



# How to Bewitch a Duke (Lady Be Seductive #3)

**Author:** *Dawn Brower*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Lady Isla Thompson has always lived in the shadow of family secrets and unspoken promises. Bound by a duty to protect her heart after a devastating heartbreak, she has kept her emotions carefully guarded—until Lucian Oliver, the Duke of Thornridge, reenters her life. Once the love of her life, Lucian broke her heart years ago, leaving her to pick up the pieces. Now, he's back, more determined than ever to win her heart once again.

Lucian, tormented by past choices and driven by a dangerous secret, never expected to fall in love with Isla. When duty and love collided, he pushed her away, fearing the danger his life posed to hers. But as his past resurfaces, he realizes that he cannot live without the woman he has always loved. With his heart on the line, Lucian vows to do whatever it takes to prove that the love they once shared is worth fighting for.

Isla and Lucian must navigate the treacherous waters of their past to find a future together. Will Isla trust him again, or will their second chance be too late to save?

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

## Page 1

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The night air was soft and still, cloaking the countryside in a hush that seemed to hold its breath. A faint breeze stirred the leaves of the great oaks that lined the path leading from the Earl of Harwood's estate, their silvery undersides flickering beneath the light of a waning moon. Shadows danced across the stone terrace and crept along the garden walls, making everything feel both secret and sacred.

Lady Isla Thompson paused in the corridor just beyond the servants' stairs, her heart hammering with the twin thrills of anticipation and trepidation. Her slippers made no sound against the polished wood, and the pale muslin of her gown whispered around her ankles as she eased the side door open. It groaned softly on its hinges, and she winced, glancing behind her to be sure no one stirred from slumber.

The hall remained quiet.

Drawing her cloak tighter around her shoulders, she slipped out into the warm summer night, her breath catching in her throat as she crossed into the garden. A familiar giddiness bloomed in her chest. Lucian would be waiting for her.

For weeks now they had met in secret beneath the boughs of the old willow near the edge of the estate, just beyond the line of wild hedges that marked the boundary between Harwood land and Thornridge's. There, away from the eyes of society and the expectations of their stations, she had come to know a different side of the Duke of Thornridge—one no one else had ever seen. A man who smiled for her alone, whose touch made her forget propriety, whose whispered words sent shivers across her skin.

Tonight, her heart felt light with hope. He had seemed quieter than usual at their last

meeting, his gaze troubled, but when she had pressed him, he had only shaken his head and kissed her. She knew he loved her. She felt it in his every word, in the reverent way he looked at her—as if she were the only thing in the world that mattered. And tonight, she dared to believe he might say the words she had dreamed of hearing. Her cheeks warmed at the thought, and she quickened her pace, stepping through the narrow gap in the hedgerow and down the winding path that led toward the copes where he waited.

There he stood—Lucian Oliver, the Duke of Thornridge—silhouetted against the trees, tall and proud, his shoulders straight beneath his dark coat, the moonlight casting a silver sheen over his raven-black hair. As she approached, he turned, and the moment his eyes found hers, all hesitation fled her heart. She ran the last few steps, and he caught her easily, pulling her into his arms. The scent of him—clean linen, spice, and something uniquely him—wrapped around her like a familiar comfort. He held her close, as if he had been waiting an eternity.

He held her briefly, almost as if he would never hold her again. He sighed and pushed her out of his arms. She glanced up at him and frowned. Lucian never had done that before. Their time together was always short, and he usually held her for as long as possible. His eyes shuttered for the briefest moment—just a flicker—but enough to make her still with concern.

Tonight, everything would change. She could feel it down to her very soul. She expected he would ask for her hand. Had expected it for a while now. She still did not understand why he had not asked her. He had told her he loved her. Surely that meant he wanted them to be together forever...

“Lucian...” He turned away from her then. Almost as if he could not bear to look at her one moment longer. Her heart began to beat inside her chest. This...this was not right. Something was wrong. “Lucian,” she said his name again. Hoping it would make him look at her again. She did not like how he was acting. Isla swallowed a

lump in her throat. “Tell me what is wrong.”

“We cannot meet like this any longer.” His voice was hoarse but firm. He had said what he had needed to. She knew what that tone meant. He would not speak of it further, but she had to push. She had to know what he was thinking. None of it made sense. The way he had held her but ultimately pushed her away, and now he would not even meet her gaze.

She stood beneath that willow tree, the place where she had met him so many times before, where whispered words and stolen kisses had made her believe in forever. But tonight—tonight was different. There had been no kisses or warm words. No longing or deep-seated need for him to hold her. “You do not mean that,” she said in a hushed tone. Isla could not have heard him correctly. This was a nightmare. It was the only explanation.

“I do mean it.” He finally lifted his gaze to meet hers. “This will be the last time I meet you here.” Lucian was staring at her with a look she could not comprehend, his chiseled features drawn, his usual steady gaze shadowed with something unreadable.

“You are not saying what I think you are saying,” Isla whispered, her voice barely carrying over the soft rustle of the wind. “This is not real.” She almost lifted her hand to slap her face, to make herself wake up from the nightmare she was living through.

Lucian clenched his jaw, every muscle in his body taut as though he were bracing for a blow. “We cannot be together. Not now. Not ever.” His golden eyes turned cold as he stared at her. “I will never marry you.”

The words struck her with a force she had not anticipated. It was as if the ground beneath her had been yanked away, leaving her weightless, untethered—falling into nothingness. Her breath came in a sharp, shallow gasp. “You—” She shook her head, willing herself to comprehend what was happening. “You do not mean that.” Her

voice shook as she spoke. Tears threatened to spill but somehow, by a miracle no less, she held them at bay.

His fingers curled into fists at his sides. He looked away, as if he could not bear to meet her eyes. “I do.” He had been doing that from the moment she had arrived. Did the sight of her disgust him now? What had she done to garner this reaction from him?

A harsh, disbelieving laugh broke from her lips. “You love me.” The words trembled as they left her, raw and aching. “I know you do. You have told me as much, and I have felt it in your every touch, your every kiss—” She faltered, pressing a hand to her stomach as nausea churned within her. “You made me believe we had a future, Lucian.” He had made her believe that they had a love that could withstand anything. That they had a future together. What a lie...

His breath was unsteady. His control—usually so infallible, so measured—was slipping a tiny bit, but somehow, he held firm. “There can be no future for us.”

A tremor ran through her limbs. “Why?” Silence. Nothing but uncomfortable silence. She wanted, no needed him to explain this to her. “Why, Lucian?” she demanded, her voice rising, splintering under the weight of her pain. “What have I done to make you treat me this way?” Her throat tightened. “Tell me what is wrong with me now when you told me you loved me a mere day ago. What has changed in such a short time?”

His expression hardened, his mask slipping back into place. “I cannot marry a woman that has ties to witchcraft. Society expects more from a marriage to a duke.”

“Damn society!” she cried, stepping toward him, desperate now, unwilling to believe that the man she loved would allow something so foolish to stand between them. “You do not care for their whispers. You never have. This is not about them.” Isla stepped closer, clenching her fists at her side. The urge to hit him filled her, but she

restrained herself. She had to control her temper. “I do not believe you. This has nothing to do with my mother’s family. Tell me the truth, Lucian.

He did not respond.

Isla’s breath hitched. “What truly made you change your mind,” she asked. He still would not meet her gaze. Then a realization dawned on her, like a blade slicing through her chest. “You never intended to marry me, did you?”

The stricken look in his eyes lasted but a moment before he shuttered it away. “I should not have let it go this far.” It was all but an admission. The world blurred. He had not denied it, but the truth was stark—undeniable. He had used her, and now he was tossing her aside like well-used rubbish.

A hollow, keening sound built in her throat, but she would not let it escape. She would not let him see how thoroughly he had destroyed her. She took a step back, then another, wrapping her arms around herself as though she could hold together the shards of her breaking heart. “I was a fool.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “I gave you everything, and you...” A sob choked her, and she turned, unable to bear looking at him any longer. “I hate you,” she whispered, the words tasting like poison on her tongue. It wasn’t the truth. She loved him still. It was perhaps more accurate to say she hated herself for what she had allowed to happen. Her heart was broken. She glanced up at him then, and Lucian flinched as though struck, his jaw locking tight.

Isla did not wait to see if he would say more. She turned on her heel and fled, the tears she had held at bay spilling freely as she ran from him—ran from the future she had believed in, from the man who had promised her the world only to shatter it in his hands.

Lucian Oliver, Duke of Thornridge, stood rooted beneath the willow tree, the shadows of the night wrapping around him like a shroud as he watched her run. Her

figure—so familiar, so beloved—disappeared into the moonlit path, her pale cloak fluttering behind her like the wings of a wounded bird. She did not look back. Of course she didn't. Not after what he had done. Not after the cruel, final words he had forced past his lips. Words designed to wound, to sever what had bloomed so beautifully between them.

And they had. God forgive him, they had done their job far too well.

Lucian pressed a hand to his chest, as though he might physically still the ache beneath. The pain was sharp, visceral. It burned through him with every breath, as though his very soul had been torn in two the moment she turned from him.

Isla. His Isla. She had given him her heart, her trust, her body—and he had shattered it all with a single, brutal lie.

“ We cannot be together, ” he had told her. “ Not now. Not ever. I will never marry you .” He closed his eyes as his own words haunted him. A muscle ticked in his jaw as he turned away from the path, his hands clenched at his sides. The words had nearly choked him. Every part of him had screamed to take her into his arms, to fall to his knees and beg her forgiveness, to vow before heaven and earth that he would never let her go. His heart ached and he longed to go after her. To tell her that he had lied. That he still loved her, would always love her... But he could not do that. He had destroyed the only good thing in his life for a reason. He'd had to keep her safe. He would much rather she go on without him and live a long and happy life, then to ever put that very life at risk. She meant too much to him.

He had to let her go. Because the danger was far too real. He could not tell her—not yet. Not while shadows still followed his every step, while the man who had sworn vengeance upon him remained unaccounted for. Isla's family had already endured more than their share of whispered scandal. To draw her into his personal war would not only tarnish her name—it could endanger her life. And that... he would never

allow.

Lucian stared up at the moonlit sky as sorrow filled his soul. He had done the only thing he could. The only thing that might keep her safe. But in doing so, he had broken the one thing he held most dear. “I love you,” he whispered into the darkness, the confession torn from him like a secret never meant to be heard. But the night was silent. And she was gone.

He sank onto the ground beneath that willow tree and allowed his grief to overtake him. She was gone. He might never see her again. He let out a ragged and uneven breath. His mind warred between the instinct to chase after her and the grim knowledge that he could not. Because if he claimed her—married her, she would not be safe. She would be a target.

And that, above all else, he could not allow. Better that she hate him. Better that she believe him cruel, unfeeling—anything but the truth. Because the truth was far more dangerous than she could ever know.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:52 pm*

One

A few years later...

Light spilled from the tall windows, golden and warm, casting a glow that danced across the manicured lawn and shimmered upon the guests descending from their carriages. Laughter, music, and the hum of conversation drifted on the summer air. The masquerade had begun.

Lady Isla Thompson adjusted the delicate mask secured over her eyes, her hands trembling ever so slightly. She drew in a breath, willing her heart to still its erratic rhythm. Her golden yellow gown, painstakingly altered by her maid, clung to her slender frame as though it had been made for her and her alone, but it hadn't. It had been one of her mother's old gowns that Maeve had found in one of the many trunks of their mother's belongings. The golden silk whispered around her legs as she stepped toward the manor, shimmering with each movement like a sunbeam made flesh.

Maeve had claimed that Isla looked radiant. But she didn't feel as if she did. Isla felt like crumbling glass about to shatter at any given moment. She did not want to be at this masquerade. She did not want to be at Thornridge at all. He lived there. The duke that had stolen and then broken her heart all in one whirlwind summer. She stared up at the grand estate and her stomach churned in one large anxiety bubble ready to spew forth. She had to gain control of her rampant emotions before she said or did something embarrassing.

Maeve stepped beside her, poised and luminous in peach silk, her own mask firmly in

place. “Are you certain you wish to do this?” Maeve murmured, her gaze scanning the glittering sea of guests. “We could return home, Isla. No one would fault us.”

Isla hesitated. She wanted to say, that yes, she did want to leave. But then she recalled why she had agreed to attend the masquerade. She was not there for herself. She never would have attended a ball at Thornridge for herself alone. She was there for Maeve. She had an interest in Viscount Pemberton, and she so wished for her sister to find her own happiness. So for her, she would see this through, and pray she had little or no interactions with the duke.

The facade of Thornridge Hall loomed before her like a memory she could not erase—its stone walls gilded in moonlight, every window aglow, its very air steeped in recollections she would rather forget. This was his home. His ball. And somewhere behind those doors, Lucian Oliver, the Duke of Thornridge, moved among his guests, unaware—or perhaps fully aware—that she had returned. She shoved all those memories and thoughts aside. They did not matter. Maeve mattered. “I do wish to attend,” Isla replied softly, her voice barely audible over the lilt of the string quartet. “I will not let the past dictate my every step.”

Maeve touched her hand briefly, offering silent support, before leading the way up the steps. Inside, the ballroom was a riot of elegance and artifice. Gilded chandeliers bathed the room in warm light. Silk draperies and garlands of summer blooms lined the walls, and a thousand flickering candles made the room glow like starlight. Guests moved through the room hiding their behind jeweled masks and their laughter was light and joyous. The music echoed in time with the quadrille currently being performed on the dance floor.

Isla remained near the edges, skimming the perimeter, smiling when she must, speaking little. She had survived heartbreak. She had rebuilt the pieces of herself, one careful, solitary moment at a time. And yet, all it took was a single step into this place—the place where everything had begun and everything had ended—to feel the

fracture lines deepening once more. He had not broken her heart in this room, but under the willow tree that his estate bordered with her father's. She could almost see him there, that night, several years earlier. He had been so grave. The man she had fallen in love with was absence, and in his place was an aloof duke that looked down on her. She still did not fully grasp what had happened. What had changed his love for her into something she did not recognize. She could not allow herself to believe he never truly loved her. That it all had been a lie...

And then, as though summoned by thought alone, she felt him. The air shifted. Her skin prickled and she slowly turned to meet his gaze. Those golden eyes of his were like a beacon she had difficulty ignoring. Though she desperately wished she could...

He stood across the ballroom, half-shrouded in shadow, a black mask obscuring the upper half of his face—but nothing could conceal that commanding frame, the breadth of his shoulders, the piercing awareness his gaze settled over her. He was no longer the reckless, beautiful young man she had fallen in love with. He was an imperious duke now—older, more carved by responsibility, but still every inch him .

As their gazes held the crowd seemed to disappear and for one suspended heartbeat, the years fell away. Her breath caught in her throat, and she almost choked on the emotion brewing inside of her. She wanted to go to him and beg him to take her into his arms. To love her like he used to. But it was far too late for such an action. He had ruined any chance they had.

He did what she refused to. Lucian crossed the room and stopped when he reached her. She did not look up at him even though she wanted to. She wanted much from him. Isla would not give into those deep-seated desires. Those desires would lead to her ruination, and she already had a tattered reputation.

His voice was husky and sent shivers down her spine as he spoke, "You came." That low timbre curled around her like a forbidden touch. She refused to turn, refused to

grant him the power to see what stirred behind her mask. Those two words were already too much, and she could not let him see how he affected her.

“I was invited,” she replied, her voice level. Isla did her best to keep all emotion out of her tone. She did not want him to know how much she still loved him, and that the hurt he had delivered still held sway over her heart. “It would have been rude to decline.”

“You never used to care for rules.” She almost snorted at the reminder. She had thrown her reputation aside to meet with him, to allow him the liberties he had willingly taken.

“I’ve learned the value of them.” The bitterness was there in her tone as she spoke. Isla could not keep that at bay. Silence stretched between them. Her heart pounded as she struggled to breathe evenly.

“You look...” he began, but the words faltered. He cleared his throat. “You look as you always did. As if you’ve stepped from a dream I can never quite hold.”

She nearly faltered then. Nearly gave in to the tears pressing behind her eyes. “You should not say such things, Your Grace,” she said, her voice brittle. “Not when you’ve made it so very clear how little I mean to you.”

His breath caught. “Isla...”

“No.” She turned, finally facing him. She was momentarily stunned by his dark male beauty—the golden eyes and black hair that scraped the edge of his neck. She shook herself free from that and met his gaze. Her mask hid much, but her voice betrayed everything. “Do not pretend. Do not speak as if the past can be rewritten. You broke me. And I cannot afford to break again.”

He reached for her hand, but she drew it back before he could touch her. “Don’t,” she warned him. “Less you forget how little I truly mean to you. Now is not the time to take liberties that you do not have permission to take.”

“I had my reasons,” he said hoarsely. “Reasons I could not tell you then.”

“And what of now?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “Does it even matter what those reasons were? You made a decision. Now you must live with that decision. Much the same way I do.” Isla lifted her chin defiantly. “I am not yours any longer.” If she ever had been... No that wasn’t true. Her heart still did belong to him. The truth was that he was never truly hers. That was where her bitterness stemmed from.

He was silent. She couldn’t help herself. She glanced up and stared into those golden eyes. Some sort of emotion flicked there. It almost gave her hope. That fleeting elusive emotion that she should ignore. There was no hope, and she should not let herself foolishly believe it. She stepped back, her voice shaking. “You still won’t say, will you?” It should not matter why he had broken her heart, but she wanted to understand. Wanted to know that it had not all been for nothing. Perhaps then she could move forward with her life instead of living a half-life.

“I would give everything to undo what I did,” he said, and in that moment, she saw the truth in his eyes—the agony, the longing, the emotions that had never truly died. Isla wanted to believe that was love she saw reflected back at her, but she had been wrong before. She turned away before he could say more. Before she could let herself believe.

She would forget this moment. She had to.

But later, as the music swelled and laughter echoed down the candlelit halls, Isla stood alone by a window leading out to the balcony and pressed a hand to her

chest—a small, fierce flicker of hope refused to be extinguished, and then she had an idea. Perhaps it would help if she revisited the place where she had lost everything. The willow tree...she'd go there. Remind herself why she could not give into the dangerous emotion. Because there was no hope to be had.

She walked to the doors and stepped out onto the balcony, the summer night cloaking her in warm, fragrant air. The distant scent of flowers mingled with the sharper tang of the clipped hedges below, and for a moment, Isla closed her eyes and let the wind caress her face, as though it might carry away the ache that had settled within her chest. But it didn't. It never did.

The laughter and music faded behind her as she leaned her hands upon the stone balustrade. Beyond the gardens, the path curved—just as it always had—toward the line of trees that led to the pond, where moonlight touched the earth like spun silver—and to the willow tree.

There, just beyond her view, waited memories she had tried for years to bury. The place where he had turned from her. Where he had uttered words, she could never forget, nor forgive. The echo of them still lived within her, like a scar that refused to fade.

And yet... she had come back.

Perhaps it was foolish. Perhaps it would only wound her further. But Isla had lived in shadow long enough. If she was ever to be free of the past, she needed to confront it. To walk that path again and prove to herself that it no longer held power over her. She turned toward her destination, her jaw set, her pulse steady now. She would go to the willow tree. Not to find closure—there could be no such thing for a love that had once burned so bright—but to remind herself that she had survived its ending.

And if he followed... Well—let him. Let him see that the girl he had broken was no

longer broken at all. Let him see the woman she had become despite him. And if her heart still beat for him, if it still held some desperate, flickering hope that love might yet be rekindled... She would bury it beneath the roots of that ancient tree. Just as she had once buried her innocence. Because she would find a way to let go of this pain and let her love go. It was past time that she did.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:52 pm*

Two

The morning light crept gently through the tall windows of Harwood Hall, casting a pale shimmer over the marble floors and catching on the edges of silk draperies still drawn closed against the warmth of the sun. Lady Isla Thompson sat at the breakfast table, her tea untouched, her thoughts tangled in a haze of emotions she had yet to fully name.

The events of the masquerade haunted her. Thoughts of him would not leave her mind—Lucian. Even now, the mere thought of his name sent a ripple through her. His voice, his eyes, the quiet agony he had revealed—unspoken truths wrapped in the cloak of longing. He had looked at her as though she were the only woman in the world. And perhaps, for one impossible moment, she had wanted to believe it again. But belief was dangerous. Hope was perilous. And Isla had nearly drowned in both once before. Still, she could not forget. A part of her did not want to. For if he longed for her then all her pain had not been for naught. There had been something real between them.

She lifted her cup but paused as she noticed her sister, seated across the table, stirring her tea absently. Maeve had barely spoken a word all morning. Her cheeks were pale beneath the dark sweep of her hair, and her eyes, though dry, were too still. Far too guarded for Maeve, who usually carried her emotions close to the surface. It concerned her. Something must have happened between her and her viscount at the masquerade. She had been caught in her own troubled misery to notice before now.

Isla set her cup down quietly. “You are unusually quiet.”



Maeve blinked, then forced a faint smile. She tucked a stray dark curl behind her ear. “Am I? I suppose I am simply tired.” Her voice was casual, too carefully arranged.

“Mm,” Isla murmured, unconvinced. She did not believe for one moment it was that simple. Maeve appeared too distraught for it to be mere fatigue from the night before. “The ball proved to be too exhausting for you then?”

Maeve’s hand stilled on the porcelain and slowly met her gaze. “It was tiresome.”

“Perhaps you should rest then,” Isla said gently. “You are not yourself, dearest sister. I would hate for you to fall ill from last night’s excursions.” Isla did not think that was what was happening to her sister. She was sick, but not from any sort of illness. Her sister was heartsick and that was something Isla knew far more of than she would ever have liked. But that did not mean she needed to goad Maeve into revealing her pain. She would let her be, at least for an hour or so. Then perhaps later she would visit with her and see if she were willing to discuss the night’s events.

Maeve gave a soft, bitter laugh. “As if resting would ease everything.”

There it was. A fracture in her sister’s silence. Still, she did not believe Maeve was ready to discuss it all. Isla rose quietly and came to her sister’s side, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Sometimes it helps far more than you believe it will?”

Maeve shook her head, biting her lip as she looked away. “I don’t know...”

“You do not need to,” Isla began. “But at least consider it.” She paused. “If you do not think you can rest perhaps you should visit your studio?”

Maeve hesitated, then slowly nodded. “Painting has always helped ease whatever bothered me.”

“Then you should go there. The morning light is still good.” She smiled. “I will stop by later and see how you are doing.” There she could perhaps get Maeve to discuss what was bothering her. But painting would ease some of her pain. It was her place to go to relax.

Maeve left the breakfast room leaving Isla alone in the room. She had long forgotten her tea. Not that she had truly wanted it. She had been in her own misery before she had noticed her sister’s pain. She sighed and pushed her cup to the side. She was not like her sisters. Isla did not have something that had always kept her from wallowing her anguish. Athena had her horse and those wild gallops through the fields and Maeve had her painting. She had nothing. She had thought she had the duke, but that had fallen apart before it truly had a chance to begin.

And now she saw something in his gaze that suggested he was as miserable as she had been all these years. What could have changed for him to reveal that to her now? What did he hope to gain by allowing her to witness such naked torment? A part of her, the part that still loved and adored him, wanted to go to him and ask him these questions. But what would that solve?

She left her tea untouched on the table and went to the library. She could find a book to occupy herself with. At least she hoped she would be able to. Slowly she made herself to the one room that was her sanctuary. She supposed she did have this. She did find some comfort in books. It occurred to her then that when her turn came for her mother’s journal, she would have it to read. But it was still Maeve’s, and she did not know for certain when it would be hers. She had agreed to go last after all.

She opened the door to the library and strolled inside. The library greeted her with its familiar hush, the scent of old parchment and leather-bound volumes washing over her like balm. It was dimly lit, the heavy draperies still drawn against the sun, and the hearth sat cold and bare, but to Isla, it felt like solace.

She moved with purpose through the shelves, her fingers grazing over gilded titles as she tried to lose herself in the act of selection. Philosophy, poetry, natural history—none of them appealed. She stopped before the shelves near the window, her gaze falling upon a small volume of Byron’s poetry and reached for it without quite knowing why. Her fingers lingered on the worn spine of one of her favorite tomes—*The Tempest*. It has all the items a good book should have: drama, romance, forgiveness, power, revenge, betrayal... She pulled the tome from the shelf and considered lounging on one of the settees to read, but then she after she considered it she decided against it. She would check on Maeve first. She set the book on a nearby table to be retrieved after she visited Maeve in her studio. She did not want to risk any of Maeve’s paints tainting the book.

She made her way to Maeve’s studio. She knocked and then made her way inside. The door creaked open, and Isla stepped inside, her gaze sweeping over her sister, then she glanced at the painting, then back at Maeve. She shut the door behind her with quiet finality. “You have been locked in here for a while now.” Her voice was soft, but there was no mistaking the note of concern in it. “Are you well?”

Maeve forced a smile, though she suspected it did not reach her eyes. “I am well enough.” She slid her gaze to the painting that had caught Isla’s eyes when she first walked in. What was it about this painting that held her sister’s interest. It had to somehow relate back to the viscount.

Isla tilted her head, studying her sister with concern. Perhaps it was time to push a little. Her sister was clearly upset, and she did not like it. “I saw you dancing with him at the masquerade,” she said at last. “And I also noticed how he looked at you.” He had seemed enraptured with Maeve. What could have gone wrong? Not that she did not understand how it all could have fallen apart. Her own history spoke loudly of that unwelcome fact.

Maeve stiffened, her fingers curling at her sides. “None of that matters now. He does

not want me. At least not in the same way I wanted him.” That familiar ache banged around inside Isla’s heart. Her sister knew heart break too. It was not something she would have wished for Maeve.

Anger filled her soul. How could he have hurt Maeve? What could have been so much more important than protecting her sister from that sort of pain? Was he truly that much of a scoundrel? “Then he is the fool,” she murmured. “And he doesn’t deserve you.”

Silence settled between them, thick and suffocating. Maeve turned away, staring at the painting as if it might somehow provide all the answers. Isla could not fathom how though. “I find I must disagree. For I knew who he was and still I gave him my heart.”

“Perhaps,” Isla allowed. “But you were also brave.” Far more that Isla had been. The duke had wanted to talk with her, but she would not listen. It would mean opening herself up to more potential pain.

Maeve scoffed. “Brave? I do not feel particularly courageous at this moment.” She stared at the unfinished portrait of the viscount. It was a good likeness of him, but then again Maeve was that talented.

“Courage is not the absence of fear,” Isla said, stepping closer. “It is knowing the risk and taking it anyway.” Perhaps she should consider that herself. Would it truly be so terrible to listen to what Lucian had wanted to say? Would he be able to finally explain why he had truly ended their relationship? She did not think he would, but perhaps she should discover that for herself instead of assuming.

Maeve’s took a deep breath. “And what if the risk was not worth taking?” She kept her gaze pinned to that unfinished portrait. She must truly love him.

Isla hesitated, then touched Maeve's arm gently. "That is something only you can decide."

Maeve frowned and gestured toward the landscape. The one that she had painted not knowing who it was meant to be gifted to. Maeve often did that. Would paint something that formed in her mind believing it was meant for someone in particular. "I am giving him the painting," she said, her voice hollow. She stared at the landscape. "It was meant for him." She turned toward Isla and said bitterly, "Then I will be done with him."

Isla kept her tone neutral as she asked, "And will that make it hurt less?"

Maeve did not answer. Perhaps because she already knew the truth. It would change nothing. Her heart would still ache at the loss. Isla knew that far too well. She still carried the pain of betrayal with her. Lucian had ruined something inside of her when he had broken her heart. She might never be the same again because of that. She was far too bitter and cynical that she liked.

None of it truly mattered in this moment. She was in the studio for Maeve and her heartache. Isla's own pain had been with her for far too long. She prayed that Maeve would not have to endure what she had. Surely the viscount would come to his senses and realize what he would lose and beg to be in Maeve's life. In the quiet of the studio, with the painting of a distant cove watching over them, she stayed with Maeve—two hearts broken but hopefully soon to heal, two women stronger than the men who had broken them ever dared imagine.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:52 pm*

Three

The gardens of Harwood Hall were a vision of midsummer perfection. Pale pink flowers bloomed in abundance along the borders, their sweet perfume mingling with the scent of lavender and freshly cut grass. A silken white tent had been erected upon the lawn, its draped sides billowing gently in the warm breeze, while inside, the strains of a string quartet floated airily through the open air.

Lady Maeve Thompson's wedding day had dawned with sunshine and joy, and the bride herself—radiant in light blue lace—was now seated beside her new husband, the Viscount of Pemberton, their hands lightly clasped as they received the well wishes of family and friends. There was a rare light in Maeve's eyes, a serenity Isla had not seen in her sister before. Love suited her.

Isla stood a short distance from the crowd, beneath the shade of a large oak, a glass of champagne untouched in her hand. Her gown of pale yellow silk shimmered like gold under the sun, but she felt oddly detached from the celebration, as though she were watching it all through glass. Her heart was not in the gaiety of the day—not entirely.

Maeve had visited with her before her wedding and given her their mother's journal. She had wanted to take it back to her bedchamber and read it right then but knew that would be rude and inconsiderate. This was her sister's wedding day. It had been almost magical to witness. Her two younger sisters were both now wed and madly in love. A small part of her was overcome with jealousy. The men that loved them had not tossed them aside. Granted, Lord Pemberton had a moment of doubt, but he had come through for Maeve in the end. Lord Kendal had been steadfast and true for Athena—he'd had no doubts. Why couldn't Lucian have been like either of those

men? Why had he tossed her aside as if she had meant nothing?

She sensed him before she saw him—Lucian. The air changed when he was near, as though the wind itself paused in reverence—or warning. She did not turn to greet him. She could not. Her heart was too full, and her will too fragile. This day had been a wonderful one and she was glad that her sister had found happiness. That did not mean she was brittle from her lack of love.

“Lady Isla,” Lucian spoke quiet and steady. Almost as if he feared she’d bolt if he were too forthright. How right he was...

She closed her eyes for one brief moment, then turned. He was as striking as ever, his dark coat immaculately tailored, the gold of his eyes shaded with something far heavier than mere longing. He looked as though he had not slept, and still, he was the most devastating man she had ever known.

“Your Grace,” she replied, her tone composed. “Why are you here?”

“I would think that is obvious,” he returned, his voice low but fervent. “I am here for my friend’s wedding.”

“That is not what I meant, and you know it,” she said in a seething tone. “Why are you here talking to me as if nothing has ever been between us. Like you are going through some sort of polite requirement and seeking out mundane conversation with me.”

“Perhaps I wished to speak with you for other reasons.” His gaze was filled with...was that longing? She had not been the one to end their budding relationship. He had made that choice. Why would he look at her as if she had put that distance between them.

She lifted her chin. “What more could you possibly have to say, Lucian? We have spoken our piece—several times now. And each time you came to me with words that would only reopen wounds you gave me long ago.”

“I find I cannot find peace with those words,” he said.

Her heart thudded, but she refused to let it show. “Then I am afraid I cannot help you. This is a decision that you made.” She let out an exasperated breath. “What do you want from me?” She raised a brow. “Do you wish for me to drop to my knees and beg you to take me back?” She laughed a little derisively. “I might have once upon a time. Back when I believed in love—believed in you. I am not that foolish girl now. Go away, Lucian. I have nothing to offer you.”

He stepped closer, his voice rough. “I did what I thought I must to protect you. And in doing so, I lost the only joy I have ever known.”

Isla’s eyes burned. She did not want to cry. Not today. Not when her sister deserved all the happiness the day could offer. “You had your chance, Lucian,” she whispered, voice trembling despite her best efforts. “You held my heart in your hands and cast it aside.”

“I was wrong,” he said simply. “But I am not the same man now. And you are not the same woman. We have both suffered. But it does not mean we cannot begin again.”

She turned away from him, her arms crossed tight before her chest. “I don’t trust you.”

“I know,” he said behind her. “But I will earn it, Isla. No matter how long it takes.”

She faced him then, eyes flashing. “You think a vow uttered beneath the flower-covered arbor will undo years of silence? Of pain? You may mean it now, Lucian, but



when your past rises up again—as it always does—you will run from me. Just as you did before.”

“I would die before I let anything harm you,” he said, his voice shaking. “And I would rather live a thousand lifetimes alone than walk away from you again. I swear it.”

The truth in his words nearly undid her. But it wasn’t enough. Not now, maybe not ever. He spoke pretty words, but in the end, he had failed her. What could have changed now? Why should she ever believe he would not break her heart again? It was a risk she did not wish to take. Perhaps it was fear, or it might even be something else entirely. “You may love me, Lucian. I cannot say with any certainty,” she said, her voice soft with sorrow. “But love is not always enough. It cannot thrive in fear. And I will not shackle my heart to a man who still hides his truths from me.”

His jaw clenched, and she knew he understood.

Isla took a step back. “Do not pursue me again until you are ready to offer everything. Not half-truths. Not protection disguised as rejection. But your whole self, as I once gave mine to you.” She turned and walked away; her steps quiet against the garden path. She glanced back, briefly. Behind her, Lucian remained still, as if rooted to the earth. She turned away, determined to remain strong in her convictions. And though her heart wept for what could have been, Isla did not look back again. She had done that more than she should have already. She would not walk that path again. Not unless he could prove to her that he could be trusted, and that was a task she did not fully believe he could meet.

Lucian Oliver, the Duke of Thornridge, stood unmoving in the shade of the arbor, the delicate murmur of wedding laughter carrying faintly on the breeze as Isla disappeared down the garden path. Her final words echoed in his mind, each one a blade: "Do not pursue me again until you are ready to offer everything."

He had known it would be difficult to face her. He had known she would be wary, bitter, wounded. And she had every right to be. He had hurt her more deeply than anyone else ever had—not from malice, not from indifference, but from love twisted by fear. Nothing had truly changed for him. He still found her radiant and strong, and she demanded nothing less than his entire heart. How could he fault her for that? He wanted to give it to her—after all it had always belonged to her.

He had given it to her years ago. From their first meeting, and the moment she had smiled at him under that willow tree, he had fallen. It had been foolish, reckless, doomed from the start—but utterly inescapable. Of course he had not known the path their love would take. Had not realized the danger he would put her in by pursuing her. His bloody uncle had threatened her life, and he could not allow anything to happen to her.

He turned from the garden and made his way toward the edge of the estate, his boots crunching over the gravel path, away from the revelry and joy he had helped orchestrate. It was not the wedding that troubled him. Lady Maeve and Lord Pemberton deserved their happiness. It was the sharp reminder of what he had lost—and what he might still regain, if only he could find a way to convince Isla to give him another chance.

Lucian reached the stables and stepped inside. Dust motes danced in the shafts of sunlight filtering through the high windows. Here, away from the eyes of the world, he let the weight of the years settle upon him. His enemy—the man who had threatened Isla's life—was dead now—he'd died in a riding accident. That danger, the one that had once forced Lucian to choose duty over desire, no longer stood between them. And yet he had still not told her the truth. Cowardice, perhaps. Or pride. Or fear that she would never forgive him.

But what was pride, compared to the agony of losing her?

He thought of her words again. Her defiance. Her strength. Her sorrow. Isla had not vanished from his life like a dream. She had endured. And she had every right to demand the whole of him. No more shadows. No more silence. He would give it to her. Everything. Lucian straightened, resolve hardening his features. He had been a fool to ever let her go. To allow his uncle to convince him that he could not protect her. Lucian should have married her all those years ago. He would not make the same mistake again.

He would explain about his uncle and the threats he had issued. His uncle, the wily prick, had not wanted Lucian to marry. The rotten bastard had thought that if Lucian had not children, he would inherit the ducal estate. Lucian had not known until those threats that his uncle had actually killed his father—his own brother because he had wanted the title. He had tried several times to end Lucian's life. It was why he had ended his relationship with Isla. He had difficulty keeping himself safe, and he did not want to put her life at risk too. If they were to have children... he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The thought of losing her and their child. It sent shivers of fear over him leaving him cold.

He would go to her. Not tonight, perhaps. But soon. And when he did, he would bring her every truth he had once buried. Every promise he had never dared to make. And he would pray that Isla, fierce and unyielding, would let him try again.

Because he loved her. He always had.

Four

The golden morning light filtered through the tall windows of Lucian Oliver's study, but it brought little warmth to the Duke of Thornridge. He stood at the window, hands clasped tightly behind his back, his eyes fixed on the distant horizon where the sun met the gently rolling hills of his ancestral lands. It was the day after Lady Maeve Thompson had married his dearest friend, Viscount Pemberton.

His two dearest friends, the Earl of Kendal and Viscount Pemberton both had found what he long believed was something he would never have—love that was both honest and enduring. Watching them the day before, exchanging glances laced with trust and devotion, had stirred something deep in Lucian's chest. A yearning he had tried too long to silence. They both had been at that wedding—though it had been Pemberton's wedding, and he should have been glancing at his bride with such adoration, it still had been hard to witness. They both had stared at their wives with utter love and devotion. It had nearly undone Lucian.

He wanted that. Desperately. But to have Isla... he needed to destroy the one threat that had haunted his every step, the shadow that had slithered through his life since his father's death. His uncle—Lord Michael Oliver.

Lucian's jaw tightened, his knuckles white with tension. The wretched man had once been a fixture of his childhood—a charismatic figure cloaked in laughter and charm. But beneath the genteel veneer had lurked ambition and rot. Lucian had never suspected it until it was too late. Until he found the evidence, the hints his father had left behind. The poison, the tampered reins on Lucian's horse, the near-fatal fall from the cliffs... Michael hadn't just wanted the title. He had murdered for it. Lucian's

father—his own brother—slain so Michael might seize the dukedom. And when Lucian had survived his schemes, he had turned to threats.

“If you marry, if you beget an heir,” the fiend had hissed in his ear, “you will not live long enough to hold your son.” He had then added, “And your son won’t breathe long after he is born.”

That had been the end. The day he let Isla go. He hadn’t done it because he stopped loving her—God help him, he had never stopped—but because the thought of her blood spilled, of a child orphaned or worse murdered by his cursed legacy, had been unbearable. Lucian turned from the window, striding to his desk with sudden purpose. He opened a drawer and withdrew a sealed missive. He had written it last evening, after watching Maeve and Pemberton exchange vows, and not long after his conversation with Isla....

He rang a bell to call for his butler. He needed to settle this all once and for all. This had to be finished and he had to take precautions. It was far past time he stopped living in fear.

Moments later, Greaves, his long-suffering butler, entered. “Your Grace?”

“Send for Mr. Stratton. Have him brought directly to me.” He handed him the missive. “And see that he receives this. It is of the utmost importance.”

Greaves gave a crisp bow. “At once, Your Grace.” He took the missive and left Lucian alone to his thoughts. He had must to plan, to see completed. He would not let Isla go. When he went to her he would finally claim her. He would offer everything to her and pray she did not turn him away again.

Stratton was key to his plan. The investigator was the best inquiry agent in all of London—discreet, ruthless, and with a particular interest in uncovering the secrets of

the nobility. If anyone could confirm what Lucian suspected, it was him.

Lucian moved to the hearth and stared into the cold grate; his arms folded tightly across his chest. He was done running. Done sacrificing everything for the sake of a ghost. If he was ever to claim the future, he so desperately wanted—with Isla by his side—he needed to see Michael’s machinations ended. Permanently.

An hour passed before Stratton was shown in, a lean man in a modest coat with shrewd eyes and an unsettlingly calm demeanor. “Your Grace,” he said, bowing slightly. “You requested my presence?” Luckily, the man had been close by. A convenience he had learned before the wedding. It was what had given him the idea to see this all through. He took a chance that the man would come to him and be interested enough to want to complete this mission Lucian had for him.

Lucian didn’t waste time. He laid out the details—the suspicions, the threats, the attempted murders that had never been proven. And finally, the demand. “Find him. I was told he died in Calais two months ago. I need to know if that’s true.” He had his doubts. It was why he had kept some distance between him and Isla. The ton believed her soiled because her mother was rumored to be a descendant from witches. Lucian had never seen her that way, but he had acted as if it was why he had ended their relationship. It had been a useful rumor even though he hated relying upon it. The real problem had always been his uncle. An issue he had not fully believed until he could not ignore the truth of it.

Stratton inclined his head. “Very good, Your Grace. I’ll begin at once.”

It took two weeks. Two bloody long weeks. He had wanted to seek Isla out but he knew he couldn’t. Not with so much uncertainty hanging over his head. He could not offer her anything, promise her nothing, and he could not claim her. Not when he could not fully give himself to her. Not when he could not give her what she demanded—everything. She deserved to have all of him.

Stratton looked grim and satisfied in equal measure as he met Lucian's gaze. "He's alive," he said without preamble. "Living under the name 'Mr. Lyle Morland' in a disreputable corner of Devon. He faked his death and fled the Continent after a string of debts and a rather inconvenient affair with a French official's wife. I have a list of his aliases, financial dealings, and former associates. Your uncle has been a busy man, Your Grace."

Lucian closed his eyes briefly. The knot in his chest loosened—but only slightly. Of course he had been living a disreputable life. His uncle had never been the man Lucian believed him to be. He had been such a doting uncle in his youth. What had changed him? When had he decided murder something reasonable? At least he knew why he had been presumed dead in Calais. He had to fake his death to escape the crimes he had committed there. "Thank you, Stratton. Your work has been invaluable."

Stratton rose. "What do you wish to do next?"

Lucian stared out the window again, but this time, his expression was resolute. "I wish to ensure that man never harms anyone again."

Because there was something to fight for—someone. He had given up too easily before. Lucian would not live a half-life anymore. He was not whole without Isla at his side. He would handle his uncle once and for all, and afterward he would go directly to Isla. He would lay his heart at her feet and beg her for forgiveness. He would not give up until she agreed to be his wife. He could see Isla in his mind's eye—her proud posture, her fierce eyes, the way her voice had trembled when she had told him it was too late. It wasn't too late. Not yet. But if he wanted to claim her, to build a life unmarred by shadows, then he needed to free himself from the past once and for all.

Michael Oliver's time had run out. Lucian turned from the window, fire burning in

his chest. The future he wanted would not come without cost. But this time, he was ready to pay it. He would have to travel to Devon if that was where his uncle could be found. But he would have to handle the situation carefully. He was not his uncle. Lucian was no murderer, but he could not allow the man to have the freedom to live his life as he pleased. Not when he threatened Isla in the past, and not when he could easily end her life.

Lucian turned from the window with a decisive step, his fists clenched at his sides. There was no longer any room for hesitation. The truth had been unearthed, and now it must be dealt with. He would see to it that his uncle—Michael Oliver, or Lyle Morland, or whatever false name the bastard now wore—would face justice. Not for revenge. Not for vengeance. But for protection. For peace.

For Isla.

“Make the arrangements,” Lucian said, his voice low and firm. “I will leave for Devon within the day. Quietly. I don’t want word of this spreading until it’s over. I want no one to know where I’ve gone.”

Stratton gave a curt nod. “I’ll see to it personally, Your Grace.”

As the investigator departed, Lucian strode toward the hearth, dragging a hand through his hair. He was tired of shadows. Tired of secrets. He had lived beneath the weight of them for too long. All to protect the people he loved. But it was time to bring it into the light. He could not see Isla yet—not while this threat still lingered like a serpent in tall grass. Not while he still carried the stain of failure from the day he let her go.

But soon. Soon, he would return to her with nothing hidden, nothing half-lived. He would tell her everything: the truth of his silence, the reason he had turned her away, and the cost he had borne in doing so. If she could not forgive him, he would accept



that. He would have no other choice... But he would not let her believe for one moment longer that she had been unwanted, unloved, or forgotten.

He sat at his desk and began to write—to give instructions for the estate in his absence, to put affairs in order. He hoped it would be a short journey—a few days, no more. He prayed it would be enough. That the law—or at the very least, a well-placed solicitor—might be persuaded to act swiftly when presented with the evidence Stratton had uncovered.

He thought again of Isla, of her standing in the garden on the night of the masquerade, proud and trembling beneath her mask. Her voice, brittle with hurt, her eyes brimming with pain. He had put that pain there. And he would spend the rest of his life trying to ease it. He would go to Devon and face the demon from his past. He would rid himself—and Isla—of the man who had haunted their lives. And when he returned, he would not be the same man who once broke her heart.

He would be hers. Entirely. Lucian sealed the last letter, stood, and moved to the tall window once more. Outside, the sun was sinking behind the hills, casting the sky in hues of violet and gold. Soon, he thought. And for the first time in years, hope bloomed in his chest like spring after a long winter. He turned from the window, summoned his valet to order his trunks packed. When he returned home, he would finally be free and able to claim Isla. He only prayed he was not too late...

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*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:52 pm*

Five

The winds in Devon were sharp and bracing as Lucian Oliver, Duke of Thornridge, stood in the shadowed lane outside a ramshackle stone cottage. Ivy strangled the windows, the roof sagged with neglect, and smoke from the hearth curled weakly into the late afternoon sky. This was the hiding place of the man once known as Michael Oliver, the his treacherous uncle—a man who had once held him on his knee, taught him to ride, and, as Lucian had discovered in the most devastating of truths, had murdered his father and plotted Lucian's downfall.

The confrontation would, hopefully, be swift, brutal in its honesty. There would be no bared steel, no dramatic struggle. Only the grim certainty of evidence laid bare and the look of bitter recognition in the old man's eyes as the magistrate's men closed in. Lucian remained still—his expression carved from ice, as the cottage was surrounded. It had not take much convincing on his part to gain the magistrate's assistance. One they knew that the man inside was a criminal, wanted in two countries, they had no qualms about apprehending him.

A large, burly man pounded on the door, his thick Cockney accent unmistakable as he bellowed, "Open up, or we'll come in after ye—and you won't like our methods, I promise ye that."

The door remained closed. His uncle was not going to come out of that hovel willingly. He could not be living the grand life he'd imagined for himself. When he had committed murder, he had hoped to be living the life of a duke, not a pauper. He could still have had a good life. One filled with comfort and the loyalty of his family. Lucian had seen how his father had adored his younger brother.

But that had not been good enough for Michael. Instead, he betrayed that love and ended his own brother's life. For greed and power, and it had gained him nothing. Because he had failed in his attempts to kill Lucian. Not that Lucian had been skilled or even aware what his uncle had been trying to do in the beginning. It had been sheer luck that had saved his life.

The man at the door banged on it louder. Still, it went unanswered. Then he nodded at his compatriots to come forward. Two of them rammed the door with their bodies, shoving at it until the old door fell to the ground. They stormed inside in search of Michael Oliver. Inside the cottage, the stench of unwashed linens and stale ale mingled with the smoke from the dying hearth. Dust danced in the slant of light piercing the filth-streaked windows, and somewhere deeper within, the clatter of boots on warped floorboards echoed.

Lucian stepped through the doorway with deliberate calm, his greatcoat catching the breeze behind him as he entered. He had no need to search. He knew where his uncle would be. Sure enough, in the back room, beyond a half-hinged door, Michael Oliver sat at a crooked table, a bottle in one hand and the faintest sneer on his gaunt, hollowed face. His once-dark hair had grayed unevenly, and lines of bitterness carved deep valleys into his cheeks. His eyes, a cold, cunning blue—the same shade as Lucian's father's had been—stared through him. There was a spark of defiance reflecting back at Lucian almost as if he dared him to do something, anything so Michael could finish what he had started all those years ago. Lucian would not give him the satisfaction.

“Well,” the older man rasped, lifting the bottle in mock salute. “Look who finally decided to make an appearance. It's about time you had the courage to face me.”

Lucian did not flinch. Nothing his uncle had to say would dissuade him from this encounter. He had to see this through. “Your days of hiding are over.”

Michael chuckled, a dry, rasping sound. “You think you’ve won, boy?”

“I don’t think it,” Lucian said, his voice was as steady and cold as he spoke. “I know it. Your list of crimes stretches across two nations. You faked your death, abandoned debts, stole from noblemen, and murdered your own brother. And when that wasn’t enough, you tried to murder me.”

Michael’s smirked. “It was nothing personal—I’d have done through any of my brother’s heirs, and any brats you sired as well. I deserve that title. It should have been mine.”

“It was never meant to be yours,” Lucian said quietly. He had grown to hate this man that he once loved. But he could no longer feel anything for him congenial. He had destroyed that bond. “As you well know, but you wanted it and stopped at nothing to try to attain it. It is time you paid for that and all that you did take. You made me believe Isla would be safer without me.” His jaw clenched. “You took everything from me. But no more.”

At a gesture from Lucian, the magistrate’s men stepped forward. Michael stood suddenly, the bottle crashing to the floor. “Do you think you’ll be free of me?” he spat. “I may rot in prison, perhaps—but mark my words, boy. You’re not like your father. You’re weak. That girl you pine for—she’ll see it. Just wait.” He sneered. “And if I am ever free, she will not be safe.”

“You will never be free again.” Lucian crossed the room in a breath and struck his uncle across the face—not with rage, but with cold purpose. Michael stumbled back into the grasp of the waiting guards. “And I am not weak,” Lucian said softly. “You have no control over me.”

The magistrate’s men dragged the disgraced noble from the house. As the last of their steps faded, Lucian stood alone in the wreckage, his chest rising and falling with a

strange mix of triumph and grief. He had no joy in the victory. But there was peace and with that peace came clarity. He turned and stepped out into the wind once more. The sky above Devon had cleared to a pale, steady blue, and the scent of the sea drifted on the air. There was nothing left to fear now.

Now, the matter was concluded. His enemy would soon be behind bars, awaiting trial, and Lucian—for the first time in years—was free. Free to claim the life he had once dared to dream of. The life he had abandoned. The woman he had lost. He could finally go to Isla—not as a man weighed down by shadows, but one ready to offer her everything. If she would not have him... he would spend the rest of his days trying to change her mind.

He could offer her what she had demanded—everything. He had thought of little else on the journey back to his estate. He could not waste another day. She might deny him. She might send him away. But he would not go quietly. Not this time.

Lady Isla Thompson was in the sitting room, sorting through letters with trembling fingers when the butler entered. She had started to read her mother's journal but could not get beyond the first few lines. She had thought she was ready to read it, but she had been wrong. It was still too much for her. It was perhaps cowardly of her, but she could not face her mother even if it was only her journal. She was not nearly as brave as she would like to be and that made her fret. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she open that journal and read it? How had her two sisters managed to read the entire book?

The door opened and the butler entered. He bowed when she lifted her gaze to meet his. "Your Grace, the Duke of Thornridge to see you."

Isla froze, the air catching in her lungs. She slowly turned toward the butler. She kept her face placid and said, "Tell him I am not at home." Why was Lucian there? He had never come to see her at her home. Even when they were courting it had always been

in secret. They had not been ready, so she had assumed, for the world to know of their love for each other. It could not be good that he had come now.

It was too late for the butler to refuse him admittance into her inner sanctum—Lucian strode through the doorway, as commanding and infuriatingly handsome as ever. A lock of his dark hair fell over his forehead only making those startling gold eyes of his more evident. “Forgive the intrusion,” he said, bowing. “But I could not wait.”

“You should have,” she snapped, rising to her feet. “I told you I do not wish to see you. There is no reason for you to be here.” His audacity knew no bounds. She would admire him for it if she did not find it irritating.

“No, Isla. I have every reason to be here.” His voice was low, urgent. “I took your words to heart. I am here, now, because it is time.”

She could not be hearing him correctly. What did he hope to gain by this intrusion? “Time for what?” she said, her voice shaking with fury. “How dare you come here expecting me to allow it. As if I owe you somehow. We both know that is not true. You are the one that ended us. Why do you believe I should listen to anything you have to?”

“I had no choice.” His voice was firm as she spoke. It almost made her pause and listen, but she could not do it. If she gave in now, then he would always have control over her.

“There is always a choice,” she said softly, but with conviction. “You made yours. Now you must live with it.”

He crossed the room swiftly. “You don’t understand—my uncle, he tried to kill me. More than once. He killed my father. If I had married you, then you would have been the one he went after next. He could never truly know how much you meant to me—”

He swallowed hard. "He might have still killed you if he did."

"You should have trusted me." She blazed with anger and disapproval. "We were supposed to be a team. You promised me the world, and you gave me silence." Isla clenched her hands into fists at her side. "I gave you everything of myself and you tossed me aside as if I were nothing. Some silly chit who foolishly gave you her innocence and love."

He stopped before her, breathing hard. "I loved you." Lucian cupped her cheek in his hand. His eyes burned bright with emotion. "I still love you."

"And I loved you then," she whispered. "And you let me shatter."

There was silence. A breath, a heartbeat. He lowered his hand and reached for her; she took a step back unable to allow him to pull her into his arms. She would fall apart if she did. "I cannot let you go again," he said hoarsely. "Not now. Not ever." This time when he moved closer, she could not stop him. She was in his arms again and she found it difficult to breathe through her emotions. "I need you," he said fervently.

"Lucian—" she began, but his mouth was already on hers. The kiss was fire and longing, memory and desperation. It consumed her. She melted against him, her hands rising to his chest, her lips answering his without thought. For a moment—one sweet, aching moment—everything else vanished. The past, the pain, all of it. There was only the feel of him, the taste of him, the love she had never truly forgotten. But then it came rushing back. With a gasp, Isla wrenched herself free. Her hand met his cheek in a sharp, resounding slap. "Do not ever presume to touch me again."

Lucian staggered back, stunned. His cheek had started to redden, but he said nothing.

"I am not yours," she said, voice trembling. "You lost that right. You do not get to

come back and sweep away the pieces you broke. It is not that simple.”

“I am trying to mend them,” he said quietly.

There was heartbreak evident in those gold depths. So much so it almost shattered her anew. Isla did not give into the need to fall into his arms again. That kiss had brought much back, but it has also been a different sort of reminder. She knew how easy it would be to give in to him. She had done so in the past hadn't she? Isla would not be his fool ever again.

She turned her face away. “Leave and do not return”

He hesitated, pain flashing across his features. “Isla...”

“Go,” she whispered.

And this time, he obeyed. As the door clicked softly behind him, Isla pressed a hand to her chest. Her lips still burned. Her heart still thundered. But she had survived the first break. She would survive this one too. She could not relive the past. It was time to move forward once and for all, and that was when she knew. It was time to read her mother's journal and see if it offered her something that would help her let go of Lucian once and for all.



Six

The sky hung low with grey clouds that threatened rain, but the drawing room at Harwood Hall was aglow with soft firelight. Lady Isla Thompson sat near the window, her embroidery lying untouched in her lap, though the needle was still threaded and ready. She hadn't stitched a single loop in over an hour. Her thoughts were not on her needlework. They were on Lucian and what she had read thus far in her mother's journal.

She had not seen him since that day he had come to visit her, to beg her to forgive him—she had done everything in her power to avoid any place he might be because she was not ready to revisit that day, or any aspect of their past. But still, he lingered in her thoughts like the echo of a melody she could not silence. The pain of the past still clung to her, but so too did the memory of how it had felt to be held in his arms, to hear the low rumble of his voice speaking only to her. To see the ache in his eyes and know it was for her. She ought to hate him. She had told herself she did. But her heart was not so obedient.

Her mother's journal had only made her question her decisions. What if she had been wrong by pushing him away? Should she have at least listened to what he had to say. He claimed that she would be in danger if he had remained steadfast in their love. Had it been that simple? He had broken her heart to protect her. Could she believe that? Her mother had believed in the power of love and had expressed that in clear concise words. Isla had taken those words to heart.

She reached once more for the small, leather-bound journal resting open on the table beside her. Her fingers lingered over the worn edge of the page—the same page she

had read over a dozen times since last night.

Fear of the future will delay the first...

She did not know if her mother had truly possessed the gift of foresight as some in the village whispered, or if it had merely been a mother's instinct to understand her daughters more than they understood themselves. But those words... they felt like a balm and a burden all at once. Had her fear—of pain, of loss, of loving a man who might hurt her again—kept her from something that could bring her joy?

She pressed her fingers to her lips, her eyes drifting once more to the fire crackling in the hearth. If she allowed herself to believe him... if what Lucian said was true, then his sacrifice had been born of love, not cruelty. And if he had faced some great danger—if he had borne it alone, in silence, in order to keep her safe—then every angry word she had thrown at him, every ounce of her scorn, had been unjust.

A knock sounded at the door, firm but polite. Isla startled from her thoughts, the journal slipping closed in her lap. "Come in," she called softly, smoothing her skirts with trembling hands.

The butler entered with a slight bow. "Your ladyship. A letter has arrived for you. Marked urgent."

She accepted the missive, her pulse fluttering as she read the seal. It was from London—no crest, but the handwriting was unmistakable. Lucian's. Once the door had closed behind the butler, she broke the seal and unfolded the letter with careful fingers.

Isla, my love,

I do not presume to ask for your forgiveness. But I do ask for a chance to speak.

There are things I have kept from you—truths I thought would protect you, but now I see they only drove you away. I cannot live with that mistake any longer.

My past is no longer a threat to us. It has been resolved. My heart, however, still belongs to you. It has always belonged to you.

If there is even the smallest part of you that wishes to understand—please, meet me one last time. Tonight, beneath the willow where we first spoke of forever, and where I made the gravest mistake of my life. The place I hope, most fervently, will once again be a place of joy if the fates, and your gentle heart, allows it.

I will wait until sunset. If you do not come, I will understand. But I shall not give up hope.

Yours, Always,

—Lucian

Isla stared at the page for a long time. Her hand shook as she folded it closed and pressed it to her chest. The willow, their sacred meeting place. He remembered, of course, and so did she how much that location meant. The promises they had made each other there, and yes, the place he had broken her heart. They had had a conversation, a brief meeting, there recently—the night of the masquerade. That night had not gone well, but that was mostly because of her own fears.

She looked toward the window, where the clouds continued to gather over the hills. Rain would come soon. But still she knew, without doubt, that she would likely go meet him. Mayhap her mother had been right—perhaps love no matter how haunted by fear, could be enough. And maybe, just maybe, it was time to find out. She nibbled on her lips in contemplation, but she did not move from where she sat. There was much to consider, and she could not go to him without being certain of her own

feelings.

A soft knock pulled her from her reverie, and moments later, her sisters swept into the room—Athena, radiant and flushed with happiness, and Maeve, equally glowing, though there was always something a little more solemn in Maeve’s smile.

“Oh Isla,” Athena said with a bright laugh, “I declare, this house is entirely too quiet without us.”

They were so alike in many ways, her sisters, and not just because they were twins. They both had an exuberance that stole her breath. She had never been that carefree. Almost as if she had been born with an old soul too restrained for something joyous to intrude upon her environment.

Maeve grinned. “Do not let Father hear you say that. He’s likely relishing the silence.”

Isla rose to greet them, embracing them both warmly, though their presence brought a sharp pang of longing to her chest. They looked so content—so complete in their joy. It was impossible not to feel a little envious.

“You are both glowing,” Isla said softly, meaning it. “Marriage suits you.” She smiled. “And father is not at home. He had business in London, but I suspect that Maeve is correct. He does enjoy his solitude; however, I have no doubt he misses you both.”

Athena squeezed her hand. “I do recommend marriage—at least to the right man. I hope you find your match one day.”

Isla opened her mouth to respond—perhaps to deflect, perhaps to deny—but Maeve interrupted gently.

“We’ve been speaking of Mama’s journal,” she said, settling into a chair near the hearth. “We hoped you have found time to read it, but we understand if you are taking your time. We both did.”

Athena nodded. “And it is important that you read it when the time is right for you.”

“I was never certain I wished to read her words. I feared it might hurt more than it would heal.” Isla shook her head and sighed. “But I was wrong to wait. I have started reading it and you are right that it is important. Her words...” Isla’s voice trailed off.

“Leave you breathless,” Maeve urged gently. “There is something there meant for each of us in that journal, have you just started reading it?”

Athena’s expression sobered. “It helped me see my own path, and I think it will help you too.”

Isla blinked. “I am almost finished with it, and I think you are right. It has helped me see what I should do?” She did not tell them that she had read every word. Isla did not know why she held that back. Perhaps because she was not ready to fully discuss what her mother had written.

Athena nodded. “I do not wish to rush you...” She nibbled on her lip. “But...”

“It’s the prophecy,” Maeve said. Of course they wished to discuss that part of their mother’s journal. Isla was still contemplating the meaning of it and just nodded at Maeve as if encouraging her to continue speaking. “You must read it. Promise us that you will.”

“I... I promise.” Isla frowned, but because she misunderstood. No, she frowned because she hated lying to her sisters. “Should I be concerned?”

They both shook their head, but it was Athena that answered. “No, I do not think you should worry at all, but it will give you insight.” She glanced at Maeve. “It is what led us to the men we both adore, and I think, that it will help you with your duke.”

Isla sighed. “I am not so certain about that...” A lot of hurt still laid between her and Lucian. “But I promise I will read it”

“That is all we can ask,” Maeve said softly. “And if after you read it you wish to talk...”

“I know where to find you both.” She smiled at them. “I will be all right. Neither of you need worry about me.”

“We cannot help it,” Athena said. “We love you.”

She smiled at them both. Isla adored both of her sisters, and she was so happy they had found love. She was not as certain as they appeared to be that she would have that for herself. Her chance had come and gone, and she had the heartbreak to remind her of that loss.

The visit with Athena and Maeve was far too brief, but it had been filled with laughter and memories. Once the door closed behind them, Isla was left in silence once more. She hesitated only a moment before retrieving the leather-bound journal. Her hands trembled slightly as she opened the worn cover and turned the pages, the ink faded but legible. Then she found it—the entry they had mentioned to her—the prophecy—the words that had been haunting her since she had first read them.

One day, they will find men to love them. I’ve seen that too. Fear of the future will delay the first, and temptation will be too much for one twin, and heartbreak will be another’s undoing. In the end, if they choose the right path, it will lead to a happy future, and even if our family’s supposed magical abilities haunt them, that love will

be enough to guide them.

Isla's breath caught. Fear of the future... It felt as though the words had been written for her. She set the journal in her lap, her thoughts troubled as she considered the words in her mother's journal. Was her fear of the future—of losing Lucian, of giving him her heart once more—delaying the very happiness her mother had foreseen? Had heartbreak undone her, just as her mother had said it would? She closed her eyes, feeling tears sting the corners. What if love truly was enough?

Did Lucian truly still love her? And what if... just once... she allowed herself to believe? The thought stirred something warm in her chest, something that refused to be extinguished, no matter how fiercely she tried to bury it. Hope—damnable, beautiful hope.

She knew what she had to do—where she had to go. Isla picked up Lucian's missive once more, read it, and then held it against her chest. Her heart beat heavily inside her chest. Even though rain threatened to fall at any moment, she had to go to him. It was time to listen to him and then decide if they had a future together. Because she loved him, had always loved him, and if there was even a small chance of them finding happiness she had to take it.

Seven

The sky was thick with the promise of rain, and the air was cool, carrying with it the scent of wet earth and greenery. Isla Thompson walked swiftly, her breath quickening with anticipation, though her heart beat with a hesitant rhythm. She was determined. Determined to meet Lucian as he had asked, determined to find the words that had been kept locked inside her heart for far too long.

The willow tree stood ahead, its long, trailing branches hanging low, swaying gently in the breeze. It had always been a place of solace, a place of memories—a place where she had once believed in the power of love and promises. She could not count how many hours she had spent beneath this very tree with Lucian, dreaming of a future they would never have.

But now, after all the years and all the heartache, she was ready. She had come to terms with the fact that no matter the dangers or uncertainties, she loved him, and that love was worth the risk. If he had come to her, asking for a second chance, then she was willing to give him one. She would find him beneath the tree and tell him—tell him that she loved him, that she was willing to try again, that she could no longer live with the regret of what could have been.

As she neared the tree, a shadow moved from the underbrush, and Isla froze. A chill swept over her as a man stepped into her path. His features were obscured by the hood of his dark cloak, but there was no mistaking that it was not who she had intended to meet. This man was not Lucian and she did not recognize him. Isla's blood ran cold as her gaze met the grim, calculating eyes of the stranger.



“Lady Isla,” the man said with a sneer, his voice carrying a venomous edge that sent a shiver down her spine. “So lovely to see you, though I had hoped it would not come to this.” His eyes, a cold blue, sent shivers over her. “But I’m afraid I must insist you come with me. My dear nephew has made a mistake—one he must pay for.”

Isla took a cautious step back. “I don’t understand. Who is your nephew?” she demanded, her voice steady despite the fear rising in her chest. “I am here to meet the Duke of Thornridge. You should leave before he arrives.” Where was Lucian? He had said he would stay until sunset, and that was some time off yet. She thought she had time. Had she miscalculated or misunderstood his note?

“Is he now,” the man scoffed, cutting her off. “Are you certain about that. You, my dear, have been nothing but a pawn in the duke’s game and that made it easy for me to manipulate you.” His lip curled into a cruel smile. “But now, you’re going to help me finish this. My nephew thought to thwart me, but he has never been more wrong. I will not be bested.”

Before Isla could react, the man moved swiftly, his hand seized her wrist in a tight grip. She tried to jerk free, but he was stronger than she had anticipated. As she struggled it started to become clear in her mind. This man—he was Lucian’s uncle. The one he thought would be a danger to her. He had not lied. “You are going to come with me,” he hissed. “My nephew has made a mockery of everything, and I intend to make him pay for his arrogance. And you, Lady Isla, will be the perfect leverage.”

Isla’s heart thudded in her chest, her mind racing. She had no idea how Lucian’s uncle had known where she would be, but she couldn’t think about that now. Her focus had to be on escaping him.

“Let me go!” she cried, struggling against his hold, but his grip only tightened.

“Ah, but I am afraid that’s not an option,” he purred, his voice low and dangerous. “My nephew might think he’s in control, but he will soon realize that mistake. You are his weakness, the fool.” He smirked as he pulled her with him toward the nearby woods. “Now, come along, my dear. We have a long journey ahead of us.”

Lucian had been pacing his study at Thornridge, the minutes stretching into what felt like hours, when he heard the pounding of hooves and the distant clatter of carriage wheels. His chest tightened. His thoughts, always in turmoil since the moment he had seen Isla after his uncle’s arrest, were now filled with an overwhelming sense of dread.

He had been so certain that Isla would meet him under the willow tree—that he would be able to speak the words he had kept hidden for so long. But she had not arrived. The thought that she had changed her mind, that she was too hurt to forgive him, gnawed at him. No. She would come. She had to. His breath caught as the door flew open the butler, entered with an urgent look in his eyes. “Your Grace,” he said, his voice tight, “You have a caller.”

“Who is it,” Lucian demanded, his voice sharp. He had already feared something was amiss, and he had a sinking feeling that he was about to get terrible news.

“A Mr. Stratton is here to see you,” the Greaves, the butler said. “Do you wish for me to escort him into your study?.”

“Yes,” he told Greaves. “If he is here then I must speak with him.” There was only one reason that Stratton would have for coming to Thornridge. Something must have gone wrong with his uncle and that terrified him.

He did not have long to wait. Greaves escorted Mr. Stratton into the room. There was a grave expression on the investigator’s face. He did not have good news to impart, but he had expected as much. He met Lucian’s gaze and said, “I fear I must tell you

that your uncle escaped the magistrate's escort to prison."

He cursed under his breath. He had expected it would concern his uncle but hoped he would be proven wrong. "Is the man incompetent? How did he escape?"

"I cannot attest to his competence Your Grace," Mr. Stratton began. "I am not familiar with him. But I received word that your uncle had slipped free and I am afraid it is worse than that."

How could it possibly be worse? "Tell me," he ordered.

"It's Lady Isla Thompson, Your Grace." He had no expression on his face as he finished, "I am afraid your uncle has taken her."

Lucian's heart stopped. "Taken?" He had to have heard that wrong.

"By your uncle, Your Grace," Stratton confirmed, repeating the words that had stolen his ability to think, he lowered his voice as he continued speaking, "We've learned after he escaped custody he went here, and has been watching you—watching her. He sent this to be given to you."

Mr. Stratton held out a sealed missive. "You do not know what is written within?"

"No, Your Grace," he said. "We believed it was best that you were the only one to read it. We do hope you will share the contents of the note, but it has your name on it."

Lucian took the letter from Stratton's hands, his heart pounding in his chest. The weight of the missive felt too heavy in his grasp, as though it were not merely paper and ink, but a physical manifestation of his deepest fears. His gaze flicked to the wax seal. It bore the insignia of his uncle, Michael Oliver, a crude mockery of the family

crest that Lucian had been born to carry with pride.

The room seemed to grow smaller, the air thick with the suffocating pressure of his uncle's betrayal. His thoughts were scattered as he broke the seal with trembling hands and unfolded the letter. The words inside were stark, almost too precise in their cruelty:

Lucian,

You have always been so blinded by your sense of duty and honor that you cannot see what has always been in front of you. You think yourself so clever, don't you? Well, it's time to pay the price for all your misguided decisions.

Lady Isla Thompson is now in my care. I've taken her to a place where you will not find her so easily. You will not be rid of me so quickly, and I will make sure you regret ever crossing me. As for your title, you are no longer worthy of it, and I will see to it that it belongs to me—if not through blood, then by force. I will not be made a fool by you, nephew. If you wish to see Isla again, come find her. But know that time is not on your side, and she may soon join your father in hell.

Michael

Lucian's fingers tightened around the letter, his body going rigid with a fury he had not known he was capable of. The words echoed in his mind, each one cutting deeper than the last. He had not only taken Isla but had threatened to end her life. His uncle was no longer just a stain on his past; he was a tangible threat to his future, and he would not allow him to destroy Isla. Especially as she still doubted his love for her.

Lucian's jaw clenched, the anger building in him like a storm. He turned to Stratton, his voice cold with resolve. "We need to find her. Now."

“I will organize a search immediately, Your Grace,” Stratton replied, his own expression tense. “But we must be careful. Your uncle is not a man to underestimate. He will be hiding well, and his network of associates is extensive.”

“I don’t care about his associates,” Lucian said, his voice low and fierce. “We are not going to sit idly by while he threatens Isla’s life.”

Stratton hesitated, then nodded. “I will gather my team at once. We will leave no stone unturned.”

Lucian paced the room, his mind racing. He needed Isla. Needed to make sure she was safe, to make sure she knew how much he loved her, how much he regretted pushing her away all those years ago. And now, more than ever, he had to find her before his uncle’s plans could come to fruition.

He did not wait for Stratton to finish his preparations. Lucian turned on his heel and strode to the door. “I will go myself. I’ll start at the places he might be hiding nearby. I know how his mind works, and I doubt he has gone far. He will want to witness my suffering.” His uncle alluded that he would have taken Isla where Lucian would never find her, but he did not believe that. Besides, even if that had been his intentions, he could not have gained much ground in such little time. He would find them, and he would ensure his uncle paid for this treachery once and for all. He had been trying to be kind in letting him live but that had been a mistake.

“Your Grace, I must insist,” Stratton said, moving quickly to intercept him. “You are in no condition to search alone. We will go together. It will be far more effective.”

Lucian met his gaze, his resolve clear. “I will not sit here and wait while Isla is in danger. I won’t lose her again.”

Stratton stepped aside with a reluctant nod. “As you wish, Your Grace. Please allow e

some time to assemble a team. I promise we will not waste time.”

Lucian didn't need another word. He turned sharply; his mind was set. He could not, would not lose Isla. She was his heart, and he would tear the earth apart to find her. As he mounted his horse and rode into the night, the rain began to fall in sheets, as though the heavens themselves wept for what was to come. But Lucian cared for nothing but the woman he loved and the fight to protect her. He would stop at nothing. He would not let his uncle get away with this.

### Eight

The storm raged overhead, the heavy clouds blotting out the last vestiges of the fading daylight. The wind howled through the trees, its sharp gusts tugging at their cloaks as Lucian and Stratton rode through the treacherous terrain, their horses' hooves slipping against the wet earth beneath them. The path had become little more than a muddy trail, but Lucian was beyond caring. His heart was a steady drum of urgency, and all he could think of was Isla—his Isla—held captive, a mere pawn in his uncle's cruel game.

Stratton rode beside him, his grim face set in determined lines. "We are close, Your Grace," he said, his voice barely audible above the wind. "I see the signal—there, just beyond the ridge. My men are waiting there."

Lucian nodded, his breath coming quicker as the scent of wet earth filled his lungs. Every instinct told him they were near. Isla was nearby, and she was in danger. His pulse quickened as they approached a clearing, where the outline of a dilapidated shack emerged from the shadows. The sight of it made his stomach tighten. His uncle would have hidden here, in this forsaken place—it was near enough to Thornridge that he would have known of its existence. It was the only gamekeepers lodging that they had long since stopped using. Isla would be inside there too and likely frightened. Lucian's hands clenched the reins of his horse, his resolve hardening with each passing second.

Stratton dismounted first, his movements swift as he surveyed the area. "Stay close, Your Grace," he warned, his tone low. "We must be cautious."

Lucian gave a single nod. He would not allow his uncle to escape this time. He would do whatever it took to save Isla, to make sure she was safe from the monster who had tried to ruin everything. They crept closer to the shack, the storm's fury masking their movements. As they approached the door, Lucian could hear muffled voices from inside—his uncle's harsh tones mixed with Isla's frightened but determined responses. His chest tightened at the sound of her voice, but he forced himself to remain calm. In one fluid motion, Stratton kicked open the door, and they both rushed inside.

The sight that greeted Lucian was one of chaos. Isla stood near the far corner of the shack, her wrists bound but her posture strong. Her eyes widened as she saw him, and for the briefest of moments, relief flooded her expression before it was replaced with fear. Lucian's gaze immediately fell on his uncle, Michael Oliver, who stood by the small window with a pistol raised, pointing directly at Isla.

"Stay where you are!" Michael growled, his voice thick with fury and desperation. "No one moves, or she dies."

Lucian's blood turned cold at the sight of the weapon, but his resolve hardened. "You will not harm her, uncle. Not now, not ever," Lucian said, his voice steady despite the terror clawing at his insides. He quickly assessed the situation and came to a decision. If it came to a choice between his own life and Isla's there was no decision. He would choose her every time.

Michael's lip curled into a cruel smile. "You've always been such a disappointment, Lucian. From the moment of your birth I knew that I would one day ensure your death," he spat, his finger twitching near the trigger. "I will make sure you regret ever thinking you could take what's mine."

The words were like a lash to Lucian's soul, but he could not hesitate. His uncle had already destroyed enough lives. This ended now. "The dukedom is not yours," he



reminded his uncle. He had to keep his uncle's attention on him. It was the only way to ensure Isla survived. With a sudden movement, Lucian lunged forward, attempting to disarm his uncle. A fierce struggle ensued, each of them wrestling for control of the gun, the tension between them palpable. The pistol was heavy, unwieldy in Michael's hands, but Lucian was determined. He had no intention of letting Isla—his Isla—be harmed.

For a moment, they both seemed locked in a deadly embrace, neither giving an inch. The rain was pounding on the roof above them, a constant reminder of the storm raging both outside and in their hearts. Suddenly, the weapon discharged with a loud crack that reverberated in Lucian's ears. A rush of panic flooded through him as Isla screamed, her voice high-pitched and filled with terror. He thought, for a moment, that she had seen him struck, and his heart stopped. But when he glanced toward her, his worst fears were alleviated.

It was Michael who had been hit. The old man staggered back, his hands clutching his side, blood seeping through his fingers as he let out a strangled gasp. The pistol fell from his grasp, clattering to the floor, and with one final, agonized look, he stumbled backward toward the window.

“No!” Michael's voice was a hoarse whisper, full of rage and disbelief. He reached out for the edge of the window frame, but his grip faltered. And then, with a sickening, helpless cry, Michael Oliver fell. His body tumbled from the window and into the darkness.

“Someone go outside and check on him.” He prayed that his uncle was dead, but he doubted the old man had succumbed to his wounds. Either way he had to make sure that man did not make another escape attempt. Isla's cries echoed through the room, and Lucian's heart pounded in his chest. He rushed to her side, cutting the ropes that bound her with trembling hands. As her arms freed, she collapsed into his embrace, her body shaking with relief and shock. “Isla,” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

“You’re safe. You’re safe now.”

She buried her face in his chest, her breath ragged and uneven. “Lucian... I thought I had lost you. I thought...” Her voice trailed off, too overcome to speak.

Lucian held her tightly, his own relief flooding over him. He had saved her. But the cost had been high. He looked toward the open window where Michael had fallen. The darkness outside seemed to hold an eerie silence, the only sound the rain as it continued to pour in sheets.

Isla pulled back slightly, looking up at him with wide, tear-filled eyes. “What happened? Where is he?” Her gaze flickered to the window where Michael had fallen.

Lucian’s jaw tightened. “He’s gone—he fell through the window,” he said quietly. “He won’t hurt you ever again.”

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Isla’s eyes locked with his, and Lucian’s heart swelled with something more than relief—it was love. The love he had been denying for so long. It had always been there, deep within him, and now it was undeniable. Lucian cupped her face gently in his hands. “I will never leave you again, Isla. Never.”

Tears spilled from her eyes, and she nodded, her lips trembling as she whispered, “I love you, Lucian.”

And in that moment, with everything that had happened between them—the pain, the betrayal, the heartache—they both knew that they had found their way back to each other. Against all odds, they would have their happiness. Together. He would never let her go again.

The journey from the derelict gamekeeper's cottage to Thornridge Hall was a quiet one. Lucian had insisted on escorting Isla back to the safety of his estate, where the shadows of her recent ordeal could be replaced with the warmth of his protection and love. The ride had seemed far too long, and though Isla's body had been exhausted, her mind raced with the events of the past hours. Lucian had held her close, his arm never leaving her side. She could feel the strength in his embrace, but more than that, she could feel the love he held for her—the same love she had spent years trying to suppress, only for it to grow stronger, more undeniable, with each passing moment.

They arrived at Thornridge Hall just as the sun began to rise, painting the sky with hues of gold and crimson. The air was crisp and filled with the scents of the estate: pine from the forests, the fresh earth after the rain, and the undeniable fragrance of home—his home. He helped her down from his horse, his hand strong as he guided her into the great hall. The familiar warmth of the estate greeted them, and Isla's heart felt a strange mix of comfort and something else—hope, perhaps.

“I will take you to a guest room,” Lucian said softly, his voice a soothing balm after the chaos they had just endured.

Isla nodded, grateful for the unspoken care he offered. She was not afraid, not here, not with him. Not anymore. As they reached her room, Lucian paused at the door, turning to her with a look that sent her pulse racing. “Isla,” he murmured, his voice low and steady. “There is so much I want to say, but right now, I only want you to know how much I love you. How much I have always loved you.”

Her breath hitched at the intensity of his gaze, the depth of the emotion he conveyed without a single word. Isla stepped closer, her heart a maelstrom of emotions—fear, hope, love—and all of it for him. “I love you too, Lucian,” she whispered, her voice shaking with the weight of everything she had held inside for so long. She closed the distance between them, her lips meeting his in a kiss that felt like a promise, an unspoken vow that had been waiting to be fulfilled for years.

The kiss deepened, as though the world outside of them had ceased to exist. Lucian's hands roamed to her waist, pulling her close, while she melted against him, her own hands tangled in his hair. The kiss was not just one of passion; it was a release, a letting go of all the barriers they had both built between them. It was everything they had never said and everything they had always felt.

With a soft sigh, Lucian pulled away just enough to look into her eyes. "I have waited for this for so long, Isla. I have hurt you. I know that. And I will never forgive myself for it, but I will spend the rest of my life making up for it."

Isla's heart clenched at the sincerity in his voice. She could see the remorse, the regret in his eyes, but more than that, she saw the unshakable love he had for her. "Lucian," she whispered, her hands resting against his chest. "I am not the same woman I was before. I can't go back to that." His brow furrowed in confusion, and Isla smiled softly, running her fingers over his jawline. "I do not want to go back to that young girl I once was either," she said, her voice full of warmth and affection. "I want us to move forward, together."

Lucian nodded, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Then we will."

With a gentle urgency, Lucian kissed her again, his hands wandering to the ties of her gown, his touch reverent, as though asking permission. Isla, with trembling fingers, helped him, her heart racing in anticipation. She wanted him, as much as he wanted her. The need, the longing they had both fought against for so long, was now too much to resist. The gown slipped from her shoulders, and Lucian's breath caught at the sight of her, his hands immediately skimming over her skin as though he couldn't get enough. Isla responded eagerly, her hands working deftly to remove his coat, her fingers tracing the broad muscles beneath his shirt.

In moments, they were both undressed, their bodies close, skin to skin. The world outside seemed to disappear, and all that existed was the feel of his touch, the warmth

of his body pressed against hers, the sound of their breath mingling together. He trailed kissed down her body, pausing to give particular attention to her breasts. He drew one taut nipple into his mouth. She moaned as pleasure spiraled through her body. Lucian tweaked her other nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Isla writhed beneath him. She had forgotten how wonderful being with him like this could be.

He lowered himself to settle between her legs. When he spread her thighs she knew what he intended. This was not their first time together and he had kissed her like this before. She recalled that pleasure and braced herself for the intensity. He slid his tongue over her sensitive flesh and then sucked her into his mouth. She screamed as her release overtook her, and then he was pressing his arousal into her, filling her. Each stroke, each thrust, taking them toward bliss together.

As they made love, the connection between them deepened. It was not just physical; it was emotional, spiritual. In that moment, they were two halves of the same soul finally reunited, as though the years of heartache and separation had never happened. Afterward, Lucian held her close, his arms wrapped around her as though he could keep her from ever slipping away. Isla rested her head against his chest, her heart still racing. She could hear the steady beat of his heart, the rhythm of the man she had loved for so long.

“I want forever with you, Isla,” Lucian whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “You are the one I’ve always been meant to be with. Will you marry me?”

The words hung in the air, both a question and a promise. Isla lifted her head to meet his gaze, her heart swelling with love. “Yes,” she breathed, her voice thick with emotion. “I will marry you.”

Lucian’s smile was all-encompassing, full of joy and relief. “I will never hurt you again, Isla. You are mine, and I am yours.”

She smiled, her heart full as she kissed him once more, her fingers tracing the lines of his jaw. “And I will love you, forever.”

In that moment, the world outside of them seemed to vanish. There was only the two of them, their love, and the promise of a future together—a future that would be built on trust, on forgiveness, and on the love they had fought so hard to find again.

One year later...

The sun was beginning to set, casting a soft glow across the rolling hills that surrounded Harwood Hall. The grand estate, so familiar to the Thompson sisters, was peaceful. The air was warm with the scent of summer flowers and the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze. Inside, however, there was a quiet sense of nostalgia in the air as three sisters gathered together in the drawing room, each holding a piece of the past in their hands. They were there to have dinner with their father. Their respective husbands had joined the earl in the library for drinks before the meal—leaving the women alone to have a visit with each other.

Maeve, Isla, and Athena sat side by side, their hearts intertwined by love, loss, and the path they had traveled together. In front of them lay the faded leather-bound journal that had once been their mother's most intimate possession—a journal that had guided them through trials, heartaches, and, eventually, to the love they had all so desperately needed in a matter of months.

Isla looked down at the journal, her fingers lightly tracing the embossed initials on the cover. "It's hard to believe it has been a little over a year since we found this journal," she said softly, her voice tinged with emotion. "And in that year, we each found our way to happiness and love. All of it started with this."

Athena, now a radiant mother of twin boys, smiled gently. Her eyes had softened in the light, joy reflected in them. "I've often thought about how much our mother's words helped us find our way. How she spoke of love, of family, and of the strength in following our hearts."

Maeve, sitting beside her sisters, nodded. She was no longer as quiet or as reserved as she had once been. Her marriage to Viscount Pemberton had brought her a sense of completeness she had never imagined. She had found a love she had and a renewed sense of hope, and her paintings had become even more exquisite in the past year—that delight reflected on canvas. “I think we’ve all found the happiness she spoke of,” Maeve said quietly. “Perhaps even more than we expected. But now, it feels like it’s time to let go.” She rubbed her extended belly—her first child would be born in a few short months.

Isla looked at her two sisters, a deep sense of peace settling over her. The heartache of the past, the pain of lost love, had been replaced by something far stronger: the love of family. And love, she realized, had always been the answer. Her mother had been right all along. “I’m ready,” Isla said softly, her voice filled with quiet conviction. “We don’t need this anymore. The journal. It helped us, and it will always be a part of our past. But we have our future now.” She had her own secret to share, the child that she would have with Lucian safely in her womb. She would be a mother not long after Maeve gave birth.

Maeve smiled and gently took the journal in her hands, feeling its weight—the weight of the memories it held and the lessons it had imparted. “We’ve made our own choices. We’ve walked our own paths. And now, we can look forward with open hearts.”

Together, the three sisters rose from their seats, walking to the attic door that had been left untouched since Maeve had found those gowns for the masquerade. The attic had once been a place where memories were stored, a place of bittersweet recollection, but today it felt different. Today, it was a place of closure. They would store their mother’s journal, along with their childhood, and move forward into a future filled with love and the knowledge that they had been guided by their mother’s wisdom all along.



Isla stepped into the attic first, her footsteps quiet on the old wood floor. Maeve and Athena followed, and together they reached the small wooden chest where so many of their belongings had been kept—treasures from the past that were no longer needed, but would never be forgotten. Maeve opened the chest, and Isla placed the journal gently inside. As she closed the lid, a quiet peace settled over her. “She would be proud of us,” Isla whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

“She would,” Athena agreed, her voice soft with love. “And I think she knows we are all exactly where we are meant to be.”

“Now we should join our husbands,” Athena said, then laughed. “They’re likely overwhelming father.”

Maeve laughed too. “If any of them are testing father’s patient it would be my husband.” She rolled her eyes. “Brooks can be a bit much...”

Isla smiled. “That is true,” she agreed. “Though he is quite charming.”

“And that is what saves him every time,” Maeve said, a little exasperated but that smile never fell from her face.”

“We all know that Roman is the reasonable one.” Athena shrugged. “We balance each other out.”

“That you do,” Isla said. “We all found our perfect matches, didn’t we?”

“That we have,” Athena said. She glanced around the room. “And mother helped us find them. It still amazes me how much her journal rescued us and led us to love.” She smiled, almost serenely. “I only hope I am as wonderful a mother as she was, even after she could no longer be with us.”

“You will be,” Maeve reassured her. “We all will. We have her words to guide us. Always.”

With that, the three of them stood in silence for a moment, hands linked together, a bond that no distance, no time, could ever break. As they descended the stairs from the attic, the soft, golden light of the evening poured through the windows of the house, as though the world itself was reminding them of all the love that had come before—and all the love still to come. The future was theirs, and in that future, their mother’s spirit would always be with them, guiding them with love that never truly faded. With hearts full, the sisters moved forward—knowing that no matter what, love would always be enough to light their way.

One

Lady Lilah Stevens was on a mission. One of great importance. At least to her... A certain viscount, one who shall remain unnamed, had ruined her. Not by actual deed, but by his damning words. If possible, she would have throttled him for being so inconsiderate. The reprobate had been foxed and slurring his words when he'd told his tale. But of course his word was above approach. Because he was a man. A man's word had to be trusted. A wallflower of little import? Not in the least...

She had hated being a wallflower, but there had been some comfort in being overlooked. Lilah had understood her place—even if it was undesirable. No lady wished to be relegated to the sides of the dance floor. But she had accepted her unwanted identity. Lilah had been a wallflower. Emphasis on the had been part. Now she was the infamous wallflower. They still referred to her in her wallflower capacity, but with loud whispers and how she had taken liberties upon that infernal viscount that no proper young lady should have.

As if she would ever... She shuddered. Lilah did not want a scoundrel for a husband. She would much rather become a spinster and live alone for the rest of her days. If she married, she wanted to at least have mutual respect between her and her husband. How could she hold the Viscount of Harcrest in high regard when he didn't seem to have any appreciation for himself. He did not live a respectable life, and he certainly did not care how his actions affected others. In short, he was a complete arse that deserved to be punished.

Which was the reason she was about to meet with her fellow wallflowers. They had made a pact. One that would ensure that each of their acts of revenge would be

successful. They were all wallflowers. No one noticed them. That was the beauty of being a wallflower, or at least it had been. Now that she was notorious everything had changed. Lilah did not have the luxury of hiding in the shadows any longer. She would have to depend upon her friends to aid her cause.

They were meeting at Hyde Park. Not during the fashionable hour of course. They did not wish for anyone to witness their gathering. A wallflower might go unnoticed, but someone might comment upon Lilah being in the park. Many gentlemen kept their distance from her when she was in their general vicinity. As if she might accost them in some fashion. Because of this she'd become resigned. There was no helping her situation now. Lilah would be a spinster, and she'd accept that fate. After, she taught that bloody viscount a much-needed lesson anyway.

"Must you walk so fast," Cora, her sister, asked, a little breathlessly. "I can barely keep up with you." Cora was older than her by a year and also a fellow wallflower. This wasn't her first season, and it may be her last as well. Unfortunately, Lilah's new reputation flowed downhill to the rest of her family. She still had not spoken directly to her father about the incident.

"My apologies," Lilah said. "I'm just so...errr." She opened and closed her fingers into fists. "I want to hit him." It would not solve anything, but it would feel good to release some of her pent up frustration.

It had been merely a sennight since he's callously ruined her. She still wondered why he'd done it. What had she done to him to make him think speak so ill of her? If only she could understand his reasoning. Perhaps then she might not be quite so angry with him. Lilah considered it... No, she would still be livid. But that didn't mean she did not still wish to understand the rotten scoundrel's motives.

"And you have every right to that anger," Cora said. "We all understand it. However, please do not take it out on me. I'd like to be able to walk home later. At this pace,

I'll be exhausted before we reach the park." Cora tucked a strand of her black hair behind her ear. Her brown eyes were filled with concern as she gazed upon her. She was correct. Cora hadn't been the one to cause her harm and she shouldn't take it out on her.

Lilah sighed and slowed her pace. They didn't live too far from Hyde Park, and before her reputation had been ruined, they had gone there during the fashionable hour often. They enjoyed going to the park. Now it was almost impossible for them to go anywhere without whispers following them. "I truly am sorry," she told Cora. "I'll endeavor to not take out my frustrations on you. Forgive me?"

"Of course, sister dear," Cora told her. "I'm here for you. As is Victoria, Emma, and Selena."

Emma was the true surprise. Her brother was the blasted viscount that had ruined Lilah's good name. She had fully expected Emma would bow out on this scheme. But she'd said her brother should have known better and someone should show him the error of his ways. For that reason alone, Lilah adored the woman. As wallflowers, they had all known each other existed. One didn't hug a wall all season and not notice the rest of the ladies being ignored. However, they hadn't truly talked until that fateful evening of Lilah's ruination. In was then they had made their pact. They all had reasons for enacting a plot of revenge, and by the end of the year, they intended to see them fulfilled.

Lilah's would be first. Depending on its success, they would move on to the next wallflower. They still had not decided which one of the ladies would be next. After Lilah got her revenge, they would make that decision. "I'm grateful to all of you."

"I still cannot believe Lord Harcrest said all of that." She shook her head and sighed. "And we have already discussed this ad nauseam. We don't need to do so again. I'm sorry."

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Lilah told her. “You’re not the one that wronged me.” They reached Hyde Park and headed to the area they had agreed to meet. There was a tall shade tree at the back of the park close to the Serpentine that would be perfect. It was only noon, and they had much to discuss before the fashionable hour. They did not wish to be in the park when everyone started to make their appearances. They had roughly four hours. Not that she thought they would need that long.

“There they are,” Cora said, and gestured in the other ladies direction.

Victoria, Selena, and Emma were sitting on a blanket under the tree. They had brought a picnic basket so they could eat while they talked. Lilah’s stomach growled as if on cue. She hadn’t realized how hungry she had gotten. Her anger had masked it as they walked.

They hurried over to the other women. They had brought a blanket as well. Cora spread it out, and they both sat down on it. “Now that we are all here,” Lilah began. “Has anyone thought about what we should do?”

“I have,” Emma said. She twirled a stray blonde lock as she stared at Lilah. “It is the only thing I can think of that would both terrify and anger my brother.”

That piqued Lilah’s interest. “And what would that be?” Whatever it was, she would see it happen. That man had to pay for what he’d done to her.

“He needs to wed,” Emma said.

Lilah wrinkled her nose in displeasure. She’d thought she’d do anything, but apparently she had a line she would not cross. “I am not marrying your brother.”

Emma laughed. “And it’s understandable that you do not wish to be tied to him

forever. What he did to you is bloody awful.” She held up a hand. “But please listen to what I have to say. You don’t have to be the one marrying him. But we can ensure that he is trapped, nonetheless.” She shrugged nonchalantly. “My brother should have married by now. In a way, I’m doing him a favor.”

“And who would the unlucky lady be?” She wasn’t certain she wanted to tie any woman to him, and she didn’t question Emma’s last statement either—that was none of her business. What woman would deserve to be his wife? Lilah couldn’t think of one. “And why is this a deserving punishment?”

“Because he has boasted on several occasions he will never marry,” Emma said. “For any reason and to any woman. He has even said that he didn’t care if he was caught in a scandalous fashion with a woman. He would not marry her.” Emma sighed. “He has a duty to his title; however, he refuses to accept that and find a wife.”

“Then how are we going to force his hand?” Lilah wasn’t so certain this would work.

“That’s easy,” Selena said. “We put a woman in his path that he can’t refuse.”

“But Emma just said...” Lilah was so confused.

“My brother may think he can refuse any woman, but we all know that isn’t true. There are ladies that have fathers or older brothers that will ensure he’s at the altar and saying those vows.”

She was right. “Unless he wants to find himself in a duel of some sort, that is true.” Lilah turned toward Emma. “Would he risk that?”

She shook her head. “My brother’s honor is questionable, and he values his life too much to risk it in a duel. He’d rather marry than face death.” Emma grinned. “And that will be his undoing. Truly, this is for the best. For everyone.” She had a faraway

expression on her face that made Lilah wonder what Emma hadn't said.

Lilah didn't have a father or brother willing to fight a duel for her. Her father was too old to take such a risk. Not that she wanted to marry Lord Harcrest. Lilah wanted the impossible—her bloody reputation back. “Then what is the plan?”

“And that's my cue,” Victoria chimed in. Lady Victoria Spencer had brown hair and hazel eyes. She was curvy and beautiful. “I have convinced my brother we must have a house party, and only the best guests are invited.” She popped a chunk of cheese into her mouth and chewed. “Which means you will all be there, of course.” She motioned toward Emma. “And that scoundrel brother of yours will have to escort you there. So, he'll be in attendance.”

“Indeed,” Emma agreed.

“Now,” Lady Selena Brooks began. “As to Lord Harcrest's potential bride.” Her blue eyes gleamed with amusement. Her golden-brown hair was pulled into an elegant chignon, not a hair out of place. She was a true beauty and her wallflower status shocking to them all. Unless one knew about the dire straits her family had been in. Her brother had turned the tables on their fortune, but that hadn't saved Selena in time when she was launched into society. She had a dowry now that rivaled some of the wealthier families, but she didn't let that secret out. If a man only wanted her for her money, then she wanted nothing to do with them. “I have a few ladies on my list that will be perfect. One is the daughter of a duke and is beyond haughty. I cannot count how many times she's turned up her nose at me.”

“As the daughter of a duke she'll have a good dowry. Does Lord Harcrest deserve a rich wife?” Cora asked.

“Normally I would agree with you,” Selena said. “But for this to work, we have to pick a lady that will be formidable, and that her family will protect at all costs. That



means money. For some, their reputation means more than their coffers. Well, to a certain extent.”

“That’s true,” Lilah said. “It’s not a perfect solution, but you know either way the viscount will hate being forced to wed anyone.”

“Absolutely,” Emma said. She turned her head thoughtfully, as if considering her next words carefully. “Trust me. My brother will fight this to the bitter end. But when it is all said and done, he will not have a choice. He’ll accept his fate, even if he resents it.”

“So is this what we’re going to do?” Victoria asked. “I’ve already insisted on this house party. My brother didn’t like the idea, but he’s agreed.”

“I believe it is our best choice,” Lilah said. “It doesn’t seem enough, though.”

“Well,” Emma began. “We can also slowly torture him while we are at the house party. Play little tricks on him. You know, like small children do to their governess.” She grinned mischievously. “I’ve always wanted to play pranks on him.”

“Oh,” Cora said. “I like that. We will have to come up with a few awful things to do to him. I’ll start a list when we return home.”

That was Cora, always making lists. “You all are the best. Thank you for helping me with this,” Lilah said, gratitude evident in her tone as she spoke.

“It is our pleasure,” Selena told her. “He deserves this. He will learn that it is never a good idea to ruin a woman. Especially without cause.”

“One would hope...” Lilah blew out a breath. “But clearly, he’s not one that thinks before he acts. He may never truly learn anything.”

Emma shrugged. “He will pay for his actions. We’ll have to accept that and live with it.” Her lips twitched. “And I’ll start this out with something that will guarantee to get his attention. It’ll lay the groundwork for our little scheme.”

“And what is that?” Selena asked.

“He started a scandal that spread rumors faster than we can blink,” Emma said. “We’re going to use that to our advantage. Give a few of the more reliable gossips something to that’ll gladly spread around.”

“What did you have in mind?” Lilah asked with interest.

“Let it be known that one Viscount Harcrest is ready to wed and that all interested parties be prepared to present themselves for consideration.” She winked. “That way when he is caught *in flagranti delicto* at the house party it won’t be such a surprise to him that a lady tried to catch his interest.”

“That’s rich. Considering how much he’s made it known he’ll never marry.” Emma grinned. “I like it. This is going to be fun.” She rubbed her hands with glee. “I know, I’m terrible. This is my brother we’re discussing. It really is for his own good, though. The title does need an heir and he will never do it on his own. I’m helping. Truly.”

“You do not need to convince us,” Selena said, then shrugged. “We all want this to succeed.” She grinned too. “And you’re right. This is going to be fun.”

She nodded. This was what they were going to do. They had a plan. Now they just had to ensure it all went smoothly. In approximately a fortnight, the viscount would understand how wrong he’d been. At least that was the hope...

Two

Henry Collins, the Viscount of Harcrest, scrolled into his club whistling as he walked. His day could not have gone better if he'd actually tried to make it so. He'd stayed up all night gambling in a den of iniquity that had proved profitable.

Now that he'd had a little bit of rest, he was about to meet with a few of his friends. This club wasn't filled with everything sinful, but it still catered to gentlemen that wished to gather free of scrutiny. He preferred the other type of place, but this club had its uses.

He walked into the backroom to find four of his closest friends already there waiting for him. They were at a table drinking what he could only assume was brandy. The Earl of Foxcroft lifted his glass and took a long swig. Before his father died and he'd inherited the title, he'd been one of Henry's closest friends. He would have been right by his side as they spent the night in every sinful activity they could find. That had changed when he had to take on so much more responsibility. It didn't help that his father had left the earldom near penniless and creditors nearly knocking down his door. Henry had to commend Foxcroft for pulling his family from the brink of ruin.

"Hello all," Henry said as he took a seat at the table. He turned to the Earl of Thornton on his left. "Surprised to see you here, Ole' chap," he said. "I thought you abhorred the club."

"I hate a lot of things that I'm forced to endure," Thornton said dryly. He ran a hand through his black hair, leaving it disheveled. "But even I have to leave my house from time to time." He gestured toward the Duke of Castlebury. "His Grace thought

this should be one of those times.”

The duke glared at Thornton. They had similar black hair, but their eyes were different. Where Thornton’s were green, Castlebury’s were blue. Rumors suggested they were truly brothers, and that Thornton was one of Castlebury’s father’s by-blows. No one knew for certain, but Castlebury’s connection to him didn’t help the rumors from spreading. They were too close, and some questioned Thornton’s right to the earldom. His father never disowned him. He held the title—even if most believed he was actually a bastard. Henry had never asked. He didn’t think it was his business, although he did have a bit of curiosity. He wouldn’t turn the information away if it presented itself. Though he did know that Thornton’s father had always been hard on him and that was one reason he didn’t socialize much.

“Thornton spends too much time in his study brooding,” Castlebury said. “You would think he’d have some motivation to enjoy life now that he’s able to.”

“Because my father’s dead?” Thornton asked. “Let’s all toast to the rotten old codger,” he said as he lifted his glass of brandy. “May he continue to burn in hell.” Definitely no love lost there...

The Marquess of Ardmore shook his head. “Mate,” he began. “I feel for you, but at least you no longer have to live with the man.” He wasn’t even certain why Ardmore had decided to join them. It took a lot to catch his interest. This club wouldn’t normally top that any of the marquess’s lists.

“Why are you with us this evening Ardmore,” Henry asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. “Nothing more appealing for you this evening?”

He sighed. “You’re as uncouth as usual, Harcrest.” Ardmore sipped his brandy. “But if you must know, I do have another engagement.” His lips twitched in amusement. “But not until much later. Until then, you chaps will have to suffice.”

“How kind of you to grace us with your presence?” Henry rolled his eyes.

“By the way,” Ardmore began. “I’m having a house party in a fortnight. You’re all invited.” He said it so nonchalantly it gave Henry pause. The marquess did not have house parties.

“And why would we want to attend a house party?” The duke drawled. “That sounds positively dreadful.” His tone suggested it would be far more than that, and he would rather not attend.

“As His Grace has so eloquently stated,” Henry said. “House parties are not the sort of entertainment we seek out.”

“That is why this one will be far more interesting than most,” Ardmore said, and then winked. “Would I have a party that promised nothing but ennui?”

Well, when he put it that way... “I’ve never known you to be dull.” The marquess did have a certain reputation.

“Is this a house party that promises debauchery?” Henry would absolutely attend, if that were the case. It had been an age when he’d attended a party of that sort.

“Of course not.” Ardmore rolled his eyes. “My little sister will be there. That’s not the proper environment for a young lady.” He sighed. “But I will have some private entertainments at a hunting lodge on my property. For those with more...discerning tastes.”

Henry grinned. “All right,” he said in a jovial tone. “You’ve convinced me.” He was curious enough to go and discover what the marquess had planned.

“I’ll consider it,” the duke said. “Depends on what other entertainments are available.

I rarely enjoy the country.”

“Do you enjoy anything?” Thornton asked?

“Do you?” Castlebury retorted. They glared at each other for several excruciating moments.

“Well,” Foxcroft said. “Now that we’ve moved past that uncomfortable exchange...” He lifted his brandy and gestured toward the marquess. “I’ll be there. Whether these two leave London or not. So you’ll have two of us at your private party while the rest of your guest take over your house.”

Ardmore laughed. “That aspect of the party is all Victoria,” he said. “My sister decided that she wanted to gather with a few of her friends and coerced me into this party. She’s inviting others, so it should be a grand affair.” He rolled his eyes. “It’ll be a pain, but if you’re all there, it will be more tolerable.”

“Well,” Foxcroft said. “If the betting book is accurate, it should be an opportunity for Harcrest here.”

“I don’t follow,” Harcrest said. What the blazes was Foxcroft going on about? “What’s in the betting book?” He had a terrible feeling he would not like what he had to say next.

“That you’re officially in the market for a wife,” Foxcroft said.

Henry blinked. Several times. Did he just say...

“You are?” The duke spun to look at him. “Since when?”

“I bloody well am not,” Harcrest sputtered out. “What the bloody hell... That cannot

be correct.”

He had to go take a gander at that book. Who would have started that rumor? Why was it even in the betting books? Whoever had done this was going to hear from him. This was horrid. If the ton at large heard that rumor... Then he'd be pursued for the purpose of marriage. He shuddered in horror. He had carefully cultivated his reputation to avoid that.

“I assure you,” Foxcroft said in a smooth tone. “It is definitely in the books. The wagers vary in what they think will happen. The odds do not favor you my friend. Most believe that some adventurous young lady will win your hand by the end of the summer.”

“Bollocks,” he cursed. “I don't understand any of this. Why are they even making these bets?”

“Perhaps it has something to do with your drunken behavior at that ball a sennight ago.” It was almost the end of the season and a lot of families would be returning to the country for the summer. That was probably why Ardmore was having his house party in a fortnight.

“Again, I do not understand. As I was inebriated, my memory is lacking. Please explain.” Harcrest rubbed his temples. Perhaps he should stop imbibing so much. No, that wouldn't solve anything, and he enjoyed brandy.

“You claimed a pretty little wallflower tried to strip you and have her wicked way with you.” Ardmore wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “And that she was quite determined in her pursuit.”

“A wallflower?” That also seemed implausible. “Why would a wallflower try to take off my clothes?” And more importantly, what was her name? Was she indeed pretty,

and if so, why was she a wallflower? He had more questions than answers.

“That is the question on almost everyone’s lips,” Foxcroft said.

“I cannot help wondering myself,” the duke drawled. “I’ve seen Lady Lilah Stephens. She is indeed pretty. On the poorer side, but lovely nonetheless. Not as pretty as some of the other debutantes this season. Probably why she was mostly ignored. There were far more appealing prospects. That is, if one was in the market for a wife.”

“Which you are not,” Henry supplied.

“Quite true, mate,” he said. The duke downed his brandy and then poured more into his glass. “Much like we all believed of you. But since that night a sennight ago many have wondered if perhaps you were just looking for a reason to claim the chit. I mean, you ruined her with your tale. Are you certain you do not recall this?”

He frowned. He didn’t even recall going to a ball. Could it have happened? Why would he tell everyone that she’d accosted him if she hadn’t actually done it? “Do you know whether or not it was true?”

“That’s what everyone believes,” Foxcroft said. “However, I do not know if Lady Lilah Stephens actually did the deeds you claimed.” He shrugged. “No one witnessed these acts. But your words did enough damage that the lady is practically ostracized.”

“I don’t remember...” Henry rubbed his hand over his face. If he did say all of it, and the lady did not in fact try to remove his clothes... What had he done? He had to find out if it was true and somehow fix it. The lady should not be shunned because of his drunken stupidity. However, if she had tried to do as he claimed, perhaps she has gotten what she deserved.

“My sister is friends with her,” Ardmore said in a casual tone. “I didn’t like it, but she



plans on inviting her to the house party. You can rest assured that she won't even come close to you during the party." He met Henry's gaze. "The lady hates you and will avoid you. There might be other ladies that would willingly trap you into marriage, but Lady Lilah won't be amongst their ranks."

"Well, hell...." He had a lot to make amends for, apparently. "I don't even know her. Why would I say all of that?"

"I cannot say with any certainty," Foxcroft told him. "We have all wondered it ourselves." He motioned between himself, Ardmore, the duke, and Thornton. "But the real question is. Are you really looking for a wife?"

"No," he said emphatically. "That has not changed. If you want to place a wager, then I'd bet against everyone else."

"Oh, I already placed my wager," Foxcroft said. "I am leaning toward you, finding yourself leg shackled. There will be some determined young lady that makes it her mission to be your wife, and you'll find yourself in a neat little parson's trap."

"You're an arse." Henry glared at him.

"But I'm right," he said. "The remaining unmarried ladies after this season's end will look at you as their last chance. They will circle you like you're their prey and it's their last meal."

He shuddered. "God..." What an image that was in his head now. "Maybe I shouldn't attend this house party after all."

"Awfully cowardly of you," the duke said, then laughed. "But that is to be expected."

"You would hide if you were in a similar position," Henry exclaimed.

“I am already,” the duke told him. “Every damn day. It doesn’t matter how much I claim that I do not wish to wed. Some young lady with high aspirations of becoming a duchess will get a grand idea of how to trap me or make me love her. It’s the curse of being a duke.” He shrugged. “You could only live on that awful reputation of yours for so long. This was bound to happen. It was only a matter of time.”

Henry hated that his friend was right. But that did not mean he had to like it. “Well,” he said. “I guess I’ll still attend. However, I have lost any interest in doing anything more this evening. If you’ll pardon me, I am going home.” He would drown his sorrows in his own brandy in the safety of home. Then he’d ponder all the mistakes he had made and decide what he should do next. What a bloody mess... “Good evening.” With those words, he stood and left his club. His mood soured, and his mind troubled.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:52 pm*

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 ten and two, 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 a 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 turn 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 then 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 back 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.