



Enemy of the Wallflower

(Revenge of the Wallflowers #29)

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Category: Historical

Description: Lady Cora Stephens has an enemy. A certain earl has always been the bane of her existence. Her father loved him and probably secretly wished he'd been his son, not his friends. He'd tormented her when they were children, and his arrogance had only grown with age. She vowed one day to wipe the smugness away and replace it with the same pain she had endured for years.

Hayes Grant, Earl of Thornton hadn't led the charmed life most had believed—even if the facade he presents to the world enhances that belief. His father was a brute of a man and beat him more times than he could count. He didn't get a reprieve until after the rotten man died, but the damage had already been inflicted, and could never be undone. Hayes lashed out at anyone that showed him kindness, not trusting its veracity—even the only girl he'd ever loved. He wished he could have taken back all the things he'd said to Cora over the years, but some things couldn't be changed. She would never believe he loved her. Why should she? He'd been a complete arse over the years. It was for the best though. He was too damaged to ever love her as she deserved, and the only good thing he could ever do for her was save her from himself.

Cora's desire for revenge turns to something else as she learns about Hayes's past. His pain had been far greater than hers, and her heart breaks for him, but it may be too late. Some wounds can never heal...even when love is given freely.

Total Pages (Source): 13

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Lady Cora Stephens happily wandered through the garden at her father's, the Earl of Farrington's country home. She loved the garden and spent as much time as possible there during the summer months. Cora could not imagine a more perfect place, and in her heart, she never wanted to call any other place hers. At two and ten, she could not imagine anything else. She wanted Farrington Abbey to always be her home. She stopped at her favorite area of the garden. In the center of the path was a large fountain with a sculpture of one of the Greek goddesses regally overlooking the garden. She did not know which goddess claimed this part of the garden; she just believed her lovely, strong, and brave. Cora wanted to be all three of those, and perhaps one day she would be so fortunate.

"Of course you're here," a boy said from the other side of the fountain. "You're always here."

She glared at him. Hayes Grant, the future Earl of Thornton, and the current Viscount Beaxton, was her nemesis. For as long as she could recall, he had been spending summers at her home, and before he'd been sent to Eton, he'd been at her home more often than his. He wasn't even a blood relation. She did not understand why her father wanted the horrid boy around. He was four years older than her, and always a nuisance. "This is my home." She glared at him. "If you do not wish to be in my company, then perhaps you should go back to yours."

He sneered at her. "Trust me, little urchin. I'd rather be anywhere than here."

She'd always hated him. Her father doted on him as if he were perfect. Clearly, her father had never seen how Viscount Beaxton treated his eldest daughter. If he had, then he might not want the horrid boy around. Though he wasn't merely a boy any

longer. He'd turned six and ten a few months past. She stared at him and studied the changes. He was still a little gangly—too thin. She wondered why. Did he not eat enough? His dark hair was on the longer side and seemed to almost gleam in sunlight. His green eyes though... That was his best feature. They reminded her of leaves at the start of spring. All new and sprouting toward the sunshine while they grew for the upcoming summer months. Not that dark green of a fully formed leaf, but the light shade of a new spring bud.

Cora didn't like that she noticed these things about him. She didn't want to find something, anything, about him appealing. She wanted to continue to hate him and enjoy the peace in that fact. He was a pretty boy, and one day he would probably be a devastating man. One with the power to break a lady's heart. She would not be that lady. Cora could never love a man that treated her as inconsequential. He seemed to hate her as much as she loathed him. They were comfortable in their dislike of each other, and she doubted that would ever change.

"Then why come at all?" she asked him as she forced herself out of her reverie. "We both would be far happier if we didn't have to cross paths."

"If it were my choice," he began. "I'd never gaze upon you again."

Was she that horrid to behold? Cora didn't think herself ugly, but she was a mere girl. Her hair was as dark as his, but her eyes were not a lovely shade of green. They were a boring brown. "There is a sentiment I can agree with." She lifted her chin defiantly. "I'd rather not see you, either."

"You're unbearable." He narrowed his gaze, then brushed past her, causing her to lose her balance. She tumbled toward the fountain with an alarming speed. Cora flailed her arms, attempting to right herself, but to no avail. Before she knew it, she'd fallen into the water face first. She came up sputtering and spitting out water. Her gown was drenched and completely ruined. Lord Dalton glanced at her and then

laughed. “Now that,” he said between chuckles. “Is well worth the lengthy journey to visit this insufferable estate. I must thank you for keeping me entertained.”

“Ohhh,” she said in frustration. Cora glared at him. “This is all your fault. You pushed me.”

“I did not.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “But I could have been more careful. Though now that I have witnessed the results, I must admit. I don’t regret my negligence.” The smug expression on his face grated on her bruised ego.

That did it. He had to pay for being such an obnoxious lout. Before she thought about her actions, Cora stormed over to him and pushed him. He tumbled backward into the fountain. When he came up sputtering water as she had earlier, she laughed. With a grin, she admitted, “You’re right, Lord Beast. That was nothing but pure joy to behold.” Cora curtsied. “I’ll take your leave now. I’m certain you can find your own way out of the fountain. Much as I had to mere moments ago.”

“That is not my name,” he shouted at her.

Cora shrugged as if he didn’t matter. Because at that moment, he didn’t. She did not stop to look as she made her way back to the house. Her father would likely chastise her later for her behavior, but she couldn’t make herself care. It had been worth it to see him a drenched mess and fluttering around in the fountain. The viscount hadn’t helped her. He’d laughed. Shouldn’t she repay him in kind?

She didn’t want to hate him, but he made it impossible to do anything else. When he’d come to Farrington Abbey for the first time, she’d believed he would be her friend. How wrong she’d been. Instead, he had become her enemy and nothing had changed that in all these years. They would always be this way with each other. Some things could not be changed and no amount of wishing could alter that.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

One

Lady Cora Stephens leaned back against the carriage seat and sighed. She'd made this journey a few months earlier for a different house party. It was the same, Ardmore Abbey, but this time they were going there for a more joyous occasion. At least that is what she kept telling herself. Her dear friend, Lady Victoria Spencer, was marrying the Earl of Foxcroft in a little over a sennight. They had fallen in love at the last house party. And so had her sister, Lilah. The difference between Victoria and Lilah's romance was clear. Lilah's husband couldn't wait to marry her or there would have been a much bigger scandal than the one he'd created previously. Lilah had married the man who had ruined her. He hadn't meant to, but a jealous lady had led him to speak lies about Lilah.

Now, her sister was gloriously in love with the reformed rogue. It was almost nauseating how much Lilah loved Viscount Harcrest. Which made this journey all the more off-putting to withstand. Cora was confined to a carriage with the two lovesick fools that could not stop smiling and staring at each other longingly. She could not wait until they reached Ardmore Abbey and she could escape their obvious adoration for each other.

She was happy for her sister. No one should be loved more than Lilah. She'd been through an ordeal when she'd been ruined. Now she was blissfully content with her life and her new husband. But for Cora, nothing had changed. She hadn't been ruined, but she was still very much unwanted. No one courted her or desired her. That left her alone and miserable. But more importantly, it left her still ignored by her father. The Earl of Farrington had always remained aloof with his daughters, and that had always bothered Cora.

“Cora,” Lilah began. “Have you thought about what it is you’ll do after the wedding?”

She met her sister’s gaze. Lilah didn’t want to know her travel plans. It was Cora’s turn to seek her revenge. She hadn’t discussed it with her sister. Not because she wanted to keep her in the dark, but Lilah had found happiness. Cora didn’t want to disrupt that for anything. Not even her own revenge scheme. “Father wants me to return to Farrington.” She loved the abbey, but she didn’t wish to go back there. Not while her father remained so distant.

“I’m glad I never had to go back.” Lilah sighed. “I am also grateful I never received one of his long suffering lectures.”

Lord Harcrest tilted his head to the side. “What was he going to lecture you about?” He frowned. “You never do anything you shouldn’t.”

“That’s not true,” Lilah said. “I allowed you to seduce me.”

“Darling,” he said. “That’s not how I recall it at all. You’re the one that invited me to your bed.”

Cora groaned. “Please say no more. I have no wish to know the particulars regarding this seduction. It’s already more than I ever wished to overhear.”

Lilah laughed. “He is right, though.” She winked. “I asked him to my bedchamber.”

“I beg you,” Cora said. “Say no more.”

“I promise I’ll keep the rest to myself.” She patted her husband’s hand. “But that’s not what you were actually inquiring about. My father allowed me to go to the house party, but I was to return to Farrington Abbey directly after. I was ruined, if you

recall. My father was to tell me what he'd planned for me, and I doubt it would have been pleasant. He was most displeased with me."

"And our father only ever pays us any attention when we've done something to displease him." The last time she'd had one of those lectures was after she had pushed Lord Thornton in the fountain at two and ten. After that, she'd avoid the earl. Not that he'd been the earl back then. He'd been the heir apparent to her father's oldest friend. He'd been Viscount Beaxton. For her he'd always be Lord Beast, because he'd treated her so abysmally.

There were times after that incident that their paths had crossed. She'd been much more clever about keeping her activities a secret from her father. She'd never been so blatant with regards to anything she did to Lord Beast. Nothing could ever be proven. She'd even been the epitome of kindness when she spoke to him. It had all been false on her part. Cora hated him, but she could never allow her father to see such blatant loathing for his precious protégé.

"Cora is correct," Lilah said. "But I never have to know what he'd had planned for me. Since I married you, my father no longer has any say in my life."

"Thankfully." Lord Harcrest furrowed his brows. "I wish you had told me this sooner."

"There was no reason to," Lilah told him. "It came to nothing." She shrugged. "It's less than important."

"I disagree," Lord Harcrest said. "You're important to me. I want to know these things."

Cora almost sighed because that had been too sweet. Not that long ago they'd all thought him an awful man, but now they looked at the viscount differently. He treated

Lilah as if there was nothing more precious than her. He loved her. Someday, perhaps if she were fortunate enough, she would have that too. She doubted it, but it didn't prevent her from hoping for it.

"You're a dear sweet man," Lilah said. "You know now and I promise if something else arises, you will hear of it."

"Good," he said. Then he lifted her hand and kissed her palm. "That's all I ask."

"Are you two taking a wedding trip?" Cora asked. "You remained here so you wouldn't miss the wedding. Will you go now?"

Lilah shook her head. "No," she told her. "I don't wish to travel right now. I'm happy enough here."

That surprised Cora. Lilah had always wanted to do more than remain in England. What would keep her from traveling? She'd ask later. When they had a moment alone. "Have you spoken with Selena?" They hadn't had a meeting with their friends since the last house party. "Are her and Emma coming to the wedding?" Emma was Lord Harcrest's sister, but she'd gone to stay with Selena for the past couple of months. They had become fast friends.

"I received a letter from Emma a few days ago," Lord Harcrest said. "They are traveling with Foxcroft to the wedding." Cora hadn't considered that. Of course, Selena would be at her cousin's wedding. She was close to Foxcroft. "They're probably already at Ardmore."

She nodded. "It will be good to see them both." At least she wasn't the only unattached lady at this wedding. It wouldn't be a large event as a whole, but there would be a ball after the wedding. Victoria hadn't wanted a wedding breakfast in the traditional sense. There would be a breakfast, but only for close family and intimate

friends. She wanted a lavish ball, and afterward, she and the Earl of Foxcroft would depart. Unlike Lilah and Harcrest, they were going on a wedding trip. They were very much devoted to each other. Just like her sister and Harcrest. Cora envied them.

“It will,” Lilah said, then grinned. “I’ve missed all of them.”

Cora had as well. They had become close rather fast after that ball where Lilah had been ruined and became the infamous wallflower. Now two of the five wallflowers were desperately in love. In some ways, Cora felt as if she didn’t truly belong. Even with Lilah’s revenge scheme, they hadn’t shared everything with her. They hadn’t wanted her to tell Lilah that they believed Harcrest hadn’t truly ruined her. They had to keep Lilah in the dark for their plan to work. Cora wished they had trusted her with the information. She knew how to keep a secret.

“We will see them soon.” They’d also have to see Foxcroft’s friends. One of which was Lord Beast. How Harcrest and Foxcroft could be friends with that man she’d never know. Those two seemed perfectly amiable. Thornton was horrid. At least he’d always been that way with her. She hadn’t actually spoken with him in several years. After his father had died, he’d stopped visiting Farrington Abbey, and he didn’t socialize much. He was more of a recluse than any other gentleman. She often wondered why he’d been so difficult all those years ago. What had she ever done to him? Was she so terrible to be around? Maybe she’d finally ask him those pointed questions.

As if on cue, the carriage came to the drive that led to Ardmore Abbey. They turned down the road and headed toward the abbey. The carriage rolled across the road and they all remained silent until they reached the entrance. They came to a stop. A footman opened the carriage door, and Harcrest stepped out, then turned to help Lilah and Cora from the carriage.

Victoria came out the front door and ran over to them. She hugged Lilah, then Cora.

“I’m so glad you’re both here. Come quick. I have tea and biscuits in the sitting room. We have much to discuss.”

Lilah laughed, then turned to her husband. “I will find you later.”

“Promise,” he asked.

“Always,” she said and blew him a kiss. Then turned away from him to follow Victoria into the house. Cora was close behind them. A pang stung her heart as she’d witnessed that exchange. She longed for that. To belong to someone, but more importantly, to mean that much to another. It had to be the best feeling in the world.

“They’re here,” Victoria announced as they entered the sitting room. “We can now begin.”

“Begin?” Cora asked.

“The next revenge planning meeting,” Selena said. She picked up her cup of tea and took a sip. “It’s your turn, isn’t it?”

Cora nodded dumbly. “I suppose.” She sat down and Victoria handed her a cup of tea. “But I don’t know...”

“You don’t want to have your revenge?” Emma lifted a brow. “I thought you abhorred Lord Thornton and wanted to have retribution for how he treated you when you were younger.”

“I do...” She sighed. “I’m not certain what I want presently. We were children then . I don’t even know him anymore. What if he’s changed?”

“And what if he hasn’t?” Selena tilted her head to the side. “If he’s the same as he’s

always been, what would you do?"

"Make him feel the same misery he bestowed upon me," she said in a firm tone. Cora believed fully that he deserved that much. "My father punished me for everything, even if he had been the one in the wrong. He told me I should have known better and that a lady doesn't act so brazenly." She glowered. "Because Lord Beast could do no wrong."

"Lord Beast?" Emma laughed. "Is that what you call him? I love it."

Something eased inside of Cora. These were her friends. They would always be on her side, no matter what. "What would I even do to him?"

"What do you want to do?" Victoria asked. "You said you want him to feel misery. What would that look like?"

She thought about it. "For someone he admires to lose faith in him." She didn't know how she'd make that happen, but she'd see it done. "Who does he favor more than anyone else?"

"That's easy," Selena said. "The Duke of Castlebury. They have what appears to be an unbreakable relationship. Thornton is a recluse. The duke is the only one that can get him to leave his estate. That has to mean something."

Cora nodded. "Then we sever that bond. Somehow."

Victoria nodded. "Use the days leading to the wedding to have your revenge, but ensure it's done before that day. Nothing is going to ruin my wedding." She grinned. "Understood?"

"Understood," Cora said. Then sipped her tea. "Who wants to become closer to the

duke and see what they can discover?"

"I will," Selena said, then shrugged. "It should prove diverting, at least."

"Wonderful," Cora said. "We have the beginning of a plan." She met Selena's gaze. "Let me know what you learn."

Selena nodded. "You'll be the first to hear everything." She grinned. "Now let's gossip like old hens and laugh until we ache from it."

This was what she'd needed. Cora had been melancholy for days. Now that she was here with the rest of the ladies, she wondered why she'd allowed herself to sink that low. She might never have her revenge, but she had this. But perhaps she'd get her vengeance, too. Time would tell.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Two

Hayes Brooks, the Earl of Thornton, lounged against the billiards table and considered his next shot. He'd been playing terribly, but he had never been good at the game. It was not a skill he had cared to learn and still didn't. But Castlebury had wanted to play and as he was fond of the duke, Hayes had conceded. He positioned the cue stick on the table and took his shot and missed. He almost always missed. "Admit it," he said as he met Castlebury's gaze. "You wanted me to play this infernal game because you knew I'd lose."

"Not at all," the duke said nonchalantly. "Well. No. I did know you'd likely lose, but that's not why I thought to ask you to play." Castlebury did not miss the shot he'd lined up. In fact, that last shot meant the duke had won the blasted game.

"Then explain it to me as if I am a half-wit," Hayes said. "What do you get from this?"

The duke sighed and put his cue stick away. Hayes did the same and wandered over to the bar. One thing the Marquess of Ardmore did right was keep a well-stocked selection of spirits. He poured himself a snifter of brandy and then one for Castlebury. He brought both over to where the duke stood and handed one to him. "I asked you to play because if I left it up to you, then you'd do nothing."

"And what is wrong with that?" Hayes did not enjoy socializing. He never did it well. Most thought him cold and arrogant. He was neither. He just had trouble talking to people and instead of fumbling over words, he remained silent. It was much easier and less embarrassing. "I can't offend anyone if I remain at home."

“That’s my point exactly.” The duke took a sip of his brandy. “You wouldn’t even have come to this wedding if I didn’t browbeat you into it.”

Hayes narrowed his gaze. “On that you are wrong.” He may not like socializing, but he did have a few good friends. The Earl of Foxcroft was one of them. “I wouldn’t have missed this wedding. Foxcroft is getting married. That is something one must witness to believe.”

Castlebury laughed. “I suppose that is true enough. Though he has been tame for a number of years now. It was likely he’d want to wed, eventually.”

“I’m just surprised that Ardmore gave him permission to marry his sister.” Hayes took a sip of his brandy. “If I had a sister, I don’t know if I would have agreed to allow one of the ton’s most infamous rakes, reformed or otherwise, wed her.”

“It’s a good thing you don’t have a sister,” the duke said. “Because this fictional lady would never find a husband, rake or otherwise, because you would not socialize long enough for her to have a debut.”

Hayes nodded. “You’re right.” Not to mention any sister he may have had wouldn’t have survived his brute of a father. Hell, Hayes had barely survived it. If he hadn’t spent so much time at the Earl of Farrington’s, he might not have. The irony there is that Farrington had considered Hayes’ father a friend. He treated Hayes like an honored guest, and while he was at Farrington Abbey, he felt safe. Even protected. It had been more of a home than he’d ever had. The only sore spot for him was when he had disagreements with Cora. Her spirit and beauty drew him but he never knew how to speak to her. Instead of saying what he truly wanted to, he found himself uttering truly abysmal things. That was why she dubbed him Lord Beast, and he did not blame her for that. He had deserved that and more. All the while, he fell in love with her a little bit more with each interaction and she grew to hate him.

“Of course I am,” The duke said smugly. “I am usually right in most things.”

“Debatable,” Hayes retorted, then laughed. “As entertaining as this was.” He motioned toward the billiards table. “Surely there is something else we can do. When will the rest of the guests arrive?”

“I suspect they are all here already. Foxcroft is here, as you know. Harcrest is traveling with his wife and her sister, and I cannot recall the other ladies’ names. A couple of other wallflowers that Ardmore’s sister is fond of.”

He frowned. “I think one of them is Harcrest’s sister.” Not that he cared. The only lady that he wanted to avoid was Cora. She would make him miserable. In more ways than one... They would argue and he didn’t want to do anything to disrupt the wedding.

“I believe you’re correct.” The duke stood and refilled his brandy. “They’re inconsequential either way. They’re no concern of ours.”

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” the butler said. He turned toward Hayes. “My lord,” he began. “There is someone here that wishes to see you.”

“Me?” he asked in confusion. “Are you certain?” No one ever asked to see him. The only person who ever truly did was already in the room with him, and Cora sure as hell wouldn’t ask after him. She would likely avoid him as much as he would her.

“I am, my lord,” the butler said. “She asked specifically for you.”

Hayes prayed it wasn’t Cora then. He’d definitely muck that up as he always did. He may love the woman to distraction, but he’d never learned how to have a cordial conversation with her. She’d never know how he truly felt about her. Which was for the best. He didn’t want to taint her with the stain of his life. “Who is it?” he asked.

“I’m not certain, my lord.” The butler frowned. “I put them in the front drawing room. Would you like me to have refreshments sent there?”

Considering he did not even know this lady’s identity; he wasn’t certain he wanted to encourage her to remain at Ardmore. “Not yet,” he told the butler. “I will let a maid know if I change my mind.”

“Very well, my lord.” He bowed, then left them alone.

Hayes turned toward Castlebury. “Care to join me?”

“Who do you think it is?” the duke asked.

“I wish I knew.” He didn’t like surprises. They had never gone well for Hayes, and he doubted that had changed. It was another reason he didn’t socialize. Fewer chances for things to shock him into becoming a lack wit.

“I must admit, I am curious.” The duke finished his brandy and set his glass down. “Let’s go see who your visitor is.”

They walked in silence as they headed toward the drawing room. When they entered, they found two women there sitting on a settee. One had hair a pale shade of blonde that was almost white, and the other had mousy brown hair. The fair-haired one made Hayes frown. He hadn’t seen his mother in years. His father hadn’t allowed her to have any contact with him, and she hadn’t bothered to come to see him even after the old bastard died. “Hello, mother,” he said stiffly. “Why are you here?”

She glanced up at him. Her lips trembled a little as she fought to speak. What had his father done to her? If he had treated Hayes so badly, he must have been a brute to his mother. Clarissa Brooks, the Dowager Countess of Thornton, had been a beauty. Now she was so timid she was a shell of the vibrant woman she’d once been.. “I’m so

sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have come.” She stood to leave and he almost allowed her to run away.

“Don’t go,” he told her. “You came for a reason. Tell me.”

Slowly, she turned toward him. “I needed to see you.”

“I gathered as much. Why now?” Hayes probably should have been kinder to her, but he had trouble letting go of the pain that he’d carried all these years. He knew what people thought. They believed that his mother had an affair with Castlebury’s father. That would make Hayes and Castlebury brothers. “Have you come to tell me the truth?” He was not certain he wanted to know if he was truly a bastard or not.

She sighed and then sat back on the settee. The woman with her hadn’t moved. She had a stern countenance to his mother’s panicked one. She looked mousy, but his mother was the one truly afraid of her own shadow. “Yes,” she said. “I think it is time.”

Hayes laughed. It was almost ridiculous. “Is it now?” How utterly ridiculous this was. He wished he had more brandy. He might need it to hear this tale of his mother’s.

“It’s not so long a story,” she said. “But I’ll tell you everything.” His mother glanced at Castlebury and frowned. “I suppose it is good you’re here as well.”

The duke lifted a brow. “And why is that, Lady Thornton?”

She smiled softly. “Not for the reasons I’m sure you are thinking.” She sighed. “I did not have an affair with your father. Bertrand thought I had. It’s why he...” She swallowed hard and turned toward Hayes. “I tried to tell him he was wrong, but he... Well, he hit me.” She trembled. “He sent me away and never let me be alone with you. After a while, I stopped trying. It was better for both of us that I stayed away. He

hit me less and allowed you to go to Farrington.”

“If you didn’t have an affair with the former duke,” Hayes began. “Why do I look so much like him?” He motioned toward Castlebury.

“Because you are cousins,” she said.

“Cousins?” The duke lifted a brow. “My father did not have any siblings.”

“Not that you’re aware of,” she said. “But he knew of me.”

“You’re his sister?” Castlebury frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“My mother had an affair with your grandfather,” she said. His mother turned to Hayes. “I’m the bastard. But no one would believe me. I look nothing like the Rowe family. I look more like my mother. No one questioned my birth. Why would they? I was a female and would never inherit any titles.” She sighed. “I should have told you sooner. But some habits are hard to let go of. I had to stay away and coming to you...”

“How did you know where to find me?” Hayes said. It wasn’t as if many knew he’d be attending this wedding.

She was quiet for a few moments. Then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I went to see the duke.” She gestured toward Castlebury. “I had hoped he’d help me to see you. I didn’t think you’d allow a visit.”

“But Castlebury was here,” Hayes said, the situation dawning on him. “And his servants told you he was away for a wedding.”

“They didn’t tell me where the wedding was being held,” she said. “But I was able to

discover everything from there, and I thought perhaps you would be here as well.”

“Now that you have unloaded your secrets, are you going to go back to the dower house and ignore me again?” Hayes didn’t know how he felt about his mother. He didn’t even know how he felt about her truth. He didn’t care that she was a bastard or that Castlebury was his cousin. None of that mattered. Hayes didn’t blame any of what had happened to him on his mother. It was all his father’s fault for being an ignorant sod.

“I...” She drew in a deep breath. “I would like to stay if that is all right.”

Hayes nodded. “That’s not my call to make. This isn’t my house or my wedding.” He would likely never marry, but he left that part out. “But I’ll ask Ardmore if it is all right for you to remain.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I think—that is...I’d like for us to talk. I would like a chance to know my son.”

Hayes sighed. “We will see. I don’t know what I want.”

“I understand,” she said demurely.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’ll locate Ardmore and if he is all right with you remaining, I’ll have a servant tell you. I need...” He swallowed hard. “I need to be alone right now.”

With that, he left them alone. He didn’t even look back to see if Castlebury followed him. The duke knew his moods well and probably realized he wouldn’t help by coming along with him. They would talk later. The information his mother had revealed to them... That would need to be discussed. Hayes just wasn’t ready for it yet.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Three

She couldn't sleep and she'd been tossing and turning in her bed for hours now. Cora had little choice left to her. She could continue to stay in bed and not find any rest, or she could go to the library and find a book to read. Perhaps if she read a little, it would allow her to become drowsy enough to fall into a deep slumber. She didn't stop to consider it a moment longer. There was only one choice.

She sighed, rolled out of bed, donned her dressing gown, and tied it tightly around her before leaving her bedchamber to seek out the library. She didn't bother with a candle. She could see well enough and she had become accustomed to Ardmere Abbey on her last visit. When she reached the library, she could light a candle. One was left on the table along with the means to light it.

As she walked down the hall, she became lost in thought. At least she had not crossed paths with Lord Thornton yet. Though that meeting was inevitable. They were both guests at the house and would be attending all of the wedding festivities. If she had her way, they wouldn't have to acknowledge each other at all, but that seemed unlikely.

A noise caught her attention and she stopped to listen. Whatever it was, had ceased. It also could have been her imagination. She shook her head and then headed toward the library. She turned toward the room but stumbled over something on the floor. Whatever it had been, it wasn't normally there. She tumbled into a room that hadn't been her original destination. Cora fell to the floor and hit her head hard. "Ouch," she mumbled to herself. What the blazes...

She kneeled around the room, trying to ascertain where she had landed. Then she felt something warm and firm. The door to the room closed with a soft click, then the sound of a key turning in the lock sent her into a panic. That was when she realized what she'd tripped over. The warmth was a person. An unconscious person. And she'd just been locked in a dark room with that person...

Cora fumbled around and checked the person. She thought perhaps it was a man... He was breathing but unconscious. Slowly, she found her way around the room until she found a chair. She sat down on that and started to shake uncontrollably. What should she do? Even if she could move him, where would she take him? She couldn't tell what sort of room they were in, but it wasn't overly large. There was no light at all. Normally, darkness didn't bother her, but something about this situation felt sinister.

A moan echoed through the room. The man was waking. He rolled over to the side and then winced. "Damn it all..." He said as he struggled to sit up. "Where..."

She recognized that voice. She closed her eyes and held back a groan. Who would have thought locking her in a room with Lord Beast was a good idea? Definitely not one of her friends. She doubted any of Thornton's friends would have done it either.

"Not again," he said. He curled into himself. "I don't like the dark. Please let me out. Please..."

Cora was so confused. What was going on here? Where did he think he was? Should she say something? He didn't appear to realize she'd been locked into the room with her. He went over to the door and rattled the doorknob. "Let me out. Let me out." He kept repeating that as he pulled on to the doorknob. Until he gave up and slid against the door. "I promise I'll be good. Daddy, please let me out."

This was...disturbing. Did he think he was a child again? There was something not

right here. Her heart was breaking...for the one man she had always hated. Cora had to do something. But what?

“Please daddy,” he said. “I hurt so much. My head. Don’t hit me again. I promise I will stay away from you. I won’t be in your way.” He started to rock against the door. The man wasn’t there anymore. Only the child. This man had suffered some trauma. One that still haunted him. What had his father done to him?

Cora stood and walked over to him. She slid on to the floor next to him and rested her hand on his shoulder. “You’re not alone,” she whispered. “I’m here.”

He stilled as she spoke. Then he said softly, “Cora?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m here.”

“I’ve always dreamed you were here with me in the dark.” His tone was still that of a child. “You made everything all right. You’re so much stronger than I am. Tell them to let me out.”

God... How many times had they locked him up this way? “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“I know,” he said solemnly. “You never do. I wish I could talk to you like this all the time.” He sighed. “But only in dreams can I find the words.”

She frowned. What did that mean? The more he talked, the more confused she became. “Why only in dreams?”

“In the light,” he began. “I am nothing but your Lord Beast.” He sighed. “I never say or do the right thing. Instead, the wrong things always happen. The wrong words, the wrong actions. All wrong. I want to be better with you, but I don’t know how.”

“You are talking to me now.” She kept her tone low and soothing. “Tell me everything you have always wished to say but couldn’t.”

“No,” he said. “If I can’t say it to you in the light, then I shouldn’t in the dark. You deserve far better than me. I’m not good. I’ve always been no good. I’ve always known that.”

She sighed. “You should rest,” Cora told him. “It’ll be light soon enough.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll rest. You’re here. You’ll keep them away from me. No one will hurt me while I sleep.”

“Of course not,” she said in a reassuring tone. “No one can hurt you here.”

He laid down beside her and placed his head in her lap. She caressed his cheek softly with one hand and curled her other in his soft locks. He relaxed and fell asleep faster than she could have anticipated. Something profound had happened. She could not say she understood him better. Not completely, but she did know that he never wanted to be her Lord Beast. She had far more questions than answers now.

There was one other thing she’d realized. She could not enact any sort of revenge on him. He’d already suffered far too much. His father had treated him ill, and he’d been a damaged soul all these years. She could not add to that pain.

Aches plagued every bit of Hayes’ body. His head hurt the worst. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d hurt this much. He didn’t ever imbibe too much spirits, so he’d never dealt with those ill effects. Once was enough for him to realize he never wanted to experience that again. He moaned and lifted his hand to his head.

“You probably shouldn’t move too much,” a female said.

Hayes' eyelids fluttered open and he met Cora's gaze. She glanced down at him with concern in her warm brown eyes. It was then that he realized his head was in her lap and her fingers were curled in his hair. What the hell had happened? He didn't think he'd drank too much. He'd had a glass of brandy before bed like he usually did... "Cora?" he asked in a confused tone.

There was not much light in the room. There was a small window that allowed some light to filter into the room. He stared around them and frowned. What was this room? More importantly, why were they both inside?

"Yes," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know..." He winced as he tried to move. "My head..."

"I think you were struck," she said. "And perhaps drugged. You were not yourself before now."

Oh, hell... What had he said to her? He could only imagine, and he suspected he wouldn't like what he'd uttered. Hayes had never wanted her to see him as weak. It was far better for her to think of him as her Lord Beast. At least then she didn't pity him. He loved her far too much to accept that emotion from her. "What..." He cleared his head. "Tell me what happened." He did not ask for any details on his behavior. Deep down, he already knew the truth.

"I cannot say," she said. "I mean, I didn't see what was done to you. I think I stumbled upon the aftermath."

"Stumbled?" He liked having his head in her lap. Hayes would have loved to be able to stay there forever. He just loved her. This was a little slice of heaven that he had never dared to hope for. Now that he was this close to her, he never wanted it to end. But it had to. "Explain it to me."

He still didn't move. Hayes intended to stay there as long as she would allow it. He prayed it would be for several more moments. At least long enough for him to have many memories to savor over the upcoming years. Cora had never been this soft and kind to him. She'd always been fiery and fierce.

"I couldn't sleep," she began. "On my way to the library for a book, I tripped and fell. That was when I realized I'd tripped over a person." Cora sighed. "Then we were locked in this room together. We have been here for hours."

"Have we?" And he'd missed the entire duration. What rot. He'd lost hours of memories with her... "Are we still locked inside?"

"I believe so," she said. "I haven't heard the key turn in the lock, and I have not slept."

"What room is this?"

"It's a storage room of some sort," she said. "I think it is one that the maids use. But clearly not often. I'm not even certain what they use it for. Cleaning things?" She shrugged. "Hopefully, a maid decides to use this room soon. I'd hate for us to be left in here much longer. I doubt we'd survive."

"Because we usually argue?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm tired of fighting with you." Cora ran her fingers through his hair. It felt so damn good. He wanted to revel in it. "Perhaps we should call a truce of some sort. We are adults now and it's time to set aside our childish behavior."

He stared up at her. "Am I dreaming?"

Cora chuckled. "If you are, then so am I." She sighed. "And we are both having a

rather odd dream.”

“It is definitely not like any I’ve ever had before.” He furrowed his brow. “Doesn’t mean it isn’t true. You’ve never been nice to me before.” He didn’t see pity in her gaze, either. So perhaps he hadn’t babbled like a fool. He prayed he hadn’t...

“I’ve definitely had more pleasant dreams.” She grinned. “I promise you, this isn’t one.”

Hayes believed her. This seemed oddly real, and he wanted to make it last. At least a little while longer. He had to understand why she suddenly didn’t want to fight with him. “So, I’m no longer to be Lord Beast?”

Her lips twitched. “I may still refer to you as such from time to time. You know, for nostalgia’s sake.”

“I suppose I can allow that.” He strangely liked that idea. “As long as we can be cordial with each other.” It was far more than he’d ever hoped for. “And perhaps once we are free from this room, we can maybe even be friendly.”

“I’d like that.” She sounded sincere. He was almost afraid to hope. What if she changed her mind? What would he do then? Hayes wanted to pull her into his arms and just feel her against him. She’d never allow that. It had to be enough that she caressed him freely and willingly. He adored how much her touch affected him. He’d never felt anything so good in his miserable life.

A key turned in the lock and a maid swung the door open. They were barely able to move in time to allow the maid to enter. She stared at them both in shock. “What’s going on here?”

“Thank heavens,” Cora said. “We thought we’d never escape that room. I need to

Speak with Lady Victoria immediately. Something sinister is afoot, and I demand that the culprit that locked us in this room be found.”

Hayes let her handle it with all the fury he knew she kept inside of her. Cora was never more glorious than when she was demanding justice. He just didn’t understand how it had all happened. But considering it gave him a softer, more congenial Cora—he’d endure it all again. For her, he’d endure anything.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Four

Cora had gone to her bedchamber after the maid had unlocked the room they'd been trapped in. She thought to sleep a little, but her mind kept wandering to what she'd learned about the Earl of Thornton. She had tried to remain calm when he had awakened. Her heart had been beating heavily inside her chest. Everything had changed, and yet, nothing had. The night had been a revelation for her, but for him... It had not been as life altering. He didn't remember any of it, so how was she supposed to move forward with what she knew? What would he do if he realized what he'd revealed to her? Would Lord Beast come to the forefront? She hoped not, but he clearly suffered as a child. Anything was possible when considering how much he'd endured.

Now that she had decided against sleep, she wanted to seek him out. Cora couldn't even explain why she felt the need to be near him. She just knew she had to be there by his side. As if he needed her there to be all right. If anyone could ever truly be fully sound after what Lord Thornton had withstood. And it had been survival for him. He'd managed to thwart his father's need to decimate the very core of him. He considered himself unworthy—of her, but she didn't see him that way. What had happened to him had not been his fault. Cora didn't even understand why his father had treated him so ill.

She wandered through the house until she came to the back entrance that led into the garden. Cora loved the garden at Ardmere. It was even more beautiful now than it had been a few months earlier. Summer was at an end and soon the leaves would turn colors. She moved through the garden path until she reached a fountain that lay in the center. There were a few stone benches around the fountain for those that wished to

sit for a while. Cora chose to do so and stared at the fountain as if it would give her all the answers she sought. None came, but still she remained. It was peaceful and with the chaos in her mind she needed that.

Footsteps on the path to her right brought her out of her reverie. She blinked a few times as everything once more came into focus. Before her was the very reason she'd been in turmoil. Lord Thornton in all his gorgeous glory. His black hair gleamed almost blue in the sunlight and his green eyes were filled with the same unrest she'd been wrestling with. "Lady Cora," he said, then bowed. "I did not mean to disrupt you."

He turned to leave in the way he'd come, but she called out to him. "Wait," she said. "Please don't go."

Slowly he turned to face her. Uncertainty filled his features. He wanted to stay, it seemed, but thought it unwise. She'd have to put him at ease or he'd flee. "Did you require me for something?" he asked. A muscle in his cheek clenched as he seemed to be fighting something deep inside of him. Cora wanted to stroll to his side and wrap her arms around him. To comfort him in a way no one ever had.

"Come sit with me," she told him. She couldn't act completely differently than she had before. He would expect animosity from her. Because that was what she'd always done in the past. Attacked first and then never asked questions. She had always accepted everything as fact: he had been mean, so she had been mean first. Cora realized what he'd been doing now that she had more information. His fears caused him to react to everything differently, and that included pushing away everyone.

"I'm not..." He cleared his throat. "Why?"

"I'd like to talk with you." She smiled at him encouragingly. "We agreed to be

friends. Did we not?"

"We did..." He still stared at her, as if he didn't quite understand what was happening. "But..." He sighed. "I must admit I didn't fully believe you. I still do not know if I can trust this," he paused and then motioned between them. "Friendship."

She considered that. In his place, she'd be uneasy as well. Why wouldn't he be? They'd been more enemies than friends for years. Cora couldn't even recall any moments where they had been cordial to each other. Their long-standing animosity was one of the reasons she'd decided to take her chance of revenge on him. Now though... That was out of the question. She could never harm him. He had been hurt far more than she could ever have done, but if she still sought vengeance, it might break him. "Have I ever lied to you?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "Not to my knowledge."

Her lips twitched. "I haven't," she told him. "Why lie when I could be a nuisance in other ways?"

This time he smiled. "There is that." He sighed. "Do you truly wish for us to be friends?" He arched a brow. "I thought you hated me."

It was her turn to sigh. "I did." What would he find acceptable as a reason for why she no longer did? Cora couldn't be certain about what he would believe. So perhaps a little of the truth would help. "Before I came here for this wedding, I would have reiterated that vehemently." She met his gaze. "You have never given me a reason to feel otherwise."

"Then why have you decided we should be friends?" His unease was pouring off of him again. She had to say something that would help him relax.

“Because I came to a realization.” She stood. Since he wasn’t going to sit with her, they needed to be a little on equal ground. “That hatred has never served any real purpose for me. It’s actually hurt me in some ways.” Cora tilted her head to the side. “My father has always ignored me. When he favored you over me, that is what I truly resented. You didn’t have any control over what my father did or did not do. You were a child, the same as me.” And his father had abused him. At least her father had merely neglected to notice her. “I think it is time for me to let that go.” Then she moved closer to him and placed a hand on his arm. She grinned. “Don’t you? Can we be friends, Lord Beast?”

Hayes wanted to believe her. He desperately wanted a cordial relationship with Cora—more than friendship, if he were honest, but he knew he’d never have that. Just the fact that she wished to be friends was a step toward the right direction. Maybe, in time, she could see herself with him. Hoping for that outcome wouldn’t benefit him, though. It would only lead to more pain, and he should accept what she offered. It was a far better relationship than he’d had with her before.

Even so, he couldn’t help wondering. What had happened in that room? How had they both come to be locked in there? What had he done or not done? Did she learn something about him that had changed her mind about who she’d believed him to be? Then again, she still called him Lord Beast and had no pity in her gaze. If she’d discovered how his father had hurt him over the years... Surely, she’d see him as broken. He sure as hell did. He was broken. So broken he probably would never be whole again.

“I would like to be your friend,” he finally said. “I don’t like being at odds with you.” Hayes rubbed his chest. “It makes me feel uncomfortable. Like I’m wearing an ill-fitting set of clothes. Too tight, and I can’t breathe properly.”

Cora stared up at him and he sucked in a breath. Lord, she was beautiful. Her warm brown eyes had always made him feel as if he could face anything and make it out to

the other side. Maybe not whole, but capable. As if she alone could keep the shredded pieces of him together. That was why he always sought her out. Even when they disagreed, she kept him sane. Cora gave him a reason to keep fighting, to continue breathing, and to believe he might have a future. Even when those very things often seemed like they might be the end of him. "Change is never easy," she said softly, "but sometimes it's the only thing we can do. Because by changing, we realize there is a better way, and by choosing to accept that we can have something far greater."

He nodded. "Yes," he agreed. "Then we can be friends."

"Absolutely." Her smile widened. "The best of friends, I hope. Given time." She gestured toward the bench she'd vacated. "Now will you sit with me for a while? I'd like to get to know my new friend."

He glanced at the stone bench and considered her offer. If he wanted this to work, he'd have to meet her in the middle. They had to start somewhere to form this friendship into something solid. He had to take a leap of faith. "All right," he conceded. "I'll join you." It wasn't as if he had something better. There was nothing better than her.

Cora sat on the bench and then glanced at him. Waiting. Her patience with him was phenomenal. He was acting like a skittish colt, afraid to get too close to her. As if she'd slay him with a mere glance or a well-executed sentence. She certainly could. Cora, more than anyone, could break him. His father had certainly tried. But he hadn't loved his father. He could have, if the man had been a decent father. But it had been clear that Hayes would never meet his expectations and he stopped trying. Cora, though, had always been kind to him. At least until he'd driven her to hate him.

Hayes sat on the bench but kept some distance between them. What now? What should he do or say? This was all new to him and he couldn't discern the best possible action. "What would you like to discuss?" Perhaps the answer was to allow

her to lead their conversation. He'd much rather answer questions than consider what to ask.

"We do not need to speak of anything in particular," she said in a nonchalant tone. "But if you would be more at ease with a topic, we can certainly choose one."

"I think," he began. "It would."

She laughed softly and it was like music to his ears. It was light and full of warmth. Somehow, she was far more beautiful like this. More than he could ever have imagined, and he'd imagined much. "Well, I suppose we must begin somewhere." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Let's discuss interests. Do you have a favorite book or piece of music? Do you even like those things?"

He grinned. "I do like books. They have given me a lot of comfort over the years." They had taken him to faraway places where a small boy could dream of a better life. "At least until I was able to travel on my own."

"Have you traveled often?" she asked, then sighed. "I've always wanted to visit other countries. That must have been simply wonderful. Will you tell me about it?"

Hayes stared at her. Just amazed at how easy this was, to talk to her, as if they had never been at odds with each other. "I'd love to." He'd love to do so much more than that. But for now, this would do. "What would you like to know?"

"Oh, everything," she said. "Anything. Whatever you wish to tell me. I'm waiting on bated breath for your tales of grand adventures."

"They were not nearly that grand." Then he smiled. It almost seemed foreign to him. To have his lips tilt upward and almost feel...happy. Yes, that was what that was. Happiness. And he owed it all to her.

He settled in and just basked in the moment. Hayes didn't know when he'd experience such joy again, and he wanted to savor it.. He started his tales and told her everything. Not that they were as grand as she believed, but he tried to make it all sound better than it had been. Because, with her, he believed anything was possible. Hayes would hold on to that for as long as he could. In his experience, nothing good ever lasted as long as it should, and for Cora to be this close to him now... Well, it would surely take a wrong turn at some point. So, he'd enjoy what he could, before he had to turn back into Lord Beast and pretend that he didn't love her.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Five

Cora wandered into the library in search of a book. The library was generally a good place to go when one wanted a book, and she had never made it to that room when she couldn't sleep. She'd had a lovely afternoon with Lord Thornton. They'd talked for hours, and she felt as if she had finally started to understand him. He relaxed the more they conversed, and she hoped he would remain comfortable in her company going forward. She found she rather liked the earl. He was funny and kind, and quite intelligent. If only it could have always been thusly between them. But perhaps everything had gone as it was supposed to. They were finally in a good place, and they were friendly, if not quite friends, yet.

She looked over the selection of books on a shelf and considered what one to read. "If you're looking for a book," her sister said as she strolled into the room. "There's a lovely volume of Shakespeare's sonnets."

Cora glanced at Lilah and frowned. "You do recall that I am not fond of poetry."

Lilah grinned. "But you're not looking for something that you like."

"And how would you know that?" She lifted a brow. "I could be."

"Sister dear," she began. "At this late hour?" This time she arched a brow, which said everything. Lilah understood her better than anyone. "You want something to lull you into sleep. Take the sonnets. They will certainly drop you into a quick slumber."

Cora sighed and said, "Very well. Which one is it?"

Lilah wandered over to a nearby shelf and plucked a tome out. Then she walked over to Cora and handed it to her. “They really are lovely,” she said. She got this dreaming look on her face that made Cora ache a little to witness it. “Henry read one of them to me. It took my breath away.”

“I’m not sure if I want this book, then.” She glared at it as if it might bite her. “That was when you fell for him. Admit it.”

Her sister had the grace to blush. “I don’t know...” She nibbled on her bottom lip. “But it may have been when it began. He made me see him differently, and before I knew it, I’d fallen.”

Cora wanted that. She wanted to be madly in love with a man that felt the same way about her. Was that too much to ask? Apparently so. Because in every season she’d been out, not one man noticed her. It was truly dreadful to be a wallflower. Gentlemen didn’t understand what their lack of attention did to a woman. At least a gentleman had more prospects. If they didn’t marry, they could still travel or find work. A woman was at the mercy of society and the dictates it expected. If a woman failed to make a good match, what choices did she have left? Perhaps work as a governess or lady’s companion. If one were fortunate enough... Either way, they’d still be considered lesser. Because no man had wanted them as a wife and mother for their children.

“I’m glad you found your happiness,” she told Lilah. “Your husband adores you.”

“He does,” Lilah agreed. “And I love him too.” Her sister frowned. “I want that for you as well. Perhaps next season...”

“I’m not going to bother.” She would talk to their father. It was time to accept she wouldn’t wed and prepare for spinsterhood. “Nothing has changed. It will be torturous to prepare for another season and experiencing the loneliness all over

again.”

“I don’t know...” Lilah nibbled on her lip. “You could at least try. It might be different.”

Cora shook her head. “It would be futile.”

“All right,” Lilah said reluctantly. “I won’t push. But please don’t let father make you do something you don’t wish to. I can talk to Henry. If it comes to it, then you can live with us.”

“That’s sweet of you,” Cora told her. “But I don’t believe it will be necessary.” At least she hoped not. The viscount and her sister were almost nauseatingly happy. It might hurt her bruised ego and empty heart to witness that love every day.

“By the way,” Lilah said. “Were you having a cordial conversation with Lord Thornton in the Garden this afternoon?” Her sister tilted her head to the side. “What about your revenge?”

She had yet to tell the other wallflowers that she would not be seeking any revenge. She best start with her sister. Cora did not want any of them to act on her behalf. “About that...” She blew out a breath. “I am not going forward with that plan. I learned some things...”

“About Lord Thornton?” Lilah supplied.

“Yes,” she said. “I do not wish to go into detail. It would be upsetting for him if he realized I knew any of it.” Cora closed her eyes and sought the correct words. “Suffice it to say—he didn’t have a good childhood. One couldn’t even say it was tolerable. It explained a lot about how he was with me.”

“Still,” Lilah said. “That’s no excuse.”

“Normally, I would agree with you.” Cora frowned. “But he didn’t mistreat me. He never truly hurt me. He was just...unpleasant.” She met her sister’s gaze. “Where in his case he was hurt, and mistreated.”

“He was?” Lilah’s mouth fell open. “Who?”

“Does it matter?” She needed Lilah to stop asking questions. “He suffered. Isn’t that enough to understand why he was surly and disagreeable?”

Her sister nodded. “Yes,” she finally said aloud. “Yes, it is.” She met Cora’s gaze. “What will you do?”

“Nothing.” She drew in a breath. “I’ve convinced him that we can be friends. So that is what we will be. Can you let the other ladies know? I don’t want anyone to harm him. He’s endured enough abuse for one lifetime.”

“I will,” Lilah told her. She tapped the book Cora held. “Go read the poetry and rest. We will talk more later.”

Cora nodded and left the library. She thought to go in search of Lord Thornton but didn’t know where he’d be. The gentlemen often went to the game room. Did she dare search for him there? She sighed and decided against it. She’d locate him tomorrow. There was time enough for them to talk before this house party ended.

Hayes wanted to see Cora again. The gentlemen were all in the game room. Some were playing cards and the others were at the billiards table. They were all imbibing spirits. Merriment saturated the room and for once, Hayes almost felt it himself. He hadn’t been brooding as much since he’d spent the afternoon with Cora.

“You seem almost—happy,” Castlebury said. “What happened?” He narrowed his gaze. “And can we ensure there’s a repeat of it?”

Hayes laughed. Honest to God laughed. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d done that. Probably with Cora. She brought out the best in him. Sometimes she also brought out his worst, but that wasn’t her fault. He’d always been awkward around her. That had changed earlier that day. They still needed to discuss how they’d come to be locked in that room together. He hadn’t broached the topic earlier because he hadn’t wanted to ruin the moment. But soon... He couldn’t put it off indefinitely. “Stop being a bore,” he told Castlebury. “I have good moments. Today just happens to have an overabundance of them.”

He narrowed his gaze. “Yes...” The duke stared at him. “Have you spoken to your mother again?”

Just like that his mood soured. “No,” he told him. “I will. It’s just...”

“Too much, too soon?” The duke arched a brow. “I understand.” He sipped his brandy. “But it does make sense. Why we look so much alike. I must admit, I had wondered myself whether you were my brother.”

Hayes had as well... How could he not? “But we’re cousins.” He shrugged. “Still family. Just legitimately. Well, mostly.” His mother was the bastard. Hayes was not. He’d bet the old man was rolling in his grave at that news. He had beaten Hayes because he hadn’t believed he was truly his child. If only there were no blood ties to that damned man. Hayes would gladly be considered a bastard. He didn’t want the dead earl to be his true father. But nothing would change that. “I doubt we can ever openly admit it.”

Castlebury shrugged. “I’d admit you’re my cousin. The ton can go to the devil for all I care.”

“Says the duke everyone adores,” Hayes said sardonically. Castlebury could do as he pleased and still be welcomed everywhere. In fact, he did do as he pleased and snubbed many. The duke abhorred society and rarely attended any social engagements. He’d barely been back in London and the invitations flooded his residence. He wasn’t bitter about that. Castlebury had no desire to be the beloved anything of the ton. Hayes would rather be left alone. Not that anyone had afforded him that courtesy.

“That is true,” Castlebury conceded. “But wouldn’t care either way. I have no use for society and its dictates. They can adore me all they wish. It makes no difference to me.”

“So we should declare our connection to the world?” He tilted his head to the side. “Does it mean that much to you that we do?”

“I would like to admit that we are family,” he told Hayes. “But not for me. It is for you that I want it to be known.”

“I do not care what they think of me.” He frowned. “If that is your reason, then I don’t believe we should bother at all.”

The duke shook his head. “I want to put those rumors to rest once and for all. When they talk about you, it should not be in hushed whispers declaring you unfit for a title that is rightfully yours.”

“Again,” he said. “I do not care. The title means nothing to me.” He glowered. “If I could shed it, I would. My father was rotten to the core. I wish to God that I was a bastard.” There, he’d said it aloud when he had only thought it in the past. “His blood taints me.” It made Hayes unworthy of Cora. That stain would never affect her. He would ensure it.

“Do not speak of yourself in those terms,” Castlebury said in a harsh tone. “You are not your father.”

Hayes glanced away from the duke. He didn’t wish to argue with him about this. It was an old argument. There was no reason to go over it again. He should just leave the game room. Especially since he’d wanted to go search for Cora, anyway. She’d been so kind to him earlier. Hayes wanted to be near her as much as possible while she was being so amiable. “It doesn’t matter,” he said quietly. “Nothing has changed.” But something had changed. Cora looked at him differently. Why was that?

“You’re correct,” the duke agreed. “You are still as stubborn as always. But I’ll say it again, and maybe it will finally breach that stubborn mind of yours.” He blew out a breath. “You are not your father. That man beat you. My friend, my cousin, would never harm a soul. A child would be safe with you. Stop berating yourself for something that wasn’t in your control.”

Of course, he’d never hurt anyone... God. To do to another what had been done to him? Hayes closed his eyes and shuddered. “No,” he said softly. “I’d never do that.”

“Then I think it is time to accept that you are not him. That even though you are related by blood, you were never his son. He didn’t deserve to be your father.” Castlebury placed his hand on Hayes’ arm. “Look at me.” He turned to meet his gaze. “Do you hear what I am saying?”

“I do,” he said. “I’m not tainted. It was him that had the stain on his soul?”

Maybe he might even believe that, too. If he was not the unworthy one, then perhaps he could openly love Cora. Would she accept him? Could she love him back? Suddenly everything seemed differently. There were possibilities that were not there before. “I have to go,” he told Castlebury. He had to find Cora.

Hayes left the room before the duke could stop him. It was late and Cora might already be abed. He'd have to wait until the next day to seek her out. Still, he had much to consider. Wooing her would be difficult. They had only just begun to be friends, but he wanted so much more with her, and for the first time in his life, he thought he might be able to have her. What a wonderful thought to dream about...

Six

Cora rarely considered a ball something to anticipate. As a long-standing wallflower, the very idea of a ball usually caused more anxiety than exhilaration. The upcoming ball should not fill her with excitement. There was no real reason for her to expect it to be any different from the balls of the past, and yet, that was exactly what she believed. This ball had the potential of being special. She could not say why she believed that. She just did.

So, she dressed with care and styled her dark hair into an elegant chignon. A few well-situated strands fell loose around her shoulders and framed her face. The coral-colored silk of her gown brought out the gold specks in her brown eyes, or at least she thought they did. Her simple amber pendant was her only adornment. Cora couldn't ever recall feeling this pretty. The giddiness that threatened to bubble from within surfaced, but she suppressed it. Barely. Those tiny sensations were making her act differently than she usually did.

It was time. She had to go downstairs. The music had started and echoed throughout Ardmore Abbey. The wedding was in two days, and this was the large celebration of the upcoming nuptials. Victoria would marry her earl. Cora was happy for her, but she wanted her own happiness. Something she hadn't thought she'd ever have. But now...the possibility of it—she could feel it deep in her soul. There was no guarantee; however, if she handled everything with care, she could have it.

She went down the stairs and entered the ballroom. It wasn't like a London ball. There was no one announcing the guests as they arrived. Most of the guests were already at the house for the wedding, but some resided close enough to travel to

Ardmore for the festivities. While it wasn't the crush of a normal ton affair, there were still many people in attendance. She could easily get lost in the crowd if she wished it. Cora had never tried to purposely hide at a ball before. There was only one gentleman she wished to spend any time with, and she had yet to locate him.

A tap on her shoulder had her spinning around. Her lips tilted upward when she met Lord Thornton's gaze. "I thought perhaps you had decided not to attend the ball," he said. "I'm glad you're here."

She tilted her head to the side. "As I've never seen you at a ball," she began. "I don't think I'm the one with a penchant for snubbing social occasions."

There was a light in his gaze that she had never seen before. He smiled at her. That was becoming more frequent as well. She almost sighed at the sight. It was so nice to see him not all broody and morose. "You're correct," he said. "But you usually are."

"I am glad you are giving this ball your attention," she told him. "I don't think you will be disappointed."

Lord Thornton lifted a brow. "It's still early yet," he said in a casual tone. "I don't think we should make any assumptions."

"One should never make assumptions," she replied. "But I have a good feeling, and I never ignore something when I do."

He gestured toward the dance floor. "They're about to start a new set." The quadrille had ended and the musicians were about to play a different set. "Will you dance with me?"

Cora nibbled on her bottom lip. She wanted to. No one ever asked her to dance. She never would have dreamt the man she'd considered to be her enemy would be the one

to ask. "I will," she told him. There was nothing she wanted more. She held out her hand to him and he led her to the floor.

The strands of a waltz began to echo around the ballroom. The earl twirled her around the floor with an expertise she hadn't expected. He never attended balls, and yet, he danced as if he'd been born to it. Cora felt as if she were floating and at any moment, she'd awaken and find herself alone. That this dream would, and could, end at any time. She prayed it didn't. "You're beautiful," he said in a husky tone.

She met his gaze and saw something there she had not seen before. Cora couldn't identify it, but it made her heart skip a beat. As if it recognized something she couldn't yet identify. She licked her lips and drew in a breath. "Thank you, my lord."

He led her around the floor and she became lost in the dance, the feel of his arms around her, and the heat that spread through her. She wanted something from him. A kiss, a touch, a look... She wanted so much, but she wanted one thing above all. Cora wanted him. Just him. When had that changed? He ceased being her enemy days ago, but to have altered so dramatically in a short time. Perhaps this desire between them had always been there, but her inability to see it had prevented her from accepting it.

The music died and they stopped dancing. Her breathing had become ragged, and he still gazed at her as if she were everything to him. Cora swallowed hard and couldn't speak for anything. No words came to her mind. All she could see was him, and all the possibilities.

"We should..." He glanced around them.

"Yes," she said. She did not know what he had been about to say. But she was in complete agreement. Whatever he wanted, she did as well.

He nodded and led her to the balcony doors. They walked out onto the balcony in

silence. The brisk air cooled her overheated skin and helped clear the haziness from her overstimulated mind. They stopped at the railing and stared down at the garden. There was a maze in the distance that she had not explored the last time that she'd been at Ardmore. She gestured toward it. "Should we?"

Hayes stared at the maze and considered her suggestions. It would be a great way for them to be alone together. He wanted that. Desperately. There were too many gazes upon them here, and he wouldn't be able to do as he wanted with all those prying eyes watching his every move.

"If you wish," he said. Honestly, he would have agreed to anything she suggested. Hayes was just grateful to have her by his side.

He looped his arm with hers and escorted her down the stairs leading to the garden. They strolled in silence on the path that led to the maze. He had never felt this content with anyone before. The silence soothed him. It was enough to just be with her. They didn't need to speak and finally; they were in accord.

"Have you ever been in the maze?" she asked.

"I have," he admitted. "I spent a lot of time here before we went on our sojourn."

"The one to Italy, was it?" Curiosity filled her voice as she spoke.

He nodded. "And a few other places." It had been his first taste of freedom. If Cora's father hadn't insisted that he be allowed to go, his father never would have given his permission. The Earl of Farrington had been more of a father to him than his own had ever been. He knew Cora had resented him for that. Farrington should have been better with her and her sister. Hayes could not change that, though he wished he could.

“What was it like?” She leaned against him as they walked. Her head rested against him. “I’ve always wanted to travel.”

He’d take her anywhere she wanted to go. Hayes would do anything for her. Only for her. “It was enlightening.” He grinned. “I had a very structured life.” That was putting things mildly. “Away from home I was able to do many things previously denied me. I might have gone a little wild at first.”

“Isn’t that the whole reason young men do that sort of traveling?” She glanced up at him. The moonlight framed her face, giving her an ethereal glow. “So, they can sow their wild oats and all that nonsense.”

“I suppose,” he said. “But I know many gentlemen that continue to do that and more while at home in England.” Hayes shrugged. “I didn’t have that luxury. I had to do all my carousing while on the continent.”

What he didn’t say was that his father had ensured he couldn’t do squat. It wasn’t until the old man died that he knew true freedom. Usually, one grieved the loss of a parent. Hayes had celebrated. No greater day existed for him. At least not until now. Having Cora by his side made him happy. Hayes had never known true happiness.

She nodded. “I understand,” Cora said in a soft tone. “Maybe not in the same fashion as you. I do not have any freedom. Most women do not.”

“If you could go anywhere, or do anything,” he began. “What would it be?”

“I’m not certain.” They reached the middle of the maze, and the fountain there. She let go of his arm and wandered over to it. “I have not allowed myself to dream. It hurts too much to hope for something when you know you cannot have it.”

His heart hurt at those words. He would give her anything. All she had to do was ask.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“What for?” She turned around and met his gaze. “You’re not the one holding me back.” There was a sad smile on her beautiful face and he wanted to erase it. Hayes never wanted her to be sad.

He strolled over to her and lifted his hand to cup her cheek. The feel of her soft skin beneath his palm almost undid him. “I’m sorry that you feel you cannot dream.” He rubbed his thumb along her lips. “I’d make every single one come true if you only gave voice to them.”

Her lips wobbled a little. “You’re a dear sweet man.” She smiled. “How could I have ever hated you?”

“I gave you plenty of reason to,” he said softly. “It’s probably best we do not relive our pasts. I like it here in the present much better.”

“As do I,” she said. Then she wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips to his. Hayes lost all ability to think. He pulled her closer and kissed her back.

The kiss was sweet and tentative at first as they learned each other. But it quickly turned to something more profound and desperate. Hayes trailed his tongue over the seam of her mouth and she opened to him. He licked his tongue over hers and deepened the kiss. Passion ignited as if a flame had been lit between them. His skin heated and his ardor drove him.

The kiss seemed to go on forever and end all too soon. Hayes lifted his head and met her gaze. Her eyes were alight with the same passion that heated his own blood. He shouldn’t kiss her again. If he continued to kiss her, it might lead to other things. He didn’t want to take her like a brute in the garden, beneath a moonlit sky. She deserved a slow seduction and a soft bed. But Hayes wanted her desperately. So desperately

that he lost all ability to reason.

“We should go back,” he attempted to be a gentleman.

“We could,” she said in a husky tone. “Or you can kiss me again.”

Hayes gave in. He could not fight them both. Especially when they both were of a like mind. He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. There was no softness this time. It was all heat and need. So much passion it erupted between them and consumed every bit of sense from them both.

Neither of them cared, because that kiss was everything.

Seven

Who knew a kiss could be that devastating? Completely all-consuming... Breathing became inconsequential as her desire demanded that the smoldering connection persist, never to end. Kissing him had become everything, and Cora would do anything to ensure his lips continued to devour hers. Each brush of his lips meant another one would quickly follow. His kiss... God, his kiss. If she had known how much it would mean to her—she'd have allowed, no, demanded he indulge them both much sooner. So much sooner...

He lifted his head and stared into her eyes. The desire pooling in those greedy depths scorched her. Cora licked her lips in anticipation. He'd kiss her again. The need was there swirling between them. Demanding they give in and take what they both wanted. He brought his hand up and stroked her hair, then pulled out the pins holding the coiffure in place. When her dark hair flowed over her back, he smiled. "I've always wanted to see you like this." His voice was hoarse with the desire still dictating their actions. "You're so bloody beautiful it aches." He rubbed his chest. "I need you."

Cora nodded. "I need you." That much was undeniable. "Kiss me again." When his lips were on hers, everything made sense. What she wanted, needed—it all blurred together. She needed that mindless feeling. Cora craved the intensity that engulfed her with each press of his lips on hers.

"Yes," he said, then brushed his lips lightly over hers. "I can do that." He kissed her cheek. "But we need to slow down. This is moving quickly."

“But I want this.” She sounded like a petulant child.

“Cora, love,” he said. “I do too.” He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. “But if we keep kissing like this...” He swallowed hard, as if he struggled to say the words. “Then it will lead to something I do not think you’re prepared for. I don’t want you to have regrets.”

“How could I ever lament anything that happened between us?” She cupped his cheek in her hands. “I want you.” Cora had always wanted him. Even when his actions made her want to throttle him. There had been a pull between them from that very first meeting. Not that she had understood it then, but now. It was all clear. They were always meant to be this way with each other. But animosity and distrust had driven a wedge between them so wide, the chasm had appeared irreparable. How wrong she’d been regarding so much. Especially him. She’d been incorrect in her assumptions and the impressions he had purposely made. She didn’t doubt him or his intentions. The fool had thought he didn’t deserve her. Silly man. She’d correct him in that regard. “Don’t push me away again. This is where I belong.” Cora believed that completely.

Slowly, he nodded. “I don’t think I can.” His voice was hoarse with restrained emotion. “I need you too much to ever let you go.”

“Good,” she said. “Then we are in agreement. We belong together and there is no more need to discuss it.” Cora gave him a wanton smile. “So will you kiss me again, my lord?”

“I might,” he said. “If you use my given name. Please.” He stroked her cheek lightly. “No more, my lord or Lord Thornton. For you, I just want to be Hayes, the man who adores you and always has.”

Cora liked the idea of saying his name. He was hers. “Hayes,” she said in a sultry

tone. "Kiss me. Now."

She did not have to wait long. He lowered his head and captured her lips. The kiss did funny things to her insides. She became all wanton need and desire. Hayes pulled her against him and her breasts tingled, her nipples tightening at the brush of heat from his hard body. He pulled away, but only long enough to trail kisses down her neck. Cora couldn't get enough. She wanted so much more, but she didn't know how to put a voice to this craving inside of her. He cupped her breast in his palm and she moaned. "Yes," she said. "more..."

Hayes kissed the top of her breast and then pulled her bodice down. When he pulled one of the tight buds into his mouth and sucked, Cora's moans became breathless. This was something she never could have imagined. Would never have thought to consider... His wicked touch drove her mad. He moved his mouth over to her other breast as he massaged the other in his palm. How had he known exactly what she needed?

"I want to taste you all over," he said. "Will you let me?"

She could deny him nothing. "Please," she said. "Yes."

He lifted her skirt and trailed his fingers over her thighs. The cool night air brushed over her skin, almost like her lover's caress heightening her need. He went to the apex of her thighs and pushed aside her petticoat, then stroked the sensitive bud there. She inhaled sharply at the first touch, then she lost all ability to reason. His talented fingers continued to stroke her need until she was on the precipice of something monumental.

"Come for me, love," he said in a guttural tone. "Let me hear your pleasure."

Hayes pushed one finger inside of her. He stroked it in and out as his thumb rubbed

her tender flesh. The repetitive motion had her writhing against him. One more stroke, then another caress, then her entire body went rigid as it broke apart. Stars flashed behind her eyelids and then nothing but black. There was no Cora, only the pleasure that staggered her into submission. Nothing would ever be the same for her ever again. He had given her something, so life altering it left her boneless and completely at his mercy. She wanted to beg him to do it all over again.

“Hayes,” she said when she could finally form words again. “As much as I loved that...” Her lips twitched. “That isn’t what you wanted, is it?”

“Oh, I wanted it,” he told her gruffly. “But it’s only the start of everything I want with you. I’m not done, love. Not even close...”

“Perfect,” she said coyly. “Because I’m not done with you either.” She kissed him and they stopped talking. There was only feeling, and no room for anything more.

Hayes could not believe how much his luck had turned. He had the woman he loved in his arms. The pleasure of that alone was indescribable. He shouldn’t be doing this with her out in the open. Someone could come upon them at any moment. It would ruin her. Hayes never wanted to cause her any sort of harm. But she had to know that. She also must realize that he intended to marry her. He never would have done any of this if that hadn’t been his goal from the onset.

“If we were not in the middle of this maze, I’d strip this gown off of you,” he told her. “I do not want any clothes between us. I want to be able to press my lips to every inch of your delectable body.”

“We can go inside then,” she said. “My bedchamber or yours. Then we can explore each other all night.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “I want to touch you and see you. Take me out of this maze.” She raked her nails through his scalp. “Bring me pleasure all night long.”

Hayes considered it. He could stay where they were and bring her pleasure, but they had a limited amount of time. If he did as she suggested, he could do everything he was imagining. Including stripping off her gown and touching her naked flesh. All of her would be his and he would give her so much pleasure she'd be mindless from it. That sounded like a slice of heaven to him. He liked that idea so much he didn't think twice. Hayes grabbed her hand and started leading her out of the maze. Her hair was still unbound, and that was a clear sign they had been doing naughty things, but he didn't care. She was his and he'd protect her with his name. Just as soon as he could get a special license, they'd wed. It was either that or they'd make a mad dash for Scotland. Whatever she preferred. He'd make it happen. Hayes would give her whatever her heart desired.

They exited the maze much quicker than they had entered it. Cora laughed as they hastened toward the abbey. Her laughter was endearing and lightened his heart. God, he loved her. How could he have stayed away from her for so long? He wanted to pull her back into his arms and kiss her senseless, but not yet. He could wait a little bit longer. Until they were safely inside a bedchamber where they could enjoy each other without the chance of anyone coming upon them.

They took the stairs to the bedchambers two at a time. Her laughter was bubbling over now. They reached her chamber first. She pushed open the door and yanked him inside. He kicked the door behind him. "Finally," he said. "Alone at last." He pulled her flush against him and crashed his lips over hers in a searing kiss.

Hayes lifted her up and carried her over to the bed. He set her down, then turned her so he could undo the buttons on her gown. With quick, nimble fingers he unfastened each tiny button and then pushed her gown down. He made fast work of her stays until it too, hit the floor. Every piece of clothing was there, except her thin shift that stopped just short of her knees.

Cora untied his cravat and pulled it free, then she slid her hands over his waistcoat.

She was as desperate as he had been. He decided to help her and began shedding his own clothes. When his shirt was off and on the floor, she ran her hands over his chest. “You’re beautiful too,” she said, then pressed her lips to his neck.

He groaned, then lifted her up to set her on the bed. He pushed her shift up and began trailing kisses over her belly all the way down to the apex of her thighs. “I’m going to kiss you everywhere, love,” he warned her. “I need to taste you now.” Hayes lowered his head and pressed a kiss to her core. Cora gasped as he slid his tongue over her sensitive flesh. He pressed a finger, then two inside of her and stroked her as he sucked on the nub at her center. She moaned with each swipe of his tongue until she shook with need. She was close. Soon she’d hit her peak and he’d be able to devour her sweetness. One more lick as he stroked her, then she shattered beneath him. Her moans echoed around the room and she went limp.

Hayes lifted his lips into a wicked smile as he shed the rest of his clothes. He crawled on the bed and settled between her spread thighs. She lifted her hand and cupped the back of his head to draw him in for a kiss. It was slow and wicked. He pressed his shaft at her entrance, but stilled to wait for her. Hayes pulled back and met her gaze. “Are you ready for this, love?” He would not push her if she wanted to stop. As much as he craved to be inside of her, he had to consider her first.

She nodded. “I need you,” she told him. “I feel empty.”

He groaned. “This might not be comfortable. It could hurt.” He’d heard it wasn’t that pleasant for virgins.

“I know,” she said. “But it should get better.” She rubbed a thumb over his lips. “Kiss me as you enter me. When you kiss me, I forget about everything else.”

He’d gladly oblige her that. Hayes adored kissing her. He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers as he slowly entered her tight sheathe. She drew in a sharp breath as

he fully seated himself inside of her. He stayed still and kissed her as she adjusted to him. Then, when she began to move, he let out a relieved sigh. “You feel so good,” he told her. He began to slide in and out of her at an even pace. Hayes had felt nothing so damn pleasurable in his life.

She wrapped her legs around him and he quickened his pace until she clenched around him. Her climax sent him over the edge and he spilled himself deep inside her. Then he went limp from the intense pleasure. She groaned and he realized he had settled all his weight on her. Hayes rolled them to the side and pulled the bedsheets over them. He drew her against him and held her. They needed to rest a little while because he fully intended to make love to her again. If she could stand it, he’d have her several times throughout the night. He wasn’t nearly satisfied. She cuddled against him and Hayes closed his eyes. He was exactly where he needed to be. With her. Always with her...

Page 9

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Eight

Cora curled against Hayes and sighed. She could become accustomed to this rather quickly. She adored him and she should tell him that. When he awakened, she intended to share her love for him. He deserved to hear the words from her.

Hayes writhed against her and began to thrash. He swung his arm and hit the bedpost. Cora reared back, startled at the action. She glanced down at him and his eyes were still closed. Was he having a nightmare?

“No,” he shouted. “Don’t. I will be good. Please stop.” He whimpered, curling his arms protectively around his torso. As if he expected a blow to land there. “Father... Please...”

It was just like that previous night. He was out of his mind and lost in the nightmare. She wasn’t certain what she should do. Cora moved forward and he swung his arm out and connected with her shoulder. She winced as pain shot down her arm. It did not prevent her from completing her task. She had to wake him and shake him loose from the memory that haunted him. Cora leaned over him and placed her hands over both of his cheeks, then she pressed her lips to his. The quick kiss stopped his movements. She lifted her head and stared down at him.

His eyelashes fluttered open and his arms wrapped around her. “Cora?” His voice was husky from sleep.

“It’s me, love,” she said softly. “You were having a bad dream.”

Hayes shot up, bringing her into his lap. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. “Did I hurt you?” He began to run his hands over her body, checking for injuries.

“I’m all right,” she told him. “Darling,” she said. “You didn’t hurt me.” She wouldn’t tell him about the blow he’d landed on her shoulder. She would be all right and it would only distress him. Cora wound her arms around him and hugged him. “I’m worried about you. Are you going to be all right? That dream seemed terrifying.”

He just held on to her as if she’d run away if he let go of her. “I don’t wish to discuss it.” His voice had taken on a stony tone. One that suggested that he’d be stubborn about this. She would have to push him or he’d keep it all inside. If he had any chance of healing, he would have to discuss it.

Cora pulled back and ran her fingers through his mussed hair. “Hayes,” she said in a soothing tone. “You don’t have to say anything.” She brushed a kiss against his cheek. “You said enough in your sleep. I understand.”

He tensed. “I should go.”

That wasn’t going to happen. “Like hell you are,” she said firmly. “I won’t push you to tell me about what happened to you, but you are not going to leave me.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I would never leave you,” he said. “That was my fear speaking.”

“What is it you’re afraid of?” She kept running her fingers through his hair. As if she were coaxing a wild colt to relax in her caress. “Do you believe I’ll think less of you? Because I know that your father abused you?”

Slowly, he met her gaze. She couldn’t quite make out his expression in the dark;

however, she could feel the strain in his stiff movements. Perhaps she had said too much. “I never wanted you to know,” he admitted.

“Does it bother you that I do?” She laid her head on his shoulder. “Because it does not change how I feel about you.” She traced a heart over his chest as she spoke. “I love you. Tell me that you know that. I would never have invited you to my bed if I didn’t love you deeply. I do not care that you were abused as a child. At least not in the way you are thinking.” She kept her head on his shoulder, continuing softly. “I think you’re brave and wonderful. You endured much and are still a kind and caring man. What was done to you does not define who you are. If your father were still alive, I’d want to hurt him for causing you such pain. I hate him on your behalf.” She lifted her head and pressed her forehead to his. “But you, my love, are my everything. I am never letting you go.” She kissed him lightly. “Or have you already forgotten your promise to me?”

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “I made many promises. Some were not even said aloud.” He exhaled sharply. “I love you.” He ran his hand down her back as if he was reassuring himself that she remained in his arms. “I don’t want to let you go. The lord knows I don’t deserve you, but I’m keeping you.”

“Good,” she said. “Then there is nothing left to discuss.”

“Actually, there is one thing,” he corrected her. “We need to discuss our wedding.”

She grinned. “Well,” she began. “I’m not against a wedding. But don’t you think you should ask me first?” She wouldn’t say no, but she had to tease him. It would help lighten the mood. He’d been so anxious when he had awakened. Now he had finally started to relax.

“No,” he said. “You are marrying me.” His voice suggested there would be no arguments on that score. “Or need I remind you that I am never letting you go.

Marriage was implied and you already agreed.”

“I suppose I did,” she said, then laughed. “All right, my lord,” she said in a compliant tone. “I am yours, and as soon as we’re able to, I’ll happily stand before a vicar and recite vows with you.”

“Good,” he said. “Then we will do it next week after I can obtain a special license. I don’t want to wait to have the banns read. I must admit, I don’t know how Foxcroft managed to wait this long to marry Victoria. I would go mad having to wait months to make you my wife.”

“I am all right with that plan.” She smiled. “I want to be your wife as soon as possible.” Her father would probably be happy about this marriage; he had always favored Hayes. “But for now you should go back to your bedchamber. I love having you here, but the servants will talk. In a sennight, we will be wed and never have to be separated again.”

He sighed. “I do not want to leave,” he said sullenly. “But you’re correct. It’s for the best.” Hayes kissed her lightly and reluctantly let her go. Then he slipped out of the bed. Cora followed behind him and slipped on her dressing robe as he put his clothes back on. Well, most of them. He carried his cravat and left his waistcoat open. She followed him to the door. He opened it and stepped out, but before departing, he turned and drew her into his arms, then kissed her. It was a passionate kiss from a lover that had pleased her for a good part of the night.

Hayes really did not want to leave. That was why he’d stolen one last kiss. It would never be enough, but perhaps it would tide him over until he could kiss her again. He unwillingly pulled back from her and stared down at her. The hallway was dark with almost no light to illuminate her lovely face. He wished he had a candle to have a better view of her, but that would have drawn attention to them.

“Isn’t this touching,” a woman sneered.

He spun around to see who was there, but the darkness prevented him from identifying her. Hayes shielded Cora from the woman’s view, but that was probably unnecessary. “Who is there?”

The woman came out of the shadows and stood in the moonlight streaming from a nearby window. He frowned. Hayes knew her. It was his mother’s lady’s maid. What was her name again? “Ruth?” he asked hesitantly. His heart raced inside of his chest. Surely, his mother’s lady’s maid wouldn’t spread gossip about him leaving Cora’s bedchamber...

“Yes, my lord,” she said in a gravelly tone. “It is Ruth.” She said her name as if it was blasphemous. “The lowly lady’s maid that no one notices.”

“Why are you here?” Hayes was so confused. Shouldn’t she be in the servants’ quarters? “Does my mother need you?” That was the only logical reason for her to be up at this hour.

“No,” she said. “Your mother.” Her voice was full of contempt. “The sniveling coward is fast asleep. She had to take some laudanum to rest.”

“Then what are you doing skulking in the hallway?” Cora asked. Her voice trembled a little as she spoke. Was she worried that Ruth would mention that Hayes had been in her bedchamber? They might have to wed even sooner than a sennight. That didn’t bother him. He wanted to marry Cora, but he did not want her to be distressed.

Ruth lifted her hand, and he caught the glint of something shiny in her hand. He blinked several times. Was that... “Why do you have a pistol?” And why was she aiming it at him? Slowly he moved, so that he was completely in front of Cora. If she wanted to shoot him, then he wouldn’t stop her. As long as Cora was protected.

“Stop moving,” she ordered. Hayes stilled. “Or I’ll shoot both of you.”

Hayes had to do something, but he didn’t know what. “What have I ever done to make you want to shoot me at all?” he asked.

“You were born,” she sneered. “That sniveling half-wit managed to give him an heir. Of course, I couldn’t let that stand. I planted those seeds of doubt. Once he didn’t believe you were his... Well, then the true fun began.” Her lips twisted into a frightening smile. “All those times he locked you in the tiny storage room. Your cries and frantic shouting. That was music to my ears. If only he had killed you one of those times he beat you.”

“Why?” his voice was hoarse as he asked the question. “What reason do you have for having him treat me so terribly?” This woman was horrid.

“I loved him,” she said. “He loved me, but he couldn’t marry me. He had to marry your mother. His father had insisted on it. He might have divorced her and married me when his father died. But then she became pregnant and that was impossible. But if the heir died... Then we could finally be together.” She held the gun steady. “And now you think you can be happy with that whore behind you? That’s not going to happen. I thought once I locked the two of you in that room together, you would run away. I gave you enough laudanum to make you completely mindless.” She sneered. “You always did talk about your nightmares and the beatings when you were mindless.”

Had he? Hayes didn’t even know. “Why would you want me to do that?” He had awakened with his head in her lap. She’d been so kind... He froze. Was that why she had changed with him? Cora had never truly treated him with benevolence. No, that wasn’t true. She had tried to in the beginning. It had been him that pushed her away.

“Because she hated you. I wanted to give her a reason to pity you, too.” She sighed.

“But the fool must not have truly hated you. That plan backfired on me.” She lifted the gun. “But I can take her away from you. Then you will never know happiness.” Her laugh was maniacal. “Your... whore must die.”

Hayes didn't stop to think. There was only one thing he could do. He lunged forward and tackled her. The pistol went off and the shot went wide. “Cora,” he shouted. “Go get help.”

He didn't stop to see if she did as he instructed. Hayes subdued the woman and took the pistol from her reach. Then he sat back and waited. The magistrate would have to be contacted. He prayed that he hadn't lost Cora over this debacle. They had much to discuss. Like why she hadn't mentioned his drugged ramblings. He didn't doubt her love; however, he did wonder at the timing of it all.

Hayes sighed. Everything had seemed too perfect, of course, something had to go wrong. It wouldn't be his life otherwise...

Cora sat in the drawing room and waited for Hayes. The magistrate had come to collect the lady's maid, and he'd remained to answer any question the man might have. He had not glanced her way once in the entire time. She had only left momentarily to dress for the day. The rest of the household had started to waken. Wedding preparations were in progress. The next day Victoria would marry her earl. Cora was starting to wonder if she would actually marry hers.

Footsteps echoed down the hall. The door opened and Hayes stepped inside. He was so handsome her heart ached to gaze at him. He didn't turn toward her. Hayes almost seemed to look past her. “We should talk.”

“We should,” she said. “But I want you to listen to me first.”

“That isn't necessary,” he replied stiffly. “I heard all I needed to earlier.”

“Did you?” He turned his gaze toward her. “Because I don’t think you did.”

“What else is there to discuss?” He sighed. “We are still going to marry. I’ll leave tomorrow after the wedding for the special license.”

“I’m glad you are still planning a wedding between us,” she said in a soft tone. “But that is not all we need to discuss.” She crossed the room until she stood in front of him. Cora placed her hand on his chest. “I love you.”

He swallowed hard and glanced away. Hayes didn’t step out of her reach and she was grateful for that. “How can you love me?”

“Darling,” she said in a soothing tone. “I’ve always loved you. You’re the one that kept me at a distance. Nothing has changed. If you don’t love me...”

“Of course I love you,” he nearly shouted the words. “But...”

“There is not, but,” she said sternly. “You just said it. You love me. That’s all that matters.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Now kiss me before I decide that you can’t satisfy my needs and search for another man to marry.”

“Like hell you will.” He growled at her before he pressed his lips to her. He kissed her as if he might never have that pleasure again. The heat between them lit like a blaze, ready to consume them. This was what she had needed. The rest were just unnecessary details. They would see it to the end, and later, she would make him talk about all of this. But they had time. They had the rest of their lives, and she would love him through it all. He was never her enemy. Hayes was the love of her life and this was the beginning of their forever.

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Cora strolled into her father's study. Hayes was at her side. They had their special license and she wanted to marry at Farrington. Hayes hadn't disagreed. As long as she was his wife, that was all that mattered.

Her father glanced up and smiled when his gaze settled on Hayes, then on her. "I was not expecting either of you. But this is a welcome surprise."

"Hello, father," Cora said. "We have news and a request."

"Is that so?" He turned his attention to Hayes. "What is it?"

He cleared his throat. "I have asked Cora to marry me," he said. "She's agreed."

Her father beamed. She knew this would make him happy. How could it not when he adored Hayes as if he were his own son? Once they wed, he would be his son by marriage. That had to please him a great deal. "I approve," her father said. "But I suspect that had little to do with this decision." He folded his hands on this desk. "Since you are not asking for my permission."

Hayes grinned. "If I have to abduct her and elope to Scotland, I will. Though I'd prefer you allow us to marry here at Farrington. It's Cora's wish. She'd like her father at her wedding."

"I would," she agreed. "We have a special license. Can you make arrangements with the vicar?"

"Of course," her father said. "When would you like to wed?"

“Today,” Hayes said. His tone was firm. He had no intention of going one more day where she was not his wife. He’d made that clear on their journey to Farrington.

Her father’s lips twitched. “That’s a bit soon, don’t you think?”

“It’s not soon enough,” Hayes retorted. “I tried to convince her to marry me before we left.” He frowned. “But she insisted we come here. I’m trying to honor her wishes.”

“As you should,” her father said. “If her happiness is your primary goal.”

“It is,” Hayes told him.

Her father studied them both for several moments. Cora did not know what he was hoping to see, but he must have found it. Because after that strained silence, he nodded. “I’ll send for the vicar.”

He stood and left them alone in the study. Hayes pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly. When her father’s footsteps echoed down the hall, Hayes reluctantly let go. As if her father couldn’t tell that he had just been kissing her. Cora’s cheeks were heated. Another moment and she would have been swooning in his arms.

“The vicar should be here shortly,” her father said.

Hayes grinned. “Perfect.”

They sat down on the settee in the study and waited. Cora leaned her head on his shoulder as they waited. She was content just to be by his side. When the vicar arrived and realized he was to perform their wedding, he beamed in pleasure. After they were wed, Hayes kissed her again. This time it was a simple kiss. Later, when they were alone, he planned to kiss her more passionately.

“Welcome to the family,” her father said. “I could not have asked for a better man to be my daughter’s husband.”

“I love her,” Hayes said. “I would not have married any woman but her.”

“Well said, son,” her father said. “Well said.”

Cora grinned. She used to hate how much her father doted on Hayes. Now she was grateful for it. They would always be welcomed there. She was so grateful that her father liked her husband. That would make her life easier. Not that it mattered. Even if her father had hated Hayes, she would have married him. Because she loved him and that was all that she needed. He was her everything.

Prologue

It was a warm spring day. Not that Miss Emma Collins could go outside to enjoy it. She was stuck indoors in a classroom. She would much rather be anywhere else. But no. She had to attend a finishing school. Her mother had insisted upon it. Her debut would not even happen for a couple more years. Why should she bother with this school? What did she have to prove to anyone? She had pleaded with her brother Henry, the Viscount of Harcrest, to allow her to remain at home. It was ultimately his decision. He had told her to mind their mother. In this instance, she knew best. If mother said she needed refinement, then by God she must.

She hated Henry for that and vowed to get even with him. How could he have dismissed her concerns without even listening to what she had to say? How rude. So now she was at a finishing school so far from home, it would take weeks before she saw it. To make matters worse... Almost no one liked her. Not that she had been given the opportunity to make friends. Most of the students hadn't even given her a chance. From the moment she had arrived, they had snubbed her. There were two in particular that were the worst. Miss Harriet Smythe and Lady Arabella Jones. Harriet and Arabella had decided she was beneath their notice, and the rest of the students had followed their example.

Which made Emma even more miserable.

"That will be all girls," Mrs. Ravenwood said. "I would like you to read Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*." She stared at each one of them. "We will discuss it at length at our next meeting."

Emma wrinkled her nose. She did not want to read. Not on such a fine day. But if she didn't and came to class unprepared, Mrs. Ravenwood would flay her. Not literally, of course. But with a look and some well-placed words she would let her displeasure known. Perhaps she could take the book outside. She could find a lovely spot to just relax and read. The Comedy of Errors was a play she had not previously read. It might even be enjoyable.

She gathered her belongings and went to her room. Her roommate was already there and sitting on her bed. Lady Fenella Carrick was a sweet girl. She had fiery red hair and pale green eyes. Freckles dotted her face and she had a shy smile. She was perhaps the only girl in the entire school that Emma liked. But then again, they had much in common. How could she not like her? The two pretentious girls that hated Emma seemed to dislike Fenella just as much.

"How was your literature class?" Fenella asked.

Emma sighed. "The same as always."

"That bad?" Fenella scrunched up her nose. "Were they terrible then?"

They didn't have all classes together. Fenella had deportment class while Emma went to literature. Emma wished that she had deportment with Fenella. Emma was unlucky in that she had many classes with Harriett and Arabella. Deportment was the worst class to have with those two.

"I am going to go outside to read," Emma said. "And forget about them. At least as much as I am able to."

"I wish you luck," Fenella said. "Those two will not allow you to forget anything. They're harpies those two."

“I agree,” Emma said, then sighed. “But I have to try. We are all confined to this school. There is no escaping them.” She had written Henry again, begging him to allow her to come home. He hadn’t replied. The wastrel had probably holed up in his club and was drinking away his life, or maybe he had a mistress now. He was a scoundrel and seemed to have many women wanting to share his bed. Not that he mentioned them. Her brother wasn’t that crude. No, the gossipmongers spread those tales. One day, he might stop being so reckless, but Emma had her doubts. “Are you going to stay here?” she asked Fenella.

“If you don’t mind,” she began. “I’d like to join you.”

“Of course,” Emma said. “I’d appreciate the company.” She scrunched up her nose. “At least with you.”

They strolled outside and through the gardens. They had a favorite spot. There was a large tree near the pond that gave them just enough shade not to bake in the warm sun, but enough light that they could read if they chose to. As they approached the pond, the echo of giggles greeted them. Fenella froze, and Emma stopped next to her. “It’s them, isn’t it?” Emma asked.

“I believe so,” Fenella replied.

“Should we turn back?” she asked.

They wouldn’t have any peace if they went to their usual place. Harriet and Arabella would make them miserable. It seemed as if that was their main purpose in life. To be irritants to those around them... Emma blew out a breath. This was not good. Not good at all.

“They probably won’t be here long,” Fenella suggested. “We could wait them out.”

“Do you think so?” She frowned. “I don’t know.” She hated being so indecisive, but those two girls were that awful.

“Let’s go,” Fenella ordered. “We cannot allow them to scare us away. Otherwise, they will do that every time we cross paths with them.” She glared at the Harriett and Arabella with contempt. “If we see them at a ball, are you going to be able to avoid them?”

“No,” she said. That would be unlikely to happen. “They would not allow it.”

“Then we cannot allow them to push us out of our favorite place. They know we come here. It is the only reason they are here.”

Emma nodded. They headed toward the pond and the tree they liked to sit under. They never made it to the tree. Harriett and Arabella stepped in front of them.

“Where do you think you are going?” Harriett asked.

“Please move,” Fenella said. “Allow us to pass.”

“I don’t think so,” Arabella told her. She jutted her chin up in defiance. “We were here first. You leave.”

“You do not own the pond and its surroundings,” Emma told her. “We are welcome to relax here, the same as you.”

“I don’t think so,” Harriett said. “Go, or I promise you will regret interrupting us.”

Emma glared at them. “No. We plan to relax under that tree, and you two will not prevent that.”

Arabella glared at her. Then she got a gleam in her eye that worried Emma. “All right. Go sit by your tree.”

Emma and Fenella stepped past them. They didn’t get far before they were shoved from behind. They both went tumbling into the pond. Emma flailed and spit out water. Fenella sank, and fast. Emma stared at her friend and dropped everything. She dived under the water to help her. She kept sinking. Her skirts flared out and she struggled to get to the surface. Finally, Emma got a hold of her and she yanked at her skirt, then pulled it free. She thanked God that her skirt was a separate piece and not secured to her shirt. She pulled Fenella to the side of the pond.

“She’s not breathing,” Emma said.

Harriet and Arabella stared. Neither one of them was moving. “Go get help, you bloody fools,” Emma ordered.

Still, they didn’t move. She didn’t stop to make them get help. Instead, she focused on Fenella. She’d seen a servant breathe into another once, after they had nearly drowned. Emma didn’t know if it would help, but she had to try. Emma pinched Fenella’s nose shut and, with trembling lips, breathed into her mouth. After a few more times of that, she sputtered and spit out some water. Fenella’s breathing was ragged, but at least she was alive.

“What happened here?” Miss Ravenwood asked.

“She fell into the pond,” Harriet said. She had this innocent expression on her face, as if they hadn’t pushed them in.

“You two,” Miss Ravenwood said. “Go back to the school. Tell the headmistress we need assistance.”

She turned to Emma. “You saved her life,” Miss Ravenwood said. “Thank you.”

“She’s my friend,” Emma said softly. “I had to try.”

Miss Ravenwood nodded. “Go back to the school and change your gown. I’ll see to her from here.”

Emma did as she was told. But she didn’t want to leave Fenella. Especially as it was the last time, she saw her. After nearly drowning, she’d been sent home. Emma had no friends left there. But she had many enemies. The top two: Miss Harriett Smythe and Lady Arabella Jones, and she vowed one day those two would pay for almost killing Fenella.

One

Emma stared down at all the invitations she'd finished addressing with a sense of satisfaction. It had taken a little convincing, but her brother had finally agreed to allow her to have a house party for Christmastide. Henry didn't know why she wanted to have one; however, Lilah did. At least to a certain degree. She hadn't outlined her revenge plan to Lilah, but she was one of the original wallflowers in the pact. Lilah had been the first one of them to seek her revenge.

It should have bothered her that Lilah aimed to achieve vengeance against her own brother, but Emma had known the truth. So she had agreed to help Lilah. Henry, in his drunken stupor, had fallen prey to an ambitious lady's scheming. While he hadn't been without culpability, it had not been entirely his fault. Lilah and Henry had fallen in love. She'd forgiven him—even before she'd realized that Lady Daisy Allen had been the true one behind her ruination.

But that revenge scheme is in the past. This was her chance. She would ensure that a few choice individuals understood the error of their ways. The invitations were officially coming from Lord and Lady Harcrest. So her quarry would not know that she was the one that had sent them. That was the beauty of her plan. No one would suspect a thing. She grinned with glee at the thought. This Christmastide she would get the greatest gift of all—her vengeance.

“Are they all completed?” Lilah asked. She stood in the doorway to the drawing room.

Emma nodded. “Just sealed the last one.” She held up the stack of invitation. “They

just need to be posted.”

Lilah strolled over to the writing desk and held out her hand. “I will give them to Henry.” She picked up the invitations. She tapped the stack. “Are you certain you wish to do this?”

“I am,” Emma said. “There are some things I’ve never told you. Things I’ve told no one.” Her years at finishing school still haunted her. How could she even begin to explain it to Lilah. Sometimes she did not understand it herself. “I need this.”

Lilah nodded. She tucked a loose strand of her dark hair behind her ear. “I understand. You know I do.” She sighed. “But sometimes revenge doesn’t turn out how we wish it to.”

Emma grinned. “And sometimes it gives you more happiness than you could ever have imagined.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Like finding the love of your life and finally living the life you always dreamed of.”

“There is that,” Lilah agreed. “But I am certain that isn’t the norm.”

“It’s worked out all right for Cora and Victoria as well,” Emma said. “I think revenge just might be the answer to finding one’s true love.”

Lila laughed. “That’s ridiculous.” She sighed. “Besides Victoria didn’t actually try for anything resembling revenge.”

“That is true,” Emma conceded. “Victoria just set out to seduce a man and fell in love.”

“And Cora realized that revenge was the last thing she needed,” Lilah said. “Now she’s gloriously happy and loves Lord Thornton. Maybe even as much as I love

Henry.”

“You all are so happy it’s a little disgusting to be around you at times.” She grimaced. “This revenge business wasn’t supposed to lead to a bunch of happy sods.”

Lilah laughed. “You know you like seeing us all settled. Before you know it, you’ll find love too.”

“Now that is unlikely.” Emma stood and went over to a window. She glanced outside and stared at the stark landscape. The colder months were not her fondest. She didn’t even like snow much. Some did, but not her. It was messy and wet and made things just...inconvenient. She’d much rather a warm summer day and the colors of life to greet her—roses in full bloom, trees flush with green leaves, and a pond full of lily pads. The frozen land of winter she could do without. “I don’t think I am meant to love anyone.” She wasn’t worthy of it. Her heart was empty. Nothing could fill it. She cared about her brother and even had a fondness for the other wallflowers. But loving a man enough to say vows? No. That was not happening. Ever.

“You never know,” Lilah told her. “Sometimes you have to let fate help you along the way. I would never have given your brother a chance otherwise.”

“I don’t believe fate had any say in why you fell for Henry,” Emma said, then chuckled. “He can be persistent. He wore you down until you have him no resistance. Then love just snapped into place like it was always there.”

“Perhaps,” Lilah said. “There is some truth there. He did seem to follow me around until I couldn’t see any other man but him.”

The grin on Lilah’s face was so fully of that unyielding love it made Emma ache. She didn’t want love. That seemed too messy, but it still made her feel more than she wanted to. She didn’t want to yearn. Emma wanted her revenge and then she could

move on with her life. Love would only get in her way, and she would not allow such a fickle emotion to destroy what she had planned.

“That sounds like Henry.” Emma forced a smile onto her face that she didn’t feel. “He’s nothing if not persistent. I am happy for you.” And she was. Henry might have been a rogue, but he’d reformed when he fell for Lilah. He had gained Emma’s respect with that devotion to Lilah. She turned away from the window and met Lilah’s gaze. “But I need you to understand. I need this party. My revenge must happen. It’s the only way I’ll ever truly have peace.” There were two ladies specifically that she would ensure felt as much humiliation and pain as she had. They had made her life hell, and it was her turn to give that back twofold.

“Your party will happen,” Lilah said. “I will take these invitations to Henry now.”

“Good,” Emma said. “I cannot wait for our guests to arrive.”

Lilah left the drawing room. Emma went back to the window to contemplate what she had planned. Soon, her prey would be in her home. Then the fun would begin.

Blake Spencer, the Marquess of Ardmore, stared at the invitation on his desk. He’d received it two days ago, and he still didn’t know if he wanted to attend. His friend, the Viscount of Harcrest, would be the host. This was a monumental occasion. Harcrest never had parties or balls, and now he was going to allow guests in his home during Christmas. He should go for that reason alone. To check on his friend and determine if he’d actually lost his mind. Had love and marriage changed the viscount that much?

A knock echoed through the room. “Pardon me, my lord,” his butler, Draven, said. “But you have a guest. Should I see him in here?”

Blake glanced up and said, “Who is it?”

“I am certain I am welcome,” another man said as he brushed past the butler.

“Certainly,” Blake said, then grinned. “It’s all right, Draven. His Grace is always welcome here.” The Duke of Castlebury stood next to the butler with a wide grin on his face. His black hair was a little disheveled. There was a rough wind outdoors. Which was why he hadn’t bothered to leave home. Blake couldn’t abide the cold.

“Would you like refreshments, my lord?” Draven asked.

“Not at this time,” Blake told him. “If that changes, I will let a servant know.”

“Very well,” my lord. Draven bowed and then left his study.

Castlebury strolled in and took a seat by his desk. “I understand why you didn’t order refreshments,” he said in a droll tone. “But please tell me that doesn’t extend to brandy. I could use a snifter or two. It’s bloody cold outside.”

Blake’s lips twitched as he fought a smile. “I must ask why you braved the cold to come here. It must be important.”

“I suppose it is,” Castlebury said. “In a manner of speaking.” He leaned forward and glanced at the invitation on Blake’s desk. “I see you got one too.” He gestured toward it. “Do you think he’s lost his bloody mind?”

Blake shrugged. “Possibly.” He went over to the bar and poured two snifters of brandy, then handed one to the duke. “But it’s more likely he is willing to do anything to make his new wife happy. He’s so in love it’s nauseating to witness.”

“Thornton is too,” the duke said, then shuddered. “Apparently, he’s been in love with that chit for years. I never knew.”

“No one did.” He drew in a breath. “Three of our friends are happily married. You don’t think it’s something that we could, you know, catch. Like a disease. I never would have thought Harcrest of all gentlemen would be susceptible to love and wed, but he was the first to fall.”

“It was a surprise when he asked to use the chapel at Ardmore Abbey for an impromptu wedding.” Blake took a sip of his brandy. “But as he is a friend, I agreed. I guess there is something about those Stephen’s sisters. Two of our friend fell madly for them.”

“Cora is my cousin by marriage now,” Castlebury said. “Now that its come to light that Thornton’s mother is my aunt. Though we shouldn’t publicly acknowledge that.”

“But you will and have,” Blake said. “Now the gossipmongers have truth to spread instead of speculation that Thornton is your bastard half brother. You two do look remarkably similar.”

“As we are indeed family, that isn’t such a surprise now, is it?” The duke sipped his brandy. “But that’s not why I am here. Discussing my odd family isn’t newsworthy.”

“Why are you here,” Blake said. “I must admit, I am surprised to see you in my townhouse. I didn’t even realize you were in London.”

“I’ve been here for a fortnight. I prefer my country estate. Fewer women vying to be my duchess there.” He set his glass down. “I had intended to return there in a few days, but now I feel obliged to attend a house party.”

“You’re going?” Blake raised a brow. “I did not think you would accept the invitation.”

“I feel obliged to,” he said in a solemn tone. “As Thornton will be there and I’d like

to spend Christmas with him. Cora will want to be with her sister, and it is at Lady Harcrest's house where this party is to take place. Everything is all tangled up and I don't like it."

"I don't either, my friend," Blake said honestly. "But what are we to do?"

"We are going to attend this party," Castlebury met his gaze. "And we are going to have each other's back. Neither one of us is going to find ourselves attached to a lady at the end of it. I will not be finding a wife at this house party."

Blake stared at him, shocked. "You don't actually believe that is a possibility, do you?"

"We have been at two house parties this year," Castlebury said. "And at them three of our friends fell in love. It could happen." He sighed. "And I do not wish it to. So we will go and we will stay by each other's side. At the end, we will return home as unattached as we are now."

"All right," Blake agreed. "We will do that. I don't wish to have a wife either."

"Good," Castlebury said. He drained his brandy, then stood. "I'll make the arrangements and we can travel together. Maybe we can find a reason to depart early too. I don't want to remain at Harcrest Manor longer than we need to be. We can find some sort of convenient excuse to take our leave."

"I will have my valet prepare my trunks. When will we leave?"

"Tomorrow morning," the duke said. "If that is all right with you." He stood and set his empty snifter on a nearby table.

"It is," Blake said. "I'll be ready." Not that he wanted to go, but at least they had a

plan.

The duke nodded and left the room. Blake glanced at the invitation again. What was it about house parties, anyway? Why had his friends fallen in love at the last two? He must find discover why, so he didn't fall prey to that befuddling emotion. He would never be so weak as to need a woman or go mad without her. Not him. Not ever.

Prologue

Elias Stevens, the Marquess of Savorton, leaned in his chair and then 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 carefully arranging them with the ones he still held.

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, and there was a gleam in her light gray eyes. She was studying her own cards. The two of them 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 a close game and either of them might be declared the victor.

"It's your turn, love," Eli reminded her and tapped a finger impatiently on the table.

"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." He refused to admit defeat until he absolutely had to.

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 cards 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 confess, "I concede, you won." He met her gaze. "I'm not saying you are a better player though."

"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 when the earl ceased breathing. When the Earl of Dryden dropped dead suddenly Eli had rejoiced, and secretly so had Elena.

"Do you think you'll ever remarry?" he asked in a noncommittal tone.

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. Not that, to his knowledge, she did... 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 the estate thrived. His father had become frail in his old age and left running all the estates to Eli, but still offered input when he felt it was required. Eli 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, but she had a past she seemed determined to forget. One he wanted to remind her about in a subtle way. “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 smooth 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 join him in that activity.

“Darling,” she began as she studied him. “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 do. What they actually 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.”

“I’ll have you approve of my future wife.” He smiled. “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.