

*Sweet Madness*



Heather Snow

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"Sweet and heart-wrenching."  
~ Night Owl Reviews, Top Pick

*Sweet  
Madness*

HEATHER  
SNOW

A VEILED SEDUCTION NOVEL

**An Excerpt From:**

*Sweet Madness*



**Heather Snow**

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## Prologue



*Leeds, June 1817*

Yellow suited her. Gabriel Devereaux's gaze followed the young woman's lithe form as she floated around the dance floor in her partner's arms. Her flowing skirts of lemon, shot with some sort of white embroidered flowers he couldn't name, barely brushed the ground as she twirled in the moves of the waltz.

He'd never liked blondes who wore yellow. They faded into their ensemble, like a monochrome painting that failed to draw the eye. Not so Lady Penelope. No, she seemed to glow, brightening everything and everyone around her like a ray of early-summer sunshine. Having known her but a few days, Gabriel had a feeling Lady Penelope was the type who refused to fade into anything.

He was glad of it, for her sake. Michael had a tendency to overshadow most ordinary people.

"Lusting after our cousin's new bride, are you?"

Gabriel's jaw clenched with indignation as his gaze snapped to the man who'd sidled up to him. He bit his tongue against a stinging retort, however. The most scathingly witty rejoinder would be lost on Edward, anyway, even were his brother sober enough to comprehend it.

"Don't be ridiculous," Gabriel drawled lazily. Of course he wasn't lusting after Lady

Penelope, even if his skin tingled with inconvenient awareness as the happy couple twirled by. He fought the strange need to follow them with his eyes and instead turned toward his youngest sibling.

Edward's bulbous nose shone bright with the redness of drink. Gabriel frowned. When had the man become such a sot? The night was much too young to be so far gone. But even foxed as Edward was, his eyes glinted with a knowing look.

Hell. Edward might have become a drunkard in the years Gabriel had been away, but his brother also knew him better than perhaps anyone. Edward must have seen something in his expression to speak as he had, and Gabriel feared he knew what it was.

Jealousy.

His gaze strayed back to the dancers as he lost the battle not to look. This time, however, he forced himself to focus on his cousin Michael, 3rd Baron Manton, whose teeth were bared in a beatific smile. And why wouldn't he be in raptures? Michael, it seemed, had found love.

And *that* was what Gabriel envied. Not the lady in specific, but the *idea* of her. Could finding the right wife bring back *his* smile?

*Not that I deserve that.*

Gabriel forced his gaze away.

"Well, it's too late now"—Edward sniffed, taking a healthy swig of what must have been some rather potent punch—"for both of us."

Gabriel glanced sharply at Edward, drawn by the hollow anger in the man's voice. Surely he wasn't saying . . . But Edward wasn't looking anywhere near the dance floor or the newlyweds. Instead he stared toward the west corner of the ballroom.



Gabriel followed his line of sight, wincing as he recognized his brother's wife, Amelia, flirting shamelessly with a well-known rake.

Edward tossed back the remains of his punch with a low growl, then wiped his mouth against the inside of his cuff. "Excuse me, brother," he said curtly before stalking off.

Hell and hell again. Gabriel made to follow. He was head of the family now, much as he didn't relish the role. It was his duty to head off any potential scene that might spoil his cousin's wedding ball.

Gabriel slowed as Edward made an abrupt turn, in the opposite direction from his wife, and pushed out of a set of French doors into the night instead.

He watched his brother's departure with frustrated sadness. How things had changed, for all of them.

"Lord Bromwich?"

Gabriel jerked as a gloved hand slid over his forearm and gripped him lightly. He fisted his own hands before he even realized what he was doing.

"Oh—I—" A nervous laugh bubbled from Lady Penelope's lips, making her seem younger than her twenty years. Her pale green eyes widened at whatever she saw upon his face, and her hand fell away from his arm.

Wariness swept over her expression, darkening her eyes much as a quick-moving storm cloud shaded spring grass into a deeper hue.

And that made him feel much older than his own seven and twenty.

He forced a smile, even as he forced muscles tensed to strike into relaxation. "Lady Penelope, forgive me. I—" What could he say? *I'm sorry that I nearly just planted you a facer?*

Since the wars, he didn't do well with the unexpected. "I was deep in thought and . . . didn't hear your approach."

"Of course," she murmured, but she didn't show offense. No, rather she looked at him in a thoughtful way that nearly made him squirm. "And I startled you," she continued, nodding slowly, as if in understanding. "How insensitive of me. Forgive *me*, my lord. I shall endeavor not to take you by surprise again."

Gabriel felt his brow knitting over the bridge of his nose. He didn't know Lady Penelope well. Was she mocking him? Or was she simply being polite? Because she couldn't possibly understand how the long years spent fighting on the battlefields of Europe had changed him, could she? He'd never spoken of it.

"Now, however," she said brightly, and to Gabriel's surprise, she placed her hand on his arm once again. Her bow-shaped lips spread in a smile that seemed to burst through any cloud that still lingered over them. "I do believe you are meant to stand up with me for this dance."

Gabriel blinked rapidly at her sudden change in countenance. He couldn't help but draw in a sharp, deep breath, quite dazzled by it. How could a simple smile dispel the remaining tension in his limbs? But it had, and more than that, it filled his chest with something . . . warm. Something pleasant. Something he was afraid to name.

He was saved from trying as Lady Penelope tugged at him. "The dancers are already lined up." Her blond head, with ringlets adorned by yellow violas, tipped toward the top of the room as she looked up at him expectantly.

Of course. As head of his family, he was to partner his cousin's bride as she led the next dance. *That* was why she'd approached him. Gabriel shook off the strange sense of connection

he'd felt with her and hastened his step to follow.

Unease curdled in his stomach as they reached the head of the line. Since the wars, he didn't do well in ballrooms, either. In fact, he hadn't even attempted to approach one since he'd returned from the Continent. It was all too . . . close. Too many people jostling about for space. Too much noise. His chest tightened painfully.

But he hadn't been able to refuse his place at a family wedding. As they took their place perpendicular to the split line of dancers, Lady Penelope slipped her hand in his and raised their joined arms. A fine sheen of sweat chilled the back of his neck.

*Time to gird your loins, old man.* All he had to do was make it through this one dance, and then he could retire for the evening.

He waited for the dizziness, prepared to fight off the vertigo that usually assailed him when he stepped onto a dance floor. But strangely, it stayed away.

The strains of violins filled the air first, joined almost immediately by the notes of a pianoforte in a lively tune he didn't recognize. Gabriel did his best not to grimace, waiting to see what dance his partner would choose. He hadn't danced in years and knew nothing of the current steps. He hoped she picked something simple that he could easily emulate without making an arse of himself.

A flute piped up in merry accompaniment, signaling the start of the dancing.

Lady Penelope squeezed his hand. "Never fear, my lord," she whispered. "'Twill be over in a trice."

Before Gabriel could reply, she flashed her smile at him once more and bent her torso away from him. Then she turned in a vaguely familiar step. When she grasped both of his hands and

pulled him into the move, his body went easily, willingly, as if his muscles remembered the dance from long ago.

Only a few steps in and he realized that was because they did. Lady Penelope had chosen a simple country dance, popular in years past, and one that blessedly he knew. Relief washed over him, his cold sweat breaking into a warm one as she pulled him into the energetic skips and turns that left him unable to think of anything but the dance.

Like a battalion of soldiers following their commander, the next set of dancers fell in behind them as they made their way down the line in the progressive dance, one pair after another, until all were stepping lively.

All in all, the dance took nearly half an hour to complete. Gabriel would wager he smiled more in that thirty-minute span than he had in the previous month. But even more unusual—he hadn't experienced the crushing fear he'd come to associate with ballrooms ever since that night on the Peninsula. Instead, blood coursed through his veins, exhilarating in a way he'd forgotten he could feel.

He glanced over at Lady Penelope as they stood across from each other, their part of the dance now finished. She grinned and clapped in time with the music, watching the other dancers finish their sets. But Gabriel couldn't take his eyes from her.

*Was it the dancing that made him feel so alive? Or the dancing partner?*

Lady Penelope's face was flushed from exertion, her green eyes bright with merriment. Tiny ringlets of her blond hair had dampened with perspiration and now clung to her temples and nape. She was the quintessential picture of an English rose—all slight and pale and graceful, with delicate ankles and wrists, a patrician nose and dewy skin. Everything a young

Englishwoman should be.

Everything he'd fought to preserve.

*Why shouldn't I seek my happiness?* he thought. There was more than one Lady Penelope in the world. Perhaps it was time he ventured out from his self-imposed exile and found a wife of his own.

He'd need a lady a bit older than Michael's bride, of course—and one more worldly. He'd make a terrible husband for an innocent young debutante. He'd seen more death and destruction in his years than anyone should be burdened with, and it had changed him. He'd also need to look for a woman who was not quite so . . . sunny. All that brightness might be a shock to his system, accustomed to living in darkness as he was. But the point remained.

A spot of applause broke out as the last of the dancers came to a breathless stop. Gabriel broke his gaze away from his cousin's wife and joined in.

Michael bounded over from his place in the line as the clapping died down. "Gad. Haven't danced that one in an age."

Damn, but Michael seemed like such a young pup. It was hard to remember he was only two years Gabriel's junior. Gabriel had often envied the seemingly inexhaustible energy Michael exuded. His cousin never tired. With his typical exuberance, he threw an arm around his bride and brushed a kiss on her temple. "Were you feeling nostalgic, dearling?"

Lady Penelope returned her husband's squeeze with a fond smile. "Indeed I was," she answered lightly, but her eyes met Gabriel's.

And in that moment, Gabriel knew she'd chosen the dance specifically with him in mind. She'd sensed his distress, even though he'd fought to suppress it. She'd also interpreted at least

part of it for what it was and picked a dance he was likely to know. He marveled at her intuitiveness. And at her consideration.

Just as he realized that she hadn't been mocking him before. Somehow, she *had* understood. How, he couldn't fathom. Perhaps someone else she knew suffered as he did. Her cousin had recently married the Earl of Stratford, a man who'd been grievously injured in the same battle Gabriel had been. Maybe Stratford experienced the same gnawing restlessness, the overvigilance, the insomnia . . . the nightmares. Reliving battles won and lost, night after night after night . . .

"Well, no more of that, my love," Michael declared. "From this moment on, we only look forward." He swiped a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing footman. The servant stopped, and thirsty dancers swarmed him for the rest of the libations as the poor man's eyes widened comically.

Michael snagged a flute for his bride and another for Gabriel before raising his own in an impromptu toast. "To our future!" He touched his glass to Penelope's, the crystal kiss ringing with a high-pitched *ting*.

"To your future," Gabriel agreed. His gaze strayed once again to Lady Penelope. "I wish you every happiness."

Michael gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder that tipped champagne over the rim of Gabriel's glass, splashing his hand and wrist with the frigidly sticky stuff. His cousin followed that up with a half squeeze that constituted affection amongst the males of the species, sloshing yet more liquor onto Gabriel's shoes.

Lady Penelope simply murmured, "Thank you, Lord Bromwich."



“Gabriel,” he insisted, kicking droplets of champagne from his feet. At the dip of her brow, he explained, “We’re family now.”

“Then thank you, Gabriel.”

“Yes, thank you, Gabriel,” Michael parroted before plucking the still full champagne flute from Lady Penelope’s fingers. “Now come, wife,” he said with an exaggerated waggle of his blond brows, as if he relished the word. Then his voice dropped to a low tone, infused with an intimacy that made Gabriel turn his head. “Let us away.”

“Let’s do,” Lady Penelope answered eagerly, and the happy couple hurried off together.

As he watched them depart, Gabriel was finally able to name that elusive feeling that had filled his chest when Lady Penelope had first smiled at him.

Hope.

Hope for *his* future.

Gabriel swallowed what little champagne remained in his glass, raising it in his own toast.

“May it be as blissful as theirs.”

## Chapter One



*The West Midlands, February 1820*

Two and one half years later, shortly after the death of Mad King George III

Lady Penelope Bridgeman, Baroness Manton, alighted from the carriage, her sturdy black kid boots crunching gravel beneath them as she stepped onto the drive of Vickerling Place.

At first glance, the seventeenth-century mansion looked like any other palatial spread. No fewer than a dozen chimney blocks jutted from the slate roof, each spouting puffs of smoke that spoke of toasty fires within, keeping the residents of the brown brick home warm in defiance of the chilly February winter.

Ivy strangled the west wing of the structure, as well as the walls leading up to the entrance of the main house. The vines were brownish green and barren now, but Penelope imagined they would be beautiful to behold come springtime. So would the large ornamental fountain that fronted the house when it was once again filled with water, as well as the acres upon acres of parkland that surrounded it when they were greened up and in bloom.

However, Penelope fervently hoped she would have no occasion to visit Vickerling Place in the spring. Indeed, she wished she weren't here now.

The carved oak door was opened for her before she even gained the top step of the stoop.

“Lady Manton.” A thin man, clad in a serviceable black suit, greeted her by her name, though they had never met. She supposed she shouldn’t be surprised. Visitors were likely regulated here and expected well in advance.

“Mr. Allen, I presume?” she inquired, pulling her dark wool cloak tighter around her as a frigid wind nipped across her nape. She stamped her feet in an effort to warm them, her eyes shifting involuntarily over the man’s shoulder to the roaring fire she could see blazing from a hearth within.

“I am he,” Mr. Allen confirmed stiffly, but he did not step aside to allow her inside. Penelope rubbed her gloved hands together and looked pointedly at him. Finally, the man relented. “Please do come in,” he said, but his tone was clear. He did not want her here.

She slid sideways past him before he could change his mind, grateful for the blast of warmth as she crossed the threshold into a well-lit foyer. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the painted ceiling that arced high above, depicting fluffy clouds in a blue summer sky that faded into the throes of a brilliant sunset around the edges.

She hadn’t expected such a cheerful scene.

A woman’s desolate wail sliced through the hall, raising the hair on Penelope’s arms, even covered as they were with layers of wool and bombazine. The high-pitched cry was cut off abruptly, leaving only an eerie echo ricocheting off of the marble walls of the foyer.

Penelope shivered. *That* was more in line with her expectation of Vickerling Place. The illusion that the manor was still a country mansion fell completely away. Certainly the flocked wallpaper of gold damask, the plaster molding and expensive artwork that lined the walls spoke of its aristocratic history, but Vickerling Place had been sold by its owner and converted to a private sanatorium for lunatics. A place where the wealthy sent their sons and daughters, their

mothers and fathers, their wives and their husbands—for treatment, or simply to hide them away from society.

As Michael's family had done to poor Gabriel.

Mr. Allen, she noted, seemed unruffled by the noise, almost as if he hadn't even noticed. One grew used to it, she supposed. Allen extended an arm to usher her into what appeared to be his office, and as Penelope took a seat in a plush armchair across from his stark, imposing desk, she strove for a similar sangfroid even as her stomach churned with nerves.

"I'm afraid your journey may have been in vain, my lady," Mr. Allen began, lowering himself stiffly into his own seat. "It seems his lordship has descended into a fit of mania this morning. When he gets like this, he can be very . . . dangerous. I cannot, in good conscience, allow you near him. For your safety's sake."

Penelope winged a brow high at the subtle condescension in the director's nasally tone. She pursed her lips.

Allen, apparently misinterpreting the reason for her irritation, said defensively, "I *did* send a messenger to the inn where you are staying, but he must have just missed you. I am sorry you had to come all this way."

Penelope barely resisted the urge to snort. The only thing *he* was sorry about was that she'd come at all.

She waved a dismissive hand. "Your man delivered the message in plenty of time. However—" However, what? She'd been a fool not to anticipate this sort of resistance. She'd gotten spoiled, working with her cousin Liliana, the Countess of Stratford, over the past year and a half, treating ex-soldiers and their families. No one ever questioned Liliana because she was a woman. Her cousin had a brilliant mind that commanded the respect of her peers, male and

female.

Penelope, however, had neither Liliana's intelligence nor presence. She chewed her lip, trying to imagine how her cousin would handle Mr. Allen. She took a deep breath and stiffened her spine. Well, she didn't know exactly what Liliana would do, but she knew how her own formidable mother would handle the man if this were a domestic situation.

She adopted her best "lady of the house" tone, all clipped and commanding. "*However*, it is my understanding that Vickers Place is a *private* sanatorium. Your guests are here voluntarily, at the behest of their families, are they not?" She raised both brows now, staring Allen down. "At their very *expensive* behest."

At his stiff nod, Penelope could almost taste her victory. She reached into her cloak, efficiently pulling out a packet of letters from Gabriel's family, detailing their wishes. Her hand trembled a bit as she leaned forward and handed them across the desk. "Then I expect to see his lordship immediately. In whatever condition he may be in."

It was Mr. Allen's turn to purse his lips, which thinned to the point of almost disappearing as he skimmed the letters. Disapproval lined his features, but all he said was, "Very well."

Penelope gave the director a curt nod and rose to her feet. She exited the office on her own, not waiting to see if he followed. He did, of course, and quite quickly. He seemed the type who would detest having her roaming around his domain on her own.

"This way, my lady." Mr. Allen rattled a heavy set of keys, plucking the head of one between his fingers as the others settled with a jangling clank on the ring.

As they made their way down a wide hallway, another howl rent the air. A man's this time, Penelope thought. The cry was accompanied by a harsh, rhythmic clanking, as if the poor soul banged something against metal . . . bars perhaps?

An ache pierced her chest. She couldn't imagine Gabriel in a place such as this. The moment she'd met him, she'd sensed he was cut from similar cloth as Liliana's husband, Geoffrey. Both ex-soldiers, both honorable and courageous. Gabriel had a commanding air, an independent and self-reliant streak that must chafe against confinement. It had to be driving him mad to be locked up so.

*No, madness is what brought him here.*

Penelope shivered. She'd have never believed such a thing about Gabriel two and a half years ago, but he *was* blood related to Michael, and if Penelope knew anything, she knew now that Michael had been mad.

The affliction had driven her husband to take his own life barely six months after they'd been married.

Penelope's steps faltered. Oh Lord. What made her think she could be of any help to Gabriel Devereaux? She'd been worthless to Michael when he'd needed her. Worthless.

Mr. Allen halted, as if noticing his footfalls were now the only ones ringing on the marble floors. He turned to look over his shoulder. "Have you changed your mind, then, Lady Manton?"

*Yes.*

Penelope's chest tightened, her breaths coming with great difficulty as the horror of another frosty winter day invaded her mind.

*He's not breathing! Michael!*

Penelope shook her head, as much to dislodge the memories as to reply to the director. "No. No, of course not." Yet her voice was much more assured than her feet. She had to force them to get moving again.

Mr. Allen fixed her with a doubtful look before turning back to lead the way once more.



She was not that naïve young society wife anymore, Penelope reminded herself. For the past two years, with Liliana's encouragement, she'd thrown herself into studying the inner workings and maladies of the mind. At first, it had been a way to distract herself from her grief, but then she'd realized she had a gift.

People of all classes had often told her she was easy to talk to, so when Liliana had suggested she spend time just talking to the ex-soldiers served by the private clinic that she and her husband, Geoffrey, had built, it had been easy to say yes. And that one yes had turned into a calling, one that had met with some success.

Which was why Lady Bromwich, Gabriel's mother, had visited Penelope in London and begged her to visit him. Well, that, and the marchioness knew she would keep news of Gabriel's condition private. She'd been married into their family, after all, and they counted on that loyalty for her silence.

Mr. Allen stopped before a massive wooden door, its brass knob polished to a high shine. He pulled the door open easily, revealing the heavy iron bars that had been installed to barricade the entrance of the suite of rooms that had recently become Gabriel's home.

The director slid the key into the lock, twisting it with an efficient click. The bars swung open noiselessly, too new yet to creak with rust.

Penelope schooled her features, trying to prepare herself for anything. She smoothed a nervous hand over her widow's weeds, her mood now as somber and dark as the colors she always wore.

What kind of Gabriel would she encounter beyond that threshold? If his affliction was similar to Michael's, he could be flying high, gregarious and grandiose, awake for days with no end in sight. Or he could be a man in the depths of despair, wallowing in a dark place where no

one could reach him, least of all her.

Was she ready to be faced with the stuff of her nightmares?

Penelope swallowed hard. Yes. Because Gabriel was still alive, still able to be saved. Whatever she must do, she would do it, if only as penance for what she *hadn't* been able to do for Michael.

Penelope stepped into the room, at least as far as she could before shock stilled her feet. “Oh . . . my . . . God,” she whispered, amazed she could push even those three short words through the sudden tightness of her throat. “Gabriel?”

For a brief second, Penelope wondered if *she* were the mad one. Because what she was seeing couldn't possibly be real.

Gabriel—a very *naked* Gabriel, she couldn't help but note with widening eyes—was cornered in the far side of the room, nearly trapped by two attendants who steadily approached him. With a strength and quickness that didn't seem human, Gabriel lashed out to his left and snagged the corner of a heavily carved rococo chaise longue with one hand, pulling it toward him as if it weighed nothing. A high-pitched screech grated as the wooden legs dragged in screaming protest across the floor. He angled it on the diagonal in front of him, effectively creating a barricade from the grasping attendants.

“Curse you, you devils,” Gabriel rasped in a scratchy voice that pricked at Penelope's heart.

The stark fear in his eyes turned that prick into a full-fledged pierce. Poor Gabriel was looking at the men as if he truly saw them as the demons he called them.

“I am burning alive already. Does that not satisfy your thirst for revenge?” he cried, muscles and tendons straining against the skin of his neck.

Penelope could only watch in horror as Gabriel snatched a pitcher of water from a nearby

sideboard and tipped it back. He gulped noisily, not seeming to notice that most of the water missed his mouth, running down his unclothed skin in dripping rivulets that pooled on the floor at his bared feet. Penelope's gaze followed the trail of liquid as it traversed lean muscle, over his chest, where tiny droplets clung to the dark hair there, down his stomach to . . .

Dear God, he truly was completely nude—

A blur of black linen blocked Penelope's view as Mr. Allen stepped in front of her. "My lady, I must insist you leave this instant—"

An explosion of glass shattered against marble, jerking both of their attention back to the drama unfolding in the corner. Gabriel had smashed the empty pitcher against the floor, and shards of crystal skittered in all directions.

Well, she'd be hanged before she allowed Mr. Allen to toss her out of the room. She took advantage of the distraction to dart farther into the parlor so that the director would have to choose between bodily removing her or helping his staff members to contain Gabriel.

Allen shot her a dark look over his shoulder but moved towards the fracas. She thought to offer her assistance, but there was little she could do with Gabriel when he was in the grips of full-blown mania.

"Ah, Christ," Gabriel groaned. "Am I to have no relief?" Water glistened on his skin as he glared accusingly at the men who were slowly skirting either side of his barricade, crystal grinding beneath their boots. "If *your* thirst cannot be quenched, then neither shall mine be? Is that the way of it?"

"My lord," Allen said soothingly, raising his hands as he advanced on the chaise longue from the center. "You know we never deny you sustenance."

"Trickery!" Gabriel accused. "Water that does nothing to wet the throat. Clothing that

burns.” He scratched at his arms, and Penelope winced at the white lines that appeared on otherwise swarthy skin. Was that why Gabriel had shed his clothes? Because they’d irritated his skin?

What madness *was* this? She’d never seen anything like it.

Penelope held her breath as the attendants and Mr. Allen closed in on her cousin-by-marriage, a man on either side with the director standing near the center of the chaise. Her heart sped, thumping against her throat as if she were the one trapped. She prayed they did not hurt Gabriel in their bid to subdue him.

One of the men lunged for him then, attempting to catch him about the waist. She gasped as Gabriel leapt vertically, pulling his knees high as his feet landed upon the chaise in a move most reminiscent of a large cat. The attendant missed, falling to the ground with a surprised grunt.

“My lord!” Mr. Allen shouted, then raised his hands in what Penelope assumed he meant as a soothing gesture. “My lord,” the man said again, more calmly as Gabriel straightened. “Please, there is nowhere for you to go.”

Penelope’s gaze darted to the other attendant, who was creeping behind the chaise while Mr. Allen had Gabriel’s attention.

“We mean you no harm,” the director said, his voice a soft lull.

But she could see that Gabriel was beyond words. The skin on his face was pulled taut in a terrified grimace. He wasn’t even looking at the director at all, she realized, but rather at the floor. He looked as if he longed to run for it, but was afraid to step down. His eyes darted to and fro, clearly seeing something that wasn’t there. Something that frightened him terribly.

“No,” he groaned. “No! Stop tormenting me so. There was nothing more I could have done!”

The intensity of his fear raised gooseflesh on Penelope's skin as tears pricked hot against the backs of her eyes. What on earth did Gabriel think he saw?

Just then, the second attendant clipped his boot against the leg of the chaise, alerting Gabriel to his presence behind him. He tensed, crouching low on the chaise again. Mr. Allen chose that moment to make his move.

And so did Gabriel.

He flew. Leapt, really, but with an energy that seemed inhuman. With the added advantage of the chaise's height, he easily cleared the top of Mr. Allen's head, who had bent to try to capture him. But how did Gabriel think he was going to—

The tinkling of thousands of crystal teardrops rang in the air as Gabriel's outstretched hands found purchase in the lowest tier of the massive chandelier above them. His momentum turned the chandelier into a pendulum, swinging him away from his captors.

Penelope watched in awe as the fast-moving glass caught the weak winter sunlight from the mullioned windows and cast shards of colored light dancing upon the walls. Dozens of snuffed candles lost their mooring, raining down like wax-covered twigs in a particularly vicious windstorm. Light and shadow played against Gabriel's naked skin, muscle flexing as he held fast.

*Lord, he'd be beautiful to paint.*

Penelope blinked. Goodness, where had that inappropriate thought come from?

So shaken was she that she didn't even register that Gabriel was swinging right toward her until far too late. She threw up her hands to protect her face at the last moment, but nothing could protect her from the force of fourteen stone slamming her to the hard marble floor.

"Oh!" Pain exploded in more places than she could feel at once. Everything hurt. Her

backside, mostly, which had taken the brunt of the impact. But her left shoulder had come down hard next, and the back of her head smarted terribly, as, curiously, did her chest.

She blinked to clear her vision, glancing down to find the top of Gabriel's head, his face buried directly in a rather delicate position. So *that* is what had caused that sharp jolt of agony. His forehead must have collided into her breastbone when he landed atop her. She winced. That was going to leave a bruise for certain.

As other sensations returned to her stunned system, she realized she lay quite pinned beneath Gabriel's larger frame. His naked, still dripping wet frame. Even the layers of her widow's weeds couldn't shield her from feeling him against her or from the moist heat that seeped through to her skin.

"Mmph," she groaned. She bent her elbows and planted her palms on either side of herself in an attempt to wriggle free.

Gabriel's head jerked up then. His eyes fixed on her, and Penelope couldn't contain a gasp. She'd never seen pupils so dilated. They reminded her of an eclipse—only one where the new moon passes between the earth and the sun, not quite blacking out the larger star entirely. Instead, the warm gold-flecked iris that remained made a fiery ring around the enlarged black pupil. The effect was startling. And unsettling.

They both went entirely still. Indeed, it seemed if the very world did. Even the scuffling of the other men in the room seemed to slow and fade away. Her heart beat wildly in her chest, as wild as the man lying atop her.

"Penelope?" he rasped, sending a jolt of sympathy rushing through her. He blinked several times, either trying to focus, or in disbelief that she was actually here. Probably both. For all that they'd been friends once, they hadn't seen each other since Michael's funeral.



“Yes. Yes, I—”

Gabriel tightened his arms around her in a sudden grip that forced any remaining breath from her lungs, as if she were the lone buoy in a turbulent sea.

He held her tight to him for a brief moment. But at the clumping of three pairs of boots rushing toward them, Gabriel released her and whipped his head around to glance behind him.

He jerked his gaze back to her. “Penelope,” he said again, his voice urgent and harsh. “Help me.”

“I will,” she vowed, just as urgently, even though she had no idea if she even could. What she’d just witnessed was much worse than she’d been led to expect.

Gabriel tensed, shifting his weight so he could scramble away from his pursuers. She tensed, too. If he kept running, kept fighting, she wouldn’t be able to help him. No one could in his current state.

“I will,” Penelope whispered once more, knowing there was only one thing she could do.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him, locking them as best she could around his larger, thrashing form, and held on for dear life. She had keep him here long enough for Mr. Allen and his men to reach them.

When Gabriel realized her intent, he let out a howl of angry betrayal that sent a shiver coursing through her. Belatedly, Penelope wondered at her foolishness. Gabriel could snap her in two if he so wished. The man she’d known would never have done such a thing, but he was *clearly* not in his rational mind. Even Michael, who had loved her, had hurt her in his mania. She cringed, but tightened her grip on Gabriel all the same.

Penelope panted with effort. *Dear God.* She wasn’t certain she could hold on to him much longer. The muscles of her arms and thighs trembled with strain and ached like the very dickens.

“Shhh,” she crooned. She tried to turn her death grip into more of an embrace, meant to soothe. “’Twill be all right, I promise,” she whispered, even though her voice trembled with what very well might be a lie.

Gabriel struggled for a few more seconds, but then relaxed with a groan of defeat.

Had her vow to help him been a lie, too? After what she’d just witnessed, she was very much afraid Gabriel was beyond help.

As he was pulled from her arms, Penelope prayed she was wrong about that.

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