

Elouisa Kensington was no ordinary woman and, with a reminder to thank her bloodline and some divine providence, neither was her mother.

While sitting in the drawing room and relishing in the unrealistic love crafted in the most recent novel Elouisa was reading, she was bombarded with an unexpected awakening to reality as her mother, Lady Celia Kensington, burst through the door.

“What is this? Were you not planning on informing me of its arrival?” In her hand, Lady Kensington held a gold-ridged envelope written to Elouisa, and her insides did a twist. She dreaded the envelope’s contents, but Mother was not going to let her out of this one.

“Mother, please—”

“No, Elouisa. I am serious. Why were you keeping your invitation, and may I say a highly envied invitation, to Lady Harper’s house party a secret? Are you a fool? How selfish can you be?”

Elouisa was not surprised by her mother’s lash of words, but she thought about how to form her next move. Lady Theresa Harper’s annual house party was highly anticipated every year, as only the most eligible singles were invited. If one was hoping to capture a well-favored match, that was the place to do it, and Lady Harper’s success rate for finding love for its attendees was close to perfect. Needless to say, it wasn’t the hostess that kept her from accepting. The opposite, actually. Elouisa had been introduced to Lady Harper at a ball earlier in the Season, and they had become quick friends. And Elouisa had already been aware of the Harpers for some time, as she found Maxon Harper, the sole son of the Harpers, quite enthralling and dashing handsome.

What kept Elouisa from accepting the invitation was her fear of rejection, and, as Mother had so often tried to have Elouisa married off, she was tired of what felt like a marriage game, like she was some prize to be sold. No bidders ever took interest in her though. Ever. And Elouisa was not going to let herself be degraded and heartbroken by putting herself out into society’s critical eye again.

“Elouisa, answer me this instant!” Lady Kensington said with a tone meant to make Elouisa feel some form of urgency and ridicule, no doubt.

But Elouisa was no fool; she knew Mother’s tactics and refused to let one little jab penetrate her fortress. “Mother, I have told you many times, and I will tell you again. Being paraded around at a house party to be looked upon and comparatively valued in the qualities of a wife are not what I would call a grand opportunity.”

“Humph. I just do not see what I did wrong in raising you. Your sister, Vivian, was much more willing to join the *ton* in the city, with the many events and balls that would introduce her into society. She was quite the belle of the *ton*, and look. She is happily married, and to a fine gentleman above her rank. How did I find myself with a daughter who enjoys nothing of the sort?” Lady Kensington walked to a seat by the fireplace, her eyes dancing in the light of the flames with a dark glow. “You will forever be a disappointment.”

Elouisa’s heart burst as her mother reaffirmed her fears. For years, she had battled with not knowing her parents’ complete lack of interest in her life, not sure what to say, or how to say it. Always lightly inputting her thoughts and ideas, and every time, she was put back into her

quiet and lonely place. She would always lie in the light and beauty of Vivian's shadow, never being good enough the way she is or what she does.

Her emotions must have shown on her olive-toned cheeks as Lady Kensington smiled with a victorious grin, knowing she had claimed more of Elouisa's self-confidence and belief in herself. Setting the invitation on the table, Mother marched out of the room with purpose in her step, only stopping at the opening of the door to get one more drop of poison into Elouisa's heart.

Drat her weakened fortress. Drat her weakened heart.

"This discussion is not over, Elouisa. Your father and I will not be content with your utter lack of interest in finding a suitable match. You will no longer be a burden to this family." With that, Lady Kensington uprooted her feet from their determined stance and left the room, leaving Elouisa to grapple with her inner turmoil.

Leaning back in her favorite settee, its burgundy and ivory lining worn from years of use and exposure to sunlight in the alcove in the drawing room to which it sat, Elouisa felt completely at a loss. She placed her head in her hands, her long dark curls cascading around her face and secluding her from the world as she leaned over her novel, which now felt like it was laughing at her. Why did she have to read of these magical scenarios where the damsel is always rescued by her knight, falling in love in the simplest of ways and not caring for the future as long as they were together? Could life not be that simple? Even sitting in the sunshine, its rays of golden happiness spilling upon her back with the likeness of a waterfall, her spirits remained dark.

For years, Mother and Father had time and time again made subtle comments to Elouisa that she was not Vivian—both in beauty, talent, social connection, and want for higher status. A sheer disappointment in the eyes of society, to be sure. Elouisa's dark tresses and plain brown eyes, alongside her olive complexion, were of no comparison to Vivian's envied honey-colored hair, piercingly blue eyes, and fair skin that showed no flaw. Vivian could sing, dance, and—albeit talk to people—with ease, whereas Elouisa . . . well, she found her comforts admiring those things from afar, away from any chance of being rejected, reticulated, or mocked. She shuddered at the painful memories that trailed her every thought since the incident from last Season. Never let people in. Never let them see who you truly are. Stating these reminders to herself increased her resolve to live a life alone. She found safety in the comforts of her books, her library, and her only friend Melody Lawson. Those were the only things she needed. But finally getting away from Mother and Father . . . that was also of high priority on her needs list.

"Ugh," she groaned, sitting up in her chair and reaching over to the table to grab the invitation where Mother had left it. Opening the envelope again, she pulled out the paper and looked at her name written in elegant marksmanship.

Elouisa thought of getting away from Mother and Father for even a short while. What blessed happiness, indeed! Her heart raced at the thought of being free from Mother's biting remarks, and she studied the invitation closer. The house party was to be held a week from tomorrow, with the end date being the end of the Season, if one had not already made a match and married by then. That gave her a little more than two weeks of freedom from the confining walls of her home in Ashcroft Heights. Just what she needed.

She hurriedly jumped up from her seat and ran to the writing desk across the room to send her acceptance of the invitation. Her hands trembled with anticipation and anxiety as the pen hovered over the cream paper.

*What am I doing?* she thought. *This is madness. I have lost it.* But before she could talk herself out of it, Elouisa jotted her acceptance to Lady Harper, thanking her for the invitation,

and sent out her response, hoping it was not too late and Lady Harper had not already filled her place in the attendees.

Sitting back down in her chair, Elouisa reopened her novel and began to read, wishing life—her life—would somehow be just like in her stories.

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“For the last time, would you please sit down and stop pacing the floor? You are going to ruin my new mahogany.”

Maxon stopped in his tracks and glanced at his mother, who looked at him with a gleam of teasing in her eye.

“Sorry, Mother. I just cannot seem to find a reason to put my heart, or my feet, at ease. A house party? Here? So soon after Father’s passing?”

Lady Harper slowly looked away, her blue eyes becoming more so by misting at his words. “I know this may sound brash, perhaps even like I am shortening the mourning of your father and wanting to get back into society. But this is not true. I loved your father very much, and he would have wanted this. He would have wanted you to find the happiness and love that a compatible match brings, and this house party allows me to follow through with his wishes for you.”

Maxon gaped at his mother’s confession. While it was true that the Earl of Havencrest and Lady Harper were ever the match to be envied, with a love that blossomed and grew and became the backbone for Maxon throughout his childhood, he was doubtful it could ever be repeated, especially for him.

“Oh, Maxon, do not look at me like that. Your father and I only wanted what we thought would be best for you. Do not close your heart off to the idea until you have given it a chance.”

Maxon closed his still gaping mouth and tried to put an expression of calm on his face to put to rest his mother’s fears. “I have no desire to be tangled up in the messes of society with women who are like lions on the hunt for a man with a title. I refuse. You may have your house party, but I am afraid it will be without my attendance.”

He turned around to stare at the door to his father’s study, and a sharp pang ricocheted through his chest. How many times had he and Father had so many talks of the future in this very room? And now they will never come to pass. Oh, how he missed his father’s wise words of wisdom and companionship. As the only son of the late Earl of Havencrest, Maxon had been bequeathed the title and with it, all of the responsibility. Not to mention the flock of women who had it out for him and his money as of late.

He sighed. *I will never be enough with just who I am. People will only see me for my title and nothing more.*

His mother let out a small, defeated breath. “Maxon, look at me.”

Maxon turned his shoulders toward the sound of Mother’s voice, and before she could see into the depths of his sorrow, which he tried so hard to conceal, he plastered his charming grin onto his face. “Yes, Mother?” He held her gaze just long enough to see the pain flash in her countenance, then made his way to her side at Father’s desk.

She motioned him to sit down across from her, and while he was a grown man of two and twenty, he still followed his mother’s bidding. Mother’s crinkled eyes shone with tears as she leaned forward and placed a loving hand on the side of Maxon’s cheek. In what seemed hours,

only mere seconds passed before Mother replied. “I wish you could see in you what I can see, my dear boy.”

The sincerity in her eyes, the tenderness in her embrace, and the loving words of affirmation sent Maxon whirling back to the earliest memories of his childhood. Times were so much happier when both Mother and Father looked at him with love and affection. Now, in the wake of his father’s passing, Mother had barely looked at him, let alone spoken such motherly sentiments. Was the desire to have him find a suitable match more important than the relationship between mother and son? Whatever the intentions of his mother, Maxon was not about to let his mother back into his heart so quickly. He abruptly sat back and pushed out his chair, causing the rug underneath him to crinkle in protest.

“I am sorry, Mother, I just forgot I had an appointment with Lord Havernick. Perhaps we’ll continue this conversation later?”

Before she could respond, Maxon jolted from the study, feeling as though its walls had become more like the confines of a prison these past months.

He needed air. He needed space. He needed freedom. And while he claimed blame for his hasty retreat from the conversation with Mother upon the shoulders of his friend Lord Oliver Havernick, Maxon had no intentions of pulling his friend into all this mess yet. In fact, he hoped to exclude his friend from it altogether. The less he let people in, the less likely he was to get hurt. And that’s the way he liked it.

As he pushed through the front door, he gulped in the sweet aroma of spring poppies that lined the portico with bursts of vibrant colors. Poppies and the arrival of spring were his favorite things about this estate . . . now his estate. He suddenly felt a slight nudge on his palm. Looking down, he was greeted with the pink, moist nose of a dog. Its eyes looked up at Maxon with questioning brows as if to condone him for not realizing his presence and making him feel welcome with a good ear rub. “Oh, hello. And where exactly did you come from?”

Maxon bent down, rubbing the dog’s soft black coat with his free hand, while the other looked to see if the pooch had a collar.

Nothing.

Maxon looked around to see the possible owner perhaps walking in the gardens and enjoying the poppies as he had planned. But no one was in sight. Glancing down at the dog once more, he estimated him to be not over a year old, still young and vulnerable, and quite certainly alone. For the briefest of moments, Maxon saw himself in the dog’s circumstance. Most certainly alone, even when surrounded by the servants and quiet dealings of his mother, the abandonment of feeling like he belonged and feeling lost. His heart swelled with a love for the dog he had barely just been introduced to.