top of hers. “We will need the time to plan the wedding and introduce her to society as your daughter and my future wife.”

“I have one other condition.” The duke’s stern countenance dropped back into place in less than the tick of the clock. “Promise me you will remain in England.” He ran his thumb down her jaw, a soft warmth that penetrated to her heart. “I need to get to know my daughter.”

“Why must they remain in England?” Veronique cocked her head at the duke, one delicate eyebrow raised. “What if they wish to come visit me and my father in Angouleme?”

“But you will be here, in England, my dear. There is one more proposal I wish to discuss with you.” He gathered her into his arms and kissed her again.

“I will take that as permission as well.” Hal pulled Gabriella to him. “To the bride and groom.” He pressed his lips to hers, sweet and wonderful beyond belief.

“Well, Hal,” Celinda said, sounding very far away, “now I’m surely holding you to your promise about Lord Finley. I need to have my happy ending as well!”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

The cut crystal chandeliers threw beams of light down from high above the excited throng of people waiting to see her as Gabriella walked into Lady Ulley's ballroom a scant week since the Duke of Rother had acknowledged her as his daughter and Hal had proposed.

Heart beating with excitement and dread, Gabriella leaned a little more on Hal's arm than she normally would have, but it was très étrange to now be the lady wearing the beautiful gown and not merely the maid who had constructed it. She glanced down at the green silk dress she'd created during the week while trying to keep her nerves at bay. Surprisingly, she'd found sewing now calmed her, kept her focused and less likely to brood about whether the ton would accept her as the illegitimate daughter of a duke.

On-dits had run wild during the past week, and Gabriella suspected the reason Lady Ulley's townhouse was full to bursting was because everyone wished to see the Frenchwoman the most eligible Duke of Rother had married out of hand less than a week ago. The very next afternoon after her mother's appearance, the duke had called on them at Lord Ivor's townhouse and gone down on one knee, formally asking her mother to be his wife. When Maman had immediately said yes, he'd pulled a special license from his pocket and spirited her off to the nearest church that very day.

Gabriella might've been scandalized—if he wished to marry her mother, he should have taken his time and courted her properly—however, her mother's glowing face when she told Gabriella the news of the betrothal and her radiant smile as she spoke her vows to the duke had stilled any protest Gabriella could've made. Maman had waited eighteen long years to be with the man she loved. What need was there for her to wait longer?

Unfortunately, her father's impetuous attitude toward his own wedding had not extended itself to hers and Hal's.

To the contrary, when Hal had immediately asked for her hand in marriage, Papa, as he'd asked her to call him, had remained adamant that she and Hal must wait for the banns to be read so that he would not lose the daughter he'd just gained. Even though Gabriella could understand that, it didn't make it any easier for her and Hal to remain circumspect in their meetings with one another, especially when each time they met they were drawn to one another as though he was the south pole of a magnet, and she his absolute north. The past week had been a frustrating series of longing looks and heavy sighs.

"There he is, Rother." Hal nodded toward a tall, striking gentleman who bore quite a resemblance to Hal, especially around the eyes and nose. "You promised to perform the introduction."

Papa turned from whispering something in Maman's ear that had made her cheeks quite pink and brought his quizzing glass up to his eye. He looked the Duke of Brixham up and down then dropped the glass monocle and nodded. "Very well, Halford. Although I do not see what all the rush is about."

"You seemed more than rushed to marry Madame d'Aventure," Hal grumbled, so low only Gabriella could hear him, thank goodness.

Frowning, she tugged sharply on his sleeve and shook her head. "Hush, mon cher . Do not offend Papa. He has only grudgingly given his consent for our marriage."

"Well, my father hasn't given consent at all, and I insist we remedy that tout suite ." He smiled down at her, but his eyes were serious. The past days had been a whirlwind of excitement for Gabriella but a trial for her beloved. "We still must have his blessing, or you will be marrying little more than a pauper until my father dies."

“Have faith, mon c?ur . My papa will make his wishes known à ton père . He will not deny me my happiness.” Gabriella returned Hal’s stare until his face softened.

“You have great faith in your father, my love.” He chuckled softly. “I only hope you have as much in me.”

“Have I not done so almost since the moment we met?” Gabriella stiffened. The Duke of Brixham was almost upon them.

“Brixham, well met.” Papa sounded jovial; however, Gabriella had learned in the short time she’d known him that her father was a master at cloaking his true feelings.

Hal’s papa was a very imposing man, with Hal’s height, broad shoulders, and dark brown eyes, though they had none of her betrothed’s warmth. No wonder Hal was concerned about his father’s acceptance of Gabriella. She began to think Hal had not exaggerated his worries over receiving the man’s blessing.

“Good evening, Rother.” The Duke of Brixham glanced from Maman to Gabriella, his face impassive.

Gabriella began to shake, as though she’d just emerged from an icy pond.

Hal squeezed her arm, giving her strength when she most needed it. She could undergo anyone’s scrutiny with Hal by her side.

Papa smiled broadly and turned to Maman. “My dear, may I introduce the Duke of Brixham? He is the Marquess of Halford’s father.” He shot a challenging look at the duke. “This is my wife, the Duchess of Rother.”

“ Je suis ravi de vous rencontrer, Votre Grace .” Maman sank in a deep curtsy. “We have all become most fond of votre fils, le marquis .”

“Delighted to meet you, Duchess.” Brixham bowed, his gaze leaping back and forth from Maman to Hal to Gabriella herself.

Her heart began to beat with the frantic fluttering of a hummingbird’s wings.

His eyes finally came to rest on Gabriella. “May I ask to be presented to this enchanting young lady, Rother?”

“Of course.” Her father motioned Gabriella to him. “Gabriella, may I introduce the Duke of Brixham? He is, as you know, Lord Halford’s father.” Papa’s stern gaze rested on the duke. “This is Gabriella Veronique d’Aventure, my daughter.”

Gabriella curtsied, her heart in her throat. If the duke didn’t approve of her, her marriage to Hal would be so much more difficult. “I am very pleased to meet you at last, Your Grace.”

“As am I, Miss d’Aventure.” His sharp gaze took her in, and Gabriella had to school herself not to tremble. What was the man thinking? Mon Dieu . Would he be appeased because Papa had acknowledged her? Would that be enough for him to approve her marriage to Hal? “You are a credit to your parents.” He turned to her father. “I’ll call around tomorrow afternoon if that’s convenient for you, Rother? So we can get on with the settlements.”

Gabriella released her breath and sent a hopeful glance to Hal, who looked stunned.

“Would two o’clock suit you?” Papa moved closer to the duke.

“Admirably.” Brixham nodded. “I imagine you will be making a formal acknowledgement of Miss d’Aventure soon?”

“We will be attending entertainments throughout the rest of the Season, so the ton

will learn of it gradually.”

“Do you think that wise, Rother?” Hal’s father frowned at Papa. “Wouldn’t one grand announcement be better for all concerned?”

“Do you wish me to put it in The Times , Brixham?” Papa’s mouth settled into a firm, thin line. He turned to Maman. “If you will excuse me, my dear? Brixham and I need a moment to talk.”

“Of course, mon cher .” Maman smiled tranquilly. “You must do what is best for dear Gabriella.”

The two dukes immediately headed toward the doorway, already deep in their conversation.

As soon as her father had gone, Gabriella hurried back to Hal’s side. “This is a good thing, is it not, mon c?ur ?”

“Amazingly good, my love.” He took her arm and wound it through his. “I would not have believed my father would capitulate so easily.” He gazed down at her, the warmth in his eyes making her tingle. “I think he fell in love with you at first sight. Like father, like son.”

“I must agree with Hal, Gabriella.” Her mother came to join them, her eyes sparkling with merriment. “Between your father’s acknowledgement of you and your own loveliness, I think the duke has been bewitched.”

“I am afraid he may be stubborn in his demands for the marriage settlements and dowry.” Hal sighed. “Unfortunately, the circumstances of your birth will give him the advantage in bargaining, my dear.”

Gabriella's heart sank. Would her father agree to such demands? "Has Papa discussed this with you, Maman? Will he agree to provide me with a generous enough dowry, do you think?"

"Do not fret, ma petite ." Maman's smile eased Gabriella's fears. "Your papa has said he will agree to almost any amount in order to give you what your heart desires."

"Oh, Maman." Tears pricking her eyes, Gabriella hugged her mother, uncaring if everyone saw. "He is truly the best Papa, n'est-ce pas ?"

"He is, ma cherie . He truly is." Maman stepped away from her and lifted her head until she looked into her eyes. "But now you must pay attention to your betrothed. You do not wish him to feel neglected, do you."

"Of course not." Wiping her eyes with her handkerchief, Gabriella turned back to Hal with a broad smile. "I would never do that." She held out her hand to Hal. "Shall we dance, mon amour ? I wish to fly all around the room to proclaim my utter joy."

"Your wish is my command, sweetheart." Hal smiled broadly and took her arm once more. "Do you think the next dance might be a waltz?"

"You love the waltz, n'est-ce pas ? I think you would dance every dance if they would play all waltzes." Gabriella giggled as he led her to the dance floor.

"If it meant I could hold you in my arms like this all night, I absolutely would." He grinned and grasped her hand and waist just before the orchestra commenced with a lilting tune. Hal started them off briskly, and Gabriella had to concentrate to keep up with his eccentric pace.

" Mon cher , you do understand the beginning of the waltz is performed in three-quarter time?" she managed to say as they swooped across the floor.

“Of course I do, my dear.” Hal continued to turn them as their hands came up to form an arch over top of them. “I am merely getting my ‘waltzing legs,’ much as one has to get their sea legs, don’t you know. I don’t believe I’ve danced enough recently.” He gazed at her with hungry eyes. “I’ve been waiting for the perfect partner all my life. And now I have found her, thank God.” Hal dropped his voice. “I may not be able to let you go after tonight. Can your father be persuaded, do you think, to our marriage taking place sooner than three weeks?”

Sighing, Gabriella kept a careful watch on where they were going, as her beloved currently had eyes only for her. “I fear not, mon amour . Papa is adamant that I remain in his house until the day he has appointed.” She cast her gaze down, not wanting him to see the distress in her face. “And although I, too, am impatient to be your wife, I also wish to be his daughter for just a little while longer.”

“I suspected as much, my love.” Hal’s voice had taken on a tender note. “And I do understand the duke wishing to make up for the lost years. Regrettably, I’ve never been the most patient of men, although I suppose I will have to acquire that virtue with the speed of a Derby champion.”

The music came to an end, for which Gabriella was rather glad. Waltzing with Hal was a challenge, to be sure. “Shall we return to Maman?” She peered around the room, searching for her mother. “I don’t wish for her to be alone so long if Papa had not returned to her. She knows no one in English society yet.”

“Of course, my dear.” Hal started them back toward the front of the ballroom, when they were stopped dead by a shrill shriek behind them.

“Gabriella! Gabriella, is that you? What on earth are you doing here ?”

The sound of that sickening voice sent a shiver of dread coursing down Gabriella’s back. She looked up at Hal to find his face pinched as if he had heard the jarring

notes of an instrument dreadfully out of tune. As one, they turned to find Lady Chalgrove standing there, her eyes wide and wild, her lips in a snarl.

“Lady Chalgrove, how lovely to see you again.” Hal’s smile threatened to turn into outright laughter. “It has been much too long.”

Wanting to sink through the floor to hide herself, Gabriella held onto Hal’s arm as though it were her only lifeline in a maelstrom.

“Indeed, my lord.” She cut her gaze to Hal, her eyes snapping. “I would say it was not long enough given the circumstances of our last meeting.” Then she shifted her attention back to Gabriella, outright hatred in her face. “I see you are still enamored of my maid, although how you managed to smuggle her into this assembly I do not know. Lady Ulley will feel herself ill-used when she finds her guest is consorting with one of the servants.”

“Miss d’Aventure has not been a servant since she left your service, Lady Chalgrove. A day that will forever be celebrated as her day of independence.” Hal still spoke jovially, although Gabriella detected an undertone of contempt. “And I believe if you ask Lady Ulley, you will find that Miss d’Aventure is a most welcome guest this evening.”

“I sincerely doubt that, my lord.” Lady Chalgrove continued to glare at Gabriella, as if willing her to flee the ballroom.

If Hal hadn’t had her arm anchored firmly in his, she might have done so. Of all the people she could have seen tonight, Lady Chalgrove was absolutely the last one she would have chosen.

“Lady Ulley would scarcely allow a lady’s maid to enter her house and pretend to be a person of quality,” Lady Chalgrove continued, her lips pursed in disgust.

“I assure you, my lady, that Miss d’Aventure is a person of quality.” Hal beamed down at her and squeezed her hand. “In fact, I will make you privy to a secret,” he leaned toward the odious woman, “that shortly Miss d’Aventure will become my wife and the Marchioness of Halford.”

Lady Chalgrove’s face drained of color, her hand going to her throat as if she might be choking. “That cannot be true! Your father would never allow such a mesalliance , Lord Halford.”

“Oh, but I assure you he will, Lady Chalgrove.”

Gabriella jumped at the voice of her father. Papa and Maman had come upon them on silent feet.

“My lord.” Lady Chalgrove smiled at her father, a simper in her voice. “Do you have knowledge of this scandalous marriage Lord Halford is proposing between himself and a lady’s maid?”

“Indeed, madame, I have intimate knowledge of it.” Papa’s face had changed until he reminded Gabriella of the gargoyles on the cathedral of Notre Dame.

“Why would that be, Duke?” Taken aback, Lady Chalgrove frowned. “I do not recall that you are related to Lord Halford or the Duke of Brixham.”

“No, but I am related to Miss d’Aventure.” Her father sent her a smile that lit up his face. His pride in her was so obvious her heart hurt in her chest. “As father of the bride-to-be.”

“What?” The single word was all but a whisper, as though Lady Chalgrove’s stays had been too tightly laced.

“Miss d’Aventure is my daughter, madame. A fact that the entire ton will be aware of hereafter. I acknowledge that she is my offspring, and as such the Duke of Brixham is delighted to welcome her into his family.”

“That makes it absolutely official, my love,” Hal whispered to her. “My father will not dare renege on the betrothal now it has become common knowledge.”

“Or will as soon as Lady Chalgrove spreads it about.” Gabriella sighed. “She will make it seem that you are marrying far below your station, mon amour . Do you mind very much what the ton says about us?”

“I have never cared before this, sweetheart.” Hal grinned down at her. “Why would it bother me now?”

“But this is outrageous, Duke.” Lady Chalgrove had apparently regained the power of speech. “You never once even intimated you had a daughter.” She stared at Gabriella, her dislike emanating like waves of an icy fog. “Would you have kept her a secret until after you married?”

“As her mother kept the secret from me for eighteen years, I may be forgiven by the ton for being ignorant of my responsibility. That, however, has now been remedied.” He drew Maman out from behind Hal, where she’d been standing unobtrusively, and turned to her. “My dear, may I present to you Lady Chalgrove, an acquaintance of mine, and the woman who was our daughter’s employer for a time.”

Lady Chalgrove’s mouth dropped open, her face varying from stark white to fiery red. Finally, she drew in a breath, her face falling into harsh lines. “You are Gabriella’s mother?”

“Yes, my lady.” Maman’s voice was even, although the look she gave Lady Chalgrove would have sent Gabriella scurrying out of the room had it been leveled at

her. She knew that look oh, so well, and the consequences that followed it were never pleasant.

“And my wife, Lady Chalgrove.” Papa’s smile was just as menacing as Maman’s voice. “May I present the Duchess of Rother?”

That Lady Chalgrove did not fall down in a faint did the woman credit as far as Gabriella was concerned. She would give the devil her due. But she could not pretend that she didn’t delight in the look of horror on the woman’s face.

Her former employer looked from Papa to Maman to Gabriella, and finally to Hal, who grinned broadly. “Surprise, my lady.”

Lady Chalgrove’s chest heaved as she tried to pull enough breath into her body. It was never pleasant having the wind knocked out of your sails. At last, the lady threw back her shoulders, sent scathing looks to all of them, then turned on her heel and stalked toward the ballroom entryway.

“I suppose the cat is out of the bag now, Duke.” Hal’s grin had widened.

“It would seem so.” Papa nodded toward Lady Chalgrove, who had stopped to join a cluster of ladies talking near the doorway. She leaned toward them, shot a malevolent look toward the four of them then bent her head and began speaking animatedly.

“Under these circumstances, Duke, I think it would be prudent for my marriage to Gabriella to proceed without delay.” Hal took her arm again, more possessively than before. “That way Gabriella will have the protection of both your name and mine.”

Papa raised an eyebrow at Hal. “I seriously doubt the lady will seek to have Gabriella physically harmed. Her spite will go no further than putting about something to besmirch her name or mine. That I will take care of first thing tomorrow.” Papa

chuckled. “What Lady Chalgrove may not have realized—nor you either, Halford—is that when I married Veronique, I gained guardianship over Gabriella. And as her guardian, I have the legal right to fight for her if anyone tries to sully her or her family’s good name.” Papa’s gaze came to rest once more on Hal. “A valiant effort, Halford, but the wedding will proceed at the appointed time, now in two weeks.”

He took Maman’s arm and led her to the dance floor.

Gabriella laughed softly at the forlorn look on Hal’s face. “Do not fret, mon cher . The time will pass quickly.”

Hal gave her a rueful smirk and shook his head. “If you were a gambling lady, my dear, I wouldn’t take that bet for any sum.” He took her arm and steered her toward the dance floor as well. “The next two weeks are going to be everlasting.”

Something about the glint in his eyes, however, told Gabriella that Hal was going to try his best to find a way to make their marriage occur sooner rather than later.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

A week after Lady Ulley's ball, Hal stood at the Duke of Rother's door once more, bouquet of flowers in hand, and plied the brass lion-head door knocker. The past seven days had been frustrating beyond belief, despite his formal betrothal to Gabriella. Of course, his frustration stemmed from their betrothal and the fact they were still being watched like hawks.

Because Rother still wouldn't allow their wedding to be moved up, Hal had had to resort to one subterfuge after another to have any time alone with his beloved. Instead of being able to take her in his arms—and into his bed—whenever he wished, he was relegated to merely wooing the woman he would've married in a heart's beat if only her father would get off his high horse and let him. It wasn't even as if Rother was paying complete attention to Gabriella. He and the duchess spent an inordinate amount of time together, though they were putting off their wedding trip in order to chaperone Gabriella until her wedding.

Hal had to admit, it was only the Rother's' perpetual presence that had kept him from pressing Gabriella to run away with him and use the special license he'd already obtained. Or at the least spirit her away somewhere to anticipate their wedding night. Likely that was the real reason the duke had remained in London.

The door opened, and Hal was admitted and shown to the family drawing room, where Gabriella was sitting talking animatedly with her parents. She jumped up and ran to him, throwing her arms around him and pulling his head down for a sweet kiss. When she stepped back, her mother looked fondly at him and her father glared as though he'd like to run him through with a saber. Well, that was to be expected when the man had only just found Gabriella. But that didn't make it any easier.

“Good afternoon, Duke, Duchess.” He bowed quickly then addressed himself to Gabriella, who had slipped her arms around his waist. Now the torture would begin. Every time he’d touched her in the days since they’d become betrothed, the fire she lit in his nether regions threatened to consume him completely. Did she know the agonies she caused him? He gazed down at her. Something in the saucy smile she sent him told him she did—and delighted in it. “Good afternoon, my love.”

“Good afternoon, mon cher .” Gabriella squeezed him, and Hal had to bite back a groan as his cock made its presence known with a vengeance. The last thing he wanted was for the duke to see how strongly his daughter affected him. Especially not today. “Come sit beside me on the chaise.”

“First, my dear, these are for you.” He handed her the bouquet of primroses and larkspur, the best blooms from his father’s garden.

“Oh, il sont très jolie .” She buried her petite nose in the blooms and breathed deeply. “Merci, mon amour .”

“Gabriella,” the duchess called to her, “ring for Carter. They must be put in water immédiatement .”

“Oui, Maman .” Still sniffing the flowers, Gabriella pulled the bell. “Please take your seat, Hal.”

“I would, my dear, but I had hoped your parents could spare you for an hour or so. I’d like us to visit the house where we will live once we are married.” Hal looked hopefully at the duke. He’d not been completely alone with Gabriella since the engagement, and he wanted that to change. Today.

“I believe we can make time to accompany you, Halford.” The duke’s gaze pierced him, as if the man understood all too well what Hal had in mind. “We have no fixed

plans for the day.”

Hal’s heart sank. Even this little time alone with the woman he loved was going to be denied him.

“ Mon amour. ” The duchess turned to her husband. “I fear I am trop fatigue . I thought I might rest for some time before dinner.”

“Are you ill, my dear?” The alarm on Rother’s face did him credit. The man had fallen back in love with Gabriella’s mother the moment they’d been reunited.

“ Non, mon amour . Do not fear. I merely need some time in bed.” Her eyes closed to mere slits. “I had thought you might keep me company.”

Rother’s brows swooped upward, like birds taking flight. He took the duchess’s hand. “Of course, I will, my dear. Halford and Gabriella can wait to see the house, can’t you, Halford?”

“Certainly, Your Grace.” Hal bit out the words with a cheerful and totally false smile.

“Good.” The duke rose and assisted his wife to her feet. “Carter will see the marquess out, Gabriella.”

“ Oui, Papa .” Gabriella continued sniffing the flowers, completely unconcerned that they still could not be alone.

“Will you dine with us this evening, Lord Halford?” The duchess spoke as she and the duke stepped into the corridor.

“I would be delighted, Duchess.” At least he could see Gabriella even if he couldn’t touch her.

Gabriella sent him a sweet smile then her gaze shifted to her parents. “ Sentez-vous mieux, Maman. ”

“ Merci, ma petite .” The duchess waved as she and Rother hurried out of sight and Carter entered the drawing room.

“You rang, Miss Gabriella?”

“Yes, Carter.” She handed him the flowers. “Will you please put these in water and set them in the foyer. I wish for everyone who enters to see them.”

“Very good, miss.” The butler took the bouquet, bowed, and left.

“ Bon .” Gabriella turned to Hal, her eyes suddenly hungry. “Now you can kiss me properly, mon cher .”

“I thought I was leaving.” Hal peered at the thin crack where the butler had left the door open.

“Only if you wish to.” Gabriella slid her arms around his neck. “Or would you rather kiss me?”

“Oh, I would rather do much more than kiss you, my love.” He skimmed his arms around her slim waist. “But I will take what I can get and be thankful.” Then his mouth was on hers, and thoughts of who might see them vanished like a puff of wind. The taste of her sweet lips drove him wild with wanting her. He pressed closer then slipped his tongue into her mouth.

Gabriella grasped his face, pulling him further into her, shocking him to his core. Before he could recover from that, she turned the tables and thrust her tongue into him. Groaning, he cradled her head, marveling at how perfectly they fit together. At

how wonderful it felt to be so close to her. At how much he wanted her in his bed. Uncaring who might walk through the door, Hal slid his hands down her back, reveling in every luscious curve until he reached her derriere , which he cupped and squeezed, pressing her firmly against the hardness in his breeches.

She broke the kiss, gazing up at him with passion-filled eyes. “You wish to go to my chamber now, mon amour ?”

“I...uh...” The woman had a knack for throwing him off kilter at every turn.

“That is why you wished to take me to our house, n’est-ce pas ?”

“Well, that...might have crossed my mind.” He didn’t know where to look. Not at her, though he could feel her gaze on him.

“I think it must have crossed something else as well, mon cher .” She stroked the front of his tented breeches ever so slightly, and he danced backward, her bare touch like fire to his cock.

“Gabriella!”

Chuckling, she came toward him and took his hand. “Do not be shocked, Hal. I am not one of your English maidens who knows nothing of how to please a man.”

His jaw dropped. Never had he expected such a statement from his bride-to-be. “You know?”

“Once I was affianced, Maman instructed me in what to do to make certain I pleased my husband.” She tugged him toward the door.

“But, Gabriella, we are in your father’s house,” Hal whispered, although no one

seemed to be in the vicinity.

She shrugged and opened the door a little wider. “It is a very large house, mon amour . Almost a mansion. I do not believe my papa will know a thing.” The minx grinned at him. “Maman will make certain he is paying attention only to her.”

Hal didn’t know what to think about that. Had the duchess given her tacit approval for their tryst?

“Be very quiet, mon cher .” Gabriella led them at a fast pace out into the corridor, in the opposite direction from the one the duke and duchess had taken. Almost immediately, they came upon a narrow set of stairs that wound upward. “Come with me.”

They climbed the steep staircase to the next floor where Gabriella paused at the door. “The good thing about having been a servant is my knowledge of how a noble household works, including the servants’ stairs. They are always tucked out of the way, for the master does not wish to see the servants at all.” She opened the door a crack then poked her head out. “ Viens .”

She pulled him down the corridor, their feet making little noise on the soft beige and brown Turkish carpet. Halfway down the hall, she stopped before a stout oak door, glanced both ways, then opened the door and pulled him inside. “Now we are truly alone, mon amour .”

That they were. Hal gazed around at the chamber, taking in the feminine furnishings but also the fact that they were as alone as they had ever been. Suddenly, Hal had misgivings. “I don’t think I should be here, Gabriella.”

“Perhaps not if we wish to be strictly by the rules, as my papa would want.” She laced their hands together. “But we will be married in two weeks. What difference

can it make?”

“If your father were to find out—” Hal had a nightmarish image of the duke crashing through the door as he and Gabriella were in *delicto flagrante* .

“And if he did, what then?” She came toward him until she stood between his feet. Peering up at him, she unbuttoned his jacket. “Will he break the betrothal? Challenge you to a duel?” Gabriella waved that away as though it were a dish that displeased her. “In his youth, *peut être* . I understand he was *assez sauvage* . Now, though, he can do nothing.” She gazed at him, a look in her eyes that made him catch his breath. “Because I, his daughter, love you. There is nothing he will do to hurt me, so he can do nothing to you, *mon c?ur* .”

She might speak the truth, but Hal wasn’t so sure. Perhaps if he hadn’t been under the duke’s roof, he would’ve been less nervous about indulging in the pleasures of the bed with the man’s daughter before they were married. Still, he didn’t attempt to stop her when she drew his jacket off and started on his cravat.

“Is this your method of seduction, Gabriella?” His heart had begun to race as she freed his cravat and draped it gaily over the mirror that sat on her *toilette* table.

“ *Mais oui* .” She unbuttoned the placket of his shirt and slipped her hand inside.

The moment she touched him, Hal knew he was lost. Her bare skin against his was incredibly arousing, his body playing traitor to what his head told him was unwise. “Gabriella, we shouldn’t—”

Her other hand went to his lips, silencing him. “Yes, we should, *mon amour* .” She pulled his head down and kissed him again, shattering any vestige of resistance he had left. “When two people love one another as we do, then *absolument*, they must make love.”

He didn't disagree with her. Couldn't. Easing his arms around her, Hal pulled the bow that tied the lacings of her gown and expertly unthreaded them. The garment began to sag, and Gabriella laughed and pulled it down over her shoulders. With a plop, the material fell to the ground, leaving her in only her stays and chemise, stockings and slippers.

"Your turn." She reached to unbutton his fall, but Hal stopped her.

"Allow me to do that, my dear. You may very well set off an explosion that will cause a delay in our plans."

"Very well, then." She began instead on her stays, pulling the strings out quickly. When that garment dropped to the floor, without any further attempt at seduction, Gabriella grasped the edge of the chemise and stripped it off, leaving her magnificently naked before him, save only her backless pink slippers and clocked stockings.

The sight of her glorious figure—round, sumptuous breasts, pert nipples pebbling in the exposed air, tiny waist with curvaceous hips he wanted to grasp this moment—made him stop and stare at the ultimate beauty before him. "Oh, my love. You are the most exquisite woman."

A proud smile spread across her mouth, and she raised her chin. "I am glad I please you, mon cher ." She arched her back, thrusting her breasts toward him, and he groaned. He would never be able to get these blasted breeches off in time.

Gabriella bent to untie her garter then turned to him, an impish gleam in her eyes. "Would you like my stockings on or off, mon cher ?"

With a growl, Hal tore at the buttons of his fall, ripping several off, their ping ping sounding like the patter of light rain on the carpet. His breeches went down, sweeping

everything else off with them. He pulled his shirt up and over his head in one effortless movement, until he stood as naked as she. “On, sil vous plait , mademoiselle .”

“ Ooh, mais oui, certainement .” She straightened and backed toward the bed, holding out her hand to him. “ Viens à moi, mon amour .”

Mesmerized, Hal followed her until they stood together at the edge of the bed. “You are certain, love?”

Her only response was to slide up onto the bed until she lay in the center, the covers fanned out all around her and her desire for him written on her face.

Hal climbed up until he lay next to her, head propped on one hand, drinking in the beauty of the woman beside him. He skimmed his hand down her body, light as a feather, until she shivered. Encouraged, he licked the sensitive dark peak of one nipple, while he traced a finger around the other until her skin pebbled beneath his touch and Gabriella moaned and clutched him. “Oh, mon Dieu .”

Everything Maman had told her simply had not prepared Gabriella for the wild sensations Hal’s mouth was causing all over her body. Her breasts had grown pleasantly taut with each stroke of his tongue, which was such a lovely feeling she wished he would never stop. Also deep inside her, an ache had begun that increased each time his finger grazed the tip of her nipple. The more that ache increased, the more she wanted Hal inside her, where he was supposed to be. Once he did that, somehow, he’d assuage this ache that didn’t hurt but made her long for it to end. She’d been assured, after a brief pain, there would be much pleasure for both her and her husband-to-be.

Gabriella moaned again and cupped his cheek. “You will come inside me now, mon amour ?”

He nodded and slid his hand down the length of her body, causing wave after wave of the most delightful shudders to wrack her. When he reached the apex of her thighs, Gabriella slid her legs open, and gripped Hal around the neck. Excitement warred with fear, but she wanted only the anticipation of what was to come to fill her mind now.

His fingers wandered down to the opening of her sex then stroked upward, making Gabriella catch her breath. Her body seemed to be aflame everywhere, like molten fire was pulsing through her veins. Again, his fingers stroked, this time dipping inward.

“Oh, mon Dieu .” Gabriella could scarcely speak, the sensation was so strange and wonderful.

“There is more, ma chère .” With a smile, Hal slid down until his face was pressed against her curls, his fingers poised at her opening. Then he pressed one finger inside her, making her gasp at the burn. Which was forgotten immediately when he set his tongue against her little nub, and Gabriella cried out as the ache within her throbbed uncontrollably. He pumped his finger in and out as he laved her nub, until she exploded, pulsing around his finger as she clutched his shoulders, not wanting the incredible pleasure to stop.

At last, however, her body stilled, and she sank into the mattress, completely spent.

Hal withdrew, rolling over to lie next to her again, his gaze sharp on her face. “Did I please you, Gabriella?”

She opened her eyes and cupped his dear face. “ Oui, mon amour. Tu m’as beaucoup

plu .”

“I believe that was a yes.” He smiled and rolled onto his back, his arm over his face.

“Very much a yes.” Gabriella snuggled next to him, her gaze straying down Hal’s wonderfully sculpted body, until it fell on his member, standing almost vertical. “What is wrong, Hal?”

He removed his arm from his face, followed her gaze, and shrugged. “It will take care of itself shortly.” He turned toward her, a softer look in his eyes. “I decided I wished for you to remain an innocent—or mostly innocent—until our wedding night. But luckily, I know ways to give my wife-to-be exquisite pleasure without the ultimate act of love.”

Gabriella stared back at him, torn between love for the man who wished to be honorable, and pique that he had not consulted her on the matter. That would be a topic for discussion in the near future. In the meantime, however...

She pushed him onto his back and sat up.

“What are you doing?” His look was half puzzled, half wary.

“Giving sauce to the goose, I believe Celinda said.” She grasped Hal’s cock lightly, thrilling when it struggled against her grip. “You are not the only one, monsieur , who knows how to give another kind of pleasure.” With an impudent grin, Gabriella slid down the bed until she was next to his almost fully erect member. Another look at Hal showed his eyes wide and staring as she put her lips around la bite and engulfed him.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

The bell of St. George's had been pealing for a solid hour, its music calling all the guests to witness the somewhat sensational wedding of the Marquess of Halford to Gabriella d'Aventure, recently acknowledged daughter of the Duke of Rother.

Walking sedately down the aisle on her father's arm, seeing Hal standing at the end of it, Gabriella thought her heart would burst from happiness.

Her father slipped her hand into Hal's, kissed her cheek, and whispered, "I love you, Gabriella." His duty done, he made his way to the second pew, where Maman, the new Duchess of Rother, waited for him, eyes shiny with tears.

The ceremony that made them man and wife sped by too quickly for her to savor it.

Luckily, she would have plenty of time to savor her marriage, which would be long and happy if Gabriella had anything to say about it. As she and Hal returned down the aisle, she nodded to the few friends she'd made, searching for the one face she longed to see.

Lady Celinda sat toward the middle, her escort a handsome, dark-haired man in an elegant morning coat. Beaming at her, Celinda mouthed something as they passed that Gabriella didn't catch.

As she and Hal left the church for the wedding breakfast at Rother House, she turned to Hal, kissed him long and lovingly then asked, "What did Celinda say to you?"

"Quid pro quo ." He laughed and kissed her again.

The wedding breakfast had seemed interminable to Gabriella. She would much rather have gone straight to Halford House, but the English must make merry after insisting on such a long, drawn-out affair as their betrothal. And if it pleased her papa, she supposed that was all that mattered. But now she and Hal were at last on their way to their own chamber, their own bed, and their wedding night.

They had managed no other trysts in the past two weeks. Perhaps her Maman had had a change of heart where her daughter's debauchery was concerned, or perhaps her glowing face the next morning had given something away to her father. Whatever it was, both her parents had remained watchful when Hal came to dinner, and they were not able to exchange as much as a kiss that was not chaperoned.

So tonight would be their first time making love as married people were supposed to do. She'd not minded that Hal had wanted to wait for this night, but now the time was near—

"I cannot wait for us to arrive, mon cher ." She squeezed the hand holding hers on his knee, as though he didn't wish to let her go ever again. "There is so much we need to celebrate."

"That is true, my dear. How would you like to begin?" Hal's voice had that teasing tone she'd come to recognize with more than a little dread. "Shall we stroll around the property? Or would you like to meet all eighteen servants first? Or perhaps we should have some dinner to begin. We only just ate, but it never does to turn down food."

"I think you wish to do all of these things as much as I do." Gabriella patted his arm and looked out the carriage window as they rounded a corner into St. James's. "Which one is it?"

“The one in the middle of the street, with the blue door.” Hal pointed to a terraced house across from a quiet stretch of St. James’s Park, not far from the site of their outing where she’d slapped Hal and stormed off. Mon Dieu , that seemed so long ago. “I bought it because of the blue door.”

“That does not surprise me, cher . Tu es très excentrique .” She laughed. Her husband had more than a little wildness in him. Merci, bon Dieu .

The carriage came to a halt, and Hal jumped down, waved the groom off, and handed her down himself. Before she could take a step, Hal swooped her up into his arms, ignoring her cry of surprise and heading for the door.

A middle-aged butler, tall with a stout stomach, opened the front door. “Good afternoon, my lady, my lord.” The man bowed low. “May I wish you both the happiest of marriages. I’ve summoned the staff—”

“Thank you, but later, Davis.” Hal didn’t stop or put her down. He kept up his fast pace all the way to the end of the foyer and up the front staircase without breaking his stride.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Where do you think?” He paused at the only door on the left side of the first-floor corridor and shifted her to one arm so he could open it. Once inside, Hal spun around and kicked the door closed.

Panting, he carried her to the massive, black oak bed and seized her mouth. Lowering her onto the mattress, he kissed her long and thoroughly, stealing her breath before leaving her lips to caress the tender flesh below.

Frantically, she arched her neck, baring the whole of it, hoping to tempt him into

exploring all of her. The feel of his lips on her sensitive flesh sent chills down her arms and through her body to lodge low in her belly, that ache deep inside she remembered so well.

It only increased as he kissed and sucked her breasts where they spilled over her stays then licked the deep cleft between.

“Ahhh.” Her moan emerged from the back of her throat. A blaze had started in her that would not be quenched save one way.

Hal groaned in answer and lurched to his feet. He stripped his breeches off then climbed into the bed with her. “I have been waiting so long for this moment, Gabriella.”

She refrained from mentioning they could have had this moment two weeks ago. What difference did it make? They were married and in the bedroom of their own house. Alone. They wouldn’t need anything other than privacy for a very long time.

Cool air touched her thighs then his hot body pressed her into the mattress.

“ Merci beaucoup, mon amour ,” she said, tugging at her bodice until her breasts popped over the edge.

“The pleasure is all mine.” He wrapped his lips around her nipple.

“ Sacre Dieu !” Gabriella surged up into him, pressing her breasts into his mouth while she ground her lower body into his hips, seeking what she’d wanted for so long.

Licking first one then the other breast, he surprised her anew when he blew gently on them. They cooled immediately, gooseflesh popping out all over her.

“I’m sorry we had to wait so long for this, love.” He panted in her ear, the aching need in his voice confirmed by the stiff cock he rubbed along her thigh.

And oh, she could not wait to appease that eagerness. “We need wait no longer, mon c?ur .” Her need for him spiraling, she urged her hips against his. “Do it now, mon amour . Do it now.” If he didn’t take her this moment, she thought she’d go mad.

Without protest, he pushed himself into her with one vigorous thrust, and it was done. He slid inside her, bringing some pain, but it mattered not at all. The important thing was that they were together at last.

Groaning with need, Hal gave another thrust, filling her completely.

The lovely fullness of him, of knowing they were joined as one, made Gabriella try to savor the moment. However, as before, each movement drew her on, building the excitement, so she was unable to stop and treasure it. She must go onward to that inevitable pinnacle.

He moved again and again, in a rhythm like nothing she’d ever felt before. With a sudden shift, he increased the tempo, until the pulse between them became stronger, and without warning, her body exploded, gripping him inside her.

“Oh, oh, mon amour !” She clutched Hal to her, thrusting her hips toward him, unable to stop the frenzied movement that brought her such incredible pleasure.

Suddenly, Hal strained against her, cried out, then slumped onto the bed.

Sated at last, her body relaxed, she lay motionless, completely happy.

“Christ, did I hurt you?” Hal started up from the bed, turning an alarmed face toward her.

“If so, it wasn’t enough to give a thought to. But can you please do it again right now?” Her racing heart slowed, returning to something like normal. Still, she couldn’t wait to feel that connection to Hal once more.

He laughed and kissed her, long and slowly. Let it never end. Finally, he lifted his head. “You were exquisite, my love. I’ve never felt such passion with a woman.” He clutched her tighter, kissing her lips, nose, eyes one by one. “Now you’re mine as never before.”

“And you are mine. Forever.” Fiercely possessive now, she clutched at him until finally he eased out of her, and she drew him back to her.

A sigh escaped his lips as he slid his hand over her breasts. “I hope your wedding gown isn’t in total ruins.” He pulled the short, puffed sleeve of the dress off her shoulder. “All we need do is rid ourselves of the rest of this clothing, and I will be happy to start again.”

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

October 1820

All Hallows Eve

Dressed in a frothy pink ballgown from an earlier era—one in which the skirts of the noble ladies had stuck straight out to the side like large baskets—Gabriella twirled around the ballroom floor in the arms of a valet, for that was the masquerade costume her husband had insisted on coming in.

“It is the best costume I’ve ever worn, my dear, as it brought me you,” Hal had said when she’d looked shocked as he entered her dressing room attired as he had been when he’d pretended to be Carpenter. “Don’t tell me you’ll be ashamed to appear on my arm at Lady Hamilton’s masquerade, will you? You didn’t used to be so squeamish about standing up with a valet.”

“Well, I never actually stood up with Horace, now did I, mon cher ?” Gabriella had laughed softly. She’d slipped her arms around her husband’s neck, leaned close and whispered, “I’d much rather lie down than stand up with you, mon amour .” Fortunately, Grimes hadn’t been in to help her dress yet, or she’d have had to change clothes yet again. Hal had a habit of visiting her chamber just as she was getting dressed—which always made them late for whatever function they were going to.

Now, however, they were sailing around the ballroom floor in a lovely waltz, no one remotely interested in a lady dancing with a servant. That was the beauty of a masquerade. You could be anything you wished to be and no one cared a sou . Of course, Gabriella wished to be no one but who she was—the luckiest woman in the world married to the handsomest, kindest man alive.

“Penny for your thoughts, my love.” Hal twirled them around, speeding through the steps of the dance as though they were in a race.

“I was thinking how lucky I am to have married you.” She gazed up into her husband’s eyes, smiling so broadly she feared she would burst with happiness. “Who would have thought the night I stole onto the balcony seeking my father, I’d instead find the man I was destined to marry.”

Hal grinned down at her. “Almost everyone at that ball, I daresay.”

“What? *Que veux-tu dire ?*” Gabriella frowned at him.

“Only that everyone knows Lady Hamilton’s ball is The Matchmaker’s Ball.” He dipped her over as they changed course again. “An amazing number of couples who meet at that particular ball end up married. So our chances were rather good from the beginning.” He chuckled. “I should have remembered that and not been so concerned when you wouldn’t speak to me for days.”

“So Lady Hamilton is the matchmaker, *est-elle ?*” Hal turned them swiftly again, and Gabriella’s stomach dropped sickeningly. “Does this ball also have name? The Masquerade of Matrimony, perhaps?”

Her husband laughed. “Not to my knowledge. Just a lovely party where everyone can be as boisterous as they wish, because no one knows who they are until midnight, and by then no one cares what they have done.” He turned them again with a flourish as the orchestra ended the waltz.

None too soon for Gabriella. Her stomach wasn’t very happy with Hal’s skill as a partner. “I need some fresh air, *mon cher* . Quickly.” Not waiting for Hal to lead her, Gabriella picked up her massive skirts and ran for the French doors. She had to turn sideways to get through them, and it was a near thing. She just made it to the

balustrade overlooking a flower bed in time to cast up her accounts safely into the dirt. Mon Dieu , but that had been a close one.

“Gabriella! My God, are you ill?” Hal ran up beside her, as she straightened, breathing hard. She fished a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her mouth.

“It is all over, mon c?ur . Do not be concerned.” Her breath had returned to normal, and her stomach rested much easier. “Although, in future, I think it best if we not dance the waltz.” She cut her gaze up into his worried eyes. “At least not for the next seven months.”

“Seven months?” He put a shaking hand on her arm. “My love, we never have to dance again if it makes you this ill.”

She smiled and slipped her arms around him. “It was not the waltz that has made me ill, mon cher , but the dance we enjoyed just before we left the house that is ultimately the culprit.”

He lowered his voice to an urgent whisper. “Our making love has made you ill?”

“ Oui, mon amour .” She gazed up into his troubled face and cupped his cheek. “Because of the babe I now bear. Votre bébé .”

His eyes opened wide and dropped from her face to her stomach, hidden by layers of frothy pink fabric. “A baby? You are carrying my child?”

Gabriella nodded. “It would seem so. I consulted Maman several weeks ago, and she called in a midwife who says your son or daughter should be born in the early spring.” She smiled up at him. “You are pleased?”

“Pleased? Oh, Gabriella.” He grabbed her up in his strong embrace and spun them

around. "I couldn't be happier if someone had handed me the moon."

"Mon Dieu , put me down, Hal." Her stomach began to roil again. "I will be ill again and not care a sou if it is you and not the flowerbed who is baptized."

"I'm so sorry, love." He set her down immediately and peered into her face. "Are you all right?"

Gabriella waited to see if her stomach would settle and nodded at last when the volatile sensation ceased. "I think I am fine." She glared at him. "But you must not do that again."

"I wouldn't dream of it, sweetheart." He cautiously put his arms around her. "Is this all right?"

"Yes, this is fine." She laid her head against his chest. "And you are pleased we are to have a child?"

"My love, you cannot imagine how much." He gently squeezed her to him. "I love you so much, Gabriella."

"I love you too, Hal." She rubbed her cheek against him, wanting nothing more than to stay like this, enfolded in his embrace. But they must return to the ball. With a sigh, she stepped back. "Much as I wish we could remain here, mon cher , I think we must go back. There is still the unmasking, and Celinda and Lord Finley will be searching for us."

Hal's sigh was even deeper than hers. "I wish I could say you were wrong." He peered through the French doors. "I believe they are making up a country set. Shall we join in the fun?"

Gabriella made a face. “I do not think it would be wise, mon c?ur . All the turning and sashaying up and down would likely send me back out here.” She looped her arm through his and started them toward the door. “Let us simply watch the festivities until we unmask at midnight then we can go home for some revels of our own.”

“You make unmasking sound very wicked indeed, my love.” He dropped a kiss on her cheek. “I will be happy for you to unmask me any time.”

“Once was not enough, mon cher ?” She glanced up at him, a knowing smile on her lips.

“Never where you are concerned, Gabriella.” Hal tilted her head up so he could stare down at her, love shining in his eyes. “Once with you is never enough.”

THE END

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:40 pm

The Ruin of Miss Amelia Burrowes

London

May 5, 1820

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

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

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

loved, what was the point of marriage, after all? That had been her stance throughout the years.

Until now.

Next year, her two younger sisters, Caroline and Margaret, were supposed to make their come out. They could only do that if someone sponsored them, and Mama was determined that someone would. After all, Amelia's reputation could still be repaired by a good marriage. And once Amelia was accepted back into society, her younger sisters would most likely be invited to fashionable events and hopefully catch husbands of their own.

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

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

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

To do so now seemed to be tempting fate, but Mama was adamant. Amelia must

repair her reputation as much as possible. She must be seen, but only with Mr. Burke, and must under no circumstances dance or flaunt herself. She was not to ride alone with Mr. Burke in any kind of conveyance but could walk beside him in the park for half an hour only. Circumspection was paramount, Mama had said, until after the wedding.

Despite her mother's confidence, Amelia had doubted this scheme would work from its very inception. The ladies of the ton had notoriously long memories, especially where scandal was concerned. All Amelia would have to do was show her face, and tongues would wag once more. Oh, but she did hate being infamous. It had taken almost a decade for her to be able to walk down the street at home without having people stop and point and whisper. Why must they tempt Fate now? But of course, she knew the answer to that—her sisters. And because she was the one who'd put the family beyond the pale, she was the one who must make the sacrifice and marry the man from whom she was now actively hiding. The man who was supposed to be her salvation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There you are, my dear."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dear Lord, she needed to get out of this room before he ruined her for once and all. Dodging around the chair, she made a break for the door, but he grabbed her wrist and swung her around to face him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amelia’s heart sank. What could she do now? Maybe if she held herself aloof, did not respond at all, he’d think her unfeeling. God knew she didn’t want his kisses, though he was remarkably gentle once he settled into it. Ceasing to struggle, she forced herself to relax, go limp in his arms, show that the kiss meant nothing to her whatsoever.

Unfortunately, that only seemed to encourage him. He ran his tongue along the seam

of her mouth, pushing insistently, trying to gain entry. Oh, absolutely not. Once again, she pushed against his chest, digging her palms into his jacket and trying frantically to back away.

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

“Kate? Are you in here?”

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

He grunted and released her.

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

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