



Unwrapping the Duke (Wayward Dukes' Alliance #15)

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Category: Historical

Description: There were few people that Leopold Tilson IV, the Duke of Claybrook trusted. One of them being Lady Bethany Grey. It wasn't simply trust, but also love. He had every intention of asking permission to court her until she, for no reason that he could fathom, pushed him into the Serpentine, and then refused to speak to him. That was a year and a half ago and nothing has changed.

Lady Bethany Grey had fallen in love with the Duke of Claybrook. Or at least she thought she had until she heard the truth from his very lips and realized that he was not the duke she thought him to be. Hurt and enraged, she did what any sensible lady would do and pushed him into the Serpentine and never looked back.

When she comes across him in the middle of the road trussed up like a Christmas Goose, it is up to her to save him. Between a battle of wills and bruised hearts, can the two reconcile their differences, or is it already too late?

Total Pages (Source): 13

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

On a road near Singlewell, England ~ December 1817 ~

Restlessness led Leopold Tilson IV, the Duke of Claybrook, to travel later than one should, but he wished to reach his destination as soon as possible and knew that if he were to stop at an inn, he'd not sleep.

However, he was wondering what had possessed him to drive from his home, Clarington Abbey in Westmorland, all the way to Faversham in Kent in an open conveyance and in the middle of December. Actually, he knew the reason. He hadn't wanted to be cooped up in a crowded carriage with his two younger sisters, older sister, and brother. They would have driven him to madness.

As his siblings had taken the carriage, Leopold had been left with the cabriolet. It was not the best or wisest choice for traveling across England, but at least he wasn't being pestered by siblings, which suited his disposition.

Yes, he was brooding and unpleasant to be around and it was for their sakes that he didn't force them to endure his dark mood.

Leopold could think of no reason to be in poor spirits, especially since he should be celebrating. His younger twin, Crispin, had written that he and his wife, Vanessa, would be delayed in their return from Greece because she was expecting. The midwife had suggested that due to the considerable size of Vanessa's abdomen, and that Crispin was a twin, that she might deliver the same. Leopold could only hope that at least one was a son as it would free him from the need to marry and produce that blasted heir and a spare.

It wasn't that he was against marriage, but he'd yet to find the woman that he would want as that wife.

That was a lie. He had found a woman that he wished to wed, but she would not have him. Lady Bethany Grey. Beautiful, sweet, kind, intelligent, calm, and thoughtful. Leopold had just been on the verge of approaching Lady Bethany's father to seek permission to court her when she, for no reason that he could discern, pushed him into the Serpentine. He had come up sputtering and shocked.

"Why did you do that?" he had demanded.

She had opened her mouth and he waited for her reasoning, but then she glanced about. They had gathered quite a crowd of those interested in their conversation.

"I shall not speak of it in public," she said. "You may call on me to discuss the matter in private, though I do not expect you to." She then turned on her heel and marched away from him.

Leopold had not called on her because a more pressing matter had arisen and by the time he was free, the Season had ended and everyone had returned to the country, including Lady Bethany.

The following spring, Lady Bethany would not so much as look at him.

Misses and ladies had flocked to him since he had become the Duke of Claybrook at the age of eight and ten in hopes of becoming his duchess with little thought for him. He had thought Lady Bethany was different. He truly believed that she saw him, for himself, and not a duke to be trapped.

Or, maybe she did see him for himself and found him lacking, which was a most disconcerting thought.

Leopold rubbed his eyes as they began to burn. It had been foolish to travel so late, especially now that clouds covered the moon. He could barely see down the road and would need to stop at the next inn whether he was tired or not because he'd not have his horse injured.

His horse neighed the moment before men ran from the bushes and trees and for him. One tossed a rope around the neck of his horse, pulling it and the cabriolet to a halt while two other men came for him.

He hadn't thought highwaymen haunted the roads in England any longer, though there were enough ruffians about.

"Take what you will and leave me be," he ordered.

"Oh weez takin' we is," one of the men answered as he produced a pistol. "Now get out and off with yer clothes."

Leopold exited the cabriolet, but that was all. "My clothing?" he questioned in outrage.

"Ye heard him. All of 'em, and those fine boots too," another ordered.

"You mean to leave me here, without my clothing?"

"Ta keeps ye from following."

"Bloody hell! I will not follow."

"No, ye won't 'cause we are takin' your clothes, boots, horse, and this little carriage."

"It is a cabriolet."

“It will still fetch a fine coin.”

“It is winter. I will freeze.” Not to mention the embarrassment of being found quite naked in the middle of the road, or if he needed to approach an inn or home for help.

He glanced over to his horse, still held by one of the men as another went through his portmanteau that had been stashed on the floor.

“We’ll leave ya a blanket and rug.” Which the man tossed into the road. These Leopold had kept in case the weather turned uncomfortably cool.

“Off with ye clothes.”

Leopold stared at the pistol and weighed his decisions. He could risk his life by fighting or face eventual embarrassment of being stranded and naked. When a second man produced a pistol, Leopold decided retaining his dignity was not worth getting shot. Slowly he undressed, but paused when he came to his trousers because once they were gone, he would be the most vulnerable. With both pistols trained on him, Leopold grimaced and began to undo the placket but before he could finish, pain sliced through his skull.

Bethany had wanted to travel to Kent and spend Christmas with her family but had declined. Her cousin, Angelo, had invited his wife’s family, which included the Duke of Claybrook. Therefore, she had claimed that she was needed in London to oversee the gentlewomen’s club she owned with her dearest friend Tessa, now the Duchess of Ellings.

However, as Society left London for country estates, the clientele diminished, and few visited to enjoy lively discussions involving art, sciences, and politics. Worse, fewer were gambling at the tables, and it cost more to pay the staff than the club was bringing in. Therefore, she had decided to close and send everyone away to enjoy the

holiday.

What she hadn't anticipated, however, was that the silence within the club, and in her set of rooms above, would become deafening and Bethany suffered a loneliness like never before. She also experienced a pang of guilt and was filled with regret for not joining her family.

Why should she let a very unpleasant and boorish duke keep her from celebrating Christmas with her family? Besides, her uncle was ill, and it would likely be his last holiday.

It irritated Bethany to no end that she had first allowed Claybrook to wield such power over her decisions but then decided that she'd simply pretend that he was not there and ignore him the best she could as she had done since she had pushed him into the Serpentine. Unfortunately, this left her traveling to Kent on her own, and staying in inns, but she had two footmen riding beside the carriage and therefore, she should be quite safe.

On their second day of travel, Bethany had insisted that they leave as early as possible so that they could make Faversham that night, no matter how late they arrived. Therefore, as the sun was rising, she entered her carriage, and they were on their way. But before long the carriage slowed and she glanced out the window to see where they were, but nothing was around, only trees on either side.

Trepidation slid down her spine. Any manner of thieves could be hiding within the wood. Not that she'd heard of highwaymen being in the area. In fact, they were a thing of myth and legends. Still, one could not be too cautious. A quick glance to the footman riding beside the carriage brought some relief as he did not appear to be concerned so Bethany set her worries aside. When the carriage came to a full halt, she rose from her seat and opened the door before hopping to the road. "What is amiss?"

“There is something in the middle of the road, Lady Bethany.”

She frowned and walked forward “A rug?” she asked when she spied what appeared to be a rolled-up carpet.

“We will have it moved out of the way quickly,” her driver promised as the footman approached, bent and was ready to lift.

“It is not a rug, but a man wrapped in a blanket and then a rug.”

“A man?” she questioned as she hurried forward. He was wrapped from head to toe without anything exposed except a bit of hair. Further he was tightly bound with a rope about his ankles and another about his chest. “Is he alive?”

“He is breathing, but not conscious,” the footman answered.

“Do you think he was being kidnapped and fell off the back of a wagon?” she asked.

“Or he is a criminal, and this was the only way to keep him from running off.”

“Regardless, we must help him,” she insisted.

The footman bent and rolled him onto his back before pushing the dark hair back.

Bethany gasped. Even though blood covered one side of his face, and his hair was matted and a mess, she still recognized him. “Get him into the carriage.”

“He might be a criminal,” the footman reminded her.

“That is the Duke of Claybrook.”

Oh, she may find him boorish and difficult, and she had fully intended to ignore him during the holiday, but that didn't mean that she had wanted Claybrook to come to any harm and she certainly would not leave him in the middle of the road trussed up like a Christmas goose.

"Should we unwrap him first?" a footman asked. "He is a duke."

"It is easier to carry him this way," the other answered.

If Claybrook woke up, he may demand that he be untied, but as he was unconscious, and given his size, it was probably best to move him while he was all bound up.

"Once he is in the carriage, you will need to drive to the nearest town as quickly as possible," she explained.

"That would be Singlewell, the hamlet we just left."

"Then we shall return to the coaching inn, and you will go in search of a doctor."

The footmen struggled to first lift Claybrook and then carry and settle him in the carriage. He was not a small man, taller than most, and at no time did he wake nor did his eyelids flutter.

Bethany scrambled into the carriage and took a seat across from him and used her handkerchief to wipe away some of the blood, but much of it was dried.

"What happened to you? Who would do this?" she asked even though she'd not get an answer.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

Leopold struggled to open his eyes, but his head pounded too much. The first thing he recalled was awakening in the middle of the road unable to move other than roll onto his side. It had also been dark as pitch outside. He must have fallen asleep and perhaps he was dreaming because Leopold could swear that he was now in a moving carriage and a woman was wiping his brow. He had no idea who she was, but her voice was that of Lady Bethany.

He was slipping into madness.

Leopold had been thinking of Lady Bethany right before the ruffians had come upon him, but that was no cause for him to hear her now.

Unless he had died, and his hell was having to hear her voice and endure her tender touch that had been denied him in life.

An eternity with her just out of reach would be hell. That would be worse than when he encountered her in London and she ignored him.

Why did he still care for her? Was it simply because she was the only female who did not want to be his duchess?

The carriage finally slowed, and Leopold wondered at what location he would arrive—heaven or hell—and maybe the spirit accompanying him only resembled the person whom he never had but had lost none the less.

Leopold's stomach rolled, someone was hammering inside his head, and his body ached as if he'd done twenty rounds with the hardest hitting pugilist at Gentleman

Jackson's. What he needed was a soft bed, except he still wasn't certain he hadn't died.

The carriage finally came to a stop, and he risked looking to see where he was, though he feared what he might see.

Very slowly he opened his lids only to be met with the angelic face of Lady Bethany staring down at him. Her brows were furrowed, and she bit her bottom lip.

Was this hell or heaven?

It was hell. He wouldn't be in so much pain in heaven.

"There is only one room available, and I have secured it for you," someone out of his sight said.

"Thank you. Can you get His Grace up to the chamber?"

"Yes."

Chamber? Was he home?

No there is only one room. His home had several.

Leopold let his eyes drift closed, but when arms grasped at him, he quickly opened them again. It wasn't Lady Bethany he saw, but a man.

"We will take care, Your Grace, but it will be difficult to move you without causing any more pain."

Leopold nodded, or at least he thought he did and closed his eyes again, grimacing at

the pain that racked his body when someone lifted his feet and another his shoulders.

When he was next alert, softness cradled his back, and a pillow was beneath his head. At least they had managed to get him to a chamber. Now, all he needed to do was rest and all would be well.

“Ride for the doctor, Henry. Ask the innkeeper for a basin of warm water and rags, Jason. I do not know how long we will be here, but George is going to try to secure another room after he has stabled the horses and the carriage is parked.”

Leopold watched as the two men left the chamber and closed the door behind them. Lady Bethany turned and glided over to Leopold.

“What happened?” she asked.

Leopold tried to remember but could only recall snippets.

“I will wash the blood from your face when Jason returns with the basin. For now, I will untie the ropes which will make it easier for you to move.”

“Thank you,” Claybrook croaked, his voice hoarse and mouth dry.

Now he recalled trying to move earlier, when he had awakened in the middle of the road, but he’d been unable to.

Lifting his head, he glanced down to note that he was completely encased in a blanket and then a rug with a rope about his ankles, which Lady Bethany was in the process of untying, and another was about his chest, which pinned his arms against his body.

Once the first rope was untied, she tossed it aside and began to work on the one about his chest. Despite the pain he suffered each time he moved, Leopold still enjoyed the

sight of Bethany over him. As she worked at the knot, her teeth biting her bottom lip, her bodice gaped just enough to give him a delightful view of her full, creamy breasts and the one part of him that remained uninjured was beginning to respond.

“There,” she finally said as the rope loosened. She pushed against his shoulder to move him to the side.

“Sorry,” Bethany apologized when he winced and then pulled the rope from beneath him before letting him rest on his back again. She then opened the rug and Leopold let out a sigh with the weight being lifted from his chest.

“There is dirt and mud on this blanket. I’m going to remove it and get something warm and clean over you,” she was saying as she reached to open the folds.

His heart raced. There was a reason Lady Bethany should not remove his blanket, but what was it? In a flash he remembered. “No,” Leopold managed to say just as she unwrapped the blanket to reveal his naked body.

For a moment she did nothing. Instead, Lady Bethany stared down at him with wide eyes. It took but a moment, and then red, nearly the color of a poppy spread across her cheeks.

“I am sorry...oh dear...I am so very sorry,” she hastened to say as she covered him once again.

Leopold would have laughed if it wouldn’t have hurt so badly, but then he sobered with the realization that his future and fate had just been sealed.

“Rule twenty,” he murmured. Never allow an innocent miss or lady to see you naked, nor should you view her in a state of undress or there will be no choice but to marry. It was one that was never listed but should have been. Leopold just hadn’t thought of

it until now.

“I do not even want to know which one that is,” Lady Bethany bit out as she straightened and fisted her hands on her hips. “The first nineteen on your Rules on How to Avoid Matrimony for the Duke in Training, were bad enough, yet you have managed to embrace each one, even though you are long past training.”

Leopold frowned. The rules weren't for him. They'd been for his cousin, the Duke of Ellings, not that they did any good. Except the new rule twenty was what would see Leopold married to a woman who despised him.

Bethany couldn't turn away from Claybrook quickly enough. She also should not have stared, but she'd been so shocked to discover he was naked that she wasn't certain what to do. She'd never seen a gentleman who was not fully clothed before and even though she was mortified, she'd also been fascinated.

Though, she shouldn't have been surprised by the muscles in his chest and flat abdomen. When he'd come out of the Serpentine, he had removed his jacket and waistcoat, which left his linen shirt clinging to his body. The memory had often kept her warm at night, but it was nothing compared to seeing his flesh.

Goodness! Not only were his shoulders, chest, and abdomen impressive, she was quite fascinated when her eyes glanced further down.

That was what a male member actually looked like? In paintings and sculptures, they were usually short, fat and small, and not at all impressive. In fact, impressive had not even been a word she had considered before when such was observed. It was more of a curiosity given what little she knew about intimacy. Except Claybrook's was different. Not short, but longer, and hard, like a muscle.

Blast! Now her face was on fire.

She should have never viewed him in such a state. It was not at all proper, though she was not sorry either.

Why did he have to go and mention one of his blasted rules. “I can promise that I shall never tell anyone what has occurred so your precious bachelor state will not be threatened.” If anyone ever learned what had happened in this room today, she would be ruined beyond repair.

She strode to the window, which she was tempted to open if only to bring coolness into the room. Was she warm because of what she had viewed or because his mention of his rules brought her anger to the surface?

“Why are you naked?” she finally asked.

When he did not answer, Bethany turned, afraid that he had fallen asleep once again. He had suffered a hit to the head and there was a danger each time he lost consciousness. Instead, Claybrook frowned.

“Do you not remember?” That also occurred sometimes when someone was struck on the head.

“I have vague...” he cleared his throat. “Water, please,” he asked. “I am parched.”

“Yes, of course.” Bethany crossed to the table and poured a glass of water from the pitcher a maid had delivered when they were shown to the room. Doing her best not to look at His Grace, she held the glass so that he might drink.

Just because he despised her and Bethany held on to some anger toward him, did not mean that she would not take care of him. He was injured and she would see to his comfort.

“May I have assistance?”

She quickly glanced to note that Claybrook had lifted himself only so much that he was supporting his weight with his elbows. His face was strained and given the numerous bruises she'd noted on his torso concluded that he was likely in a great deal of pain. “Here.” She grabbed the extra pillows and put them behind his head and shoulders to offer support.

Claybrook relaxed back into a reclining position then blew out a sigh. While one hand grasped the blanket across his body, the other reached for the glass. Even his arms were bruised.

“Let me.” Bethany leaned forward and put the glass to his lips and tried to ignore his broad, naked shoulders.

She may need to leave and stand outside so that the temperature of her body could return to normal.

“Thank you,” Claybrook murmured.

Bethany took the glass and set it aside.

He then lay back and closed his eyes.

Bethany watched on with concern.

Leopold groaned.

She straightened.

“Chamber...” he didn't finish but placed a hand over his mouth.

Bethany grabbed the closest vessel, which unfortunately was the pitcher and held it as Claybrook tossed up his accounts.

When done, he once again fell back against the pillows, eyes closed.

While concerned for his wellbeing, she also sighed as his breathing grew steady. It was probably best that he slept while his body recovered.

Brushing his tousled hair across his brow, Bethany was reminded that at one time she cared so deeply for him. In fact, she'd been in love with the Duke of Claybrook and had even been hopeful that they would court. She had wanted him to call on her, but then she realized that the Duke of Claybrook had only been toying with her affections. She had been so angry and had acted spontaneously for the first time in her life and pushed him into the Serpentine. She almost regretted it immediately and when he asked why she had pushed him, she couldn't tell him with so many watching and listening, so asked him to call on her.

He never did. If he had ever cared, he would have visited.

Bethany turned her back once again on Claybrook.

It was better this way. He thought of her as a bird-witted twit and he was boorish and difficult. Why she still cared, she had no idea, but she did.

Drat him!

Jason, her footman returned a moment later with the cloths and water she had requested, and Bethany set to washing the dried blood from Claybrook's face. He did not wake, which brought even deeper concern for his health.

Was he more injured than she realized?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

When Leopold next woke, the room was bright from the sunlight and Bethany stood by the window speaking to an older man.

“I have stitched the gash in his head, but as he did not wake while I was doing so, it gives me grave concern.”

Was he going to die?

“I do not believe any of his limbs are fractured, but it is possible that a rib or two are bruised. He took quite a beating.”

That explained why it was painful to take a deep breath.

“His Grace should not travel or even leave this chamber for a sennight. At best he should remain in bed, but it has been my experience that those of higher rank do what they wish despite my advice.”

“Sennight!” Bethany exclaimed.

“It could prove to be fatal if he does not rest.”

Bloody hell. He was not dead yet, but it could still happen.

“Send word if there are any changes and I will come by to check on His Grace tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Dr. Gooding.”

Bethany saw the doctor to the door then turned and came toward the bed.

“How much did you hear?” she asked when he looked up into her eyes.

“Enough. I cannot remain here for so long.”

“You have little choice. You have suffered a head injury, which can cause headaches and dizziness.”

His head did pound and if he didn't know better would have thought he had overindulged the night before instead of being struck on the head.

“Are you hungry? Dr. Gooding suggests only tea and broth for now.”

His stomach grumbled, but nausea accompanied it and Leopold feared that if he tried to eat anything now, he would be tossing up his accounts in front of Bethany. Then he groaned. He had already done so. Wasn't it bad enough that she had to see him in this weakened and injured state? Must he suffer the further humiliation of vomiting while she held the pitcher?

“Do you recall what happened?” she asked.

“Some,” he answered. “Miscreants came upon me and took everything except this blanket and the rug,” he answered then frowned as he glanced down to note that he was now in bed with fresh linens and a new blanket covering him. Pillows were propped so that he reclined and was not flat on his back. Leopold could only assume that Lady Bethany's footmen had seen to having him settled in the bed and not her. Though, she had already seen everything.

“When did this happen?”

“Sometime last night. I barely recall.”

Bethany sucked in a breath. “You lay in the road all night? It is a wonder you were not struck by a horse or carriage.”

“I suppose I should feel lucky to still be alive.”

Bethany tried to read while Claybrook slept but could not concentrate on the words because of worry for him. She then tried to sleep but was not very successful. Even if she had been in a comfortable bed and not a settee, she still would not have slept.

Several times she woke to check on Claybrook for fear that he would pass while he slept. The doctor assured her that those in Claybrook’s condition were likely to sleep often, but she had also heard of those who had been struck in the head never waking and eventually dying, which was her fear.

Pushing the blanket aside, she stood and walked to the bed where Claybrook slumbered. She’d seen her brother after he had failed to shave, and one would barely notice. Claybrook already had the start of a short beard as if he hadn’t let a razor touch his face in nearly a sennight and she quite liked it. His features were sharper and less boyish, and with his hair disheveled, and still dirty from being in the road, along with the bruise on his cheek, he appeared more rugged and dangerous than the boorish duke who toyed with and broke innocent hearts.

She pushed his hair away from his face hoping that he would stir, but there was no response. He had fallen asleep early last evening and hadn’t yet woken up. What if he didn’t?

With his face relaxed in slumber, she was reminded of a time when she had truly liked him. He’d been friendly, kind and even found humor in situations. He had also utterly charmed her. Bethany had fallen in love with him that spring even though he

was supposed to have been courting her dear friend Tessa. Claybrook and Tessa had only attempted a courtship because at one time their fathers had hoped that they would be a good match. They were not.

A part of that love still lingered and came to the surface yesterday when she had seen him lying in the road and his face bloodied from the attack. Since, she had been trying desperately to shove that emotion back into the dark recess of her heart so that it never emerged again. But it was so difficult when she gazed upon him in such a vulnerable and human state without a hint of the churlish duke he had become.

Bethany shook her head and walked away from his sleeping form. She must put all emotion away for she knew that as soon as he woke and was able to move about, Claybrook would return to his unpleasant and suspicious self, and she wanted nothing to do with who he had become.

Who he may have been all along, but she'd been too foolish to see.

What were they to do? Already they'd been alone, in this inn, for nearly a full day. Such was extremely dangerous to her reputation. She was already skirting ruination by being part owner in a gentlewomen's club and living above stairs, but this would see her completely shunned by Society.

Bethany glanced out the window to the quiet hamlet that surrounded the coaching inn and watched the citizens go about their daily lives and the travelers who were arriving and leaving by carriage quite frequently. She'd not seen anyone she knew, but it was still a possibility and why she must remain in this chamber. "No one can know what has happened."

"Yes, well, it is rather embarrassing to be robbed, stripped and left in the middle of the road."

She whipped around, unaware that Claybrook had awakened.

“The ton would first be scandalized and then have fun at my expense if they ever learned.”

Of course, Claybrook was only thinking of himself. “That is not to what I refer.”

“I know,” he said softly. “Truthfully, if it was just me, I would not care.”

“Then it shall stay between the two of us?”

“Yes, Bethany, it will.” His eyes focused on her. “I would not have you ruined because you were kind enough to assist me.”

He sounded as if he genuinely cared when she knew for certain that Claybrook would do everything possible not to be stuck with her, which meant he would never breathe a word of the time they spent together for fear of what would be expected of him.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

Leopold stared at the closed chamber door. The doctor had just left and was quite pleased that he had survived the night.

Those words had sent a chill down his spine, but then he wondered at the doctor's education. Had he been so concerned, wouldn't he have instructed Bethany to send for his family or make certain the heir apparent was notified? Though, that would have been difficult since Crispin was in Greece.

The doctor also insisted that Leopold still not travel for a sennight. He agreed only to appease the doctor but would decide for himself when he felt ready to continue his journey.

He'd slept most of yesterday and Leopold wanted to be up and moving. However, each time he attempted to do so, pain racked his body. The few times that he had gotten up, he'd become dizzy. It was bloody aggravating and embarrassing to ask Bethany to call one of her footmen for assistance since he certainly could not ask her. Had he any clothing, then at least he could cross the chamber without her viewing his backside, or his front.

"I will send word to your family," she began. "My driver can be at Faversham by late tonight."

"What of you?" he asked. "Will your family not be expecting you?"

Bethany sank into a chair. "They believe that I was going to remain in London."

"Then they will not be concerned if you do not arrive."

“Nor will they ever learn of our current situation.”

“And you will not be ruined,” he added. Though in truth, given the circumstances, nobody would think less of Bethany. She’d only taken him from the road, put him in an inn and found a doctor. She could leave, report on the situation and no harm would come to her. Besides, their families would not want to risk her reputation so it was likely nobody else would ever learn the part she had played in his rescue. “You should go.”

“I cannot leave you here without someone to take care of you.”

“You cannot stay either.”

“Nor can I go on to my uncle’s home and tell your family what has happened.”

“Why not?” He frowned, then relaxed his features when pain sliced through his scalp. That must be where the doctor had stitched him.

“My Aunt Anne.” Bethany sighed. “The woman could hear gossip whispered in another county, so no matter how much I would try to tell your family in private, she would learn. That woman gossips more than anyone I have ever met and embellishes with each telling. I fear that if she learns that I have been alone with you in an inn, despite the circumstances, she will not be able to keep quiet and write to all her friends.”

Leopold had no idea who this Aunt Anne was, but the last thing either of them needed was households across England learning about his injuries and how Bethany had nursed him alone in an inn. She would be ruined beyond repair.

“Send word to my family and then return to London.”

“That would be the wisest course, but I do not feel right just leaving you alone while you are still recovering from your injuries. Dr. Gooding still has grave concerns, and I would not be able to live with myself if something happened that I could have prevented had I been here.”

Leopold started to smile. Maybe she did care, even if it was a little bit.

He closed his eyes as they grew heavy. Was it the head injuries or pain that had him wanting to sleep?

“I would seek help from Tessa, but she is too far away,” Bethany said almost as an afterthought.

Tessa was married to his cousin, the Duke of Ellings...Leopold opened his eyes, though it was difficult as they felt like there were weights on them.

If there was ever a situation that called for the assistance from any of the dukes in the alliance this would be it. “Write to her...no...write to Darius.”

Blast! The ring that he was to use on the wax seal when summoning one of the dukes had been with his things, and was now lost after being taken by some miscreant.

“They are in Shropshire. Days away,” Bethany reminded him.

“They are the only ones who can help...keep confidence.”

“Are you certain you wish me to address the letter to Ellings?” Bethany asked.

“Yes. Write...tell what happened.” His eyelids were too heavy to keep open and Leopold let them close once more. “But do not send it until...”

Bethany looked at the back of the parchment once again. Ring stolen. Come immediately. Those words Claybrook had insisted be written next to the seal of the missive being sent to the Duke of Ellings. Claybrook wouldn't explain why this was necessary, but perhaps he feared that Ellings wouldn't open the missive if Claybrook's signet hadn't been pressed into the wax.

"See that this is placed in the hands of the Duke of Ellings the moment you arrive and make certain that he knows it is from the Duke of Claybrook," Bethany instructed.

Her driver took the letter and then left. Except, he was going to travel to Shropshire on horseback as it would be quicker than taking the carriage.

A second letter had been written per Claybrook's dictation advising his family that he had been delayed and still hoped to join them but would not be able to do so for at least a sennight.

They had discussed the option of sending for his siblings, which would free Bethany, but Claybrook feared his younger brother or sisters might accidentally slip and mention how she had remained caring for Claybrook without a chaperone watching on.

That left only one problem. "My family might recognize my footmen. If I send one of them, they may assume that I am with you."

"Not if he claims that you sacked him, and he was then hired by me," Claybrook suggested.

"I am not going to ask Jason or Henry to lie," Bethany insisted. The two stood just inside the door awaiting instructions.

"Then sack one of them," Leopold offered nonchalantly, as if their livelihood was of no concern to him. It was probably because Claybrook was a duke. Why should he

care about anyone so far beneath him?

Jason and Henry straightened and shared a look of fear.

“I will not,” Bethany insisted. “We will find someone not known to us to deliver the missive.”

Claybrook lifted his eyebrows, winced, and relaxed his face. “Whoever you sack I will hire immediately.”

The two footmen relaxed.

“That way nobody is lying or being lied to.”

Bethany would much rather send a trusted servant than a stranger...

With a sigh she looked at the footmen. “Jason, I am sorry, but you are no longer needed in my employ.”

His eyes widened. Certainly, he wasn't truly afraid that he was being let go. He had listened to the conversation.

“Therefore, I shall hire you,” Leopold said. “Such heartless employers, letting servants go and this close to Christmas. It really is a shame.”

Bethany narrowed her eyes. “This is a temporary situation,” she reminded him. “If my parents inquire, tell them that I sacked you and that Claybrook was kind enough to give you a position. Just do not provide them with any details of how it came about, or you will be out of a position.” Luckily neither were dressed in the uniform they wore while working at the club, but he wasn't in Claybrook's livery either. Hopefully it would not be noticed.

Jason gulped and lost some of his color. "If they ask, I will tell them I would rather not discuss the matter," the footmen answered.

"Very good," Leopold said. "You will do well in my employ."

Bethany turned on him. "He will return to employment with me," she insisted.

"You sacked him. I may want to keep him."

She stared down Claybrook and clenched her jaw then noted that the footman still stood by the door, his eyes shifting between the two. "You may go and deliver the message from His Grace."

"He is my footman." Claybrook looked to the lad. "You may leave and please see that the message is delivered to my sister."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

A message was on its way to Ellings and another to his family. Leopold's siblings would not question his absence and would accept any excuse he offered. As for Ellings and Tessa, they would hold their confidentiality so he and Bethany may survive this situation unscathed, or at least her reputation untarnished.

Only one obstacle remained. "Is there a shop in this hamlet?"

The question was directed to the only servant who remained, Henry.

"I will see, Your Grace." Henry started to open the door. "What needs to be purchased, Your Grace?"

Leopold stared at him because the lack of clothing should be obvious.

"Oh, yes. I will return straight away."

"Take this." Bethany pressed a purse into Henry's hand.

Leopold hated that she had to purchase his clothing but a servant walking into a shop where he was not known, nor dressed in proper livery, and requesting credit on behalf of the Duke of Claybrook would not likely purchase a handkerchief let alone a complete set of clothing and boots.

"I will pay you back. I promise."

"I know you will." Her blue eyes lit with humor. "I may even charge interest."

Which he would gladly pay, given she had not only saved him, but continued to take care of him when she could have left Leopold alone in the inn and traveled on to Faversham.

Henry returned not even an hour later with the clothing he had purchased. Bethany removed herself as Leopold tried to find something that would fit him so that he could move about without exposing his nakedness. Everything was too small.

“Are you certain they had nothing larger? There must be someone who lives here that is larger than me.”

“This is all I could find in the shop.”

“Is there no tailor?” Leopold asked.

“Only a bakery and blacksmith.”

“There is nothing else?” He looked over the clothing.

“You have not tried the nightshirt, Your Grace.”

Leopold hadn’t slept in a nightshirt since he was a lad and did not want to do so now. Except, he was also sharing a chamber with Bethany. “Give it here.”

Henry handed him the nightshirt and Leopold pulled it over his head, then attempted to shove his arms in the sleeves. It fit, but he could not move because the shoulders were too narrow for him. “Bloody hell!” He turned one way and then the other, hoping to stretch the material only to have it rip. Frustrated, he tore it over his head, damaging it even further. It was impossible that he was the largest man in this hamlet.

“What about others staying at the inn or enjoying a meal before they continue their

journey? Someone must have something,” Leopold barked.

“I will go see, Your Grace,” Henry promised before he quickly left the room.

Leopold sat on the bed and pulled the coverlet over his lap. At the light tap on the door, he called, knowing that it would be Bethany. She’d already seen his body so his chest and lower legs should not be too disturbing.

“Nothing fits,” he ground out.

“So I have been told.” She actually smirked.

“That leaves me stuck here, in this bed and hiding under a blanket.”

“As you are supposed to remain in bed, I see no difficulty.”

Leopold glowered at her. Though in truth, he had moved about more today than he had since before he was attacked. His head pounded, there had been moments of dizziness, and his body still ached as if he’d been pummeled. Not that he would admit as such to Bethany. He’d already humiliated himself in front of her.

“I am certain Henry will find something for you to wear,” she offered.

He was not in the mood to be coddled, but he shouldn’t take his poor mood out on her. And he hated that he was tired—exhausted when he’d done nothing but try on clothing.

“You are in pain,” she stated.

Leopold said nothing.

“You were injured two days ago. The bruises on your body are still purple. You are foolish to be up and about and moving.”

“I am not foolish,” he ground out.

“No, you are used to matters progressing as you wish and command.”

“I am.”

“Well, do not be a fool and get some rest.”

He hated that she was right. He hated that he was weak, tired, and hurt.

“Into bed with you.” Bethany came forward and gently pushed him on the shoulder until Leopold once again lay back against the pillows.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that he’d be much more comfortable and that he would promise to remain in bed if she joined him. At one time, he may have but he did not want to risk her walking out and not coming back. Besides, in his current state, he was too tired and pained to pursue what he’d once fantasized about sharing with Bethany.

Without looking, she then drew the covers over his body.

When he next woke, it was dark outside and a candle burned on a table near where Bethany stood in conversation with Henry.

“Clothing?” Leopold asked.

“I am sorry, Your Grace, but I could find nothing.”

“I do not care what the material or fashion. I simply want something on my body.”

“There is no one I could find.”

If he could get out of this bed, Leopold was certain he could locate something to wear. “My townhouse in London. Go there and tell the butler my needs.”

“London?” Bethany asked.

“As I cannot very well travel in a blanket and apparently only men of smaller stature reside in or visit this hamlet, I have little choice,” he barked, which Leopold immediately regretted as it pained his head, and he hoped the headache didn’t return.

Bethany stiffened and stepped back at his tone.

“I will leave right away, Your Grace,” Henry offered.

“You will not,” Bethany countered.

“Why is that?” Leopold demanded.

“It is nearly eleven at night. I will not have Henry waylaid on the road as you were. He can leave first thing in the morning.”

Bethany wasn’t really surprised that Claybrook was becoming difficult, nor could she blame him. She would not be happy in his situation either.

Claybrook had asked her to leave. If Bethany truly did not fear for his well-being, she would have. He clearly did not want her here.

As the sun was rising, there was a light tap on the door. Bethany opened it to find

Henry.

“I am ready to depart.”

“Thank you and I hope you have a quick and safe return.”

She then closed the door and leaned back against it.

She was exhausted and returned to the settee in hopes of getting more sleep before Claybrook woke.

Bethany wasn't certain how long she slept, but a noise brought her from slumber, and she opened her eyes to a room lit with filtered sunlight and Claybrook standing, holding onto the foot of the bed and pinching the bridge of his nose, his face stiff in what she assumed was pain. A blanket fell about him. He may have attempted to use it to cover his nakedness, but right now it hid nothing.

She was also torn. Did she offer help or pretend to sleep. She'd heard him grumble enough about assistance. Though she shouldn't, Bethany took in his form again and when she looked up to his face, she realized he had been watching her. Bethany's face heated. Oh, she should have pretended to be asleep. Instead, he had caught her staring at his body.

“Is all well?”

“I am fine now.” He climbed into the bed and then under the covers.

Claybrook may be boorish, but his form was quite delightful to view. This was the first time that she'd seen him from the side, his firm buttocks and muscular thighs before he pulled the coverlet over him.

“What was wrong?” she quietly asked.

“Blasted dizziness after I used the chamber pot.”

Henry or Jason used to assist him, but they were both gone.

“Wake me next time.”

“I am not going to ask you to help me use the chamber pot,” he ground out. “This is humiliating enough.”

Bethany sat up. “What is humiliating?”

“This weakness, dizziness, blasted pain...needing help.”

“You were attacked and are lucky to be alive,” she chastised.

Claybrook blew out a heavy breath. “You are correct, but at least allow me to be frustrated with the situation.”

“That is allowed,” she returned. “Is there anything that I can get you?”

“No. I fear only sleep will cure what ails me.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

Leopold did not go back to sleep even though he had closed his eyes.

Why had Bethany frowned when she looked over his body? Did she find something displeasing?

He sat up and looked over at her. Bethany lay curled on her side, hands tucked beneath her cheek and blanket covering her.

She should have a bed, not be sleeping on the settee. She should inquire if there was another room available. Though he liked having her here, he just didn't like that she slept on the settee while he had the bed.

He should be on the settee and not her and would tell her when she woke.

"Do you need something?" she asked without opening her eyes.

"I am sorry if I disturbed you." How had she known he was awake?

Bethany then opened her eyes and stretched before sitting up. She still wore the same traveling dress that she had been wearing when her driver discovered him in the middle of the road. Her trunk was by the door so she could change if she wished. There was a screen before the chamber pot if she wanted privacy.

Now it was his turn to frown. Had she even used the chamber pot since they arrived?

Of course, it wasn't something he could ask, but Leopold was beginning to realize how much his being attacked had inconvenienced Bethany and vowed to make it up

to her somehow. Though, it was likely she would not let him since she did not even like him. Yet, she was kind enough to remain with him until he recovered.

Bethany was a much better person than he was.

“I will bring you breakfast.”

“You should not be doing such chores.”

“As my servants are off delivering messages and gathering clothing, either I go for breakfast, or we starve.”

He would make her allow him to make up for the inconvenience, whether she liked it or not.

“Where is your maid?”

“I gave her permission to spend the holiday with her family. My uncle has more than enough servants if I need assistance.”

She was in need of assistance now, not that Leopold would mention such to her as he would not embarrass her. He also liked her mussed appearance. The traveling dress was wrinkled for having slept in it three nights in a row and each side of her golden hair had been braided and pulled away from her face and tied with a now limp ribbon behind her head with the rest of her hair tumbling down her back.

Bethany stood, shook out her gown then frowned. Lastly, she blew out a sigh. “I shall return.”

After Bethany saw to her most urgent concerns in the necessary behind the inn, she requested a tray brought to the chamber. She’d not allowed a servant from the inn to

enter the chamber since they had first arrived, but she didn't want to remain in the common room where people dined, or even in the taproom for a tray of foodstuffs to be given to her.

Not only had she been horrified at her appearance when she caught her reflection in the mirror, but the whispers from the others gathered at tables disturbed her.

How could anyone know who she was or the guest recuperating above stairs?

Except, Claybrook was a duke, a title that invited speculation and gossip.

As she turned to return up the stairs a man stepped into her path. Bethany quickly stepped backward.

"I understand you are the one seeing to the care of the Duke of Claybrook."

She would not answer a stranger's question. Anonymity was necessary in this situation, or she risked being ruined.

"Lady Bethany, this is the Constable Merryweather," the maid offered as she came forward.

Bethany didn't think this hamlet was large enough to employ a constable. They did not even have a shop that provided clothing for the male residents.

"From Gravesend," he added as if he had read her thoughts.

She took in the information but said nothing as she was not going to confirm that Claybrook was here.

"A few of our less respectable Gravesend residents attempted to sell a Cabriolet," he

offered. “These two could not even buy an ale to share, but turned up in fine, though ill-fitting clothing, which drew suspicion, and I was asked by the magistrate to discover how they came by such a vehicle, which led me here.”

“What did you do with the men?” she asked.

“Nothing, as of yet. We have no proof that they didn’t find the cabriolet, horse and clothing abandoned in the wood as they claimed.”

Bethany nearly snorted. “As if such would be left behind.”

“Unless the owner died,” the constable commented, and she supposed that was a possibility.

“Is the Duke of Claybrook here and might I have a word with him?” the constable asked.

“I will take you up to him. I am about to deliver his morning meal,” the maid answered.

“You will do no such thing,” Bethany argued and took the tray from the girl. “If you will excuse me.”

She turned her back and marched up the stairs. She would not say a word to the constable, nor did she wish the comely maid to be in the chamber with Claybrook while he was naked in bed.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

Leopold was becoming restless waiting for Bethany to return.

What was taking so long?

What if something happened to her? They were in a coaching inn. He had been able to determine that based on the number of carriages and coaches he heard arriving and leaving and the voices that came up from the courtyard below. Any manner of disreputable man could see, then admire her, and...well, anything could happen, and he wasn't there to protect her.

At least when her servants were here there was security as they fetched food and whatnot. Now she was vulnerable.

A moment later the door flew open, and Bethany entered carrying a laden tray then kicked the door closed behind her.

"A constable is here asking to speak to you."

Leopold sat forward. "Why?"

She quickly explained the conversation. "What do we do?"

"Bring him up. I want those men caught and punished."

"Yes, but..."

He knew what her true fear was—if anyone learned that they'd shared a chamber

these past days, especially without him having any clothing...

Well, she would just need to become used to the idea of being his duchess. Deep down she must know that was the outcome they both faced. Even in a small hamlet such as this, someone was bound to learn.

“Bethany,” Leopold began calmly. “All will be well.”

“Yes. Of course.” She set the tray on a table. “Would you like to eat first?”

“No. I want this matter resolved and hopefully my belongings returned.”

“Yes. Of course,” she repeated then came forward and pulled the blankets up to his chin. “You really should learn some modesty, Your Grace.”

He chuckled. “You have not complained previously.”

Her face took on a lovely, rosy hue. “We have not had guests before now.”

With that, she turned on her heel and marched from the room and returned a few moments later with Constable Merryweather, and Leopold nearly groaned.

“Your Grace,” Merryweather greeted with a big smile as he entered the chamber.

Bethany glanced quickly between the two.

“Merryweather, how did you become a constable?” Leopold then looked to Bethany. “We attended school together. Merryweather is Lord Clark Merryweather, second son of the Marquess of Godolphin.”

“Boredom, I suppose. My father wouldn’t allow me to join the Bow Street Runners

and you know my fascination has always been crime, punishment, and the law.” He turned to Bethany. “Father believed the law beneath me, and I have no more temperament for being a vicar than Claybrook.”

“What happened?” He directed the question to Leopold.

He did his best to describe the events, including everything that had been taken from him, but did not answer how he had been found or Bethany’s involvement. “There are still moments that are not clear.”

“You have no clothing?” the constable asked and slid a glance to Bethany, whose face was now as red as an autumn apple ready to fall from the tree.

“There were none to be found in this hamlet. A footman has been sent to my home in London.”

“There is a village not too far away. I will have them send something over when I pass through.”

As he was not certain where he was, and that he had a headache more times than not, Leopold hadn’t even considered the possibility of a closer village. Nor had Bethany.

He frowned. She was probably too exhausted to think straight, having slept on the settee, which could not be the least bit comfortable.

“Thank you,” Bethany offered. “It would be very much appreciated.”

“Yes, and then I might move about freely,” Leopold added.

The constable turned to Bethany. “I know your uncle, as well as your mother and aunt. My family lived in Faversham when I was a boy.”

Leopold watched the exchange to see how Bethany would respond.

“In fact, my father and I were just visiting your uncle a few days ago. Your entire family is in residence, including your mother and Mrs. Montgomery.”

Bethany’s eyes widened. “Aunt Anne?” Bethany questioned as the color left her face.

The constable chuckled. “I understand she is still the biggest gossip in London. Father told me that she’d been that way since she first learned to talk.” Those words were delivered with a warning to Leopold.

“It was to be a surprise,” Leopold said and began to spin a tale that would not see Bethany ruined. “We enjoyed a small, private wedding and wished to keep the marriage a secret for as long as possible so that we were not bothered.”

Bethany frowned at him.

Certainly, she knew that they would be wed shortly. They had no other choice.

“Though, we knew that as soon as we arrived at the Dargates’ home that Aunt Anne would not be able to resist the urge to write a letter to every single acquaintance.”

The constable chuckled again. “She will be sending missives from heaven when her time comes.”

The constable turned to Bethany. “How is it that you did not suffer injury?”

Bethany’s breath lodged in her throat. How did she answer the question? Until now, Claybrook had described how he was attacked and that it was Bethany’s servants who had brought him to the coaching inn without mentioning how she may have been a part of the rescuing.

“She ran,” Claybrook answered from the bed. “When we were stopped, I urged her to run, which she did and hid until we were later found.”

How could he tell such a lie?

Then she realized that he was protecting her, but to claim that they were married was too much of a ruse that would see them trapped. And, if she knew anything about the Duke of Claybrook, he had rules to avoid such unwanted entanglements. She’d heard him recite those rules, and then he wrote the entire list for his cousin, the Duke of Ellings. So, why would he seal his own fate now?

“By whom?” the constable asked.

“My driver,” Bethany answered easily since it was the truth. “My carriage with two footmen riding beside it came across His Grace in the middle of the road.”

“You were with him?” the constable asked.

“I was by his side as soon as I was able.”

“Why were they following so far behind?”

Why did Merryweather have so many questions? None of this mattered. Catching the miscreants who had attacked Claybrook and his belongings was far more important.

“We had gone on ahead. We wished to be alone since we were recently wed,” Claybrook offered.

“How recently? I am to understand that your wife spent the night here before she found you in the road the next day.”

There was no privacy in England. Not even in a small hamlet such as this where nobody knew her, yet everyone knew her comings and goings.

“I snuck in through an open window and left the same way,” Leopold answered.

Merryweather laughed. “You always did have an answer for even the most impossible and ridiculous situations, but this one will not stand up to scrutiny.”

“I will work on a tale that is more plausible.”

“Nobody needs to know anything,” Bethany blurted out. “Claybrook is injured. He nearly died. I cared for him only because there was no one else. He should not have to suffer the gossip any more than me and I shall not see us ruined because ruffians decided to rob him one night.”

Merryweather pulled back and then laughed, which did nothing to help her irritation. “I congratulate you, Claybrook, on your good fortune.”

“Good fortune? He nearly died.”

Merryweather chuckled and shook his head, which Bethany did not understand, but sometimes gentlemen were simply odd.

“I will have clothing delivered and then see about the arrest of the men who did this, though I suspect that they are long gone since I was asking questions.”

“Likely with my horse and good boots,” Claybrook grumbled.

“Yes, but you gained a wife.” Merryweather laughed again. “I will have them hold your cabriolet until you can retrieve it.” He then nodded to Bethany and was gone.

At the click of the door, Bethany stomped to the bed. “Why did you tell him we had wed?” she demanded.

“Because eventually we will, and this protects your reputation.”

She could not believe she heard him correctly.

“We most certainly will not marry,” she insisted and then returned to the breakfast, removed plates for herself and then deposited the tray on his lap. “I should have left you in the road.” She didn’t mean her words of course, but neither did she want to face the truth.

“We should discuss the matter,” he said.

“You should eat your breakfast,” she argued and turned her back on him.

She could not marry the Duke of Claybrook. She just couldn’t.

Oh, why did it have to be her who found him in the middle of the road?

They would never suit. He did not even like her, and she couldn’t stop loving him. Well, she did not care for the man he had become in the last two years, but still loved the person he had been before she pushed him into the Serpentine.

She loved the man she had thought he was.

Bethany sat on the settee and stared at the food before her, no longer hungry. No matter how much she wished to deny their predicament, deep down she knew the truth.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

The two of them ate in silence, though Bethany picked more at her food than ate it. No doubt she was disturbed by his declaration that they would wed, but surely, she understood that they had no other choice.

Did she hate him so much that the very idea of life as his duchess was abhorrent?

At one time, they had gotten on very well and he had even started falling in love with her and then it ended, and Leopold never knew why. One day they were enjoying a pleasant conversation while all he could think about was kissing her and the next day, she pushed him into the Serpentine with no explanation.

“Why were you originally going to miss Christmas with your family?”

Bethany looked up from her plate and stared at him. “It is not important.”

“It must have been, or you would not have made your original decision.”

Bethany glanced down and picked at the eggs on her plate.

Maybe he shouldn't pry, but he wanted to know her reasons. One does not simply miss out on such an important holiday with family without good cause.

“The club,” she finally answered.

Bethany and Tessa had opened a gentlewomen's club this past spring. From what he had been told, it was more of a salon where sciences, politics, and arts were discussed. There was another room for gambling and a dining room where meals

were served. Even though it was for women, he knew gentlemen who were granted entry and paid for a subscription. He had applied once and was turned down. At the bottom of the rejection either Tessa or Bethany had penned: You would not approve, Your Grace.

Ellings had told him that Bethany deemed him too priggish to appreciate what was offered.

Priggish! Was that how she saw him?

Though, these past few years, he had been.

No wonder she did not want him around and it explained why she refused to discuss marriage.

“I understand that the club is a success. Not that I would know as I have not been granted a membership.”

She said nothing but sipped her tea instead.

“If you are needed there, why were you traveling to Faversham?” he asked. He needed to get Bethany to talk to him.

“With the holiday, we had fewer in attendance than I anticipated so I closed until after the first of the year.” She took a sip of tea, and gently set her cup back in the saucer before looking up and meeting his eyes. “I also reevaluated the true reason I had chosen to stay behind and decided that I was not going to let anyone keep me from my family this holiday.” She glared at him with her last statement.

“Anyone?” he asked. Something told him that Bethany didn’t mean the members of her club. “Me? Is it because I was going to be present since my sister married your

cousin?"

Bethany must truly hate him, which did not bode well for their future.

"I did not want my holiday ruined by a duke who cannot stand to be in my presence, and who glares and growls when I am about."

"I do no such thing," Leopold argued.

"Yes, you do. You have treated me the same since that regrettable day when I pushed you into the Serpentine."

Bethany gasped and placed a hand over her mouth.

Leopold raised an eyebrow, even though it pained him to do so, but at least he may finally learn why she did so.

Bethany had not wanted to admit why she was avoiding her uncle's home but did not want to lie either. But she certainly hadn't intended to remind him of the most humiliating and uncharacteristic moment of her life.

His eyes narrowed as he set his breakfast tray aside and sat up more fully, the covers dropping so that they barely covered his lap. Oh, she wished he would keep them pulled to his chin so that she did not have to stare at his muscular chest with the sprinkle of dark hair that matched his thickening beard or view the defined lines of his abdomen that nearly looked sculpted.

One glimpse and she warmed all over. So much so that the fire she'd been tending since they arrived was not needed.

"I still do not know why you did so. There was no cause," he said calmly.

“There most certainly was!” She’d never been so deeply hurt by words before, which was likely what prompted her to shove him in the first place.

“Would you care to enlighten me because I was having a conversation with friends then suddenly, I found myself falling into the water.”

“You claimed that you were happy to be free of Tessa and her friends who were nothing but bird-witted twits.”

“Tessa was quite happy to be free of me as well,” he reminded her.

“That is not to what I refer,” she said through clenched teeth as she became angry again.

“The bird-witted twits?” he asked, as if he was confused.

“Yes!”

Claybrook stared her down and then his brown eyes widened, and he started to smile. “I did not mean you.”

Bethany sprung to her feet. Oh, she was not going to allow him to lie to her. She’d been standing there and had heard him quite clearly. “I am her closest friend and if all her friends are bird-witted twits then that is what you think of me. Thus, you earned that push into the Serpentine.” Her face heated. “Though, in truth, I was quite mortified by my actions as it was uncharacteristic of me. For that I do apologize, Your Grace.” She plopped back down, determined to push the hurt of that day down so deeply that it could not be found again. That was two and a half years ago, and she had moved past the event.

Claybrook swung his legs over the side of the bed, grasped the coverlet, and wrapped

it about him before he stood. “Do you honestly believe that I thought you were a bird-witted twit?”

Bethany stood again and threw her hands up. “Of course I did. It is what you said. I heard you.”

Claybrook chuckled. “I meant that gaggle of misses who suddenly surrounded Tessa that season. The ones that were no more than children with their giggling and fanning themselves and always twittering about. Those bird-witted twits. Never you.”

Bethany could only stare at him. Then she recalled that spring and the new debutantes who were in awe of Tessa and wanted to be like her and learn from her. They had nearly driven Bethany mad with their incessant questions and inability to remain on one topic. Tessa found much humor in their presence, though it wasn’t so often...except they did always seem to be underfoot when Claybrook was about. “Is it because of them and their getting in the way that you did not pursue Tessa?”

“Good God, no!” he barked with laughter. “Tessa and I would never suit. Clearly you saw that.”

They had been an odd pairing. “You courted for nearly two months. Certainly, some emotion was involved, unless it was simply to appease her father.”

“Bethany, the only reason I attempted to court Tessa for so long was because you were always there.”

Her heartbeat seemed to skip, and Bethany wondered if she had imagined his words. “Me?”

“Have I not been clear?”

“There is no need to yell at me. You know you have not been clear.”

Claybrook blew out a long, belabored breath. “It was you who I wanted to court. It was you who I found fascinating. It was you who I found beautiful.” He took a step toward her, holding the blanket so as not to expose his nether region. “When Tessa and I had ended our potential association, it was only after you and I had come to know one another. It was you I grew to desire and wished to court. I had planned on calling on your father to ask permission but before I could do so, you pushed me into the Serpentine.”

Bethany gasped and placed a hand against her heart.

Except, it hadn’t been just the comment about Tessa’s friends, but what she’d heard even before that, and it made her wonder if he was only saying what he thought she needed to hear as appeasement since he was certain they would wed.

Could she trust anything he said now? He had easily lied to the constable so couldn’t he just as easily lie to her?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

“For a time, I did think that you might care for me,” she started. “Your courtship of Tessa had ended, yet you still asked me to dance and approached me when we were in the same location. I had thought...Never mind, it no longer matters.”

“I was pursuing you,” he argued.

“To what end? To make a fool out of me?”

“Of course not.”

“I know the truth, Your Grace. I heard the very words from your lips. I was a diversion if anything. Perhaps used to keep other misses away, or perhaps it was a game to you, and you did not care whose heart you broke along the way.”

“What the blazes are you talking about?” he demanded.

“Your bloody rules!” she returned, her back straight, hands fisted on hips, blue eyes glaring.

“Rules?”

“Yes, you began making them as soon as the future Duke of Ellings arrived in England. You wanted to protect him from being trapped.”

“They were for him, not me,” Claybrook argued.

“You already employed them for yourself.”

“How and when?” he demanded. Leopold was quite certain that he had not.

“Dancing,” she began. “You always approached at the beginning of an event, but you never picked the first dance because that would have been in violation of rule number four.”

“Do not show favoritism to one lady by dancing the first dance with her,” he recited. In fact, he never danced the first dance.

“Occasionally you requested a waltz, but it was rare, because had you, that would have been in further violation of rule number four.”

“Do not always choose a waltz,” he offered, his stomach tightening.

“You most certainly never asked for the supper waltz. Rule fifteen!” she bit out.

He sank onto the bed. “Or one will find themselves stuck at a table with a miss for what will feel like an entire Season while she prattles on about nonsense.”

“How many supper waltzes and suppers did you spend in the card room, Your Grace?”

Leopold chose not to answer.

“We did stroll about the perimeter of a ballroom, but never in the gardens and now I know why.”

“Rule number eleven.” he groaned. “Never go anywhere with a miss or single lady without a chaperone and that includes a stroll through the gardens at night.”

“And when I glanced at you during a ball, or any entertainment, you always looked

away.”

“I did not want gossips to wonder as to our relationship,” he insisted.

“Rule seventeen!”

“Do not make contact from across the room with an eligible miss or her mother. It encourages them.”

“I heard you discuss each and every rule with your friends that day, as if they were some great lark.”

“Those rules were for Ellings, not me, and I most certainly did not have them in mind for you.”

“Then it is a shame that I did not know, nor did you take the opportunity to explain.” Bethany arched a brow. “If you recall, after I pushed you in the Serpentine, instead of explaining for all to hear and witness, I asked you to call on me, but you did not, which I can only assume was because it violated rule number three. Never pay a call to any miss or lady, not even during the fashionable time as it will be speculated upon.”

Leopold had no idea that Bethany had heard him list the rules, or that she would believe that they were ones he followed himself.

Except, he had since the age of eighteen when he started making note of what he could and could not do in Society. He had never meant to use them with regard to Bethany, but perhaps they were so well ingrained that he had not even noticed.

“I had planned on calling that day and was determined to do so, but when I returned home to change out of my wet clothing, I was met with disturbing news.”

She folded her arms across her chest, head tilted, mouth pursed and waited for his excuse.

“That is when I learned that my brother Millard had attempted to kill Donovan MacGregor.”

Sadness filled her eyes as the realization of the timing struck. “I had forgotten that had been the same day.”

“I had assumed you had learned before me and that is why you pushed me in the Serpentine.”

Bethany frowned. “I did not find out until later, but why would I have punished you for something your brother had done?”

“It was a grave offense and all of Society placed some of the blame on me, as if I should have known that my brother was disturbed.” Leopold sighed under the weight of her words and how he had ruined everything. “Perhaps I should have been more observant, or spoke to him more...”

“Do not blame yourself,” Bethany insisted. “Nor should Society. He may have brought scandal to your family but to blame you is unfair. I would not wish to be held responsible for any transgressions my brother or sister committed.”

“It was attempted murder, not a mere transgression.”

“Nor were you to blame.”

All Leopold could do was stare at Bethany. Her accusations were damning, and she was not wrong. Had he only called on her then to demand why she had pushed him, the matter could have been cleared up, though it likely would not have done any

good. Given that Millard had attempted to poison MacGregor not once, but twice, the scandal was too much for anyone to overcome and it was likely that Bethany's father would have rejected his suit, even though Leopold was a duke.

"I left Town immediately, with my family. That is why I did not call that day."

"I realize that now."

"So, I was tossed in the Serpentine because you believed that I was toying with your affection."

"That, and what you said of Tessa's friends."

If she had not been so hurt, she would have realized why Claybrook had not called that day, and the necessity of him returning to the country much sooner than she had. But Bethany had been lost in self-pity, her heart crushed and feeling foolish. It was then that she had decided as a certainty that she was going to be a spinster as her friend, Tessa, planned on being and the two of them would make their own way. She certainly was not ever going to love again.

"You did return to London the following spring, and had you been interested or even curious as to why I had pushed you, you could have called on me. That is, if it is true that you had wished to pursue me."

"I did, twice; you were not at home."

That was not possible for she would have been told. Had she been home, she would have certainly met with him.

"When?" she asked.

“Two days after your family arrived,” he answered.

Bethany frowned. Where had she been and why hadn't she been told?

“Then I thought to speak to you at the first function in which I saw you, but you gave me the cut direct.”

That she did recall. “I most certainly did not.”

“I distinctly remember glancing toward you, and you tilted your chin just enough to put your nose in the air and turned your back before walking off.”

“That is because you scowled at me,” she argued.

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did,” she insisted.

“I remember standing there, trying to get out of a conversation with Mrs. Draper, who had two daughters...” Claybrook groaned. “I had been trying to discourage that woman and she had the audacity to put her hand on my sleeve to keep me in place. I had glanced down at her hand and glared at her. When I turned away, you are the first person I saw, and you gave me the cut direct.”

Mrs. Draper was pushy, and not the least bit pleasant. “Perhaps you should learn to school your features, Your Grace.”

“And carry on as dishonestly as the rest of Society?” he grumbled. “Anyway, as you had not been home to me twice and gave me the cut direct, I decided that it was useless to pursue you.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that he had given up rather easily but she did not.

“I rarely saw you after that night, but that was because I was invited few places.”

Bethany frowned. He was a duke and invited everywhere.

“Some scandals are not overlooked or easily forgotten as quickly as one would like,” he offered. “Most of the invitations I received were from parents of daughters in need of a spouse and did not care if there was scandal attached to the name because of my rank. The others, not that there were so many, I avoided because I knew you would likely be present.”

“Proof that you really didn’t wish to know why I had pushed you in the Serpentine.”

“It was because I could not face another night of my heart being crushed beneath the heel of your slipper as you took yourself away as quickly as possible.”

“Your heart? What of mine?” she blurted and then quickly covered her mouth. She’d not meant to let him know just how badly she’d been hurt. It was bruised and ached even now, and she couldn’t help but wonder at the what ifs. Had she only been home when he called that Season? Had he been able to call before he had learned what his brother had done...would matters have turned out differently for them?

She wanted to cry for what had been lost.

“I truly was not at home when you called, nor had anyone told me that you had.” She needed him to believe her. “Had I been, I would have had the butler show you in.”

Leopold stared into her eyes, his filled with uncertainty.

“That is a promise. I would not lie to you, especially about something so important. Something that could have changed how we dealt with the other.”

“It could have changed everything,” he agreed quietly.

“But those Seasons are over. You turned into a broody, unpleasant duke and I became an independent spinster.”

“I am only churlish because I lost you before I ever had a chance to win you.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “But you already had.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

She had been his and he had lost her, and all because of ill-spoken words and her misunderstanding.

“If I had your heart before, is there any chance that I might one day win it back?”

A tear slipped down her cheek and Bethany swiped it away, but she said nothing.

It was too late.

Bethany glanced down. “I am not so certain I ever got it back. I have tried to reclaim it these past two years, but it will not return to me.”

Relief coursed through him.

“What of you, Your Grace?” Bethany asked. “Where is your heart?”

He shook his head and got up from the bed and walked toward her. “My heart has always been with you, and I gave up ever seeing it again.”

“Are you speaking the truth, or are you telling me something that you hope will appease my reluctance if we are forced to wed?”

Was it possible that she mistrusted the motivations of others as much as he did? “I would not lie to you, Bethany, not about something so important.”

“I am sorry for pushing you in the Serpentine.”

“It was deserved,” he admitted. Leopold never should have spoken cruelly about the other misses, even if they were quite silly.

“You also should be resting in bed,” she said with a smile. “Have you no modesty.”

“Not when I finally may have a chance to kiss you.”

Bethany gasped and looked up at him and Leopold sat beside her on the settee then brushed his lips against hers.

It was not enough. Leopold anchored his hand behind her head, angled his and kissed her again and when Bethany sighed, he plunged. The deeper the kiss, the more he desired, especially when Bethany grabbed hold of his shoulders and pulled him closer.

It would be so easy to seduce her right now, and Leopold wanted to dearly, but they’d not spoken words of love nor accepted that they would wed, just that they held each other’s heart.

With those thoughts, he pulled away.

When he looked at her, Bethany glanced away shyly.

“I will now rest, as you have ordered.”

Leopold stood and walked back to the bed and when he turned to face Bethany, she looked over his body and frowned once again.

Blast! His blanket was open. He had not meant for that to happen again.

He was also concerned by her frown. What did she not like? Further, he was fully

aroused, and she appeared disappointed.

If she was disappointed in what she saw of him, what had she seen before?

It was a thought he no longer wished to consider and crawled back under the covers and hoped that he did not turn out to be a disappointment to his future wife.

That was the most wonderful kiss. Not that Bethany had anything to compare it to, but she was certain that nobody kissed as well as Claybrook.

With a contented sigh, she gathered the breakfast dishes and returned them to the tray.

It was likely he'd fall back asleep as whenever Claybrook exerted the slightest bit of effort, he needed to sleep again, which was to be expected. At least it would allow her to ponder her future.

"I will take these downstairs and return shortly," she announced, then quit the room.

Claybrook claimed she held his heart, but was that the same as love to him?

Bethany loved him, but hadn't said the words, nor would she until she heard them from his lips.

At least she knew that he cared, and always had, and if they had only been given a chance to discuss and likely fight about his stupid rules that day, they may have then courted.

Except he had left town, then his brother died, and then his brothers-in-law had killed each other in a duel. No wonder he hadn't been well-received in London the following spring, but she had been just as guilty.

Oh, why hadn't anyone ever told her that he had called?

Not that it mattered now because they both knew where they had erred, but so many months may not have been wasted had she only been at home or had known that he wished to speak with her.

It was as if the fates were against them, which sent a chill down her spine.

Were they not meant to be together?

Except fate had put him in her path so maybe that hadn't meant to be until now.

After giving the servant the tray, Bethany was interrupted with a delivery for Claybrook. If she could judge by the softness within the brown paper, then the constable had sent clothing as he promised.

Claybrook would be relieved to have something to wear, and she should be as well, but she rather liked looking at him relaxed on the bed, the covers low enough that she could view his chest, and she'd been quite interested when he'd accidentally let the blanket open completely.

Her cheeks were burning at the memories, and she quickly put those images from her mind, though she also would not likely forget. She purchased one of the papers that had just arrived by mail coach from London and then in an instant, she rushed up the stairs. Clutching the newssheet, she burst through the door to the room she shared with Claybrook. "It is Christmas Eve! How is it Christmas Eve already?" How had she lost track of time?

It was then that she noticed him standing by the bed, again, naked as the day he was born.

Bethany couldn't help but take in the sight of him, from the top of his head to his toes and that most interesting part of his anatomy, that seemed to forever change, and she could not understand.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

Leopold had not expected Bethany to return so quickly, and he yanked the blanket about his body. He also wished she would have knocked, and he certainly did not appreciate that when she viewed his body she frowned. It was the third time that she had done so.

“Do you find something offensive with my person?”

She blinked. “Ummm...no...it’s just that.” Her face slowly turned red as the color started with the center of her cheeks and spread out, even down to her neck and chest.

“It just...it is...”

Leopold didn’t know it was possible for a person to turn so red, unless they’d spent the entire day in the sun and by the water. As this was December, and she’d only been gone a short time, he knew that was not the cause.

“It is not important.” She thrust a paper package at him. “This was delivered.” She then set to straightening the bed and the pillows and then crossed to the settee.

He sat at the foot of the bed and tore open the paper, relieved to find clothing within. He and Merryweather had known each other a long time and he was likely to have found something that came close to fitting Leopold.

“Ale!” she announced a moment later.

“Ale?” He questioned.

“We need ale. It is Christmas Eve and we shall have ale.”

Before he could stop her, Bethany once again quit the room.

Leopold just shook his head and then set about getting dressed. As he still would not be leaving this room, he only pulled on the shirt and trousers then left the suitcoat, waistcoat, and cravat on a chair.

It was a good thing that he was not leaving as there were no boots. But at least he was now clothed and could move about without embarrassment to himself or Bethany and with his body covered, there was no longer a reason for her to frown at his naked body.

Leopold reclined back on the bed, as he had been doing since his arrival.

He wouldn't mind an ale, or brandy, or even a wine. The surprise was that Bethany wanted the ale. Had looking at his body disturbed her more than he realized. It was bad enough that she frowned, did she now wish to drink enough to erase the image from her mind?

Leopold glanced down at his now clothed body. What was wrong with him?

Bethany seemed to take her time in returning, but when she did, she carried a tray laden with a pitcher of ale, two tankards and a loaf of bread.

“Bread to help from getting sick,” she announced as she put the tray on the table. “Or so I’ve been told.”

“It soaks up the ale and delays becoming drunk,” Leopold corrected.

“Oh, I had not realized.” Then Bethany shrugged and poured him a glass of ale and

handed it to Leopold before pouring one for herself.

“How do you normally spend Christmas Eve, Your Grace?”

“Given the circumstances, should you not call me Leopold.”

“It is far too intimate,” Bethany answered and took a deep drink of the ale. Given she had hardly touched her breakfast, he hoped that she ate some of the bread.

“You have seen me naked four times. We are past concerns for intimacy.”

“You are wrong. That was lack of modesty on your part, three times. The first was my error. Not intimate.”

Bethany was acting very strange, and he was not certain why. Plus, her face was flushed, different from the blush she’d been wearing earlier.

“What else did you do when you went to retrieve the ale?” he asked with suspicion.

“While I was waiting, there were some men celebrating and they bought everyone in the taproom whiskey. After it was placed before me, I thought it only polite to drink it.”

Leopold wanted to laugh, but he did not. “How many did you drink?”

“Just the two. I had not tried whiskey before and rather liked it.”

She was also feeling the effects because she had not eaten, nor was she a large woman. It likely would not take much for Bethany to become inebriated. While he would never attempt a seduction while she was in this state, any conversation they may have could prove to be interesting and informative.

Each day alone with Leopold became more difficult, but perhaps it would be easier now that he was clothed.

Disappointing too.

Bethany chastised herself. She was a respectable miss, and should be pleased that he was finally no longer naked in her presence, though he had been quite spectacular to view.

She sighed and took a sip of ale.

What she hadn't anticipated was becoming quite relaxed from drinking whiskey, and warm in a way that had nothing to do with Claybrook being naked.

Tearing off a piece of bread, she ate it before drinking her ale only to note Leopold lying in the bed, pillows propped so that he sat straighter, and staring at her.

"Is something amiss?"

"No, nothing." The side of his mouth quirked before he took another sip of ale.

"Did you want to read any of the newssheet?"

"It would be rude to do so when the company is so charming."

Bethany nearly snorted.

Silence stretched before them for Bethany could think of nothing to say.

Leopold barely drank his ale, whereas half her glass was already gone. If she was not careful, she would get drunk and that would never do.

“May I ask you a question?” he said quietly.

“You may.”

“Why do you frown when you look at my person?”

“I do not,” she insisted. “You are quite handsome and pleasant to look upon.”

The side of his mouth quirked again, and Bethany knew that she needed to think on her words carefully before speaking.

“You have only frowned when you have looked at me unclothed. I would like to know why.”

There was a very good reason, but should she ask? “It is not that I find anything wrong,” she explained. “It is a curiosity.”

Leopold gave a slow nod, as if he understood, yet he did not.

“Why does it look different?” she blurted out.

“What looks different?” he asked slowly.

She may regret this question tomorrow, and it was likely she would not be able to look Leopold in the eye for some time, but she needed the answer.

“I have viewed statues and paintings and two of the times your appearance was almost similar to those.”

He nodded for her to go on.

“But when I unwrapped you, it wasn’t.”

“It?”

“The, um...” what was it called? There was a name but she could not think of it, probably because she’d been told never to think on it or discuss it.

“My manhood?”

“Yes!”

The corner of his mouth began to quirk, or at least she thought so, but he took a drink so maybe she was mistaken.

“How was it different?”

“It seemed bigger and not as soft. Was I mistaken? I have no experience in these matters, and I am very curious.”

“You were not mistaken, Bethany.”

“Then after you kissed me, it seemed larger than before, yet when I came back from downstairs, it had shrunk again.”

There was humor in his eyes as if he were trying not to laugh at her. But who else was she going to ask? Such a question could see her ruined.

“There is the normal state, and the other...” He stared into her eyes, his getting darker.
“Desire.”

Bethany frowned. “Desire? You were barely conscious when I unwrapped you from

the blanket. Do gentlemen suffer from desire in such instances?”

This time one corner of his mouth quirked before he fully smiled. “I was very conscious and had a most tantalizing view down your bodice while you worked at the knots in the rope, first about my ankles and then around my chest.”

Her face heated and Bethany looked down, then put a hand over the gape in her dress.

“I was desiring you, Bethany.”

“And after you kissed me?”

“Yes, very much so, as you noticed.”

She seemed to think on his words and recalled conversations she had overheard...

“Oh!” At least she thought she understood. Often the conversations or comments she’d heard made little sense. Her eyes widened as she put it all together. So much was clearer now. “Oh!”

“Yes, Bethany.” He chuckled. “Oh!”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

It was delightful how much whiskey and ale could loosen a tongue and Leopold wondered if she would have ever broached the subject of her curiosity when sober.

Likely not.

He chuckled. Bethany was five and twenty, and part owner in a salon and gambling den, but was as innocent as a debutante right out of the schoolroom. Then again, such was not discussed with innocent misses and from what he gathered, misses were not given many details for what to expect on their wedding night, such as the changes in a gentleman.

At least her frowns had been out of curiosity and not displeasure.

“I do think it is unfair that you have seen all of me, but I was only able to enjoy what the gape in your bodice revealed.”

“Well, that is all you will be seeing.”

Leopold was not going to argue with her, but he knew that one day, not far away, he would be able to gaze upon her.

“It was more than desire, Bethany. It is love,” he admitted. He might as well admit the truth fully because they would wed and he wanted her to know. “I have wanted you for over two years and started to fall in love with you that spring and as much as I tried to hide it, even from myself, it never went away.” Her state of mind also made it easier for him to confess his heart, something he never thought he would do.

A bright smile burst on her beautiful face. “I fell in love with you too. And if you must know, I suffered a good deal of guilt over it because you were supposed to be courting my dearest friend.” She then frowned. “I have resented you because I loved you.”

“That makes no sense,” he laughed. Nor did it matter. She had just admitted that she’d loved him too, and he hoped that she still did.

“It does to me.” She added a nod in emphasis.

“Perhaps my being attacked was not such a bad thing after all.”

“My finding you was not such a bad thing. Your being injured was.”

“You had loved me. Is there a chance that you might still?” he asked. While he was glad to know what her heart had been then, what mattered is where it was now.

Bethany sighed. “Yes, you grumpy duke, I still do.”

He nearly snorted and rose from the bed. “And I still love you, even though you have treated me quite poorly until you came across me in the road.”

Bethany gasped.

He reached her side and placed a finger against her lips because he did not want to get into another argument.

“Perhaps a marriage between us may work after all.” Leopold was just about to kiss her again when there was a scratch at the door.

Bethany wasn’t expecting their supper so soon, but she was glad for it. She should

not have drunk so much because she had confessed far more than she had ever thought she would. She also was not sorry for it either.

Leopold loved her. She loved Leopold.

This may be the very best Christmas ever.

Crossing to the door, she opened it to find George, her driver.

“How did you return so quickly,” Leopold asked.

“A mail coach,” he answered. “The horse I was riding lost a shoe and I had to leave him in the stables. A mail coach was leaving just then, and I found a seat.” George shook his head. “It is true. They do travel much faster than any carriage.”

“Where is Ellings?” Leopold asked.

“He is not coming. Instead, he sent this.” George passed over a bundle wrapped in paper.

“Thank you for your quick return,” Bethany said.

“Is there anything I can get you, Lady Bethany or you, Your Grace?”

“No,” she answered. “Find something to eat and then your rest.”

He gave a quick nod and left them alone.

At the ruffling of paper, she turned back to Leopold, as he opened the package from the Duke of Ellings. “Bloody hell!” He removed an oversized shirt. “Ellings knows I don’t wear nightshirts.”

“Though perhaps you should then I’ll not need to wonder and frown any longer.”

He snorted. “I believe that wonderment has been explained.”

Her face heated but she said nothing.

“Ah, another set of clothing. Trousers, shirt, waistcoat, suitcoat, and cravat and boots.”

“How did he manage to completely outfit you?” Bethany asked.

“Ellings and I are much the same size.”

He set the clothing aside and then unfolded a piece of parchment and read. Then he laughed.

“What does it say?” she asked before she thought better of it. It was probably a personal letter not meant for her.

Still laughing, Leopold held it out to her. Curiosity compelled her to take it from him.

Leopold,

This is not a crisis requiring my assistance. Nor does this require that I leave Shropshire when Christmas is so near. Tessa is also in favor of me remaining at home as she believes this is the best that could happen to you and Lady Bethany. Not your being injured, simply the circumstances in which you find yourself. She told me long ago that the two of you were in love and either did not realize it or were too stubborn to admit it. Therefore, I am eager to learn what is the truth, though I hope she is correct for I do not see how the two of you being alone in an inn can remain a secret.

However, if Lady Bethany does wish to be free of you, I have no doubt that the whole of the dukes' alliance will do everything in their power to preserve her reputation and set matters right before the next Season begins. She should not suffer for having saved and taken care of you.

Congratulations, cousin, and Happy Christmas.

Darius.

"What is the dukes' alliance?" she asked with a frown.

"Nothing you need to worry about now or ever," Leopold answered.

She thought to question him further, but decided that it really did not matter, especially since she did not wish to be free of Leopold.

"It appears Tessa knew better than the both of us." Bethany looked up into his warm brown eyes. "We have been fools. Stubborn fools."

Leopold grasped her hand and pulled her onto his lap. "Yes, we have. If only I would have demanded an answer."

"If only I would have chastised you."

"You can do so later," he said as his hand cupped the back of her head and drew her close and then, his lips were on hers.

Bethany sighed when he pulled away and then his lips were on her again, harder, and passion began to burn deep inside.

Goodness! She had become warm simply looking at him, her body now heated from

the inside out, and she grew dizzy, as if she were falling, and then Bethany found herself on her back, the bed cushioning her as Leopold continued to kiss her.

Wrapping her arms about his shoulders, she kept him close, afraid this was a dream.

His hands swept down her body, caressing as his lips traveled across her jaw and down her neck and then he cupped her breast. A need to have his hands on her flesh and not her clothing rose within, and Bethany wondered how she could get out of her dress without breaking the magic of his kisses and touch. She wanted to learn more, experience more, and for the ache that was developing in her nether regions to be soothed, but before any of that could happen, Leopold pulled back and stared down at her.

“I will not seduce you tonight.”

She supposed that was what he was doing, though the words hadn’t formed in her mind, and she hadn’t cared. “Why not?”

“I will only do so when you have your wits about you.”

“I do have my wits about me,” she argued.

“Two whiskeys and a pint of ale is not having one’s wits. We shall discuss our future in the morning, when you are clear-headed.” He grinned. “Then I shall seduce you and show you what desire truly looks like. And, how it feels. As for tonight, you shall be sleeping in this bed beside me.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:35 am

The next morning Bethany woke in the softest of beds, or perhaps it only seemed so because she'd spent three or four nights on a settee. But Leopold was not in bed beside her. Sitting up, she glanced about to find that both of her footmen were pouring steaming water into a tub set before the fire. Leopold stood not far away and sadly was fully clothed.

Bethany stifled the pang of disappointment because she was certain that there would be many chances in the future to view him unclothed.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Wonderfully." She smiled and stretched.

"Did you wish to bathe?" she asked.

"I already have. This is fresh water for you."

It was then that she noticed his damp hair.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Bethany frowned. "I am supposed to ask you that question. You are the one injured."

"I did not have two glasses of whiskey and a pint of ale yesterday. You fell asleep before dinner was delivered and slept the night away."

She'd not slept so long in her life before. She also hadn't gotten much sleep since

she'd found him in the middle of the road.

Between the whiskey, ale, and being tired, it was no wonder she'd slept so long.

Whiskey and ale. She nearly groaned at how much they had loosened her tongue and the discussions about his manpart. Her face heated.

"There is nothing to be embarrassed about."

"It was not the drinking that I was thinking about."

Leopold grinned. "I know."

The footmen finished filling the bath and stood.

"Enjoy Christmas," Leopold said. "Have a hearty meal, drink some ale."

"It is the morning, Your Grace," Henry reminded them.

"That it is." Leopold laughed much like he used to before she had shoved him in the Serpentine. "Break your fast and in two hours, bring a tray to us. Your mistress should be done with her bath, dressed, and ready to be seen again by then."

The two shared a look of concern.

"I understand your unease." Leopold then picked up the screen at the corner and placed it around the tub. "Lady Bethany will have all the privacy she requires. I simply remain to guard her. This is a coaching inn with all manner of people roaming the corridors.

The two nodded as if they agreed.

“We will return in two hours,” Henry said and pulled Jason from the chamber.

“I do not need two hours to bathe and dress,” she insisted.

“I see no reason for you to feel rushed,” Leopold explained, his eyes darkening, making her a bit nervous, though Bethany could not understand why. Except it would be her without her clothing this time.

“What if I do not wish you to stay. Unlike you, I am modest.”

“I think it is hardly fair that you have gazed upon me whenever you wish, yet I’ve only gotten a glimpse of your breasts.”

“Nor should you see a thing. We are not married. Nor do I believe a woman should be naked and on display as you have been. It cannot be proper,” Bethany argued.

“Yes, but we will be married as soon as I can obtain a Special License.”

“You have not even asked my father. Not that I believe he would object, but you must speak with him first.”

Leopold turned and opened her trunk. “Which dress would you like to wear?”

Bethany got out of bed and walked to her trunk and removed a dressing gown. She would attire herself more properly after she had bathed and dried off completely. Her concern was Leopold’s silence.

“You were going to speak with my father, were you not?”

“He already knows.” Leopold glanced away.

“What does he know?” Bethany demanded as panic set in.

“Jason was unable to lie and when pressed, told your family and mine everything. Your father is expecting me as soon as I am well enough to travel.”

Thank goodness they had finally been honest with each other, or the marriage her father would force would be a nightmare. “Why did they not come right away to check on your condition?”

“I asked Jason the same, and he claimed he thought I was on the mend and only needed to rest to recover completely and as we had already been here for a few days, there was no longer a need to rush to my rescue or to preserve your reputation.”

He was correct.

“When do you wish to leave?” she asked, no longer eager to join her family.

“The doctor did insist I rest at least a sennight and it has only been five days.”

Leopold turned her around so that her back was to him. “I also know exactly how we are going to spend those two days.” As he unbuttoned the back of her dress, he kissed the side of her neck. “It is Christmas and as you have already unwrapped your duke, I intend to unwrap my future duchess.”

About DUKE IN TRAINING

Darius Copeland, an American, and now the Duke of Ellings, believes he knows all that is necessary for his new station in life.

Theresa “Tessa” Claxton, self-professed spinster, will show him that there is so much more to learn than memorizing a list of rules.

What they come to realize is that some rules are meant to be broken.

Read DUKE IN TRAINING.

About SCANDALOUS WAGER

Miss Vanessa Claxton gave her heart to Lord Crispin Tilson when she was only seventeen. He did not ask for it, but it went willingly. A secret friendship on the cusp of young love, and then he was gone. Lord Crispin Tilson hadn't expected that at the age of twenty he'd fall in love with a miss enjoying her first Season. He certainly hadn't anticipated that their meetings would take place in secret and that nobody would ever learn. But, as much as he wished to be with Vanessa, adventure called, and he had to leave her behind. Nine years later, they meet once again when Lord Crispin, the finder of all things, and Miss Claxton, the thief finder, are asked to locate a missing gem. Will love bloom again, or will competition and wagers get in the way?

Read SCANDALOUS WAGER.

Thank you so much for reading UNWRAPPING THE DUKE.