

The Banker

By C. Jade Wyton

Alistair Highstone is the town's local bigwig; after coming into control of two family businesses, he is the richest man in town. Luckily for the dragons around him he has a big heart.... And after hearing the recently-widowed Abigail Felix is about to lose her house to a smug banker, he rushes to her aid.

Contains depictions of grief and harassment.

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The day had been long. Alistair had needed to reorganise the timetable for half of the factory workers after hearing about the piping issues in Warehouse D.

That damn place was so old— It was safer just to bulldoze the whole building and start again from the ground up.

The issue was making sure there were no lay-offs while that happened. The dragons who worked for him were fierce and loyal to each other; something he respected, but also feared.

If he went about this wrong, and left anyone in the dust, the entire workforce would be at his throat... and rightfully so. Those old pipes should have been replaced years ago.

Curse that utterly *useless* inspector from the city! He would have to find someone new. Someone local, who actually cared about the community and their safety....

'Alistair? Love?' the quiet, nervous voice of Alistair's wife spoke from across the dinner table, and he looked up from his simmering to see his wife's hands trembling as she put out her smoke. 'Are you alright? You look furious.... It's nothing I've done, is it?'

'Beatrice, dear, it's *never* you,' he reassured, reaching for her hand and giving it a loving squeeze. 'You're nothing but a delight in my life. No, my angel. It's the pipes.'

'Oh, that's a relief,' Beatrice gave a long sigh and began to clear the plates. 'I thought I might have done something wrong.'

'No, love, I would tell you,' Alistair comforted. 'I love you—'

'Daddy! Daddy!'

A cry from the front yard caught Alistair's attention, and he quickly took his wife's hand as the slam of the door made her flinch.

'Daddy! Come quickly!' it was Theodosia, the couple's only daughter. And she sounded very, *very* upset. 'Daddy!'

'Theo? Theo, dear!' Alistair exclaimed, leaping from his seat and meeting his daughter in the hall. 'What is it? What's wrong? Are you hurt? What's happened?'

'It's— It's Mrs Felix!' Theo panted, doubling over to catch her breath. 'Mrs Felix...'

'The widow?' Alistair asked. 'My dear why— Are you alright? Did you run all the way here from town?'

Theo gave a breathless nod, swallowing to moisten her dry throat before standing and pointing in the direction of the widow's home. She could barely speak she was panting so heavily. 'She's— There's— A gold dragon in a suit— He says he's from the bank! He's going to— Take— Her house!'

Alistair was out the door in moments; his tailcoat fluttering behind him as he pulled his wings and arms through the sleeves.

*Blast it all!*

Darcy's funeral plans hadn't even been finalised yet! The last thing his poor wife needed was some city scrooge threatening her!

Alistair ran as fast as he could through town; the people parting to let him through as he leapt over cars and carts in his hurry.

As he ran, he was joined by several familiar faces. Men who worked for him, mostly; who could read the urgency in his expression and had begun hurrying after him.

*Fierce and loyal*, Alistair thought to himself. *Good. We need that now.*

By the time he made it to the widow's street there were almost twenty dragons behind him. Alistair came to a stop as he made it to the corner and composed himself before slowly and confidently making his way over to the forming crowd. Though his group was only half the size of the crowd of women and children around the widow's house, it was made up of tradesmen and was at least five times as threatening; it brought him confidence to know he had good men to back him up if things turned sour.

And the chance of things going wrong was very high, he could tell. The closer he got the clearer he could hear the distraught wailing of Mrs Abigail Felix as she sat, collapsed and crying, on the pavement outside her front gate. And the clearer she got, the further back he felt his feathered crest press in his anger.

'*Please!*' Mrs Felix begged, loudly. 'Please, I just need some more time!'

'I'm so sorry, Mrs Felix,' the voice was patronising; falsely-sweet, it was clear that the golden dragon it came from didn't mean a word of his apology. 'My hands are tied. I'm simply the messenger....'

'She's just lost her husband!' a furious voice called from the crowd.

'It's not my decision—'

'She has *children!*'

'Two of which are clearly old enough to work!' the gold dragon snapped, motioning to the young teen who was placing a coat over his mother. 'This boy should have been in the work force at least a year ago, shouldn't he? Perhaps if he had been *responsible*, this wouldn't be happening—'

The gold dragon cut off, ducking as he dodged a can of beans that was aimed at his head.

'Do *not* make me call the authorities!' he snapped. 'Because I assure you, *assaulting* me won't help whatever case you think you have! She and her family need to clear out before the end of the month, or they will be removed by force—'

'Excuse me! Excuse me!' Alistair cut in, pushing through the crowd. 'Please, make way. Make room. I want to speak with him!'

'Oh, *now* you're in trouble!' a voice muttered. 'Highstone's brought his men.'

The gold dragon gave a haughty sniff and ignored the furious muttering as he turned to Alistair.

'Ah! Hello, good sir,' he grinned, offering his claw to the man. 'I see that you're a fellow man of taste, unlike this... riff-raff, here. My name is Forgegate. Calvin Forgegate.'

'Highstone,' Alistair replied, curtly, not offering his first name nor taking the gold dragon's claw. 'And I wouldn't go about calling the locals here "riff-raff" if I were you.'

Handshake rejected, Forgegate simply waved his claw and chuckled. 'I don't fear housewives, dear Highstone.'

'No? Well, perhaps you might fear their husbands,' Alistair offered, flicking a wing in the direction of the men who'd followed him.

Forgegate's lip twitched, then, and though he spoke coolly it was clear he knew the power dynamic was shifting. '*Perhaps*,' he answered. Then he sniffed again, his pompous attitude returning. 'If you're here to convince me to "have mercy" on the widow, I'm afraid that's not something I can do. As I have just finished telling these... *wonderful* women, it is the bank's decision to evict her. Not my own. So, unless you are willing to pay her debt for her, I'm afraid that you will have to take it up with the bank, directly.'

Alistair glared, his nostrils flaring as he took in a deep breath— But then, he let it out slowly. Evenly. And pulled out a small paper booklet which he flipped open. 'How much does she owe you?'

'The two months of payments she owes, plus her late fees, total five hundred gold,' Forgegate sniffed. 'Though, we take a one to one-hundred silver ratio, if you would prefer.'

'Five hundred gold,' Alistair muttered, furiously scribbling out the cheque and thrusting it into the gold dragon's hands. 'Take it, you damned snake, and get out of my town.'

The gold dragon examined the cheque thoroughly, a smug grin on his face, before folding it and neatly slipping it into his breast pocket. 'Hm. Well. It's getting late; I was thinking of perhaps returning to the city in the morning. Do you have any recommendations for a half-decent hotel?'

'If I were you I'd call a cab home. Not waste my money on a room for the night,' Alistair said through grit teeth. And when Forgegate opened his mouth to reply, Alistair raised his voice to speak over him. 'The people around here don't take too kindly to the tormenting of widows.'

That seemed to get through to the man. Forgegate pressed his ears back as he glanced around the crowd with tight eyes and, obviously realising exactly how much danger he was in, he quickly adjusted his hat and gave another sniff. 'Noted,' he said, simply, before glancing back to Mrs Felix. 'I'll be seeing you again next month, shall I? Ta ta, now.'

Forgegate turned, then, and made his way through the crowd; head held high and ears still pressed back in smug confidence. He was briefly blocked by the young Stonescale boys, Boris and Jerome, until Alistair ordered them to let him through.

'Let him leave, boys. He's not worth the trouble.'

Reluctantly the boys stepped back; glaring and twitching their fangs in a show of disgust.

Then, Alistair felt a hand around his wrist and looked down to see the widow

had grasped his arm and buried her face into it.

‘Thank you!’ she sobbed. ‘Alistair, thank you so much!’

‘It’s alright, my dear,’ Alistair comforted, helping the woman to her feet and leading her inside. ‘Let’s get you some tea, shall we? Come on, now. It’s alright.’

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