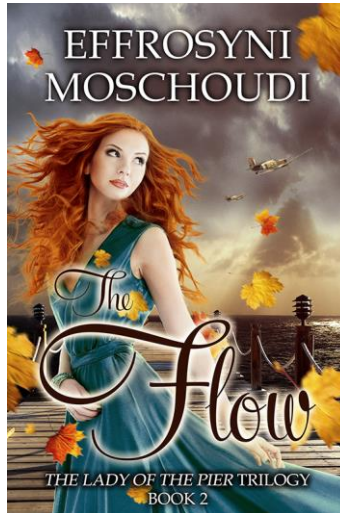


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Excerpt from *The Lady of the Pier – The Flow*

“Mother, could I have a word please? Excuse me, ladies,” said Charles as soon as he approached. Susan Fenshaw was lounging on a sofa at the time, chatting with two elderly women that seemed about to nod off.

“Of course, dear.” Lady Fenshaw excused herself to her old friends and followed Charles to a corner of the room where they could talk privately.

“I would like to speak to you about Laura, Mother.”

“Oh, isn't she heaven? Thank you so much for bringing her here tonight. What a treat for us all she's been with her marvellous singing!”

“Yes indeed, quite right! Anyway, I was wondering if you could ask her to stay overnight. I thought it would be lovely to have her here tomorrow for the picnic.”

“Oh, what a splendid idea! Of course you should ask her!” she said patting his hand.

“Mother, I would like *you* to ask her please!” Charles huffed and ran a hand through his hair with exasperation. Whenever she drank a few glasses, it became impossible to communicate with her. “It’s quite important, that you ask her,” he repeated. This time, he managed a feeble smile.

His mother tilted her head. “Why is that, dear?”

“I think she has plans for tomorrow to see friends.” Charles was certain Laura was seeing Christian. The very thought made him nauseous with annoyance, but he tried to clear it from his mind so that he could focus. Laura was a clever girl; he needed to set a perfect trap. She should enter it totally unaware of any danger, and who would be better to set it for her but his innocent-looking mother?

“Well if she has plans . . .” said Lady Fenshaw with a shrug from her shoulders, breaking his reverie.

“You don’t understand, Mother!”

“What is it, dear? What is troubling you?” Unsettled, she reached out to caress his cheek with a tender hand, as if he were a child.

Charles didn’t resist it but rather accepted it with gladness. It often perturbed him, the thought that although he had all the luxuries he ever wanted, it all became tiresome sooner or later. Yet, tenderness was always the one thing he never got enough of.

“It’s important to me, Mother. It’s important that she stays. Can you please do me a favour and go ask her for me? She won’t have the heart to say no to you. Please convince her to stay. It will make me very happy, Mother. Do you understand?”

“Good heavens, Charles . . . you have feelings for her?” His mother’s eyes opened wide when it dawned on her that her son had finally fallen in love.

“Yes Mother,” he said, taking her hand from his cheek to kiss it. “Will you please do me this favour?”

“Leave it with me, darling.” She patted his hand and gave him a sweet smile, then followed his eyes and spotted Laura

across the room. When she turned to go to her, Charles watched, but before Laura could catch his eye, he turned around and left the room.

There was an evil gleam in his eye when he stood outside in the courtyard lighting his cigarette. *Mother is bound to do the trick.* He was so close to the prize now that his fingers had started to itch. *At last, it's time to reap the benefits after all this waiting! I'll teach a lesson to that stinking peasant, who thought he could ever win one over me!*

When he returned to the drawing room ten minutes later, Charles found his mother and Laura sitting together. Laura wore a distinct expression of discomfort, and he smiled to himself. She looked downhearted and apprehensive, like a cornered animal looking in vain for a way out. And so, the trap had been set.

"Hello Laura! James is ready to go when you are," he said breezily.

"Oh, that won't be necessary, dear," replied his mother, winking at him secretly from Laura. The young girl was gazing at Charles with a forlorn look on her face at the time. She wouldn't have caught his mother's playful wink, not in a million years.

"Oh? Why not?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"Your mother has kindly asked me to stay for the picnic tomorrow," Laura finally said, trying all she could to sound excited about it, but he could tell it wasn't so.

"I thought you had plans! Are you sure?" he asked, tilting his head with mock concern.

"No, it'll be fine. Can I just make a telephone call please? I'll get a neighbour to notify Maggie I won't be home tonight."

"Yes, of course Laura. Please, follow me," he said eagerly, beckoning with a fluid movement of his hand.

He led her to the library where he pulled a face of dismay. "I'm so sorry, Laura. I tried to tell Mother you had plans for tomorrow, but she wanted to ask you anyway. In the end, she looked so excited about the prospect, that I just didn't find the heart to insist and put her off asking you."

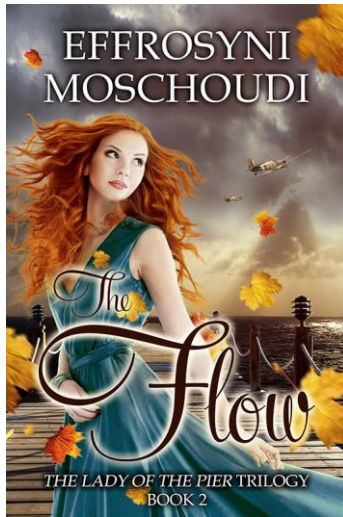
"It's quite all right," replied Laura, with a little wave. She felt too obliged to Lady Fenshaw to allow herself to show even a hint of her frustration. Besides, it was only a day. "I'm looking forward to the picnic. It's awfully nice of her ladyship to invite me."

Charles issued her with a tight-lipped smile and shut the door to give her privacy, then returned to his mother with long, triumphant strides to bow before her with a wide grin on his face.

"You're a cunning woman, and I love you for that," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

"Anything for my boy," she replied, relishing his affections. Such gestures didn't come often, neither did his happy spirits, and it was wonderful to see him cheerful for a change. She was hoping Laura had feelings for her son too, somehow. It would be wonderful if they were to be married, and it didn't matter she wasn't of noble descent. Neither was she, after all.

Times had changed. Nowadays, love often transcended social classes, and that was widely acceptable. Besides, she was in her late sixties now. She no longer had the luxury of time to wait for her son to find the right girl. This is why, by the time Charles left her to check on Laura back in the library, she was already fantasising about cots, tiny clothes, and baby skin that smelled of talcum powder.



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