



A Hellion's Christmas Kiss (Connected By a Kiss #8)

Author: *Dawn Brower*

Category: Historical

Description: Lady Rosella Prescott has loved one man for as long as she can remember. To her dismay, he has only ever seen her as a friend—or worse, as a little sister. Despite her best efforts to capture his attention, nothing seems to change. It frustrates her endlessly, and at times she wonders if she's a hellion for her boldness. But in her heart, she knows she's his hellion. If only he would look at her and truly see it.

Lucian Abbot, the Marquess of Kistleton, has desired Rosella ever since he realized she was no longer a girl, but a desirable woman. How could he act on such feelings when she is the sister of his closest friend? The impropriety of it haunts him, and he suppresses his desires, determined to honor their bond. That is, until one fateful night when his resolve shatters, and he can no longer ignore what has been in front of him all along.

With the magic of Christmas in the air and a shared wish for love, Rosella and Lucian are drawn together at last. But as the night ends, they must confront a difficult choice: to follow their hearts or honor their loyalties.

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Lady Rosella Prescott stared out the window of her family's London townhouse. It was their family's turn to host their neighbors for the holiday dinner. It was the start of Christmastide, and their next-door neighbors always celebrated with them. For as long as she could recall, they had done this. Every other year her family would hold the festivities, and opposite years the Duke of Kissinger and his family would do the same.

Her father was the Duke of Clare. Her mother was a former gypsy, or perhaps she still was, but she did not follow their customs. Mostly. Sometimes, Lulia, the Duchess of Clare, would get an odd idea in her head that only made sense to her. She was the most unconventional duchess. Somehow, she made her station work for her, though. Rosella adored her mother and for her, she saw no reason for the duchess to be anything other than herself. When she was older, she wanted to be just like her. There was no one she'd rather emulate than her mother.

"Why do you have your nose to the window?" her older brother Asher asked. He leaned against the doorway and stared at her. "Do you think if you stare out the window long enough, you'll see snow fall?"

She turned and stuck her tongue out of him. He could be such a pain. Brothers, she thought, were insufferable creatures, existing solely to vex their sisters. Sometimes she really did not like him. "I'm waiting for Noelle," she said.

"Of course you are." He sighed. "I really wish we could dispense with this yearly tradition. We have been doing it long enough already. I'd much rather it just remained the family."

“I don’t agree,” she said. She loved her brother. She really did. But she didn’t want to spend all of Christmastide with only him for company. He didn’t seem to like her any more than she did him at times. Noelle was the only person who made her days tolerable. She was her best friend. “And if you stop to consider it, neither do you. You enjoy when Lucian visits.”

“You should not use his given name,” Asher chastised her. “He is the Marquess of Kistleton.”

She wrinkled her nose. “He’s not nearly as priggish as you are. You need to be more relaxed with close friends and family.”

“My family can call me Asher,” he said. “Close friends, do not get that privilege.”

“You’re awful,” she told him. “When you marry, are you going to insist your wife calls you Daventry? What a cold marriage that will make if you want your future bride to refer to you only with your title.”

“I’m only ten and eight,” he said in a stiff tone. “It’s not as if I am going to wed soon.”

“As if that matters,” she scoffed. “You’ll still be just as insufferable in a decade.”

She rather pitied the woman that Asher would end up marrying... She wanted a husband that adored her, and only her. One that would want to be with her always and treat her as something to be cherished, not endured. She had a feeling that Asher would keep some distance from his wife. It would indeed be a cold union between them. A part of her hoped that the woman he married would help him become less...well, less of a person who only followed the rules. He should develop some roguish tendencies. It wasn’t right for him to be so proper all the time. Asher, she feared, would keep his future wife at arm’s length, creating a union as frosty as the

December air. Perhaps, though, his bride might thaw his icy demeanor.

Rosella stared out at the sky. A shooting star streaked along the velvety blackness. She drew in a breath as the delightful surprise presented itself to her. “Oh, my,” she said and placed a hand on her chest. She could make a wish. What should she wish for? She glanced back at her brother and then at the fading star. There was only one thing she could wish for.

She closed her eyes and sent her wish up to the heavens. Please help me find my true love, and if you’re listening, find someone to wake my brother up and show him how to live. We both deserve happiness. Even if he is the worst sometimes.

“What has you so excited,” Asher asked.

“There was a shooting star,” she told him. “I made a wish.”

“Did you now.” He scoffed. “You still believe in such fanciful things? You’re foolish, as always.”

Rosella sighed. Again, and probably not for the last time. “To think I may have wasted it on the likes of you.”

“I don’t need you to make wishes for me.” He turned his nose up at her. “I’ll do just fine without your meddling.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” she told him. “But all the same, I think you needed this. Only time will tell if it comes true or not.”

She turned back to the window. Their guests were walking along the sidewalk, Noelle leading the group. She grinned and turned to her brother. “They’re here. Are you ready for them?”

“I will endeavor to persevere,” he said stoically.

The butler answered the door and let them all in. The Duke and Duchess of Kissinger, along with Noelle and Lucian, entered the room. She sucked in a breath when her gaze met Lucian’s. She didn’t tell Asher why she refused to use his title. Because she had been in love with Lucian for years now.

The issue, of course, was he didn’t seem to really notice her. To him, she was nothing more than his little sister’s dearest friend, and a girl he had to be nice to when their families socialized together. When they were alone, though, he was far more brusque. He didn’t like to have her near and would often snipe at her.

She wanted to hate him. Life would be far easier if she could. It had been almost a year since she’d seen him last. The sight of him now did funny things to her heart, but she wouldn’t allow him to notice her anxiousness. Instead, she turned to Noelle. Her friend was safe. Any proximity to Lucian could lead to her undoing.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she told Noelle. She gestured toward Asher. “My brother fails at being decent company.”

“Doesn’t he always,” she said, then rolled her eyes. Noelle glanced at Asher and glared at him. Asher and Noelle did not make their dislike for each other a secret. They didn’t even care if the family was around or not. They argued. Always. It could be disconcerting. So much so, she couldn’t help wondering if they were drawn to each other and that was their way of showing their feelings. Of course, that could just be wishful thinking. Rosella would love to have Noelle be her sister, in truth. “We should go to the library.”

“Go ahead. I need to fetch your gift,” Rosella said, excusing herself. “I’ll only be a moment.”

Rosella rushed up to her bedchamber to retrieve the gift. They didn't always exchange any gifts, but in the last couple of years, they had. This year, they were six and ten, and she wanted to get something special for Noelle. She grabbed the small box and then went down the stairs. She tripped on the last step and stumbled forward. Her arms flailed and the tiny box went flying. Rosella would have hit the floor if not for the quick thinking of someone nearby.

"I have you," Lucian said. His arms were wrapped around her and she was flush against him. She blinked up at him several times. Rosella had never been at a loss for words before. But then again, she had never had the privilege of being held by Lucian either.

"Thank..." She swallowed hard, then began again, "Thank You."

"It's my pleasure." He smiled at her. Was it her imagination or was it a little roguish? As if it truly was his pleasure to hold her? She shook her head. No. That could not be right. It was definitely the musings of a wishful mind.

"You can let me go now." She really didn't want him to, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

"Can I?" He lifted a brow. "Are you certain? You might trip over your feet at the sight of me again and fall to your death."

It was her turn to roll her eyes. "Do not flatter yourself," she told him. As if... Though to be honest, he wasn't that far off the mark. "My clumsiness has nothing to do with you."

"If you say so, love," he said. There was something almost roguish there. Surely, she wasn't mistaken in her observation. What was he playing at?

“I do,” she said, more firmly this time. “I need to go find that gift I dropped.” She had to make sure it wasn’t broken. Please let it not be broken...

“A gift?” He tilted his head to the side. The scoundrel was still holding her. What could she do that would ensure he let her go? Did she really want him to remove his arms from around her? It did feel good... “What did you get for me?”

“Absolutely nothing,” she said. She would not allow herself to give him anything. Rosella feared he would know how she felt if she did. “That gift is for Noelle.”

“Ah,” he said, feigning disappointment. “I see where I stand. My heart may never recover from the slight.” Her heart ached to give him everything.

“You have never wanted a gift from me. You are mocking me.” She licked her lips. “Why would you want anything I had to offer?”

“Love,” he said huskily. Lucian’s expression softened. “Perhaps I want more from you than you know.” He shook his head and started to release her. She mourned the loss of his warmth. “I’ll help you find the gift.” There was a solemnness to his tone now. The moment was lost. Whatever it had meant, she did not know. Something had passed between them though, and part of her wanted to insist he explain himself. That last statement had been far too cryptic.

She never had a chance to ask him, though. He retrieved her box and handed it back to her. “Have a wonderful Christmastide, Rosella,” he said in a soft tone. She tightened her grip on the box as she met his gaze. “I hope it’s all you dreamt it would be.” Then he walked away as if nothing had happened. Nothing really had happened. It just felt like it had been important somehow. Why had he pulled away? What had he wanted?

Rosella feared she would never know the answers to those questions, and that made

her sad. She stopped to check the box and breathed a sigh of relief. At least one thing had gone right. Her gift for Noelle was intact. Now to just meet with her friend and give her the gift.

She let her moment with Lucian fall from her mind. It would only frustrate her to continue dwelling on it. Lucian still didn't see her the way she wanted him to. That had to be a trick of her imagination. His little endearments had meant nothing too. She wasn't his love or anything close to it.

Her brother had been correct, her wishing on a star wouldn't give her what she wanted most. She loved Lucian, but he would never truly love her. If only wishing made it so...

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One

Lucian Abbot, the Marquess of Kistleton, had no desire to travel to the country for Christmastide. These annual family gatherings had become insufferably tedious. If it were only his family in attendance, he might not find them so irksome, but they shared the season with another household—one now tied to his own by marriage. This year marked the first Christmastide house party hosted by his sister, Noelle, and her husband, the Marquess of Daventry.

Lucian liked Daventry well enough—had always liked him, in fact. That did not mean he enjoyed the knowledge that his closest friend had married his sister. The thought of them as a couple made him shudder. Best not to dwell on that unpleasant image. They had been married nearly a year, having fallen in love after being trapped at an inn during a snowstorm last Christmastide. Once the storm had cleared, they had eloped and arrived at the house party with their scandalous news.

Lucian grimaced at the memory as the carriage jolted over a rut in the road. That fateful day had not been his favorite. He had spent most of it arguing with Lady Rosella Prescott over holiday decorations. Their bickering was a near-constant occurrence, and he dreaded the thought of spending yet another Christmastide under the same roof as her.

Rosella was the bane of his existence.

She was also the only woman who had ever captured his heart.

Lucian sighed heavily. He had to find a way to let go of his feelings for Rosella. She

loathed him—or at least acted as though she did. Their interactions were filled with sharp words and heated arguments. Her fiery nature, which he so admired, was directed at him with relentless precision. He knew he should stay away from her, but the thought of doing so was a torment all its own.

The carriage turned onto the long, winding drive leading to Daventry Manor. Lucian suspected he was the last guest to arrive. He had intentionally delayed his departure, under the pretense of attending to business, but in truth, he simply had not been eager to face what awaited him. His parents, the Duke and Duchess of Kissinger, and Daventry's parents, the Duke and Duchess of Clare, would already be settled in. Perhaps his uncle, the Viscount of Greenville, would be there too. Lucian hoped so. Greenville, only a few years his senior, had always been a source of mischief and camaraderie. Greenville was his mother's much younger brother. One day he would be the Earl of Riverdale once his grandfather passed on, but for now his uncle was content to live the life of a rogue.

The carriage came to a halt, and Lucian braced himself. Now he had to go inside and pretend that he was happy. With a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped out into the brisk winter air.

"I'll ensure your trunks are taken inside, my lord," one of the footman said.

"Thank you, Connors," Lucian replied before making his way to the front door. He lifted the knocker and rapped it sharply against the heavy wood.

The butler, an elderly man with snowy white hair, opened the door and bowed. "Good day, my lord. Please, come inside." His tone was solemn as he met Lucian's gaze.

"You are finally here," Daventry said, striding into the foyer. "We were beginning to think you had gotten lost."

Lucian forced a smile onto his face.. “Not at all. Some business matters delayed me, but they are settled now.” He did not want to explain to his friend the real reason he had not arrived sooner.

“You have not missed much,” Daventry assured him. “You know Noelle—she will ensure this house party is...”

“Lively?” Lucian supplied dryly. His friend had seemed unable to find the right word to describe his sister’s scandalous behavior.

“That’s one word for it,” Daventry said with a grin. “Come. Let’s have a drink in my study. The ladies are having tea, our fathers are in the billiards room, and we can seize this moment of quiet.”

Lucian followed Daventry gladly. The study was familiar, a space they had often shared during his visits to the estate. No matter how much Lucian disliked these gatherings, his friendship with Daventry had always been a bright spot.

Daventry poured two glasses of brandy and handed one to Lucian. “What business kept you away?” he asked.

“I acquired some additional property,” Lucian replied smoothly. It wasn’t entirely a lie. He had purchased land adjacent to his estate, though the transaction had been finalized weeks earlier.

“You finally convinced the owner to sell it to you.” Daventry whistled. “I had not expected that. You must tell me everything.”

“There is not much to tell,” Lucian said, then shrugged. “The heir needed funds more than he needed the land, and I was fortunate to make the acquisition.”

“Fortunate indeed,” Daventry said with a whistle. “You’ve been after that parcel for years. Well done.”

Lucian nodded, sipping his brandy. The familiar burn eased some of his tension. Still, he couldn’t quite relax. He wanted nothing more than to retreat to his assigned chamber and savor a moment of solitude before facing the inevitable chaos of the house party.

Daventry set down his empty snifter. “You must want to rest,” Daventry said, noting Lucian’s empty glass. “Would you like another drink, or would you prefer to retire to your room?”

“I think I’ll rest for a bit,” Lucian said. “We can catch up more after dinner.”

“You are in your usual chamber,” Daventry said with a nod. “I trust you remember the way?”

“I do. Thank you.”

Lucian excused himself and made his way to his room. Once inside, he exhaled a long breath and locked the door behind him. This was his sanctuary, however brief. Soon enough, he would have to face Noelle, their parents, and—worst of all—Rosella. But for now, he had peace. He intended to savor every second of it, even if thoughts of Rosella threatened to invade his solitude. Always, they returned to her. He feared they always would.

Rosella wandered into the library at Daventry Manor, unsure of why she had chosen this particular refuge. She certainly wasn’t seeking a book to read; no story could soothe the restless turmoil within her. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy spending Christmastide with her family—she cherished their annual gatherings. Her disquiet stemmed from something deeper, something she could no longer ignore. It all came

down to one man. The Marquess of Kistleton.

Lucian Abbot had held her heart for years, yet he seemed blind to her feelings. He alternated between ignoring her entirely and engaging in arguments that left her flustered and frustrated. There was no middle ground with him, no warmth to give her hope. And yet, her heart remained steadfastly his.

She sighed deeply, her thoughts swirling. Somehow, she needed to let go of this love that consumed her—or make him realize he couldn't live without her. The latter seemed an impossible dream. How could she force a man to see what he refused to acknowledge? She longed for a life with him, but love could not be commanded. It had to be given freely, and she feared Lucian might never offer her his heart. Somehow, some way she would have to find a way to either end this love she felt for him or make him realize he could not live without her.

This Christmastide felt like her last chance. One final opportunity to show him what they could be together. But how? Their history of bickering had done little to endear her to him. She yearned for him to look at her not with irritation, but with admiration. Love. Yet she had no idea how to capture his attention in a way that mattered. She wanted his love not his apathy.

So how could she gain those things? What could she do to ensure that he could at least start to fall in love with her? She had so much love to give. If only he would see that... She sighed and strolled over to one of the shelves. Rosella trailed her fingers along the spines of books lining the shelves, debating whether to grab one for appearances' sake. If someone found her here, it would save her from awkward questions.

"This is the last place I would have expected to find you," a man with a rich deep voice said from behind her.

Her heart jolted, and she closed her eyes for a brief moment. Fate had intervened, it seemed. She was not ready for this, but her mother had always told her that moments like this came for a reason. She turned slowly, tilting her lips into what she hoped was a confident smile. “Hello, Lord Kistleton.” She licked her lips, an unintentional reaction to her nerves, and tilted her head, studying him. “You appear well. Your mother will be glad to see that. She fretted over your late arrival.”

In truth, he looked so bloody gorgeous it made her heart ache for the want of him. His dark hair fell in a rakish lock over his brow, and his golden eyes sparkled with a warmth she rarely saw directed at her. Her heart ached with the effort of keeping her composure. How easy it would be to let her feelings overwhelm her, to lose herself in the dream of what could be. It would be to fall under the spell of her love and lose everything to this man.

“Are you saying my mother missed me?” he asked with a raised brow, his tone teasing. “I suppose that could be true.”

“Why would it not be?” Rosella frowned, folding her arms. “Of course, your mother misses you. Do you enjoy provoking me into arguments?”

“Not at all.” He sighed and then brushed his hand over his face. His frustration was coming forth. It was always this way with them. Oh, how she wished she could change it. But damn it all...how? “My apologies,” he said softly. “I fear that I am still disagreeable after traveling all day. Forgive me?”

That caught her off guard. “You have never apologized before.” She would forgive him anything. He was her weakness and she could never stay angry with him. No that he knew that...

“Of course I have,” he said, frowning. “I am not a brute.”

“No, you are not,” she conceded. “But you have never been one to apologize so readily, especially to me. You are usually determined to win every argument. What has changed?”

“Nothing,” he said dismissively, then hesitated. “Perhaps I am simply tired of bickering with you.”

That would be a welcome change. She hoped it was true. The admission had sent a flicker of hope through her. “I would like that,” she said softly. “I do not enjoy our disagreements either.”

He smiled, a gentle curve of his lips that sent warmth spreading through her. “Then let this be the year we leave animosity behind. I would rather not spend Christmastide locked in battles of wit.”

“Then we are in agreement.” Rosella kept her gaze locked on his, hardly daring to believe what she was hearing. If they could find a way to stop arguing perhaps they could also discover something far deeper, more meaningful with each other. “At least for the duration of the house party, we’ll call a truce.” Could this truly be the beginning of something different? Something better?

“A cessation of hostilities,” he said, his lips twitching with amusement. “Very well. We are in accord.”

Her heart raced, hope blooming within her. She had walked into the library restless and uncertain, but now she had a chance—a truce that might lead to something more. All she had wanted was a chance and now she would have one. If she could show him the depth of her heart, perhaps he would see her in a new light. Perhaps her wish, the one she had whispered to the heavens, would be answered. By the end of Christmastide, she might just win his love.

Two

Lady Rosella Prescott dressed carefully for dinner, instructing her maid to prepare one of her best gowns. It was a soft blue chiffon with white lace trim around the bodice, a color that matched her eyes and, she thought, enhanced them quite well. Truthfully, what she hoped was that a certain marquess would find it enticing—or better yet, irresistible. Perhaps it was a foolish endeavor, but she had to start somewhere.

She slid on her matching slippers and took one final look at her reflection. Her dark hair was swept into an elegant chignon, with a few loose tendrils framing her neck and cascading softly down her back. A simple diamond and sapphire pendant adorned her neck, the only jewelry she had chosen. Briefly, she had considered donning a diadem but dismissed the idea immediately. It was, after all, only a family dinner, and anything more would have been ostentatious.

A smile curved her lips as confidence blossomed. This time, she would succeed. He would not know what to make of this version of her. They had agreed to a truce, and she fully intended to use it to her advantage. Tonight, she would be charming, tantalizing, and utterly irresistible.

All her hopes and dreams revolved around one man. The Marquess of Kistleton held her heart, and tonight, she had to make him see her in a new light. If this attempt failed, she would have no choice but to set aside her feelings and accept that nothing would ever come of them. She loved him—foolish, blind fool that he was—but perhaps she was the greater fool for believing she might win his heart.

Taking a deep breath, she left the sanctuary of her bedchamber. Not that there was any real danger awaiting her, but in solitude, there was no fear of rejection or the daunting task of seduction. “This will work,” she told herself, repeating it like a mantra as she descended the staircase and entered the sitting room.

Noelle was already there, along with their mothers, the Duchess of Clare and the Duchess of Kissinger. But where were the men?

“I’m glad I do not appear to be late,” Rosella said, frowning slightly.

“Not at all, dear,” her mother, the Duchess of Clare, assured her. “Your father was delayed by some unexpected business, and the Duke of Kissinger is assisting him. They refused to share the details, but I expect they will join us soon.”

“My brother and yours are in the billiards room,” Noelle added. “They thought it an opportune time to play, given the delay.”

Rosella frowned again. “How long will dinner be delayed?” She had taken such care with her appearance, only to find the one person she wanted to see missing. How could she impress the Marquess of Kistleton if he wasn’t there to admire her?

“Dinner will be served in half an hour,” the Duchess of Kissinger replied. “Whether the gentlemen join us or not.”

“Our patience only extends so far,” the Duchess of Clare agreed. “As they well know.”

Noelle grinned. “Lucian and Asher won’t be long. My husband knows I’ll fetch him, and I am not above making a scene.”

“Your brother knows that as well,” Noelle’s mother added with a resigned sigh.

“Thankfully, I no longer need to fret over your scandalous behavior now that you are married.”

Noelle rolled her eyes. “I was not that terrible.”

“Not at all,” her mother replied with a wry smile. “You were far worse.”

Rosella laughed as Noelle’s mouth fell open in shock. “Mother!”

“I speak the truth, and you know it,” the Duchess of Kissinger said with a shrug. “I have never made excuses for you.”

Noelle sighed. “Yes, I suppose that is true.”

Rosella took a seat beside Noelle on the settee, her mind already formulating a plan. She needed to interact with Lucian, and the billiards room offered the perfect opportunity. If only she could plant the idea in Noelle’s mind...

“This is lovely,” Rosella said. “The Christmastide gathering is always one of my favorite times of the year.”

“As it is mine,” Noelle agreed. “And I am so pleased Asher and I have the honor of hosting this year.”

“Now Rosella must marry,” her mother said, smiling pointedly. “Then the next Christmastide gathering can be hers to host.”

Rosella sighed. “I have no prospects, Mother. You must temper your expectations. It’s unlikely I’ll fall in love and marry before the next Christmastide.”

“A mother may hope,” the Duchess of Clare replied, undeterred. “And I do believe it

will happen sooner than you think.”

Rosella narrowed her gaze. Her mother’s cryptic predictions often had an uncanny way of coming true. “What have you seen?”

“I cannot say,” her mother answered with maddening serenity. “I do not wish to spook you.”

“As if that cryptic remark hasn’t already done so,” Rosella muttered. “Keep your secrets then, Mother. It matters not. I know no gentleman is interested in me at present.”

Her mother smiled knowingly. “If you say so.”

“I do.” Her tone was petulant, though inwardly, she dared to hope. Could her mother be right? Could the man she longed to marry already be under the same roof? Turning to Noelle, she asked, “Do you think Asher and your brother have finished their billiards game?”

Noelle frowned thoughtfully. “I cannot say for certain.” Then, as if the idea had struck her, she tapped her chin. “Perhaps we should go and encourage them to finish.”

It was almost too easy. “If you think it’s a good idea, I’ll gladly accompany you.”

“Excellent,” Noelle said, standing. She turned to their mothers. “We’ll return shortly.”

As they walked toward the billiards room, Noelle leaned closer. “I thought you might need some space. Your mother means well, but I could tell her words unsettled you.”

“Only a little,” Rosella admitted, grateful for Noelle’s understanding. “Thank you.”

“Of course. There is nothing I would not do for you,” Noelle replied with a smile. “Besides, the billiards room will be far more entertaining than your mother’s matchmaking scheme.”

Rosella could not agree more. “Absolutely,” she said with a smile. “You had a brilliant idea suggesting we go to the billiards room.”

As they approached the billiards room, Rosella’s thoughts raced. This might be her chance to interact with Lucian, to show him a side of her he had never truly seen. Plans were fickle things, prone to unraveling when least expected. Perhaps it was time to place her faith in fate.

Lucian stared down at the billiards table, contemplating his next shot. In truth, he cared little whether he won or lost. The game had simply been a way to pass the time until dinner. He and Asher could have remained in the sitting room with the ladies, but they had decided instead to spend the time in each other’s company. Since Asher had married his sister, opportunities for such camaraderie had become scarce, as was proper. Lucian certainly would not have wanted his friend to neglect his wife—especially when that wife was his sister.

Still, their friendship had taken a different turn since Asher and Noelle wed nearly a year ago. The change had been profound, not just in their relationship but also within Lucian himself. It had forced him to confront desires he had not previously acknowledged. Marriage, once a distant concept, had started to feel less abstract—particularly with the emotions Rosella stirred in him.

But pursuing Rosella presented a daunting challenge. Although they had called a truce, there was no indication that her feelings for him extended beyond irritation. What if she did not share even a hint of his romantic inclinations? Worse, what if she

laughed at the idea of them together? He would never know if he did not attempt to discover how she felt. Which in itself was terrifying. They would have to face each other every year at least during Christmastide. That would be onerous and humiliating.

“The shot is not that difficult,” Asher drawled, pulling Lucian from his musings. “Why are you staring at the table as if it is a puzzle that is unsolvable?”

Lucian shook off his thoughts and met his friend’s gaze. “The shot is not what preoccupies me.” He grinned. “I have other concerns weighing on my mind.”

Asher nodded knowingly. “If you wish to discuss them, I am here to listen.”

“No, it is all right. I will sort through them on my own.” Lucian leaned down, aligned his cue, and took the shot. The ball rolled smoothly across the table and sank neatly into the pocket. “It will resolve itself in time.”

“The offer remains,” Asher said with a grin, then wiggled his eyebrows. “Unless, of course, these concerns involve a lady. Do you have someone on your mind?”

Lucian turned his head slowly, fixing Asher with a glare. “Of course not. I have far more pressing matters to consider. It will work out when it is meant to.”

Asher held up his hands in mock surrender, laughing. “Noted. Though you should consider settling down. It might do you some good to focus on more than estate business.”

Lucian knew Asher was right, which was precisely why he had been seriously contemplating courting Rosella. Yet, discussing such feelings with her brother—his closest friend—was a delicate matter he wanted to delay for as long as possible. “I will consider your advice,” he said evenly. He did wish to have Rosella in his life. He

just did not know how to go forward and implement that desire

“Good.” Asher grinned. “I would like to see you happy.”

“You don’t think I am happy?” Lucian raised a brow. “I hadn’t realized I was so melancholic.”

“Not melancholic,” Asher corrected with a roll of his eyes. “But not entirely blissful either. It’s a different kind of happiness I wish for you, and I hope you find it.”

“Perhaps I will, in time,” Lucian conceded. The game had lost its appeal, and he saw little point in continuing. “Shall we call this a draw?”

Asher surveyed the table, then nodded. “It seems fair. We should rejoin the ladies. Perhaps our fathers have concluded whatever mysterious business delayed them.”

Lucian replaced his cue on the rack and turned back to Asher. “Do you have any idea what they’re up to?”

“Not the faintest,” Asher replied. “But you know how they are. It’s bound to be some grand scheme that will surprise us.”

“Likely something Christmastide-related,” Lucian agreed. “But I cannot begin to guess what.”

“Let’s join the ladies, then.”

“But what if we wish to join you?” Noelle’s voice rang out as she strolled into the room, Rosella at her side.

Lucian’s gaze immediately landed on Rosella, and his heart quickened. She was a

vision in blue, her gown perfectly complementing her luminous eyes. If they were alone, he might have told her how utterly beautiful she looked—and perhaps stolen a kiss. The mere thought of holding her in his arms, tasting her lips, sent a desperate longing coursing through him. If she had any inkling of how much he desired her, it would likely shock her.

“Hello, darling,” Asher greeted his wife. “Are we late? Have the dukes returned?”

“Not at all,” Noelle replied. “But I missed you. Also, the duchesses are growing restless. We should likely begin the meal.”

Asher nodded. “We were just finishing. I’ll let the staff know to serve, and then we can escort everyone to the dining room.”

“Perfect,” Noelle said, turning her gaze to Lucian. “You look distracted. Is something bothering you? Or do you object to beginning dinner without the dukes?”

Lucian had been so focused on Rosella that he barely registered Noelle’s question. Dinner, the dukes—it all seemed inconsequential compared to the woman standing before him. “Nothing is bothering me, dear sister,” he replied smoothly, though inwardly he seethed at Rosella’s apparent indifference. Had she even glanced in his direction? How was he supposed to win her heart if she barely noticed him? “Let’s eat. I’m certain our mothers are impatiently awaiting us.”

The group left the game room and headed toward the sitting room. Lucian watched Rosella from the corner of his eye, his mind racing. He needed a plan—something to shift her feelings toward him. For years, all he had seemed to inspire in her was irritation, but now he wanted something far more profound. He wanted her love, and he was determined to find a way to earn it. If only he knew where to begin...

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Three

Rosella strolled into the sitting room and frowned. Every inch of the room was covered in greenery, and in the middle of it all stood her father, the Duke of Clare, along with the Duke of Kissinger. They were surveying the accumulation as if trying to decide how to divide the spoils. It was most disconcerting to witness, and she did not know what to make of it at all.

“Father,” she began, “what in heaven is all of this?”

Slowly, he turned to face her. When he met her gaze, she saw that his eyes were filled with excitement. “We are going to create our own Christmastide decorations,” he explained.

Rosella frowned. “Is this what the two of you were concocting last evening while we were awaiting dinner?”

The Duke of Kissinger grinned. He was a handsome man well into his prime, with dark hair and eyes an arresting shade of blue. She could easily see where Lucian had inherited his striking appearance. Lucian would likely age as gracefully as his father and, no doubt, become even more handsome as the years passed. Though, perhaps, she was biased... “The servants did assist us,” Kissinger explained. “Once everyone has arrived, we will explain everything.”

She had not known why she had been summoned to the sitting room, but this now made much more sense. They had never done anything like this before, and it would be a delightful change to their tradition. Though all the holly and pine branches were

a bit excessive. She narrowed her gaze... was that mistletoe? What were the dukes thinking, bringing that into their decorating scheme? Did they hope to catch their wives under the greenery? Perhaps it was as innocent as that... After all, everyone in attendance had a spouse except her and Lucian. And if they were trying their hand at some misguided matchmaking—well, she supposed she could actually accept that. She did wish to increase Lucian’s attentions and could use all the assistance she could get in achieving that goal.

“What inspired you to do this?” she asked.

It was a splendid idea, and she wondered why they had not considered it sooner. It would give her ample opportunity to spend time with Lucian. Perhaps, in some small way, it might even open up the possibility of something more with him. As for the mistletoe... she was not above using that to her advantage. She had often wondered what it might feel like to be kissed—particularly by Lucian.

Her father, the Duke of Clare, shrugged. “It seemed like a way for us to come together and create some memories.”

“It is indeed,” she told him, smiling warmly. Then she narrowed her gaze. “It was something Mother said, wasn’t it?”

“Perhaps,” her father replied, adopting an innocent expression. He always tried to feign ignorance when it came to her mother’s peculiar insights, but they all knew that Lulia, the Duchess of Clare—a gypsy princess in another life—often had premonitions they took seriously. “It’s not for me to say.”

Which meant her mother had sworn him to secrecy. Well, wasn’t that interesting. There was only one reason her mother would keep such things to herself: she hoped for a particular outcome and feared tipping off her intended target—if that was the right term—might ensure the opposite result. Rosella could only assume this

somehow concerned her. Asher was already happily married, leaving Lulia with only one child to match. She should be vexed at her mother's machinations, but she could not dismiss the potential benefit. This could be exactly what she needed to win Lucian's heart. "I'll allow you to keep your secrets, Father," she said magnanimously. "I have no real interest in discovering the depths of this scheme."

At that moment, Noelle and the two duchesses strolled into the room. The Duchess of Kissinger paused and stared at the greenery overtaking the sitting room. "Oh, my, this is..."

"A bit much," Rosella offered when the duchess seemed at a loss for words.

"It is," the duchess agreed, then turned her attention to her husband. "What is the meaning of all this?"

"I'll explain once the boys arrive." Though they were all adults, to their parents, they would always be children. It was almost endearing.

As if on cue, Asher and Lucian entered the room. They each surveyed the space with wide eyes, but neither spoke. Instead, they turned their questioning gazes to the dukes. The Duke of Kissinger barked out a laugh, while the Duke of Clare appeared sheepish—a testament to their opposing personalities. "Come on in," Kissinger said. "It is time to explain what we have in mind."

Everyone gathered around the dukes, awaiting their instructions. "We asked Noelle to leave the estate undecorated," Kissinger began, "so that we could take this opportunity to do it ourselves. It is our celebration, and we should do this to make it more memorable." He motioned toward the array of supplies. "We have everything we need. Now we just need to create and hang the decorations."

"This will take some time..." Asher frowned. "I suspect it will consume a good part

of the day.”

“It very well might,” the Duke of Clare admitted. “But what fun it will be.”

“It seems... messy,” Noelle replied distastefully. “Must we do this?”

“Yes,” the Duchess of Kissinger said, beaming at her husband. “This is a brilliant idea, and I think it should become a new tradition.”

“Oh, bother,” Noelle said. “Very well. I will string some holly together. It might not be as terrible as it seems.”

Asher laughed and strolled over to his wife, pulling her into an embrace. “It won’t be, love,” he assured her. “I am here to help you, after all.”

The glance between them was breathtaking. Their mutual adoration was plain to see. Rosella felt a pang of envy at the love they shared. She stole a glance at Lucian and nearly sighed. He was her everything, and hopefully, given time, he would feel the same. For now, they had this chance together. The married couples would undoubtedly pair off to create their decorations. That left Rosella and Lucian to work together, and she could not have planned it better herself.

Lucian stared at the piles of holly and pine branches and frowned. What the blazes did his father expect him to do with all of this? He had never made decorations, nor had he ever wanted to. He sneaked a glance at Rosella and frowned again. She seemed remarkably happy about this development. Perhaps, however, there was something useful to be found in this endeavor. Noelle was occupied with her husband, and his parents were already working together, as were the Duke and Duchess of Clare. That left him with one logical partner for this project: Rosella.

If she wanted to make decorations to adorn the manor, then so did he. It would give

him an opportunity to spend time with her—a chance he would not waste. This clearly mattered to her; therefore, it would matter to him. While he cared little for the decorations themselves, her enthusiasm made them important.

“Where should we begin?” Rosella asked, gesturing toward the piles of greenery, ribbons, and other various items scattered before them. “This is...”

“A mess?” he suggested.

Rosella chuckled. “Well, it is that,” she agreed, “but I was going to say overwhelming. I do not have the faintest idea where we should start.”

He frowned. She had a point. He suspected that neither of them had any experience in creating decorations. “What would you like to make?” he asked. That seemed the best place to start. With a clear idea in mind, they could sift through the materials and find what they needed.

She tapped her chin thoughtfully before replying, “We could use the holly, ivy, and rosemary to make boughs to hang along the banister and the grand staircase.”

“All right,” he agreed. “I will gather the materials, and we can begin stringing them together.”

It was fortunate that Christmas was only days away. The greenery would wither quickly if it had to last much longer. Still, it smelled wonderful, and even though he had not wanted to make decorations, he found the scent strangely pleasant. He carried the necessary materials over to Rosella and set them before her.

She sorted the ribbons and string into neat piles before starting to weave the holly and ivy together with an efficiency he could not help but admire. “You have done this before, haven’t you?” he asked.

Rosella shrugged. “Not exactly. My mother has projects she often has me help her with, and this is similar to some of those.” She picked up a sprig of rosemary and added it to the greenery. “It is not difficult.” She handed him a piece of string and a sprig of holly. “Would you like to try?”

Lucian considered for a moment before nodding. He took the string and attempted to attach the ivy and holly, but it did not go well. The whole thing fell apart and landed at his feet. Rosella giggled. “Here, let me show you.” She moved closer and held the string before him, her body brushing against his. He nearly groaned at her nearness. It would be so easy to pull her into his arms and revel in her warmth. But not here—not with everyone else around. For what he wanted, he would need privacy.

“Do you see what I am doing?” she asked.

Hell... he had not been paying attention. His thoughts were entirely consumed by her—her scent, her proximity, her everything. “Could you show me once more?” he asked. “I want to be sure I have got it right this time.” It was a lie, of course. He needed her to repeat herself only because he had not been listening. What a fool he was.

“Do you have any questions?” she asked, glancing up at him.

Yes. Far too many. He wanted to ask if he could kiss her. More than that, he needed to know if she could ever love him. But this was neither the time nor the place for such questions. He would have to find a way to get her alone. For now, he shook his head. “I think I’ve got it now. Thank you for your patience.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she glanced away. “It is nothing,” she murmured. “I am glad I could help.”

Lucian studied her carefully. Was she nervous? And if so, why? Could it be that she

harbored feelings for him as well? Had their years of bickering been nothing more than a way to mask deeper emotions? The possibility intrigued him. Yet another topic to add to the growing list of things he wished to discuss with her.

They worked in companionable silence, crafting boughs of holly and ivy. When he finished his, he held it up for her inspection. “Do you think it is acceptable?” he asked.

Rosella grinned. “It is perfect.”

“I would not go that far,” he said with a self-deprecating smile. “I am not nearly as skilled at this as you.”

She waved his words away. “It is perfect because you made it. It doesn’t need to be anything more than it is.” She gestured toward their parents. “Should we ask them if we should hang it, or wait until all the decorations are finished?”

Lucian glanced toward the others in the room. He didn’t know what their intentions were, but he knew what he wanted. This was his chance to get Rosella alone. He turned back to her. “Let’s hang it. If they object, they can tell us later.” He grinned. “But I suspect they won’t say a word. They wouldn’t want to hurt our feelings.”

Rosella’s lips twitched with amusement. “In that, you are undoubtedly correct.” She gathered her bough and gestured toward his. “After you, my lord.”

“Not at all,” he said, bowing slightly. “Ladies first. I insist.”

She didn’t argue. Rosella turned on her heel and headed out of the room. Lucian followed close behind, his heart quickening at the thought of their time alone. He had many questions for her, and if fortune favored him, he might even steal the kiss he so desperately desired.

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Four

Rosella and Lucian carefully strung the boughs of holly along the banister of the grand staircase. They worked mostly in silence, and Rosella struggled to find a way to encourage him to speak. She ought to be grateful they were not bickering, but mere peaceful accord was not enough. Rosella longed for more—much more. She wanted to be the love of his life, though she realized with a pang that such a wish might never come to fruition.

“I believe we have secured everything,” Lucian said, stepping back to inspect their work.

“It appears so,” she agreed, taking a step back as well.

The banister looked lovely with the boughs of holly elegantly draped along the sides. Rosella admired their handiwork but could not shake the wistful thought that her life could not be fixed as easily as a string of greenery. Why couldn’t life be simpler? She sighed, the weight of her unspoken feelings pressing on her chest.

“Do you think they expect us to create more decorations?” Lucian asked, breaking the silence.

Rosella shrugged. “I am not sure. We could, though I doubt anyone has noticed we left the sitting room.”

“They did seem quite keen on this project, yet they have not bothered to check on our progress,” Lucian mused, a slight frown creasing his brow.

“It’s probably best not to concern yourself with their motives,” Rosella said carefully. “I suspect we might not like what they hoped to achieve.”

“Oh?” He lifted an inquisitive brow. “And what do you think they are trying to accomplish?”

Rosella hesitated. She suspected her mother was orchestrating some grand scheme, but she did not want to voice her suspicions. Revealing her mother’s potential matchmaking efforts might embarrass him—or worse, make him retreat entirely. “I could not say for certain,” she finally replied, keeping her tone light. “But considering how often we have bickered in the past…”

“They might be hoping we will learn to interact more civilly.” He frowned again. “Though we did not need a decorating scheme to accomplish that. We have already settled things between us.”

Rosella smiled faintly. “We know that, but they are not privy to our truce.”

Lucian tilted his head, his expression thoughtful. “True enough. If that was their intent, at least we have given them no cause for worry. We have not argued once.”

Why did that make her feel sad? Did she actually miss their bickering? Perhaps a little. At least when they argued, there had been a spark—a semblance of passion. Now, there was a stilted distance between them, a void she could not seem to cross. She was close to him, but at the same time, impossibly far away. It was maddening. “If that is the measure of success, they have nothing to fret over,” she said, an idea sparking in her mind. “Why don’t we leave off the decorating and find something else to occupy ourselves with?”

“And what do you suggest we do instead?” he asked, his curiosity piqued.

“We could play a game,” she offered. “That sounds far more entertaining than stringing more holly.”

Lucian tapped his chin thoughtfully, then smiled. “Do you have a particular game in mind?”

Her planning hadn’t extended that far, and she hesitated. “Not exactly,” she admitted. “But that’s part of the fun, isn’t it? Let’s see what the game room has to offer. I doubt anyone else is in there right now.”

He nodded. “Very well. Let’s go.” He motioned for her to lead the way, then fell into step beside her. When they reached the game room, he pushed the door open and held it for her. “Now that we are here, what are our options?”

“There is always billiards,” she suggested.

“A fine choice,” he said, his lips twitching into a smile. “Do you know how to play?”

“A little,” she confessed. “Asher taught me, but I am not very good. I have hardly practiced and can’t shoot with much accuracy.”

“I can help with that,” he offered. “If you are willing to let me show you.”

Rosella’s heart fluttered. She would do anything if it meant spending more time with him. If Lucian wanted to teach her, she would gladly learn. “All right,” she agreed. “Let’s play.”

Lucian moved to the table and began gathering the items they needed to play. He retrieved the necessary balls—two white and one red—and chose a cue stick from the rack. Handing it to her, he asked, “I trust you know the basic rules?”

“I do,” she confirmed.

“Good,” he said, motioning toward the table. “We will start with something simple. Try to hit the red ball into a pocket without committing a hazard.”

Rosella leaned over the table, aligning her cue stick as best she could. Drawing back, she struck the white ball, but it spun miserably, missing the red ball entirely and rolling straight into a pocket. She sighed, straightening. “I told you I was terrible.”

“And that is why I am here,” he said with a grin. “To help you improve.”

He reset the balls on the table, his movements calm and deliberate. “Line it up as you did before,” he instructed, “but do not take the shot until I say.”

Rosella complied, leaning over the table once more. Her breath caught when Lucian stepped behind her, placing his hands over hers to guide her grip. His body pressed lightly against hers, and warmth flooded her cheeks. This was...scandalous. And yet, she could not bring herself to care.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

“Helping you,” he murmured, his tone low and smooth. “Hold steady, darling. I’ve got you.”

Her heart raced as he prepared to guide her movements. For a fleeting moment, the game of billiards became utterly irrelevant. All that mattered was Lucian—his nearness, his touch, and the hope that perhaps, just perhaps, he felt the same longing she did. Still she did not move. He had not told her to strike the ball, and she feared even when he did she would be unable to comply. She was that riveted by him, and the potential for something far more than a mere game of billiards could offer her.

Lucian took a deep breath, drawing in her delicate scent. His body stirred, and he feared she might feel the evidence of his arousal if he pressed too close. The last thing he wanted was to frighten her. But he wanted her—desperately. Leaning down, he whispered near her ear, his voice low and rough. “I am going to guide your stroke so you can feel the proper movement.” He barely cared about the billiards game. This was for her—an excuse to be near her, to hold her in the only way he dared. “Do not fight me. Just let it happen.”

He wondered if he was asking too much.

“All right,” she said, her voice slightly breathless.

Placing his hands over hers, Lucian slowly guided the cue stick back, then slid it forward across the table. The white ball rolled smoothly, striking the red ball and sending it into the pocket. “There,” he said, stepping back reluctantly. Already, he mourned the loss of her warmth against him and wished he had an excuse to pull her close again. He retrieved the balls and reset them on the table. “Now, try it again on your own.”

Rosella approached the table with renewed confidence. She leaned over, focused intently, and took her shot. The white ball glided across the table and struck the red ball, which dropped cleanly into the pocket. She grinned triumphantly. “I did it!”

“You did, darling,” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. He swallowed hard, suppressing a groan as his desire for her swelled.

Lucian was impressed by her quick progress, though a small part of him was disappointed. He had hoped she might require more of his assistance—more moments of closeness. “How did you not learn this already?” he asked, his tone teasing. “I thought you said your brother taught you.”

“He did,” she replied with a shrug. “But clearly, he is not as good a teacher as you.”

He chuckled. “Do you want to play a full game, or would you prefer more lessons?” He secretly hoped she would choose the latter. He relished the excuse to remain close to her.

“I think we can play,” she said, her lips curving into a soft smile. “I know the rules, and the only way I will improve is to practice.”

“Are you certain?” His tone held a hint of persuasion. “I do not mind taking more time to show you the finer points.” Truthfully, he longed to teach her far more than billiards. He wanted to strip away the layers of propriety between them, to kiss every inch of her soft, enticing skin, and make her his. Thoughts of her consumed him day and night, tormenting him with unfulfilled desire.

“I am certain,” she said, her smile deepening. “Perhaps we could make it more interesting. Do you feel like placing a wager?”

“No,” he replied firmly. “I am not about to take advantage of your inexperience. That would not be very sporting.” His lips twitched as he fought a smile. As tempting as it was to wager for a kiss, Lucian could not bring himself to exploit her lack of skill.

“Fair enough,” she agreed. “What shall we play to?”

“We will keep it simple—first to six points wins,” he suggested. “It is more of a practice game.”

“That sounds reasonable,” she said, nodding. “Perhaps we can play for a higher total another time.” There was a wistfulness in her expression, and he longed to know her thoughts. What was going on in that beautiful head of hers? Did she wish for more between them as he did?

“You may go first,” he offered, confident in his own abilities. Letting her start gave her a slight advantage.

Rosella leaned over the table, her cue stick poised to strike. The white ball rolled forward, hitting the red ball cleanly and sinking it into the pocket. She beamed. “I did it!”

“You did, darling,” he said softly, barely containing his longing.

They took turns, the game proceeding far more slowly than he anticipated. Neither of them managed to reach six points quickly. Lucian currently had two points, but his focus was elsewhere—on her. Her presence distracted him so thoroughly that he could not muster his usual skill. Her beauty, her laughter, the graceful curve of her neck—everything about her captivated him. He breathed a sigh of relief when he managed a difficult shot, earning another two points.

Rosella stepped up to the table, her cue stick in hand. She needed three points to win. Her shot sent the white ball rolling toward the red, but the hit lacked power. The red ball spun aimlessly before coming to a stop. She sighed in frustration. “Oh dear. That is not what I intended at all.”

Lucian smiled warmly. “It is all right, darling,” he said, his voice gentle. “You will improve in time.” He reached for her cue stick, placing it back on the rack. The game no longer interested him—not when he was so close to her, craving her attention. “Let’s call it a draw.”

“A draw?” she echoed. “What shall we do now?”

He had a few ideas—each one involving her in his arms, her lips on his, and a bed nearby. But he could not voice such scandalous thoughts. Instead, he forced a smile and said, “Perhaps we should return to our chambers to prepare for dinner. The others

will be waiting for us.”

The words tasted bitter on his tongue. He had wanted to confess his feelings, to lay his heart bare. But the timing was not right. Not yet. Slowly, Rosella nodded, and they left the game room together in silence.

Lucian’s mind swirled with emotions as they walked. Before this Christmastide gathering ended, he would tell her the truth. He could only hope she would receive his confession with an open heart and that, by some miracle, she might love him in return, but he had to prepare himself for the possibility of heartbreak...

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Five

Rosella could not sleep. She had been tossing and turning in her bed for what seemed like hours—perhaps it had been. There was no way to know for certain, enveloped as she was in the darkness of her bedchamber. With a resigned sigh, she rolled to the side and sat up, her legs dangling over the edge of the bed. Sleep evaded her, and with the plans for the following day looming, she dreaded facing it all without proper rest.

The men were set to hunt for a yule log, while the ladies would await their return in the sitting room. Noelle, undoubtedly, would have some engaging activity prepared. Rosella sighed. Perhaps she should go to the library for a book. Reading might lull her into drowsiness, provided she chose something dull. Her usual fare, however, would only ensure she remained awake, eager to reach the end of the story.

Resigned, she slipped out of bed and reached for her dressing robe, tying it snugly over her night rail. She hesitated briefly, debating whether to light a candle. Venturing through the dark would certainly be a challenge, but carrying a lit candelabra would attract attention if anyone else were awake. Then again, her errand was entirely innocent. Deciding it was best to avoid fumbling blindly, she lit the candles and exited her room, candelabra in hand, making her way to the library. She made her way to the library and hoped this excursion would not be a waste of her time. She really did need rest.

Once inside, she crossed to the shelves lining the back wall, holding the candelabra high as she scanned the rows of leather-bound volumes. She did not know what she wished to read and it might take her a while to find the perfect book. She paused at a

thin red book and pulled it from its place. Setting the candelabra on a nearby table, she opened the volume and read the title aloud: *The Lady of the Lake*.

She delved into the poem, captivated by the tale of Ellen Douglas, caught in a love triangle between two powerful men in the Scottish Highlands. The vivid descriptions of love, loyalty, and duty stirred something within her. It made her want to visit the Scottish highlands so she could appreciate the beauty of the landscape herself. She lingered on one line in particular: "'My hope, my heaven, my trust must be, My gentle guide, in following thee.'"

The words resonated deeply, compelling her to reflect on her own circumstances. She was running out of time to secure her future, and she realized that waiting passively would not achieve her heart's desire. She needed to take action, to risk her heart for the chance of love. Lucian was the man she wanted, and she could no longer afford to let her feelings remain hidden. It was time to trust in the love she felt for him. One way or the other she needed to know if she had a possible future with the Marquess of Kistleton. Lucian was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. She would not know if he felt the same if she did not take a risk, to take that leap of faith, and trust that the love she harbored for him would steer her in the right direction.

"You are the last person I expected to find here," a man with a deep voice said from behind her.

Rosella gasped, nearly dropping the book. Fumbling, she clutched it tightly to her chest and turned toward the voice. Her heart leapt as her gaze met Lucian's. It was almost as though her thoughts had summoned him. She inhaled a steadying breath. This was her chance to be bold. "I could not sleep," she said, her voice steady despite the fluttering in her chest. She held up the book. "I thought reading might help." It was time to take that leap of faith and pray it wasn't in vain.

"We appear to have had the same idea," Lucian said, his gaze lingering on her. "Have

you decided on that book?” He almost appeared disappointed that she would depart soon, of course she might not be reading his expression correctly either.

She thought she detected a flicker of something indiscernible in his expression, as though he wanted something from her but could not form the words to make the request of her. But perhaps she was only imagining it. “I am considering it,” she replied. In truth, she had already begun reading it and was intrigued by the story. It did go on farther and she would like to know the end of the narrative. What happened between the king, the knight, and the lady? Did loyalty or love win in the end, or did it all end in tragedy? Perhaps there was no clear winner at the end of the tale, and wasn’t that a sad thing to consider. Her heart felt heavy inside her chest as she met Lucian’s gaze. Her focus had now shifted entirely to the man before her though—the story of the lady and her errant suitors could wait for another day.

Her gaze traveled to the mistletoe dangling above him. It was as though fate had presented her with an opportunity—an invitation. She set the book next to the candelabra on the table and took a deliberate step toward him. His eyes never left her as she crossed the room, her heart pounding with each step. When she stopped before him, she hesitated only a moment before rising onto her tiptoes and pressing her lips to his.

The kiss was tentative, a mere brush of her lips against his. Her inexperience betrayed her, and when he did not immediately respond, panic surged through her. He seemed frozen by her actions and she feared she had made a grave error. Had she been too brazen? Her breath hitched, and her courage faltered as she began to pull away.

Lucian had descended to the library in search of something to aid him in finding sleep. Yet, the very reason sleep evaded him was awaiting him there, as though fate had decreed he could no longer avoid the inevitable. He had not lied—he truly hadn’t expected to find her there. But now that she was, it felt as though destiny itself had intervened. He fully believed they were meant to be together, but for far too long, he

had been a fool, avoiding what he had always known deep within. He loved her. He had always loved her. The fire between them burned bright, nearly consuming him.

Now, as she stood before him, pressing her lips to his, all coherent thought fled. Her warmth overwhelmed him, and waves of desire crashed over him. When she began to pull away, he could not allow it. He moved swiftly, pulling her into his arms and pressing his lips more firmly to hers. A deep groan escaped him as she opened to him, allowing his tongue to meet hers in an intoxicating dance. She tasted of heaven—better than any dream or fantasy he had ever conjured. In that moment, he was utterly lost.

Every part of him belonged to her. He was hers, now and forever, whether she wanted him or not. But she had crossed the room to kiss him, and that must mean she desired him as he did her. He would not squander this gift nor let hesitation rob him of the chance to make his feelings clear. He had waited too long, and now that the moment had arrived, he could not falter. He had to say the words—actions alone were not enough.

Slowly, he drew back, his gaze meeting hers. She was stunning, so lovely it caused a physical ache in his chest. “Rosella,” he murmured, his voice thick with the heat still coursing through his blood. “I don’t understand.”

“I shouldn’t have done that,” she said hesitantly, her tone filled with regret. “I overstepped. Forgive me...”

He cursed himself for his delay, for the way his thoughts had scattered. He was botching this, and she was retreating. He could not let her believe for a moment that he regretted her kiss. He gripped her arms gently but firmly, his voice urgent. “You have done nothing to beg forgiveness for,” he assured her, his tone vehement. “In fact, I would love nothing more than for you to kiss me again. It was perfect.”

She rolled her eyes, clearly not believing him. “Do not placate me, Lucian. It was far from perfect. I have no experience in such matters.”

He wanted to laugh, to tell her how wrong she was. He would happily ensure she gained all the experience she desired—and with him alone. Much like their lessons in billiards, he had no doubt she would prove to be a quick study. But seduction was far more delightful a subject, and he ached at the thought of her honing such skills with him. Shaking those heated thoughts aside, he focused on the present.

“It is all right, darling,” he said softly, stroking a hand over her dark locks. “Trust me on this. There is nothing you could do that I would not adore.” The idea of her hands exploring his body sent a shudder of longing through him. Damn it all—he wanted her naked, now, this very night. But he forced himself to rein in his desires. This moment called for patience.

“But...” she began.

“No,” he interrupted gently. “Let me show you.”

Before she could respond, Lucian lowered his mouth to hers, pulling her flush against him. His body burned with a need so fierce it threatened to consume him. When she moaned softly and wrapped her arms around him, he deepened the kiss, savoring the sweet taste of her surrender. He trailed kisses down her neck, his lips and tongue worshipping her skin.

He untied her dressing robe, pushing it open to reveal the delicate night rail beneath. The thin fabric did little to conceal her curves, and the sight of her hardened peaks sent a jolt of desire through him. He leaned down and captured one pert nipple through the fabric, his lips closing around it as she gasped, leaning into him. “Lucian,” she moaned, her voice a sultry whisper that undid him.

Unable to resist, he slid his hand beneath her night rail, trailing up her thigh until his fingers brushed her heated core. She shivered beneath his touch, her body arching toward him in silent invitation. He stroked her sensitive flesh, relishing the way she writhed against him, her pleasure evident in every movement and sound. When her climax broke over her, he smiled against her skin. “That’s it, love,” he murmured. “Take your pleasure.”

Lucian wanted nothing more than to lay her down and claim her fully, to mark her as his forever. But he forced himself to pause, knowing the risk was too great. For now, he contented himself with holding her close, placing soft kisses along her temple as she caught her breath.

“Lucian,” she whispered, her voice tremulous. “I need to tell you something.”

“And I have much to say as well,” he replied, his tone serious. He met her gaze, his heart hammering in his chest. “You do know I have thoroughly compromised you.”

“Not thoroughly,” she corrected, her lips curving into a small smile. “I am still an innocent. Well...mostly. I definitely know far more than I did before.”

Her teasing did little to assuage his guilt, though he admired her spirit. “I want to marry you,” he said firmly.

Her expression shifted, and she tried to pull away. “Because you think you’ve compromised me?” she demanded.

“No,” he said, holding her firmly but gently. “I want to marry you because I love you.”

Her struggles ceased, and she stared at him, her eyes searching his. “You’re not saying that to make me agree, are you?”

He cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing tenderly over her skin. “It is the truth, Rosella. I have loved you for so long, and when you kissed me...” His voice caught, and he swallowed hard. “You gave me the courage to admit what I have felt all along. Please, say you will be mine. I want a forever with you, my little hellion.”

Her smile was radiant, lighting up the room. She lifted her hands to cradle his face. “Yes,” she said, her voice brimming with emotion. “A thousand times yes. I would like nothing more than to be your wife. I love you too, my darling.”

Relief and joy washed over him, and he claimed her lips in a passionate kiss. He would love her fully, now and always. There was no greater gift this Christmastide than her love. Rosella Prescott, his hellion, had claimed him utterly, and he vowed never to let her go.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:06 am

Five years later ...

It was their turn to host the Christmastide house party, and Rosella knew their guests would arrive soon. Most were now settled and had begun their families. Noelle and Asher had welcomed their first child not long after Lucian and Rosella had exchanged their vows. Unlike Noelle and Asher, who had eloped, Rosella and Lucian had celebrated their union with a grand wedding at her father's estate. The ceremony had taken place in early spring, by which time Noelle had already been well along in her pregnancy.

That Christmastide had been filled with joyous announcements. At dinner, there had been not one but two revelations. Rosella and Lucian had shared their plans to marry, and Noelle had announced that an addition to the family was expected in six months. True to her word, three months after Rosella's wedding, her nephew, Cassian Prescott, the Earl of Rossington—and future Duke of Clare—was born. Of course, that was a future far off in the distance.

“Darling,” Lucian said, entering the sitting room with their daughter cradled in his arms. Holly's dark curls framed her cherubic face, her bright blue eyes brimming with mischief. Holly, along with her twin, had arrived eight months after their wedding. Though others might have assumed she'd been born early, no one questioned it. After all, she and Lucian had enjoyed a vigorous love life, something she would never change. “Your daughter,” Lucian continued, “is exactly like you—a hellion determined to send me to an early grave.”

“What has she done now?” Rosella asked with a sigh. At only four years old, Holly had a knack for finding trouble, even when she wasn't looking for it.

“She convinced her brother to help her make Christmastide decorations,” Lucian replied with a wry smile. “It did not go well.”

“And where is her twin mischief-maker?” Rosella inquired.

“The nanny has Jasper,” Lucian explained. “He required a bath.”

“Oh dear,” Rosella murmured. “That does not bode well.” Rosella frowned. “Holly seems clean. What exactly did they do?” She was almost afraid to ask... Narrowing her gaze on her daughter, she said, “Holly, what exactly did you and Jasper do?”

“Jasper had a little too much fun with the holly. We are fortunate he did not think they might be a tasty treat,” Lucian shuddered as he explained it to her. “But he has a rash on his skin and the maid thought it best to bathe him to remove any residual holly berry from causing it to extend farther than it already had.”

Rosella sighed and glanced up at her daughter. “You encouraged him to play with the berries didn’t you?” She held her daughter’s gaze willing her to tell the truth.

Holly gazed at Rosella with wide, innocent eyes. “We were having fun, Mama,” she said earnestly. “Shouldn’t we have fun?”

Rosella resisted the urge to groan. Save her from the innocence—and audacity—of her children. Was this how her own parents had felt when she’d gotten into trouble? Perhaps this was fate’s way of delivering her well-deserved karma. “Holly,” she said sternly, lifting the girl from Lucian’s arms, “the holly berries are not toys. You should never play with something without permission. As a punishment, you and your brother are to remain in the nursery for the rest of the day and you will not help us create decorations later. Do you understand me?”

Holly’s pout was instant, her lower lip trembling. “But I don’t want to stay in the

nursery,” she protested.

“I know, poppet,” Rosella said, softening her tone. “But actions have consequences. You’ll remain in the nursery and not cause any more difficulties for nanny. Perhaps next time, you’ll think twice before leading your brother into mischief.”

A maid entered the room, and Rosella handed Holly to her. “Take her to the nanny,” she instructed. “She’s to stay in the nursery, and she will need a bath as well.”

After the maid and Holly had gone, Rosella turned back to Lucian, who looked both exasperated and amused. “It will only get worse once Asher and Noelle arrive,” he said. “Caspian, added to the mix, is a disaster waiting to happen.”

Rosella’s lips twitched with humor. “They are far more united than we ever were as children. We didn’t collude to drive our parents to distraction.”

“No,” Lucian agreed, shaking his head. “We chose sides and fought like rivals. You and Noelle against me and Asher. But these three—they’re inseparable, with Holly leading her two adoring minions into all manner of chaos. I dread the day she’s launched into society. She will be a far greater hellion than you ever were. We might need to hire a strict chaperone to keep an eye on her.”

Rosella laughed. “Even the strictest chaperone wouldn’t contain her,” she said, her tone filled with affection. “But that is a dilemma for another day.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep fortifying breath. Lucian opened his eyes before he stepped closer, cupping her cheek with one hand. “Indeed,” he murmured. “For now, I am grateful for my family and the love of my life. Everything else is just details—challenges we will face together, one at a time.”

Rosella leaned into his touch, her heart full. “I love you,” she said softly.

“And I love you, my darling,” he replied, his voice rich with emotion. He leaned down, brushing his lips against hers in a tender kiss.

Their life was far better than she had ever dreamed possible. Christmastide held a special place in her heart, marking the season when she had first been brave enough to confess her love. Thanks to a sprig of mistletoe and her mother’s gentle machinations, she had found her happiness with Lucian.

Each year, they honored the tradition her parents had started, though they would now take greater care to avoid mishaps with the holly berries. Even with the chaos their children brought, Rosella had no complaints. All in all—she had nothing to complain about. She had love. There was nothing more important than that.

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Prologue

A fire blazed in the hearth and along with several sconces of candles kept the room aglow. The window was glazed over with ice, as little Lady Juliette Brooks stared outside. The velvet black sky sparkled with stars twinkling down with heavenly light. A luminous streak filled the sky as a star shot across the darkness. Lady Juliette's heart beat heavily in her chest. This was her chance to make the wish she'd been carrying inside of her for so long. There was only one thing her nine year old heart desired more than anything in the world. It was to always have her best friend by her side. She couldn't imagine a life where he was no longer in it.

"What is so interesting?"

Juliette turned and met Lord Grayson Abbot's, the future Duke of Kissinger's, gaze. Her family estate bordered Kissinger Castle the ducal estate. Her father was the Earl of Riverdale. Every Christmastide their families came together to celebrate. Not that Grayson and Juliette ever needed a reason to spend time together. As long as she remembered he'd always been by her side. He was as patient, kind, and loyal as a twelve year old boy could be. She imagined he'd grow up to be the hero every girl swooned over.

"I made a wish on a shooting star," Juliette said.

Grayson peeked over her shoulder and stared at the night sky. "I don't see anything."

"Don't be silly," she retorted. "Shooting stars dissolve as fast as they make an appearance. I'm sure my wish sent it on its way."

Grayson stood behind her his gaze focused on the darkness outside the window. Juliette wasn't used to his silence—it was almost crushing, and unbearable to withstand. After a moment he stepped back and put some distance between them. Something was wrong—horribly so. He was distancing himself from her. What had she done?

“What did you wish for?”

Finally he spoke to her, but it didn't ease her concern. He held himself stiff and distant. She didn't like this side of him. What happened to the friend who was always willing to have fun and play silly games with her? She missed that Grayson and wanted him back. This boy in front of her was almost a stranger.

“I can't tell you or it won't come true.”

He tilted his head and a stray lock of his dark hair fell over his forehead. He sighed. His blue eyes were almost as glacial as the ice outside. “I hate to break your heart,” he said with feigned concern. “But you should know wishes never come true. They're a falsehood best left to story books.”

“They are not,” Juliette exclaimed. “Why are you being so mean?”

This was not her Grayson. Her friend would never be so cruel. What had happened since she'd last seen him? It had been less than a sennight. She'd found him at the pond separating their estate. He'd been sitting on the frozen water and staring down at it as if he expected to find the answers to all his questions. He'd been quiet then, but not like this.

“I've coddled you long enough don't you think?” He crossed his arms across his chest. “I'm growing up and you're a silly little girl.”

Juliette's bottom lip stuck out as a full on pout formed. Tears pooled at the corner of her eyes. Big droplets fell down her cheeks. What had she done to make him act thusly? She lifted her hand and wiped away the wetness from her face. If he was going to be a surly brutish nitwit than she had better things to do with her time—and being called a silly little girl didn't top her list. "It is sad when I think about it," she replied.

"What is?" he asked.

"That I was foolish enough to waste my wish on you." She stomped away from him and left him to stare out the window. A friend that belittled you was no friend indeed, and Juliette didn't need one who'd do something so dastardly.

Grayson Abbot stared at the entrance of the sitting room. He should go after her and explain why he was being so churlish. It wasn't her fault he had to go away. He wanted to make sure she was able to make it on her own. He wouldn't be around much longer to protect her. Soon he'd be at Eton and would only see her on holidays. Father had informed him of the plan a sennight ago. He should have expected it. All young lords either went to Harrow or Eton to start their education. A tutor could only do so much to ensure an heir was properly taught. Grayson already devoured every book his tutor had put in front of him. He thirsted for more knowledge, but he hadn't realized what that desire would lead to. He'd have to leave Juliette behind, and there wasn't a thing he could do to change that. She'd been his only friend for so long he couldn't imagine a day where he'd not be able to see her.

He should apologize, and yet he stayed still as if frozen in place.

Juliette wouldn't understand. She'd think he was abandoning her, and her heart would surely break. She'd wished on a shooting star and still believed there was a possibility it could come true. How could he have mocked her so cruelly? He sighed and forced his feet to move. The sooner he found her the quicker he'd be able to grovel at her

feet.

He found her in the billiards room pushing the balls across the table. They rolled across the smooth surface and hit the other side with a soft thunk. “If your father finds you in here you’ll be punished.”

“I don’t care,” she replied mulishly. “Christmas is ruined anyway. I’d be happy to stay in my room for the rest of the festivities. At least then I wouldn’t have to see you.”

Grayson sighed. Why did his heart melt whenever he was around her? This little girl had meant so much to him for so long... Her raven-black tresses spilled around her shoulders in soft curls, and her blue-green eyes usually sparkling with mischief were now filled with misery. That was his fault. He’d ruined Christmastide for her, and it wasn’t going to improve much with his apology.

“Please forgive me,” he coaxed. “I didn’t mean to take out my concerns on you.”

She perked up at his words. Her eyes were brighter and some of the sadness left them, but the evidence of her gloom still bloomed on her barely dried cheeks. “What is bothering you?” She moved to his side. “I’ll help if I can.”

She would do anything for him as he was well aware. That is what friends did for each other. Soon they’d have too much distance between them, and friendship between a lord and a lady wasn’t done. It was best that he cut the ties now and left her to grow up without him by her side. His father explained he couldn’t have a friend like Lady Juliette if he was at Eton. He’d be a laughing stock and be twice as miserable.

“There’s nothing you can do for me poppet,” he said. “I’m to go to school and won’t be living next door any longer.”

“No,” she said. “You can’t leave I won’t let you.”

He pressed his lips together and slowly shook his head. “I must. I’ll be a duke someday and I need to be educated so I can properly run my estates.”

Juliette stuck her nose in the air and folded her arms over her chest. “That’s not happening for a very long time. Your father is the duke, and he doesn’t have to send you away.”

“Oh, Jules,” he said with sadness. “I want to go.”

That was the hardest part for him. He craved more than knowledge. He wanted friends who were not little girls who lived next door. Boys his own age and who shared similar interests. Juliette was his past and he had a future he must plan for. Staying cooped up in his father’s estate with only a tutor and a mere girl as his only friend wouldn’t aide him in his goals.

“I thought as much,” she said glumly. “I’d hoped it was against your will.”

His lips twitched. Juliette always did manage to surprise him. She was only nine years old, but sometimes acted as if she was on the verge of her come out. He supposed it had a lot to do with their isolation. Neither one of them was allowed to play with the servant’s children, nor were there any other children of their rank around to fill in the gaps. They’d been forced to grow up much too young.

“It won’t be forever,” he promised. “I’ll be home on holidays and school breaks. We’ll see each other again.”

Juliette sat down on a nearby chair. “It won’t be the same.”

What could he do to make her understand? Nothing. She didn’t need him to explain

any of it. Her gaze said it all. She was aware of why he had to go away—it just wasn't to her liking. "In time you'll forget about me. You'll go to finishing school and learn how to become a proper lady. Then you'll have your come out and find a husband. I'll be a distant memory, a foolish boy who was once a neighboring playmate."

She shook her head. "I could never forget you."

Sadly he believed that was true. A part of him didn't want her to. This might very well be their last Christmastide together, though, and he didn't want to waste it with melancholy thoughts. There had to be something he could do to bring a smile back to her face. An idea took root and he decided to try it.

"I don't want to leave you sad," he said. "I have a present for you. Would you like it now?"

"Oh, yes," Juliette bobbed her head. "Please."

"Give me a moment to retrieve it," he explained. "Meet me in the sitting room. I don't want you to be punished if you're found in here." He couldn't help his need to protect her. As long as he was around her—she'd always come first. It had been ingrained in him for so long it was a habit he had trouble breaking.

"Very well," she agreed.

They both exited the billiards room. Juliette headed toward the sitting room, and Grayson headed toward his guest chamber. During Christmastide his family spent half of it at Riverdale Park and Juliette's family spent the other half at Kissinger Castle. The gift he'd purchased for Juliette, Grayson had always planned on giving her in private. His father would berate him if he was aware of what he'd had commissioned. Juliette would love it though. He quickly retrieved the small box and

tucked it inside his pocket. Satisfied it was secured; Grayson left his room and toward the sitting room. He found Juliette staring out the window once again. This was his second chance to redo his earlier blunder. He'd not make the same mistake again.

“Any more shooting stars?”

She giggled. “No I think that was the only one we're going to ever see.”

“I don't know. One day we might be lucky enough to see another.”

What boy of twelve had ever looked at a girl and knew she was the only one who'd ever own his heart? Grayson gazed down at her in wonderment. He was being absurd. Juliette was a mere nine years old. He'd not be able to tell the woman she'd become in the next decade. They had a lot of growing up to do and may not suit after they reached their majority.

“Did you bring my gift?”

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the small box. His hand was fisted tightly around the sharp corners. When he'd purchased it he'd believed Juliette would love it. What if he was wrong? There was one way to find out. With much trepidation he stretched out his arm and offered it to her. She clapped gleefully and tore open the box.

And then remained silent for several heart wrenching moments...

“Oh Gray.” She sighed. “It's so lovely.”

She picked up the delicate locket and flipped it open...inside nestled a tiny portrait of him. “If you don't like it you can put?—”

“Don’t even consider finishing what you were about to say. This is the best gift you could’ve ever given me.” She kept it tightly in her grasp. “Whenever I’m sad you’re gone, I can look at it and remember you.”

He let out a sigh of relief. So he’d not misjudged, but a part of him wondered if he was only delaying the inevitable. His job was to encourage her to move on, and this wasn’t achieving that goal.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Can you promise me something?” she asked.

Grayson wanted to promise her the world. He’d lay it at her feet if it kept her smiling and as happy as she was in that moment. “Of course,” he said emphatically.

“If I ever need you, you’ll be there for me.” She gazed up into his eyes with trust shining through. “No matter what it takes.”

Grayson opened his mouth to respond, but wasn’t sure if he was capable of it. What she asked should be an easy thing to agree to, but he feared it wouldn’t be so simple. Nothing ever was where promises were concerned. He’d hate to break it, and in turn the part of her he’d always adored. Her faith in him was unwavering and a little unnerving. He feared he’d never live up to her expectations. Perhaps he was over thinking things and should give her what she desired. Chances were they’d not see much of each other after this Christmastide either way. So he gave in and agreed.

He nodded. “I promise I’ll always be there. You can depend on me to do whatever is necessary to aid you.”

Grayson vowed he’d keep that promise, even it cost him everything...

One

Could her life possibly get any worse? Lady Juliette Brooks fell on her bed and let out a frustrated sigh. She should be able to go out in society, and find a husband. Her only desire was to escape her father's house and start a family of her own. Truthfully, she'd settle for escaping alone—her stepmother Eloise was the bane of her existence.

If only Mother hadn't died... Everything would be so different, and Juliette wouldn't have had her first season cut short. She'd not been out a fortnight before tragedy struck her family. There'd been no time to find proper suitors, and even if a gentleman had caught her eye no one noticed her. She'd made no friends, barely conversed with a soul, and found the sidelines much to her liking. At least that last part is what she kept telling herself. She'd never imagined she'd be a wallflower watching all the other ladies twirling around the ballroom and laughing with enjoyment.

None of it had gone as she'd planned, and the one person she'd wanted to see hadn't bothered in too many years to count. After the mourning period ended, Juliette fully believed she'd rejoin society and the marriage mart. Nothing of the sort happened. Instead, her father had found Eloise and promptly married her. The new Lady Riverdale wanted nothing to do with Juliette. She'd not commissioned any new gowns and made no plans to re-launch her in society. Father had been too smitten with his new countess to bother with Juliette. She might as well have become invisible as much notice as those around her paid to her life. After a while she'd rather liked no one bothering her. She buried herself in books and embraced the life of spinsterhood. Why bother with marriage when she had all she needed at her father's home. Who needed new frocks when her old ones could be redesigned and

altered? At least that was what Juliette kept telling herself.

Until her little brother was born she kept to herself and did as she pleased. With father finally having his heir he suddenly realized he had another child. A daughter he'd neglected, and tossed aside for his new family. Juliette suspected Eloise prompted his sudden attention. She'd been eyeing her warily for a while, and made no secret she'd wanted her gone. So years after she should have had a second come-out Juliette's season was being planned.

At five and twenty she'd let that dream go.

She couldn't dawdle in her room much longer. Her father had summoned her presence in his study. What he wanted she could only guess, but ever since the maid had informed her of the request, Juliette's stomach had been a flutter of unease. Slowly she strolled down the stairs and headed in the direction of her father's study. She paused outside the entrance and listened.

"Lord Payne will make a wonderful husband for Juliette," her step-mother cooed. "At her advanced age she has little choices, and a viscount is more than she could hope for."

Juliette opened her mouth as a silent gasp slipped out. She lifted her hands and placed both over her face. Surely Eloise wasn't that cruel. Did she not know the viscount's reputation? He was rumored to beat servants and small children. What he considered his could be dealt with as he pleased. He'd not treat a wife any differently. She'd rather die than tie herself to such a man. Her father wouldn't agree—he couldn't...

"He does possess a good fortune," her father replied. "His estates are flourishing, he's neither given to excessive drink nor gambling."

Juliette's heart fell at her father's words. There was more to a man than how much he

imbibed or gambled. She did not want to be saddled with a poor man, but if given the choice she'd rather live in a hovel than be beaten every day. That was what her fate would be if they forced her to marry Lord Payne. Juliette stepped closer and peered inside the slit in the door.

"He isn't too old for her either." Her step-mother sat down in her father's lap. "She'll still be able to have a family of her own. Juliette should know the joys of motherhood. It's a good match. When Lord Payne arrives in a few days to sign the marriage contract, your daughter will be well taken care of."

Juliette clenched her fingers together into a tight fist. How dare she? All she cared about was herself. She saw Juliette as competition, and was doing everything in her power to get rid of her. What was the hurry? The spring season wasn't that far away, only mere months. Why was Eloise forcing the issue so soon? Did Juliette not deserve a choice?

She couldn't take it anymore. If she had to listen a second longer she'd lose the contents of her stomach. This plan of Eloise's must be stopped. Juliette eased the door open and cleared her throat. "Ahem, father, you asked to see me."

Eloise and her father were locked in a passionate embrace. A gag rose in her throat at the sight. She should be used to it by now, but it always sat uneasily inside of her. Her new step-mother was an usurper in her life. She'd never take the place of her mother, and she'd never stop missing the woman's love. The new countess while a beauty, was selfish and vain.

Eloise stood and crossed the room to meet her. "Please, come in dear. There's much your father and I wish to discuss with you."

She bet they did. They were about to unload a bunch of misery on her she'd not felt—well not since her mother's death, and before that the abandonment of her only

friend. What was one more momentous bout of melancholy to add to her list? This one would be the last if she had anything to say about it.

“Oh?” she raised an eyebrow. “Please continue.”

“Why don’t you have a seat dear.” Her father gestured toward a chair. “There is much we have to tell you.”

Juliette did as her father bid and sat in a chair. Her father’s study had been one of her favorite places as a child. At least in their London townhouse. Her favorite place to be was Riverdale Park, but she’d not been to her family’s country seat in years. Not since her mother’s death. Her father had chosen to remain in London instead of visiting a place of happier times. It had brought nothing but pain to him, and then he’d met Eloise. The new countess abhorred country life and begged him to remain in London. A part of Juliette longed for Christmastides of the past. When Riverdale Park was filled with visitors and the festivities lasted days.

London was rather ugly and drab in comparison.

“After careful deliberation,” her father began. “I’ve come to a decision regarding your future.”

“You have?” Juliette tilted her head. “Am I to shop for new gowns? I do need some current attire for the upcoming season.”

If her father was aware of her penchant for listening at doors he’d punish her for her insolence. For now she’d play along with his news, and then afterward she’d make a plan of escape. She’d not be marrying Lord Payne.

“I’m afraid that won’t be necessary,” Eloise said. Her lips tilted up smugly. “You won’t be having a season as planned.”

“I’m not?” She widened her eyes in feigned shock. “Why? Has something happened?”

She wanted to wipe that smug smile off of the countess’s face. She believed she’d won, but in time she’d realize she hadn’t. Eloise wanted her gone, and she’d get her wish one way or the other.

Her father’s gruff voice interrupted her musings. “I’ve been in talks with Viscount Payne. He’s interested in marriage to you, and it’s my belief it will be a good match. He’ll be here in less than a sennight to go over the marriage contracts.”

Juliette clenched her fingers together. She could not give into the desire to scream. It wouldn’t do if she showed any emotion. If she did Eloise would use it against her, and in turn drive her father in the direction she wanted him to go.

“Father,” she began. “I appreciate you looking out for me, but marriage to Lord Payne is not something I desire. While I don’t blame mother—I did miss out on my season. I’d prefer to at least have a small season.” She smiled encouragingly. “A choice at least in husbands.”

Please let him agree. She couldn’t marry Lord Payne. Hadn’t she already paid the ultimate price? No, she supposed not. That would include the loss of her life, and that price was too high... She had too much she wanted to do with her life.

“I’m afraid I can’t humor you, child.” Juliette almost snorted. She’d not been a child in years, but perhaps her father would always see her as such. “Lord Payne insists that I sign the contract now or not at all.”

That worked perfectly as far as she was concerned. She didn’t want to marry the viscount, and no amount of coaxing would change her mind. “I see,” she replied. “That would be a grave loss for sure...” She paused and considered her words. “But

surely there would be others willing to marry me. Ties to the Riverdale line aren't anything to scoff at."

"You're correct," he agreed. "However the same could be said about Lord Payne. It's a good match and I'm not changing my mind. The contracts will be signed before the end of Christmastide, and you'll be married after the new year once the bans have been read."

Juliette gulped down the lump in her throat. There was no reasoning with her father. He was fully ensconced in Eloise's control. She was pulling his strings, and therefore she presumed Juliette's. Well the countess would see in time that no one would ever control her. Before the day was out she'd be gone, and out of their lives.

"As you desire," Juliette nodded demurely. She couldn't give them even a hint of what she had planned. "May I be excused?"

"Yes dear," her father said. "When Lord Payne arrives I want you to be on your best behavior."

"Of course father," she replied. "I'm always the proper lady." Not that he'd felt the need to send her to finishing school. Her father could be quite miserly with funds at times. He'd believed it wasn't necessary to spend a fortune on schooling a mere girl. The earl left her deportment lessons to her mother and governess.

She bowed her head and then stood to leave. When she reached the entrance her step-mother's voice made her pause. "Juliette dear," Eloise said. "I'll escort you to your room. There is something I wish to speak with you about."

Drat. What did the woman want? Hadn't she done enough to ruin her life? Juliette turned and met Eloise's gaze. "I look forward to it." She waited for the countess to join her. They strolled side by side down the hall in silence. When was she going to

say something?

“I hope you won’t put up a fuss about the marriage,” Lady Riverdale began. “Lord Payne will make a good husband for you.”

Juliette bit down on her bottom lip. A drop of blood trickled into her mouth from the impact. If she said what was truly in her heart Lady Eloise would make things much worse for her, and escape near impossible. For now she must appear as biddable as possible.

“I look forward to starting a family of my own. It’s what I’ve always wanted.”

“Good. I’m glad we were able to arrange an advantageous match for you.”

They reached Juliette’s chamber. Thank God. She could bid Eloise good night and start her plan of escape. “Good night Lady Riverdale.” She always addressed Eloise formally. It was what Eloise preferred. In her thoughts though she called her anything she wanted. The countess nodded her head dismissing Juliette.

After she was inside she locked the door and pulled out her reticule. She’d not be able to take much with her, but there were a few items she refused to leave behind. Most of it was sentimental in value as she had little worth. The little bit of pin money she had would have to do. She hoped it wouldn’t matter either way.

If he kept the promise he made her all those years ago, she’d not worry for anything. He was her last hope, and if he refused her she’d have no choice but to follow her father’s dictate. She prayed it wouldn’t come to that. It was a sad day indeed when her life depended upon the Duke of Kissinger—desolate rake, debaucher of anything in a skirt, and a reprobate of the highest level. The scandal sheets took pleasure in outlining many of his exploits.

Prologue

T enby, Wales 1803

Cold wind blew through the small coastal town with frigid efficiency. The bitterness settled into Finley Prescott, the new Duke of Clare, and he couldn't shake it. His father's funeral still lingered in his soul. The grief had been unshakeable, and Fin wasn't entirely certain he wanted to lose the grip that held him. If he managed to let go of that feeling, then it meant his father's death hadn't left its mark. He wasn't ready for the responsibility of the dukedom. His father shouldn't be dead already.

What kind of world did he live in when a man didn't live past his fortieth year? Did that mean he wouldn't have a long life? Both his parents were gone, and Fin was completely alone in the world. He had no one to lean on and share his grief with. It was the Christmastide season, and it should be a time of joy. It never would be for him again. This time of year would always mark a change in his life he'd not been ready for. He'd turned twenty the day before, and what had been his gift? His father's death, courtesy of the brutish horse Fin had given him as an early gift. He honestly hadn't thought his father would ride the stallion. Fin meant for him to use it as a stud, but his father had been insistent about trying him out. The horse had thrown his father, and his neck broke instantly.

Fin had committed patricide—at least that's what his guilt screamed to him in regular intervals...

Oh, he knew he hadn't actually done it, but he'd been the instrument all the same. If he'd not given his father that damn horse, he'd still be alive. That kind of shame

would never go away. He would have to live with that truth the rest of his miserable days. Perhaps he wouldn't die at a young age. The older he lived, the longer he'd suffer for the crime he'd committed. He deserved to suffer.

Fin walked along the shoreline, staring out at the sea. Maybe he should leave Wales for a time. It was his home, but did he really deserve to be there? They would all stare at him, either judging him, or pitying him. Either way, he didn't want to look in the faces of those around him with their mixed emotions messing him up more with each passing day. He didn't pay attention to where his feet lead him. He roamed up the hill and into the small town. There was a small shop that gypsies ran—or rather the husband of one, when the weather turned too cold for the small family to roam the lands.

He'd never gone inside, and found it odd that they had a shop at all. It wasn't normal for a gypsy to be tied down, but the shopkeeper's wife settled in Tenby during the colder months for her husband and their children. They kept their own hours and mainly remained open during the winter. The rest of the time they were gone. He had to wonder how they could make any profit with the store open for such a short time.

He headed toward it, his curiosity too much for him to ignore. Fin reached the door and tested the door knob, surprised to find that it turned. He stepped inside the shop. There didn't appear to be anyone inside of it. The shelves were nearly empty. Candles filled one of them in different sizes, ranging from long, tapered candles to thick, oblong ones. He picked one up and tested its weight. They seemed solid enough...

“Can I help you, my lord?”

Fin opened his mouth to correct her—he was a duke—as he turned. He met the gaze of one the most ethereal girls he'd ever seen and decided against chastising her—his title didn't matter. She had violet eyes and hair the color of the night sky unfettered by stars. He bet her midnight locks would be lovely dressed with diamonds, and

would put a star-studded sky to shame in its beauty. She had it plaited with a long braid that fell to the middle of her back. The girl couldn't be more than fifteen or sixteen, and he shouldn't be admiring her. Maybe when she grew up... He shook that thought away.

"I don't know if anyone can help me," he finally said.

"You have a great sadness in you." Her voice held an almost ethereal quality to it, but perhaps it was just how he perceived her. He'd never met anyone quite like her before. "Please, come sit and I'll tell your fortune."

Fin didn't believe in such things, but it would help delay his return home. He didn't much feel like gathering around mourners and their sympathetic gazes. He'd made enough of a mess of things, and there was no fixing it. He might as well humor the girl and let her tell his fortune. Fin walked over to a chair in front of a table. She sat on the other side. "Give me your hand."

"Does it matter which one?"

She shook her head. "No, whatever one you're comfortable with."

He lifted his left hand and set it on the table. She flipped it over and trailed her fingers over his palm. The gypsy was quiet for several moments and then she glanced up at him. There was a bit of surprise in her glance, but whatever had earned that particular look, she kept to herself.

"Tell me, my lord, do you believe in love?"

"I'm not sure I do. Nothing in my life has made that particular emotion well received." He'd experienced far too much loss. "Do you?"

She smiled. “Love isn’t for everyone, and I’m young yet. I’ve at least witnessed the possibility.”

Try as he might, he’d never be able to explain why he’d been drawn to her from the moment they met. There was something unidentifiable about her—almost special. “Do you have a name?”

“We all have names, my lord, even you.”

Fin wanted to laugh at her words. He was acting rather silly and deserved that response from her. This small moment of time with her had lightened his mood quite a bit. There was a truth in her eyes that told him she’d never lie to him. He needed more people like her in his life. “If I tell you mine, will you share yours?”

“Perhaps,” she replied cryptically.

She’d known he was of noble birth since the moment she’d started talking to him. He hadn’t told her how far his rank rose to keep her from being even more formal. He wanted to keep that to himself longer, so he wouldn’t give her anything other than his given name. For some reason, he wanted their relationship to be on more intimate grounds. “My name is Finley, but my close friends call me Fin.” At least, they did—some might start calling him Clare now. He hated that idea already. Before then, he’d been the Marquess of Tenby. They should have called him by that title, but he’d insisted on Fin. He hoped the ones that mattered still called him that.

“It’s nice to meet you, Fin,” she said politely, but still didn’t offer her name. She kept staring at his palm and nibbling on her bottom lip. She was so bloody beautiful, and she’d probably grow even more so as she matured.

“What is so fascinating in my palm?” he finally asked.

She jerked her head up and barely met his gaze. Had she seen something she hadn't liked? Had he been wrong and he was doomed to die young? Wouldn't that be rich? He couldn't say he was surprised at that fate. Not too many Dukes of Clare managed to live past the ripe ole' age of forty. If he had two more decades left, maybe he should start living it now.

He sighed. No, that little bit didn't surprise him one bit. "An early one?"

She shook her head. "Are you asking about your death? I'm afraid, my lord, I cannot predict that, someone you love will die—or perhaps has already passed... The lines are murky and broken, but that's not the fortune you need to be told." She trailed her finger across the lines on his palm and told him his fortune. "You have two paths—a fork in which you must choose. One path leads you to happiness but some heartache along the way."

He jerked back at her words. She tried to explain away the first part of her prediction, but he couldn't let it go. His death he could accept, but someone else he loved? That couldn't happen. Hadn't he already lost enough? He would refuse to fall in love and then he'd be safe from any further heartbreak. That would be easy enough to do. He didn't particularly want to give his heart to anyone, and he surely didn't want to live with the guilt of another's death.

"I think this fortune is over." He should perhaps ask more questions and demand she give him better answers, but he was afraid of the truth.

She held on to his hand. "Don't go. I can see you're already going down the wrong path. Please listen..."

He yanked his hand out of her grasp and fell backward in the chair. His head smacked against the floor, and she rushed to his side. She brushed back his hair and crinkled her brows together. "You have such pretty, golden hair, my lord and your eyes are the

color of the sea on a hot, summer day. I'd hate to see either marked with blood and death. You already carry too much sadness."

Her accent almost made the words sound poetic or perhaps he had become delirious from hitting his head so hard. He reached up and twined his hands around her head and pulled her down toward him. When she was close enough, he closed the distance and pressed his lips to hers. They were a lovely pink, and so delectable to taste. She didn't fight him, and it was the one good thing he'd had in days.

She pushed on his chest lightly and sat back on her haunches. "While that was lovely, it can't happen again."

"Do you believe in risks?"

She nodded. "Some risks are too great, but yes, there are times they are worth it. Why do you ask?"

"I've made too many mistakes in my life to risk my heart. I can't love anyone."

"That would be unfortunate," she said softly. "For you, more than anyone, needs love. Our lives are best left to fate. Some pain is worth living for. You can try to prevent it, but by doing so, you'll miss your greatest joy."

He wished he could take her advice, but he couldn't do as she suggested. It was clear to him, by her little fortune, happiness wasn't something he could afford to try for. The world would be better off if he remained alone. His pain wasn't meant to be thrust on the innocent.

"Are you going to at least tell me your name?" he asked as he came to his feet. Fin straightened his jacket and glanced at her. He didn't like the look of sadness that had filled her violet eyes. "Not you too." Fin was tired of the pity so many people

bestowed upon him. Surely, she didn't know that he'd lost his father and grieved. He didn't want her to see him as damaged, even though, deep down, he couldn't be any more unworthy of her.

"My name doesn't matter. I'm leaving tomorrow, and I have no plans of returning. I doubt we will ever cross paths again."

"Then it won't hurt for you to share it."

He didn't know why it was so important to have her name, but he felt in his gut he should know it. They'd shared a kiss. Shouldn't they at the very least be on a first name basis? He knew they had no future together, but he wanted something to hold on to in the cold, dark nights ahead. He'd never have love, but he wanted this small thing.

"Lulia," she said quietly.

He nodded at her and smiled for the first time in days. "Lulia," he said her name softly. It was almost like a benediction for him. "Thank you."

"For what?" She tilted her head, her accent a melody he'd never tire of. "I've given you nothing but grief and set you on a path of destruction."

"That's not how I see it," he explained. "You have given me a purpose. I'll be stronger for it."

She frowned. "No," she replied defiantly. "You'll be alone. I'll never forgive myself for it. I pray that, in time, you'll realize there is a better choice to make. There will be a time when you reach that fork, and when you do please choose love."

With those words, she spun on her heels and left him alone. He would probably never

forget her. She was wrong though—he could never choose love. That would be the one thing he could never do. It would be the beginning of the end if he did.

One

London, 1815

Something about the cold winter chill invigorated Lulia Vasile, but then, she was not the normal society lady. She'd grown up alongside her family and embraced their way of life. Her mother was Kezia Vasile Alby—a Romany princess. She'd married Lulia's father at eighteen against her family's wishes. When Lulia turned eighteen, she'd had to make a choice of her own—stay with her father's family or embrace her mother's. Her free spirit hadn't felt right confined to the strictures of society and decided to see what living as a Romany meant.

Not once had she regretted that choice. It had led her down a wonderful path and to the one person she considered her friend—Diana. Her friend had married and was now the Countess of Northesk. At first, Lulia hadn't liked her friend's future husband, but the man had a way of worming into a person's good graces. Lulia didn't tell him that though. She liked making him miserable. Someone had to... The Earl of Northesk could be a tad arrogant at times. Lulia wanted to ensure her friend's happiness, so if it meant keeping the earl second-guessing what she might do—then, yes, she would browbeat him as often as possible. It was Lulia's way of protecting her friend, and she would do almost anything for someone she cared about.

Today Diana had planned a soiree of some sort. Lulia would much rather be fencing, or really anything other than socializing. The things she did for friends... If Diana wanted her to—Lulia shuddered—socialize, then she'd do her best. She walked up to the Earl of Northesk's townhouse and rapped her knuckles on the hard surface. When Diana had lived alone in her father's London home, Lulia had waltzed in without a

care, but there were certain boundaries in place she had to follow now that Diana had wed the earl. They deserved a certain amount of respect and privacy, even if they had servants around them. Lulia would not be rude.

“Miss Vasile,” the butler greeted her. “So good of you to join us today. Lady Northesk will be pleased.”

She scrunched up her nose. “Of course, she will.” It didn’t take much to please Diana these days... “She’s as happy as a bee in a fresh flower patch. Move aside now.” Lulia brushed past him and entered the foyer. All right... Some habits couldn’t be broken. She hated standing on ceremony. “Where is she holding this soiree of hers?”

“You’ll find all the guests in the drawing room,” the butler answered. “A few have arrived thus far.”

The old man had a stiffness to him that made Lulia question his humanity. No person should be that—straight. He barely moved, even when he bowed to the lords and ladies of the ton . It was probably a result of too much starch in his clothing. He couldn’t possibly breathe well in all that taut clothing. “I’ll see myself there,” she told him and left him alone in the foyer. Lulia visited often enough she might as well reside there. It was for that reason that she could find her own way and didn’t require an escort.

Laughter echoed through the hall. That was the only sign of life she received as she headed toward the drawing room. When she entered, she found Diana, her husband, Luther and two other people. The butler hadn’t lied when he’d stated not everyone had arrived. She didn’t know the other individuals. Well, that wasn’t completely accurate either. She did recognize the man. He was Lord Northesk’s friend, the Marquess of Holton. The lady at his side she didn’t know though.

“Lulia,” Diana said gleefully when she finally noticed her arrival. “I’m so glad you

decided to attend.” Her friend came over and hugged her.

“Was there any doubt?” Lulia stepped back from Diana’s embrace and lifted a questioning brow. “You were quite insistent. So why do you need me here?” Truthfully, Lulia couldn’t deny her friend much. It had been that way since they first became acquainted when Diana was fifteen. The four years separating their age made little difference. In some ways, Diana was the sister Lulia never had.

“I have some news,” Diana replied. “We’ll talk more later. Come meet Lord Holton and his cousin.”

Diana pulled her over to the group near the center of the room. Lord Holton was a handsome man with sandy brown hair and mesmerizing hazel eyes. She could see why Lady Katherine Wilson was taken with him. At some point, those two would figure out they were meant to be together—once they got out of their own way. Diana smiled at Lord Holton and his cousin. “I’d like you to meet my dear friend Miss Lulia Vasile.” Then she turned to Lulia. “This is Lord Holton and Lady Lenora St. Martin.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Lord Holton said smoothly. He appeared the perfect gentleman, though Lulia had a feeling he disapproved of Diana’s relationship with her.

“It is,” Lulia agreed even though, so far, it hadn’t been pleasant. “And you as well, Lady Lenora. How are you on this fine day?”

“Oh...” She glanced down. “I’m...”

The lady was a shadow of who she would eventually be. Lulia could almost see her future self. One day she’d blossom into a strong, independent woman. With Diana and Katherine’s influence, she’d discover who she was meant to be. Lulia would help where she could, but she was no society matron. Her role was best left to the

background. “You’re lovely,” Lulia supplied for her. “Perhaps you’d like to visit the refreshment table with me. I’m parched.”

“Oh, I suppose I can do that.” She glanced at Lord Holton and then back at Lulia. “Um... If you’ll follow me...”

Lulia smiled to herself and then brazenly met Lord Holton’s gaze. Let him disapprove. He’d come to realize it meant nothing to Lulia. As long as Lady Lenora didn’t come to harm from her boldness, she saw nothing wrong with thwarting the marquess. She spun on her heels and followed Lady Lenora to a nearby table. A punch bowl, tea service, and tiny sandwiches were displayed artfully on top of it. Lady Lenora nibbled daintily on her bottom lip. “Do you prefer punch or tea.”

Neither really... If given the choice she’d rather have a snifter of brandy. “Punch will do nicely,” Lulia answered. “I can serve myself.” She reached for a tiny goblet and filled it with the fruity mixture. “Do you not want any?”

“Oh, no,” Lady Lenora answered. “I’m too nervous.”

The little bird would take a lot to come out of the nest on her own. Lulia would work with her a little and encourage Diana and Katherine to as well. Lady Lenora was far too timid, and she’d be crushed when the season began again. How could Lord Holton have allowed her to close herself off from everything? Lucky for them both, Lulia couldn’t turn away from a lost soul. Lord Holton wouldn’t thank her at first, but in time he’d see why she was a blessing for Lady Lenora. “Why?” she asked. “Are you not amongst friends?”

“Yes, I am.” She glanced away. One day she wouldn’t be afraid to meet a person’s gaze. “I’m not comfortable here. I’d rather be at home—in the library. Books are more relatable to me.”

“Well, that’s no way to live now, is it? Everyone needs someone at some point. Don’t close yourself off to the possibility of meeting new people. You never know when you might meet the love of your life.”

She shook her head. “I doubt love is in my future.”

“Don’t you worry about it. When you’re ready for it, or even when you least expect it, love will find you.”

Lulia believed in love—for other people. Lady Lenora may have already met her match but hadn’t realized it yet. Sometimes, the man was the obtuse one; however, this particular lady was more oblivious than most. A gentleman could flirt with her, and she probably wouldn’t notice.

“I wish I had your certainty,” Lady Lenora said softly. “But I’m not brave enough to explore love. Almost everything is frightening to me.”

Lulia placed her hand on Lady Lenora’s arm. “Maybe not now, but one day you will.” She took a sip of her punch, and then set it back down on the table. It was a terrible mixture that was bland—a bit of water would have been better than the punch. Perhaps she should have had the tea... “Let’s join the others again.”

They turned to walk back to Diana and her guests, but someone else entered the drawing room. Two someones to be exact. Both had dark hair and striking features, but Lulia was drawn to one of them. He’d always be familiar to her. That man had haunted her dreams nightly, ever since their first meeting. A part of her had started to believe they would never cross paths again. She lifted her hand to her chest and reminded herself to breathe. Perhaps he wouldn’t recognize her. She’d been curious about him after their initial meeting and uncovered his identity. Back then he’d been so melancholy and for good reason. A man on the brink of leaving his youth behind shouldn’t face it alone, and especially without his father. It must have been difficult

for him to suddenly hold the mantle of the Clare Dukedom.

“Do you know the gentlemen?” Lady Lenora asked gently. “Do you wish to stay by the refreshments longer.”

“No,” she answered. She wasn’t sure if it was for recognizing the gentlemen or to staying by the table. Either way, the answer worked. Staying by the refreshments would perhaps encourage one of the gentlemen to come over to them, but Lulia didn’t want to give the Duke of Clare a reason to speak to her. If she could avoid him, she would. “Let’s take a stroll around the room instead. I find I’m restless.” A truer statement had never been uttered. She’d run out of the room as fast as her legs would carry her if it wouldn’t embarrass Diana.

“The one gentleman is friends with my cousin,” Lady Lenora offered, but didn’t indicate which man. Lulia hoped it wasn’t Clare.

“Oh?” She lifted a brow. “And what does that mean to you?”

Her cheeks pinkened at Lulia’s question. The lady had tender feelings for the gentleman she spoke of. So perhaps she had already found love, but love hadn’t sparked between them both. “He’s Holton’s friend—nothing more.”

The lady doth protest too much... “I don’t think it’s that simple. Tell me about him,” Lulia encouraged. “I’ve been known to be a bit of a matchmaker at times. I can even tell your fortune if you’ll allow me.” She’d done it often enough as a young girl when she worked at fairs. It was one of the first things she’d learned living amongst the Romany. They taught her many things, but fencing was what she loved. Fortune telling had its uses—like easing Lady Lenora into trusting her, but it wasn’t her strongest gift.

“The duke is one of the biggest rogues of the ton ,” she said. “I doubt he even sees

me.” Lady Lenora glanced away from Lulia and toward a nearby window. “I may as well be invisible.”

So, it was Clare she spoke of... Drat. “Some men are blind until one day they’re not. Don’t discount him yet.”

It had been several years since Lulia had last laid eyes on the Duke of Clare. He was as handsome as she remembered—no, more so now with age. He had a scar across his cheek that hadn’t been present then. Maybe he’d received it while at war. He’d join Wellington’s campaign versus Napoleon against the better advice of those around him. Sometimes Lulia believed Clare had a death wish. It had been evident in his eyes when she’d met him at fifteen, but even more so now. There was a darkness to him that remained prevalent.

“I’ve known him most of my life—it’s who he is. I wouldn’t want to change him either way. I wonder who it is he’s with.”

“The Duke of Clare?”

“Is that who he is?” She lifted a brow. “Imagine two dukes at one soiree. How often do you think that happens?”

Who was the other man then? She was curious now that she realized they were not speaking of the same person. “I’m not acquainted with your duke. What is his name?” She wasn’t familiar with a lot of the members of the ton .

“Julian Everleigh, the Duke of Ashley,” Lady Lenora answered. “How are you acquainted with the Duke of Clare?”

“His ancestral estate is in Tenby,” she answered. “Near where my father’s family is located.”

Truthfully, her father's family was a county over from Tenby. The village was where her father had decided to settle down. His family hadn't approved of his choice in wife any more than her mother's had liked her marrying him. It left them both on the outskirts of their families, and Lulia torn between two worlds. "Would you like to meet him?"

She doubted Clare remembered her. At first, she didn't want to find out, but now she had a bit of morbid curiosity about him. She wouldn't know unless she went over to him and discovered the truth for herself. Lady Lenora would give her that opportunity whether she realized it or not. She didn't wait for her to answer. Lulia looped her arm with Lady Lenora's and guided her across the room. It was time for them both to seize control of their destiny.

Prologue

Elias Stevens, the Marquess of Savorton, leaned back in his chair and rocked it on the back two legs as he studied his cards. How many should he discard? After pondering it for a few moments, he set his chair back down on all four legs and leaned on the table. He plucked five cards out of his hand and placed them face down on the table, and then drew five more from the deck.

He refrained from grinning at the cards he'd added to his hand. He glanced up at his dearest friend, Elena, the Dowager Countess of Dryden. Her dark red hair shimmered in the candlelight. She was studying her own cards. They were engrossed in a duel of sorts as they played a grueling game of piquet. This was their last hand in a set of six and would determine which one of them came out the winner. It was close and either of them might be declared the victor.

"It's your turn, love," Eli reminded her.

"I'm aware," she drawled. "I do not need your guidance." Elena winked. "I'm a far better player than you are."

"Debatable," he replied in an arrogant tone. "I am not so certain you're correct."

Her lips lifted into one of her sensual smiles. It was the type of smile that would set most men aflame with desire, but Eli felt nothing. For him that smile meant something far different. The minx was about to pounce and he would end up metaphorically wounded after she made her strike. Hell. She was going to win, and he didn't like it.

“You always did hate losing,” she replied in a glib tone. She removed three cards from her hand and then replaced them with three more from the deck. “There’s no need for deliberations. We both know the truth.”

“That piquet is a game of chance?” Eli lifted a brow. “In that you are correct.”

She laughed and then grinned at him. “I suppose that is true with any game used for the purpose of gambling. Luck may or may not be on your side.” She rearranged her card in her hand. “But we both know piquet is much more than that. It requires skill, strategy, and an excellent memory. I happen to have all three.”

Eli shook his head and sighed and made his declarations, and they continued on with the game. After they were done playing, he had to admit, “I’m not saying you are better.”

“Of course you will not. I’d expect nothing less.” Her gray eyes sparkled with mischief. “You never have. Why would you change that core part of you now?”

They were at Elena’s London townhouse. Many members of the ton believed they were lovers, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Elena and Eli had been friends since they were children. He was only three years older than her, and they first met when he was four and she could barely stand to walk in the nursery. Their mothers had been close and that had brought them together often. Eli was as protective of Elena as he would be if he’d had a sister. When she had married an old man, he had tried to persuade her against the match, but she reminded him they all had their duties to perform and her marriage landed firmly in that column. Her father had arranged the marriage, and she had done as she was told.

Elena had regretted it as her marriage made her miserable. Her husband hadn’t been abusive, exactly, but he’d been cold. When she failed to conceive, he’d treated her as if she were a useless person. He may never have physically hit her, but his words were like blows that failed to leave a visible bruise. Eli had never been happier that a

man died. When the Earl of Dryden dropped dead suddenly he had rejoiced, and secretly so had Elena.

“Do you think you’ll ever remarry?” he asked.

She snorted. “Not bloody likely. One marriage of inconvenience is enough to turn me away from such an endeavor.” Elena gathered the cards and stacked them neatly on the table. “Why do you ask?”

He didn’t want to tell her he’d been thinking about how unhappy she had been. Elena enjoyed being a widow. She had freedom and if she wanted a lover, she could and probably had taken one. Eli didn’t ask her about anything he didn’t really want answers to. “What if you fell in love?”

“That is even more unlikely. Love is a myth they try to make a woman believe.” She leaned back and studied him. “Are you in love, Eli?”

“Absolutely not,” he said in an emphatic tone. “Unless you count that gorgeous opera singer, I spent an evening with a few nights ago. She was delicious and might convince me I could believe in love.”

He was far too busy helping build Savorton Shipping. His family had struggled when he was younger and now that he could, he worked to make their fortune something that rivaled even the most affluent in English society. He was an heir to a dukedom and now as well. His father had become frail in his old age and left running all the estates to Eli. He did not have time for love.

“A night of passion is not love,” Elena replied in a dry tone. “Neither of us is on the market for that elusive emotion.”

“So you do not believe you will ever willingly give your heart away?” This seemed like an opportunity. Should he take it? Elena had never really given any man a

chance, and she had good reason for that. As a widow of wealthy means, she didn't have to remarry. "You don't have to marry a man if you love him, you know."

"I'm aware," she said, then tilted her head to the side. "I never have to marry again. But you do."

"I've never been married, love," he replied. "I cannot marry again when I never have."

"You are purposely misunderstanding me," she accused. "You know perfectly well what I meant. You're going to be a duke one day and you need heirs."

"I was hoping to convince you to marry me," he said in a glib tone. "You're the only woman I actually like."

"What a vile thing to suggest." She glared at him. "The very idea of sharing a bed with you..." Elena shuddered.

"Now that wasn't necessary. I'm not revolting." He frowned. She made a valid argument, though. Eli didn't wish to bed her any more than she wanted to be with him.

"Darling," she began. "You are passably handsome. I've heard many debutantes expound on your breathtaking visage. Apparently, your black hair and green eyes make them swoon with desire."

"Of course they desire to be a future duchess, and my gorgeous physique has nothing to do with their admiration." Eli might be a bit jaded. "I am not marrying until I absolutely have to, and love won't be part of the bargain."

"That's too bad," she said in a somber tone. "You're destined to have a marriage like mine."

“I won’t be a brute like your husband was. I’d never treat a woman so callously.” He wouldn’t. Eli had to believe he’d be better than the late Earl of Dryden. Elena was still young and only eight and twenty. She could find someone to be happy with. Somehow, he had to convince her to try.

“Perhaps not,” she agreed. “You might be the one that is emotionally abused. I pray you choose wisely.”

He smiled. “I’ll have you approve of my future wife. You may have better judgement than me.”

“I already do,” she said, then laughed. “Perhaps we should make a wager.”

It couldn’t be that easy... She was playing right into his plans. Elena was a lot like him. She hated to lose. “What sort of wager?”

She tapped on the cards. “All gambling is a matter of chance, but some games are a little more than that. Much like piquet, love can be played in a similar fashion.”

“So we use our strategy and skill to avoid falling?” he asked, trying to understand her meaning.

“In a sense,” she replied. “We will also have to keep track of all the players, for unlike our little game here, there will be more than two.”

“And what exactly is this wager?” Eli asked.

“How about we make it simple,” she began. “The first to fall in love by the end of Christmastide loses and owes the other a boon.”

He pondered her suggestion. “And what if neither of us falls?”

“Then we both win,” she said in a wistful tone. “Or perhaps we will both lose, depending on one’s perspective.”

Eli doubted he would fall in love. He had yet to meet a woman that inspired such an insipid emotion in him. “All right, I accept. In fact, I have the perfect playing field for us.”

She lifted a brow. “Oh?”

“Lady Winston is having a house party. It begins in a couple of weeks and will extend through the entirety of Christmastide. My mother has been hounding me to attend. I’ll tell her I will as long as you go and we can put our wager to the test.”

Elena steepled her fingers together. “Excellent,” she said in a gleeful tone. “Let the best player win, then.”

He was going to enjoy watching her fall, for he knew something she did not. The Earl of Northfield would be in attendance. Elena had never said as much, but the earl had been her first and only love. One she had never had a chance at having a relationship with. Elena had shoved those feelings deep inside her and prepared to marry the Earl of Dryden as her father had ordered. Perhaps this was her second chance at finding happiness.

He wasn’t worried about himself. Eli had time to find a suitable wife. His concern was for his dearest friend and helping her find a love she deserved. Besides he hadn’t lied, Eli didn’t believe in love, at least not when it came to his own life. Love was for other people. Individuals who had the luxury of accepting that gift into their lives. Eli would never be that fortunate.