



Rogue Wallflower: Lady Be Vengeful (Revenge of the Wallflowers #18)

Author: *Dawn Brower*

Category: Historical

Description: Lady Victoria Spencer has loved one man her entire life. Of course he never notices her. Why should he? She's a wallflower and no one pays the unwanted ladies much mind. Had she been a bit plump? Yes. Now that she no longer is, she has a plan. She's going to become a rogue wallflower, and only one man will do as her first lover.

David Brooks, Earl of Foxcroft had led a charmed life. Right up until his father died and he was forced to take responsibility for his family and the estate. His father had run the coffers nearly empty and it had been up to him to restore their fortune. He could have married an heiress, but felt that was a cowardly way out. Instead he focused on rebuilding his fortune. Now that he feels secure enough with his family's status he has decided to take a wife. Only one woman will do, but now that he can claim her, she would rather take a lover, not a husband.

All Victoria needs is a gentleman well versed in everything roguish to give her those lessons. David seizes upon the opportunity. He is more than willing to use her curiosity to his advantage. As long as in the end, he's the only rogue she wields her newfound skills on.

Total Pages (Source): 12

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

Lady Victoria Spencer dressed carefully for dinner. They were having guests. Important guests. All right, they were important to her. Well, one guest in particular. One that she had fallen in love with at the tender age of four and ten. That had been a mere two years earlier. She'd fallen hard and fast for Viscount Dalton. One of her brother's closest friends.

He was a gorgeous man with golden brown hair and exquisite blue eyes. They were a deep blue, like the sky as the sun was setting. Dark, brooding, and arresting when his gaze met hers. The viscount had always been kind to her. Even when others had looked down their noses at her. As if any of them were better than her. She scoffed at the very idea.

Victoria was a lady, just as they all were. She was the daughter of a marquess, and now the sister of one. Her father had passed a few years earlier, leaving her brother Blake with the title. But none of that mattered. Not when Lord Dalton was coming to dinner.

She put on her best gown. It was a soft blue silk that made her feel pretty. Even though she knew she wasn't close to being beautiful. She was too plump for conventional tastes. Her mother told her that in time, that weight would fall away. Victoria had her doubts. Her brown hair was twisted into a simple knot that made her round face more appealing. She might even be considered pretty. Maybe...

Satisfied she looked as good as she could, Victoria stood and slid on her slippers. She had to be down in the parlor when the earl arrived. She would not miss one moment of his visit. He rarely came to the abbey. She didn't even know why he was now. But he would be there for dinner, and perhaps longer. She hadn't bothered to ask Blake.

He wouldn't have told her either way. Her brother was five years older than her and had far more responsibilities than he'd should. He had a lot to handle at merely one and twenty.

Slowly, she walked down the hall. She heard voices echoing in the corridor. He was here. Already? Drat. Victoria had spent too much time worrying about how she looked. She'd missed speaking with him and laying her greedy gaze on his gorgeous face. Now she would have to wait until dinner to have any sort of conversation with him.

But she could listen... Eavesdropping was a terrible habit, but she couldn't resist the lure of his voice. It had a deep timber that sent shivers all over her. She could listen to him speak about anything. As long as he was saying words of any sort, she'd be riveted.

"I don't know what I am going to do," Lord Dalton said. She peeked through the crack in the door. She could almost make out his features. "It's just..." He sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face. "If I had known how badly he'd let it get, I'd have done something."

"What could you have done?" her brother asked him. She'd never heard Blake sound so, well, concerned. Not even after their father died, and he had to assume the title. "He would not have let you help. He was too prideful. You know that."

Lord Dalton sighed. Again. "I could have at least tried."

"My friend," Blake began. "Our fathers each made mistakes. Yours, unfortunately, was far graver than mine. It's our cross to bear to clean those up those disasters." He shook his head as if he still couldn't believe what he'd had to endure. "Yours will take longer, and you need funds. Lots of them."

“I have a small inheritance that my mother’s father left me. I can use it to rebuild the estate.” He sighed. “But you’re right. It will take time.”

“You could marry,” Blake suggested. Victoria wanted to scream that no, no, he could not. She was still far too young for marriage, and she hoped. Even when she shouldn’t, that she would be the woman he chose. Her heart was breaking.

“I could,” Lord Dalton said. “But I won’t. It wouldn’t be fair to bring a wife into this situation. I will rebuild my finances. Maybe afterward I can consider marriage.”

Blake chuckled. “You don’t want a wife. Let’s be honest,” he began. “Even if you had the funds to support one.”

Lord Dalton was silent for several moments. “You’re right. There’s no female I am acquainted with that I’d willingly marry.”

“But one day you will consider it?” Blake lifted a brow. “I doubt that as well.”

“We all have to consider it,” Lord Dalton said in a sullen tone. “We have our duty, don’t we?” He blew out a breath. “I could use a drink.”

“I’ve plenty of brandy to spare.” Blake stood and walked out of Victoria’s sight. He must be pouring them some brandy.

What had happened that had the earl so upset? Something about funds and his father. Was his estate in debt, or was it somehow worse than that? Victoria had so many questions...

Blake came back into view and handed a glass of brandy to Lord Dalton. He held up the glass. “A toast,” Blake began. “To the new Earl of Foxcroft. May you find your way out of your financial difficulties with ease and one day be free to avoid marriage

in the same fashion as the rest of us.”

Foxcroft? His father had died? Everything made a lot more sense now. He was no longer Lord Dalton a mere viscount. He was the earl now. No wonder he seemed so concerned. The estate must be in debt then...

“If Victoria wasn’t too young, you could have always wed her,” Blake said with a chuckle. “She has a lofty dowry that my father set aside for her eventual marriage.”

“I cannot marry your sister,” the new earl said. “That wouldn’t be fair to either of us. Even if she were older. We wouldn’t suit.”

“My sister isn’t good enough for the likes of an earl?” Blake raised a brow.

“I’m sure she will be perfectly acceptable wife,” Foxcroft said. She was having trouble remembering that he held the title now. “For someone other than me.” He sounded resigned.

Her heart broke a little at his words. He didn’t see her as a possibility. Somehow, she had always known that. Was it because she was too plump? Did he not see her as pretty enough? Why wasn’t she good enough for him? A tear fell down her cheek.

It was time to put away childish desires. The new Earl of Foxcroft may not want her, but that was all right. She no longer wanted him. She wanted something far better. Victoria wanted to be desired, to be loved, and above all, she wanted to be the one person someone refused live without. The Earl of Foxcroft could go to the devil...

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

Five years later...

Lady Victoria Spencer was tired of being a wallflower. She didn't want to live the rest of her life in the shadows and forgotten. She wanted to be known. To be seen. More importantly, she was tired of being known as that plump girl. Especially considering she was no longer plump. She hadn't been plump for at the past year. Not that anyone had noticed. They dismissed her during her first season, and her second. Now, at her third season... They'd forgotten about her.

She'd made a pact with some fellow wallflowers to get revenge. To enact a scheme that would make those that wronged them understand their error of judgment. The problem with her retribution? There was no one in particular she wanted revenge on. However, there was one man that she wanted above all others. He didn't want her, though. Had never wanted her. So perhaps the revenge she sought was simple enough. Victoria wanted him to see her and finally want her. But she wouldn't allow him to have her. Even though she loved him. He didn't feel the same way, and she'd never have him when he'd never loved her, could never love her.

The man in question? That hadn't changed in all the years she'd known him. The Earl of Foxcroft had owned her heart since she was four and ten, and now that she was one and twenty? Yes, she still loved him. But she was bitter about it now. Especially with spinsterhood looming on the horizon. She would never have his love, but perhaps she could have his passion. And she had a plan to get it from him. If he desired her... Yes, then she would allow him to have her, at least as a lover. It would have to be enough.

And it would be at this very house party... The one she planned to help Lady Lilah

Stephens ruin her quarry's life. Vengeance would be had, for her, and for her fellow wallflower. Lilah would have her revenge, and Victoria would have the Earl of Foxcroft. Her retribution would be of a different sort than Lilah's, and more pleasurable by far. If it all went as planned. Now she just had to take the first steps. She had to ensnare her prey and lead him down the path to sin.

Slowly, she walked into the game room. All of her brother Blake's, the Marquess of Ardmore, friends tended to congregate there. She adored Blake, but he could be too predictable. He thought he was smart and hid his true intentions from her. Like his little cabin in the woods. The one he intended to use as a hideout for scandalous activities.

Victoria grinned. She wanted to explore that cabin and soon. She strolled into the game room and glanced around. Surprisingly, it was empty. Where had they all run off to? She had to find the Earl of Foxcroft. None of this would work if she couldn't lure him into a scandalous liaison.

She turned to leave and ran into the very man she'd been searching for. Lord Foxcroft reached out and steadied her. "My apologies," she said, then glanced up to meet his gaze. He still had those mesmerizing blue eyes that held her captive, and damned if she didn't want to reach up and stroke his golden-brown hair. She itched to discover if it was as silky as it appeared. "I should have paid attention to where I was walking."

"No need to apologize," Lord Foxcroft said in an amiable tone. "I could have warned you I was here. It was clear you were preoccupied." He glanced into the room. "Were you looking for your brother?"

That was an easy excuse and she was grateful he gave it to her. But she had other reasons for coming into the game room. She tilted her head to the side and smiled. Victoria hoped she could convince him to aid her. Unfortunately, she expected that to

be difficult. He wouldn't easily volunteer for what she had in mind. "I did hope to discuss some things about the party with him." She told Lord Foxcroft. "But as you can see, he's not here."

"Yes," he replied. The earl turned his attention to her. "I had hoped to speak with him as well. I take it you are unaware of his location, then?"

Victoria shook her head. How was she going to ask him for what she wanted? What would work? She wanted him to show her passion. No, that wasn't entirely true. She wanted him to show her what it was like to be completely taken. To get so lost in someone that she didn't care that she'd be ruined afterward. But she couldn't put that into words. It wouldn't convince him to be her lover. "I never know what my brother is doing at any given time." She shrugged. "He doesn't bother to inform me. Though he should be somewhere on the estate."

Lord Foxcroft laughed. "It's a large estate."

"Very true," she agreed. "So, it might take a while to discover his whereabouts." She tilted her lips upward into what she believed to be a sultry smile. "Unless you are aware of someplace, he might specifically go."

The earl glanced away. She had a feeling he was thinking of that cabin. Did he know its location? Had he planned on participating in those activities Blake had arranged? "Not that I can think of." He turned his attention back to her. Those expressive blue eyes were once again pinned on her. "What did you need him for?"

"Nothing in particular." She was losing an opportunity. If she didn't ask him now when would she have another chance? "At least nothing that cannot wait."

They still stood close to each other. He had dropped his hands from keeping her steady, but neither of them had backed away. How had she not noticed that sooner?

“My lord,” she began. “I was wondering if I could ask your opinion on something.”

Victoria stepped away from him and went back into the game room. She needed some distance from him if she had any hope of saying the words. He followed her into the room and headed over to the bar Blake had stocked for the gentlemen in attendance. He poured himself a snifter of brandy and took a sip. “Wouldn’t your brother be a better option to give his opinion?” Lord Foxcroft wandered over to a nearby window and glanced outdoors. The rain continued to pour outside. It had been raining for a couple of days now.

“Not on this.” She grinned as she considered her next words. He should be afraid of what she intended, but he didn’t have a clue. “I doubt my brother would be interested in hearing about my amorous intentions.”

He spun around and faced her. “Pardon me,” he said, shock evident in his voice. “I couldn’t have heard that correctly. What amorous intentions.”

“Well,” she began. “I don’t have any specifically.” She strolled over to the bar and perused the selections. Whisky, brandy, rum... She smiled. No ratafia or sherry for the men. She had never tried any of these spirits. Perhaps she should. “But I would like to have a bit of fun. I’m considering my options.” Victoria turned to face him. “And I may also be viewing the gentlemen in attendance as potential lovers.”

He choked on his brandy and started to cough. “You cannot...” He coughed again. “That’s not...”

“Beg your pardon.” She blinked at him with an innocent expression. “Are you all right, my lord? You don’t look well.”

The earl set his glass down and strolled over to her. He managed to get himself under control and the coughing had seized. “You cannot take a lover.”

“Can’t I?” she said in that same guileless tone. “I’m a wallflower. Soon to enter spinsterhood. Why not take a lover?”

“Because...” He opened and closed his mouth several times. “You’ll be ruined.”

Victoria shrugged. “I will be,” she said earnestly. “You’re correct. But you need not worry about me. My brother will never turn me out and he’ll ensure I’m always taken care of.” She wandered around the room, laying all the seeds of her trap into place. “I want to know what it is like to be a gentleman. You probably don’t understand what I mean.”

“I don’t,” he said. “You can never truly know that.”

“I can to a certain extent.” She smiled whimsically. “A man can do as he pleases, take what he wants, explore all of his desires.” Victoria met his gaze. “He can control his money, go on wild adventures. Be a scoundrel and bed any woman that catches his fancy.”

“It’s not that simple,” Lord Foxcroft insisted.

“It is,” she insisted. “And that is what I want.” She smiled. “I’m going to be a rogue. The only rogue wallflower. I am not afraid to take what it is I truly desire.”

“You can’t.” Panic filled his voice. “I won’t allow it.”

She sighed. “It’s not up to you, my lord. I am a grown woman. One that can make decisions for herself.” This was far more thrilling than she could have imagined. “So, about what I wanted to ask you.”

“You wanted my opinion,” he began. “I’m giving it to you. This course of action is not wise. You will come to regret it. I am pleading with you. Don’t do this.”

“Why not?” Victoria needed to know his reasons. Did he want to compel her against this course because he cared about her? Did he want her for himself? Was he aiming to protect her?

“Because your brother is one of my closest friends, and by that extension, I care about you. He’ll be upset if you ruin yourself.”

She nodded. “I understand,” Victoria told him. She had her confirmation. He didn’t want her. Not the way she had hoped he would. Well then, there was only one option left to her. “It’s all about Blake.” Victoria would not be upset. She’d expected this. It still hurt, but it wasn’t a surprise. “It has nothing to do with what I want or need. You’re more concerned about him.”

“That isn’t true.” He took a step toward her. “I do care about you, too. I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret. I implore you to reconsider this.” He looked so stricken with this idea of hers to be a rogue. “And are we not friends as well? I don’t wish for my friend to be ruined.”

Victoria was so disappointed. She had hoped for a different outcome. She still had some hope, though. He might yet agree to help her. She just had to play this a little differently. He could be goaded into it. He might even do it in the name of protecting her. “I’ve had years to consider it.” She would not be changing her mind and he had to understand that. “I’ve been a wallflower every season since my debut. I could have another season. I might even find a husband. Chances are I will not.” She didn’t want to find just any husband. She’d rather be a spinster. “But let’s be honest,” she walked back over the bottles of liquor. Victoria trailed her fingers over each bottle. “I don’t want another season. I want to be as roguish as a gentleman is permitted. I will imbibe too much, gamble away my purse, and take as many lovers as I can seduce.” She tilted her lips into a wanton half smile. One that told him that she would not be swayed, and in fact, anticipated doing every last one of those things. “And I’ll do it on my terms.”

“It’s a mistake,” the earl said. He frowned. “I could tell your brother.”

“Go ahead,” she dared him. “Tell him that his little sister is headed down a scandalous path. He won’t believe you.” Victoria strolled over to him and trailed a finger over his chest. “Because I’ve always been a good girl and done as I should. He won’t want to believe I could be wicked.” She licked her lips and met his gaze. “But I promise you, I most definitely can, and I’ll embrace every single scandalous item my imagination can conjure.” She winked at him. “And you will be fortunate enough to have the privilege of witnessing all my sinful aspirations firsthand.”

With those words, she turned and left the game room. All her seeds were planted, and now she’d just have to wait to see if they took root. She had a feeling the earl would be seeking her out soon. Victoria only hoped that he’d volunteer to be her tutor in everything roguish.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

David Brooks, the Earl of Foxcroft, sat down in a chair and stared around the game room. Shock still permeated every inch of his body—and his mind? Well, his mind had frozen on one thing. She wanted to take a lover. A lover. A lover that would not be him. That fact kept spinning around inside of him, making him dizzy and out of control.

He'd thought he would have time, and perhaps he had. More time that he should have. She'd had three seasons while he sorted out the mess of his estates. Victoria should have married by now. He had breathed a sigh of relief as each season ended and she remained unwed. He'd have one more year. One more chance. But now all his chances had come to an end. Because if he didn't somehow convince her this was madness, then he'd lose her forever. She would never be his. He'd lose the one thing he wanted above anything else...

Not that he'd think of her as somehow soiled. He could never think ill of Victoria. But because she'd know he wasn't worthy of her. She would never look at him again, and he grieved that eventual loss. David had never been the man she deserved. That hadn't stopped him from wanting her.

At first, she'd been too young. Waiting for her hadn't seemed like much of a hardship. At least until he discovered his father had plunged them into debt. He'd pushed away any feelings he had because she should have a better man. But now that he could finally take a wife...

His last venture had paid off. Before coming to the house party, he'd discovered how much money he'd earned in that investment. The estate would more than flourish. His funds had been fully restored, he could marry. Finally. And there was only one thing

he needed to feel as if he'd finally accomplished all he'd set out to do. Victoria. She was his everything.

David could court her. He could claim her. Victoria could be his. But she didn't want a husband. She wanted a lover. Her desires were something that he could never have anticipated. And if her brother discovered her scheme... He couldn't be certain what the Marquess of Ardmore would do. If she took a lover? Ardmore would demand satisfaction. The man could end up dead. Did Victoria not understand what this might all lead to?

"What has you so preoccupied?" a man asked bringing David out of his reverie.

He glanced up and met the gaze of his friend, the Viscount of Harcrest. "Nothing of import." David pasted a smile on his face. He couldn't tell any of them about this. Not even Harcrest. Though he did trust the viscount. They had always been fast friends and had often found many sinful activities together. That was before. Two things could measure his life. Before his father died, and after. Before, he had been a dissolute rakehell. After he had become a responsible member of society, fallen on hard times. But determined. He would crawl out of ruin and become a better man. It was during that time he'd become acquainted with Victoria and come to love her.

David had met with Ardmore and discussed what he should do next. The marquess had a good head for business and he had trusted his advice. Through the past five years, he had met with him often, and he had also come to know Victoria well too. He'd spent many nights at their estate. She'd been a friend at first, and then she'd become more to him. That first year after his father's death had been his own kind of hell. He had his cousin Selena to consider, too. She had no one, save him. Both of her parents had died, and David's father had been her guardian. That had fallen to him upon his father's death. She had no dowry and that had led her to have a couple disastrous seasons too.

Harcrest studied him and then shook his head. “If you don’t wish to discuss it, then I will not insist.”

That was one of the things he had always liked about the viscount. Their friendship had been uncomplicated. “Is something vexing you?” he asked his friend.

“No,” Harcrest said. He ran a hand through his hair leaving those golden locks disheveled. “Well, that’s not exactly true. I just came from the conservatory.”

“Oh?” David frowned. “And that troubles you?”

“Of course not.” Harcrest chuckled. “It’s as lusciously supplied with plants as usual.” He waved a hand. “But there was a lady there when I entered.”

David frowned. That rumor the viscount was looking for a wife seemed to be at the root of his aggravation. “And did she try to convince you that she is the only woman for you?”

He shook his head solemnly. “The opposite, actually.” Harcrest wandered over to the bar and poured whiskey into a glass and took a deep swig. “Lady Lilah Stephens hates me. She’s probably the only woman in all of England that will have nothing to do with me.”

“Ah,” David said as the real dilemma dawned on him. The lady he’d found in the conservatory was the very one he’d ruined with his careless words. “Are you interested in her?”

Harcrest was silent for a few moments. He took another drink of his whiskey. While he remained quiet, David refilled his glass with brandy and returned to his seat. He had his own lady troubles. But he couldn’t share those. At least not yet.

“I like her,” Harcrest finally said. “And I am having difficulty believing I actually said all those awful things about her.” He took another swig of whiskey. “But I did. I have to accept that.”

“You cannot make her like you,” David said in a quiet tone. “You should leave her be.”

“I don’t think I can.” Harcrest furrowed his brow. “I’m drawn to her.”

David blew out a breath. He understood. God, he understood. “Then tread carefully, my friend. She’s like a skittish colt. You’re going to have to earn her trust.”

He nodded. “I know, and I intend to. I can be patient.” He shook his head and sighed. “We have a fortnight here. I think I can win her over in that time.”

Damn Harcrest. David laughed and it felt good to feel something resembling amusement. “Only you, my friend.” He stood and motioned toward the billiards table. “Should we play a game?”

“I was told Ardmore would be here to meet us.” Harcrest glanced around the room. “Is anyone else here?”

David shook his head. “Not yet,” he said. “Castlebury and Thornton are coming in a couple of days. It’s just us.” He frowned. “And of course Ardmore. Whenever he decides to grace us with his presence.”

“Then we should definitely play,” Harcrest said. He refilled his whiskey. “Should we make a wager?”

“If you wish,” David said. It didn’t matter to him either way. He had abstained from gambling as he was rebuilding his fortune. Now that he had the funds to do so he still

didn't do it often. Harcrest would not take advantage of him, though. They had been friends since they were lads at Eton.

"I'd rather just play if it's all the same to you." Harcrest set the balls on the table and took a cue stick off the rack. "No reason to make a wager."

"I agree." David grinned and took a cue stick to prepare to play.

They were well engrossed in the game when Ardmore finally joined them. He went over to the bar and poured his own glass of brandy. He seemed a little preoccupied. What could be bothering the marquess? David took his shot and missed. He stepped away from the table and grabbed his glass of brandy. "You look troubled," he said to Ardmore.

They were quite the trio. Harcrest was worried about Lady Lilah. David couldn't stop thinking about his conversation with Victoria, and now it appeared as if Ardmore had something bothering him as well. What happened to the rogues of the ton that they used to be?

"I'm concerned about Victoria," Ardmore said. That made the two of them... Did he discover her plans? It was on the tip of his tongue to ask. "I've had an offer for her hand."

That shocked him even more than her announcement she wanted to become a rogue wallflower. "You have?" David arched a brow. "Who?" He'd have to quietly discourage the man.

"It's someone from a neighboring town." He ran his hand through his hair. "Baron Herbert."

David frowned. "I don't believe I've made his acquaintance." Though he would make

it his mission to meet him and tell him to stay the hell away from Victoria. “Would it be a good match for her?”

“Of course not,” Ardmore nearly spat out the words. He let out a long sigh. “But she has no prospects. I worry about what will become of her.”

“Are you going to tell her about this baron?” Harcrest asked. “Shouldn’t she be able to decide for herself if she wants to accept him?” He finished his shot and won the game. David sighed. He was sorely out of practice in many things.

Ardmore glared at the viscount. “Oh hell, no.” David agreed with that sentiment... “He’s atrocious. He thought because she used to be a little plump and this was her third season, I’d gladly consent to the marriage. But he’s a beast and I’ve heard he beats his servants. How would he treat a wife if he does that?”

David’s jaw clenched. “Someone should take a flog to him and see how he likes it.” He put his cue stick away.

“Probably,” Ardmore agreed. “But that’s not our call to make.” He took a sip of his brandy. “But I can tell him to bugger off regarding my sister. I’d rather she remains unwed forever than be tied to that man.”

He should tell him about Victoria’s plans. If anyone could stop her, Ardmore could. David wouldn’t, though. He’d never betray her trust that way. “You should still tell her,” he found himself saying. “Just so she knows to avoid him.”

“You’re probably correct,” Ardmore said. “I don’t like it, but she would be angry with me if I kept this from her.” He finished his brandy and set the empty glass on a nearby table.

“I think your sister will be all right,” Harcrest said. “She’s in a better position than

some. She has you and you'll always protect her." He put his cue stick away. "Just keep an eye on her and ensure no one takes advantage of her."

Ardmore grinned. "Well," he began. "You may be right there." He sighed. "But I might need some help. With this house party, I cannot be with her the entire time."

"What do you suggest?" David asked.

"That if I cannot be there, one of you should." He met David's gaze. "I don't trust anyone as I much as I do you."

"You want me to watch her?" David said.

"I'm not a good bet," Harcrest told him. "I already have too many things to avoid at this house party." He gestured toward David. "He's friends with her, isn't he?" She trusts him."

"He's correct." Ardmore tilted his head to the side. "You should stay with her as much as you can. She'll listen to you."

David barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Victoria did not listen to him. If she did, she'd have given up that insane idea to become a rogue wallflower. She was heading toward trouble, though. Someone would have to ensure she didn't find herself in something she could not extricate herself from. "I'm not sure..."

"Don't be difficult," Ardmore said. "You know that you care about her. Please do this."

Did Ardmore not realize how he felt about Victoria? Of course, he cared about her. More than cared... He sighed, resigned to this. He was probably going to do it, anyway. This way he had Ardmore's blessing, in a way. "All right," he conceded.

“I’ll attempt to be with her as much as possible.” He met and held the marquess’s gaze. “But you do realize that will lead many to believe I am courting her.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “We know the truth,” he said, as if that didn’t matter at all. “And besides. Victoria considers you a friend. She won’t think anything of you being around.”

That was something he feared. He wanted her to see him as more than a friend. Though that gave him an idea. Something he should have considered sooner. Victoria wanted to be a rogue wallflower. But she wouldn’t have the first clue how to be one. He could offer her lessons, and then he could convince her that he should be her one and only lover. David could win her love.

David’s lips tilted upward into a wicked smile. One that he felt to his very bones. “We are friends,” he said, more to himself than Ardmore. “She won’t suspect a thing.”

“Excellent,” Ardmore said, misunderstanding what David meant with that statement. He intended to use that friendship to his advantage. “Then you’ll let me know if someone harasses her.”

“Of course,” David said in an absentminded tone. His mind was already whirling with possibilities. “If you’ll pardon me. There’s something I need to do.” More like he had to find Victoria and set his plans in motion. He whistled as he walked. Excitement filled him with each step, and he hope that he might win her heart if this all went as planned.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

Sometimes Victoria wondered why she had decided a house party would be the perfect place to enact any sort of revenge. Not because it wasn't a suitable location to launch her schemes, but because she had to actually plan the bloody house party. Then there was the entertainment portion of the gathering. The guests truly expected she would provide them with something to ease their apparently constant state of ennui. As if one had time to ensure they all didn't suffer from something so mundane as boredom. She nearly rolled her eyes at that very thought.

But, as she needed these insufferable guests for her plan to work, she now sat in the library, going over the myriad of details for the upcoming fortnight. She'd planned outdoor activities, praying the English weather would be favorable. Victoria glanced out a nearby window and grimaced. Which thus far it was most assuredly not. The rain had been coming down for days now, confining the guests to the abbey. Which made everyone miserable. Her most of all... Because if she had to hear one more complaint, she might just make them all leave, and that would not do. Everything would be ruined.

"Why are you pouting?" a man asked.

She held back a grin. Victoria recognized that voice. She had wondered how long it would take for him to search for her. "I do not pout, my lord." She glanced up and met Lord Foxcroft's gaze. "I'm merely concentrating on my task."

He strolled farther into the library and sat in a chair near the desk. She was going over the meal plans for the next several days. Now that they were confined to the abbey, more structured dining would be more optimal, though she still would have a breakfast buffet set out for the mornings. Every single one of her tasks were pure

tedium. Someone had to see to it, and she may not enjoy it, but it remained her responsibility.

“I had hoped we could have an honest conversation.”

She glanced up from her menu. “Regarding?” Victoria arched a brow. This should be interesting.

“About this notion you have to become a rogue,” he explained.

“Oh that,” she said, and waved her hand dismissively. “We don’t need to discuss that again.”

“So, you’ve decided against it?” he said. “Thank God,” he said in a relieved tone. “You had me concerned.”

Victoria held back a grin. “You’re a dear man,” she said. “And a good friend. You need not be concerned about me at all.” She settled back into her chair. “I’ve got it all in hand. I’ll be perfectly fine.”

“Fine with what?” He stared at her with an adorably befuddled expression on his gorgeous face. “Please tell me that you will not attempt to be a rogue wallflower.”

“Oh,” she said earnestly. “I most certainly am. I believe I already explained all of this to you in the game room.” Victoria tilted her head to the side. “Did you misunderstand something?”

“I believe I did,” he said. “Your inability to see reason.”

“I can see reason with acuity, my lord,” she told him in a haughty tone. “You don’t like that I am taking control of my life.” She folded her arms over her chest. “Just

because you do not agree with what I want doesn't mean it is unreasonable."

"It is unreasonable," he insisted. "A woman cannot be a rogue."

"Of course, a woman can be a rogue," she grinned. Victoria leaned on the desk and bit her bottom lip. "A woman can be anything she wishes. Well, that is, if society would loosen its strictness a bit, anyway."

"You honestly do not care if you're ruined?" he asked.

"I do not," she said. "There's no reason to save my virtue. It isn't doing me any favors. It's holding me back from what I truly desire."

"And that is?" He lifted a mocking brow. "To be a rogue?"

No, she almost said. She desired him, the fool. Victoria blew out a breath. "It's more than merely adapting the behaviors of a rogue." How could she make him understand? "I want to live my life." She motioned to the surrounding room. "Right now, I'm going over menus." She stared at him. "Do you have any idea how dreadful it is to plan a menu for a plethora of guests that only complain about everything?"

"What does this have to be with your desire to be a rogue?" he asked.

"That is what is expected of me." She sighed. "I'm a lady. Therefore, I cannot do anything other than mundane tasks. Otherwise, I might tax my delicate mind and swoon or some other nonsense."

"And by becoming a rogue you will disabuse everyone of that silly notion." He nodded. "So, you want to ruin yourself, so your intelligence is more highly regarded." He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "You do realize that is the most ridiculous notion I've ever heard from you."

“That’s a high standard, my lord.” She tilted her lips upward into a coy smile. “How do you qualify it as the most ridiculous notion I’ve ever had? I’m certain I’ve had many over the years.” Victoria should not find this so amusing, but her lips continued to twitch as she suppressed a giggle.

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t play coy with me, love,” he began. “Being a rogue wallflower will only lead you to heartache. I’m begging you to reconsider before you do something you’ll forever regret.”

“I understand,” she said in a solemn tone. But she was still quite amused. Victoria wanted him to take this seriously and laughter wouldn’t help her. “You don’t think I’d make a good rogue?” She took a deep breath. “Be honest. Is it because I’m still a little plump?”

“What?” He stared at her as if she’d said something even more ridiculous than she wanted to be a rogue wallflower. “You’re perfect. That has nothing to do with...” He sighed. “You’re beautiful. Surely, you know that.”

She would not blush. She. Would. Not. Blush. She would not blush... Victoria chanted that to herself in an attempt not to feel that burn on her cheeks. The pleasure of hearing him say she was beautiful—nothing had ever felt so good. “Then I shouldn’t have any difficulty finding a lover.” She set the menus aside. “If that is all...”

Bloody hell. This had not gone as he planned. David would have to attempt to convince her that his plan would work. It was the only way he could be by her side as she embarked on this foolish idea of hers. If he was with her, he could protect her. If she wanted to be a damned rogue, well, he’d help her with it. If she practiced all her wiles on him, she’d be safe. There was a very real possibility he wouldn’t survive any of it, though.

“That’s not all,” he said as she stood. “If you’re certain you wish to do this…”

“I’m quite certain,” she interrupted him. “We’ve discussed this enough, don’t you think? I understand your position, and I do hope you understand mine.”

David took a deep, fortifying breath. “I do.” He leaned forward. “I do have one question.”

“Only one?” She quirked a brow. “I’d think you would have several. You’ve asked many already.”

“Don’t be cheeky,” he said, but his lips twitched a little as he fought a smile. “I have one more. That might lead to another, depending on your answer.”

She tilted her chin up. “Very well. Ask your question.”

“Do you know how to be a rogue? How will you go about it?” He asked.

“I believe that is two questions, my lord. I knew it wouldn’t be just the one at first.” Victoria grinned. She met his gaze and replied, “I have a bit of an idea.” She waved her hand dismissively. “I do have a brother.”

“So you’ve gone to his club with him?” he prodded. “Seen him at a gaming hell? Witnessed him seducing a woman of ill repute.” He gestured toward her with his hand. “Please tell me of these lessons your brother unwillingly bestowed upon you. I’m certain he will be grateful he’s give you such a torrid education.”

She sighed. “You’re telling me I have much to learn before I can become a rogue?” Victoria stared at him pointedly. “How did you learn how to be a rogue?”

“I’m not…” He almost told her that he wasn’t a rogue, but he had been. Once upon a

time he'd rivaled even the Viscount of Harcrest for the most notorious rake in the ton. He'd spent all night at gaming hells and left so foxed he didn't remember his own name at times. Then his father had died and he'd had to dig his family out of debt. He couldn't tell her any of that, though. It wouldn't help his cause with her. He wanted her to turn to him. "Well, that is. I'm not that roguish."

"But you can be." She smiled encouragingly. "Tell me. What do I need to be a rogue? Give me your wisdom."

Now this was what he needed. Her attention was solely on him. If she spent her time with him, she wouldn't be off trying to seduce another man. But he couldn't have her working her wiles on him, either—at least not yet. Ardmore would happily murder him if David bedded his little sister before he married her. Once she got this notion out of her mind, then David could court her. As he'd wanted to for some time. She thought they were only friends. He wanted to be much more than that. This was an opportunity for her to see him as a potential husband, too.

"You need lessons," he said. "If you're to do this properly."

She studied him for several moments. Then she nodded thoughtfully. "You may be right." She scrunched her eyes together as she considered it. "I would have much to learn. It's not as if my friends would be able to help me with this." Victoria frowned, then slowly lifted her gaze to meet his. "But you could. You're my friend."

He had never hated being called a friend so much in his entire life. But in this one instance, it would be useful. David had to tread carefully with her. He didn't want Victoria to dismiss the idea of him helping her. He had to play this just right. "I am your friend." He nodded at her. "As your friend, I've been trying to offer you logical advice. Do you honestly believe I will give you lessons? Wouldn't that be encouraging you when I've done my best to do the opposite?"

“Well,” she began. “I am going to do this regardless. If you do not wish to help me that is your right.” She smiled at him. “I think, knowing you as I do, that you’d rather it be you giving me those lessons than another gentleman—scoundrel or not. But if it’s too much for you, I understand.” Victoria shrugged. “If you prefer I will ask another gentleman if he’s interested in tutoring me in all things wicked.”

That would not work. The idea of another man touching her was enough to drive him mad. “That’s not necessary,” he finally said through gritted teeth. “If you insist on this.”

“I do,” she told him. “I really do.”

“Then I will help you.” She opened her mouth to speak, but he held up his hand to stop her. “I do have conditions.”

“Of course you do.” Victoria smiled. She waved her hand in his direction. “Please. Continue.”

“You will do everything I tell you. This will not work if you argue with me on every point.”

She nodded. “I want to learn. I’m willing to do that.”

So far, so good. He only hoped the next thing on his agenda would not make her decide against this. “If I tell you to do something for your safety, you cannot argue about it. I understand that you wish to be a rogue and do not care if your reputation is ruined. However, as you’re still learning, I’d ask that you refrain from using these lessons on anyone else until I say you’re ready.” If it was up to him, she’d never be ready. He’d keep giving her lessons for the rest of their lives if need be.

“All right,” she agreed. “When shall we have our first lesson?”

So eager... He sighed. "Tomorrow. Meet me in here and we will discuss what comes next." He stood. "For now, I'm to meet your brother in his study." He bowed. "Enjoy your menu planning." David gestured toward her lists. "When we speak again, I'll have your first lesson."

David turned and left her alone. He could not wait until the next day. He shouldn't be so excited, but this opportunity could not be wasted. She would be his. In time, she'd love him as he loved her. He only hoped that it would all go as he hoped. Because if he lost her... Nothing would ever truly be right again.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

Victoria wished the rain would stop already. Just one day. Would that be too much to ask? Apparently so... She sighed and entered the parlor. Several guests had already gathered there. Some guests were just now arriving. Others had remained in their rooms or joined Blake in the game room. None of the outdoor activities she'd planned had gone forward. None could be done with the rain pouring down. It was time to give this group a game to play. One she hoped would take a while to complete. Which was the reason she'd chosen it.

"Hello everyone," Victoria called out. "If I can have your attention."

They all stopped and looked at Victoria. She smiled at them. Not that she felt that smile. It was more to make it seem like she was enjoying herself, when she really would rather be anywhere but in the parlor. "My apologies that we had to cancel the outdoor activities for today. We do hope that tomorrow the rain will allow those to be rescheduled." She sighed. "But we all must accept that weather in England can often turn toward rain." An unfortunate reality...

Laughter echoed in the room. She should find the humor in this situation as well. Somehow, Victoria could not. Partially because she had not yet spoken with Lord Foxcroft again. He was supposed to give her a lesson. He'd said he would. She looked forward to what that lesson would entail. She did not know what he aimed to teach her. Truthfully, what she wanted was to spend time with him. Victoria wanted him to fall in love with her, or at the very least, fall into lust.

"Now that we have no other choice," she said. "I planned some parlor games for each day on the chance we would need them. Today we are going to do something that perhaps we have not done since we were children." Victoria wasn't even certain

she'd played this game as a child. Who would she have done so with? She was several years younger than Blake, and she'd had no close friends as a child. But some of the guests must have played it.

She glanced around the room. Lord Harcrest was there, as was Lady Lilah Stephens. Good. That plan was progressing as it should. She sneaked a glance at Lady Daisy Allen as well. She was the other part of that scheme. Each part had to be played carefully to see that to an end. None of them realized exactly what was going on. Which is how she, along with Selenia, and Emma had planned it. Now back to her other guests. The ones waiting for directions to the game they were to play.

"We are going to play hide and seek," Victoria announced. They all stared at her. Some still wore their mask of boredom, but she did not care. They were here, and if they wished for some sort of entertainment, they'd play. "No room is off limits. You can hide anywhere. Once you are found, you must return here to the parlor. The last person found will win a boon." She still had to discern what that boon would be. Perhaps she should not have offered one.

"How will you choose who is the seeker?" one guest asked. That's an excellent question. She wished she could just make herself the seeker. Then she could take as little or as much time as she wished to seek out those hiding. That wouldn't exactly be fair, though.

"We are going to draw straws," Victoria said. She held up a fistful of sticks. "The shortest one is the seeker. Now everyone, come forward and pick one."

There were a dozen people in the room. Most were females except for a few gentlemen. The rest might have gone to the game room instead. Each person stepped forward to draw their straw. They drew their straws. Each person held up their straw. Lord Foxcroft had the short straw. She smiled at him. That was convenient. She couldn't have planned it better herself. He looked as if he would rather not be there,

but she supposed that was because he owed her that rogue lesson. “All right,” Victoria said. “Lord Foxcroft is going to count to a hundred.” She grinned. He frowned. How lovely. “As slowly as possible. We need to give everyone a chance to hide.”

“Are you hiding?” Lord Foxcroft asked her. Then winked. What was he up to? She narrowed her gaze at him, but his expression gave nothing away. “I might need help counting.” Victoria blushed at his words. Perhaps she wasn’t quite ready for those rogue lessons. He had such an effect on her. She did her best to ignore his blatant flirting and turned her attention to the guests. “Go everyone. Hide.”

Once everyone left the room to hide, she turned to him. He had her full attention now. “I doubt you need help counting,” she said. “What is it you expect me to do for you?”

“We can begin our lessons while everyone scurries off to hide.” His lips tilted upward. “That is what you want, is it not?”

She did want to have those lessons. Victoria believed they would prove enlightening. What did he hope to gain from them? Was this his opportunity to dissuade her from taking a lover? What would he say or do if he knew that she hoped he would want that role? Time would tell. She nodded. “It is. What shall we focus on first?”

“I would think that part is obvious.” He grinned at her. Lord Foxcroft closed the distance between them in a few quick strides. “We have the count of a hundred and then I must seek out those hiding.” He leaned in and whispered. “That is such a brief span of time. We must be quick.”

“Quick?” Victoria was confused. “With what?” None of this made much sense to her. She needed to understand, but he was not giving her enough information. “You haven’t said what this lesson is?”

“Haven’t I?” He quirked a brow. “How remiss of me.”

Victoria stared at him with apparent confusion. The lady did not know how to flirt. At least not well. That should be where she started. A good rogue understood the value of charm. “Love,” he said. “You don’t have the skills to seduce anyone. You can’t flirt to save your life.”

“I can,” she insisted. Then frowned. “Well, a little at least.”

“I understand I’m not a man you wish to be coquettish with,” he began. “But you must practice with someone.”

She nibbled on her lower lip. He wanted to groan. David wanted to pull her into his arms and press his lips to hers. Those teeth scraping across that plump lip drove him mad with desire. She was not even trying to flirt and he’d become enraptured. “I don’t know where to begin.”

“I know, sweet,” he said in a patient tone. “That’s why we’re doing the lessons.”

“I should know how to do this. Do you suppose this is why I’ve been a wallflower for so long?” She sighed. “I don’t have the tolerance for silliness.”

“It can be silly,” he agreed. “But that’s why it is supposed to be fun.” David grinned. She was so bloody adorable. “Now,” he said. “Be a good girl and try to flirt with me.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Is that why you keep using those endearments with me? Is that how you’re flirting?”

He blew out a breath. This was not working. At all. “If you have to ask, my efforts are lost on you. Can’t you pretend you’re attracted to me? It will help.” He hated that

he had to even ask that of her.

Victoria stared at him for several moments, then nodded. "I suppose I can try. But I don't know if I can use any endearments for you. It would seem too...I don't know. Wrong somehow."

That wounded him a little bit. "You don't have to if it bothers you."

He wished she did see him as more than a friend. He had desired her for a while now. If she ever did... David would happily claim her. It was one of the reasons he believed this scheme would work. The flirting was going nowhere, though. Somehow, he had to open her eyes to what they could have together.

She stared at him and seemed to finally relax. As if she'd had a stern talking with herself and gathered the fortitude to see this through. Then slowly, her lips tilted upward. That smile was like one he'd never seen on her before. It was pure wanton and desire wrapped up in a pretty bow. One that he wanted to unwrap with his own lips. The need to kiss her suddenly became overwhelming. She hadn't said a word. Just that smile undid him. Perhaps she wasn't as unpracticed as he'd believed...

"Darling," she began. Her voice had taken on a different tone. One that made him think of sultry nights, naked flesh, and a soft bed. One where he could take the time to touch every inch of her, taste her sweetness, and become lost in her soft body. He nearly groaned, but somehow, he kept his gaze on hers and remained quiet. "I must apologize. I've been derelict in my attentions. You should never be neglected." She pouted prettily. God help him if she ever did this and meant it. "Please forgive me for my lapse." Victoria trailed a finger up his arm that sent tiny shivers over his entire body. He swallowed hard. "I know how much you need me." God, he did need her. "And I never should have kept you waiting for so long." When she leaned into him, he almost wrapped his arms around her and pulled her flush against his body. "It's no secret that your ability to count is difficult for you." Her voice was breathless now.

“And reaching the greatly sum of one hundred may be beyond even your vast abilities.” She lifted her hand and trailed a finger over his jawline. “Do you think you’ll be able to find everyone, or will you require me to be by your side through that as well?”

David stared at her as if he’d never seen her before. She’d said all the right words, in the right way, and even touched him enough to keep him riveted on every nuance. Her gaze even seemed to be completely focused on him. If he didn’t know better, he’d almost believe she desired him, too. That this little lesson hadn’t been necessary at all. He cleared his throat and fought for the ability to speak. “If you wish to help me,” he told her. “I would not turn you away.” He leaned in until his lips brushed her ears. This was his chance to make her feel that same desire. “I’d never allow you to feel neglected either, sweet.”

“You’re too good to me, my lord,” she said in that breathy tone of hers. “How did I do on this first lesson?”

“Perfectly,” he said. “Almost too perfectly.”

Victoria stepped away from him and stared into his eyes. Those hazel eyes of hers shined with happiness. Tiny green flecks seemed to float around in them. It was almost mesmerizing. “Good,” she said. “I always like to succeed. I look forward to the next lesson, then.”

She turned away from him and sat down on the settee. “If you would like me to assist you on this hunt, I will,” she told him. “But I think I would be more useful here keeping watch as the guests you find return.”

Dismissed. That easily. David would sigh, but she’d only wonder what had vexed him. “I’ll send those I find back here as planned.” How had his life come to this? He really couldn’t say. But he had to believe he’d made some progress with her. She

must have felt something while they practiced flirting. The question though, was what the blazes would he have her do for their next lesson? He had much to consider. He left her alone in the parlor as he went on his search for those hiding.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

Victoria stepped outside, closed her eyes, and tilted her face to the sun. The warmth bathed over her and she let out a breathy sigh. Only a person who had been stuck inside for several days with surly guests could appreciate the heaven of a nearly cloudless sky. Today they would finally have some of the outdoor activities she'd planned. Considering she had a couple days' worth that were not used, she'd decided to have two for the guests to choose from that day. They could, of course, always remain inside.

In the morning they would have archery, which would lead into the afternoon. There would be lawn billiards and refreshments. Light food items guests could eat while they socialized, watched the lawn billiards, and enjoyed being outdoors. They only had eight mallets and balls for the lawn billiards. So not everyone could play at the same time, they could however observe the game. She fully expected some would choose to watch instead. It's what she'd have done.

"The sun is quite breathtaking today, isn't it," a lady said as she stepped beside her.

Victoria smiled and glanced over to her side. Lady Cora Stephens had come out to join her. Her black hair was coiled into an elegant chignon. "It's life altering," she told her friend. "If the rain had not stopped soon, I might have gone mad."

Cora laughed. "It couldn't have been so terrible..."

"It was worse, I assure you," Victoria told her emphatically. She grinned. "But I am glad to see you. I trust Lilah's revenge is going well?"

"Indeed," Cora said. "As far as I can tell." She motioned to where a group of ladies

had gathered. “That Lady Daisy shouldn’t be such an easy girl to lead astray.” She wrinkled her nose. “But she seems to genuinely want to be near that arse, Viscount Harcrest.”

Cora didn’t know the full scope of the plans they had for the viscount or Lady Daisy. She’d tell her sister, and Lilah could not discover it all. She’d ruin their carefully laid plans. “Trust me on this,” Victoria motioned toward Lady Daisy. “That one is far more than she appears. Quite malicious where it counts.”

“Is that so?” Cora studied Lady Daisy. “Intriguing. I look forward to seeing her world unravel then.”

“Me too, my friend,” Victoria said. Then smiled slyly. “It will be worth noting when it does.”

“I do hope that I’ll have a chance to witness it.” She motioned to where the servants were setting up bales of hay for the archery. “Do you think this is wise?”

Victoria shrugged. She rather liked archery and was even good at it. Though she probably would not participate. She had to oversee it all and it wouldn’t do to take some of the fun away from her guests. Besides, she couldn’t very well keep an eye on Lady Daisy and shoot at a target. Though she did think Lady Daisy would make a fine one. She could even pretend it was her before she launched an arrow. Not that she hated the woman, but she didn’t like her either. Lady Daisy was a nuisance that thought herself above everyone else. That was why she was going to be taught a lesson. One she should have learned years ago. “Do you not like archery?” she asked Cora.

Cora studied the archery field. “I don’t know.” She tilted her head to the side. “I’ve never been permitted to shoot an arrow.” She turned toward Victoria. “My father has always been disappointed that he only had daughters. We’ve been nothing but a

disappointment to us.”

“He’s a fool then,” Victoria said. “My father adored me.” At least until he was no longer around to dote on her. “Did he ignore you then?”

She snorted. “I suppose, in a way, he did.” Cora’s countenance darkened. Something bothered her a great deal. “My father didn’t pay us much mind. He had another that he gave all his attention to.”

“Who?” Victoria asked. Her curiosity was something she’d never been able to control.

“The Earl of Thornton,” she said. “Not at first, mind you.” She sighed. “It’s a bit of a long story. The earl was often sent to my father for educational purposes. He’d spend months at a time at our estate. He was, in short, an arse. I very much doubt much has changed. Though I haven’t been in his company for several years now. His father died and he stopped coming to the estate.”

“Was he not grateful for your father’s tutelage?” More importantly, why didn’t his own father give him those lessons? She’d ask Blake. He’d know the answer. “I believe he’s friends with my brother. He spent a summer here, and he was quite broody. I believe it was just before they all took that holiday to Italy or some such faraway place.”

“Ah, yes,” Cora said with a nod. “I believe that is the summer before his father died. My father insisted that he be allowed to go. Said all young men need to sow their wild oats or some such shite.” She frowned. “Pardon me. I shouldn’t curse.”

“Don’t let me stop you.” Victoria waved a hand. This was quite interesting. But she had to ask, “Is he the one you want your revenge on?”

“That obvious, is it?” She drew in a breath. “He was a miserable cur and took out his frustrations on me. Lilah was saved from his beastly behavior and I’m glad for that. But he should understand no one should be treated that way. I aim to show him that he made a mistake with me.”

“In more ways than one.” She grinned. “Don’t fret. We will help you. It’s our pact, after all.”

Lord Foxcroft strolled out onto the lawn and it caught her attention. He promised her another lesson. The flirting one had gone well. He had thought she wouldn’t be able to flirt with him. Once she got out of her own way, it had been quite easy. She’d shocked him, and that had been worth that lesson. She’d use it in the future when she hoped to seduce him.

“And there is your quarry,” Cora said. She smiled at Victoria. “I’ll leave you to your scheme. Good luck.” With that, Cora walked away and back into the house. She couldn’t think about Cora or the revenge her friend sought. She had her own to see to, and as Lord Foxcroft strolled in her direction, Victoria started to consider everything she wanted from that man. The length of that list was long, but only one thing topped it. Him. She just wanted him.

David didn’t know what this next lesson should be. The last one had addled his brain a little bit. He had barely touched her. All she had said was a few words and she had touched him. Just enough to make him stop thinking and only want. Desire had fallen over him like a downpour. He had become so drenched in it that he could not see past it. If she hadn’t pulled away from him, David would have kissed her. He still wanted to do just that.

He made his way over to her. When he reached her, he gestured toward the field. “Archery?”

“You don’t like archery either?” she said, a little sullen. “What does everyone have against archery?”

“I am sure it will be all right.” He shrugged. “Some of the guests will appreciate it.” He could use it to his advantage. Maybe. He just had to discern the best way how.

“Well,” she began. “I can show them to entertainment, but it is up to them to partake in it.”

“Like leading a horse to water?” His lips twitched.

“Precisely,” she said, then beamed. “How astute.” She motioned to the field. “And you, my lord? Will you take up a bow and see if you have the skills to hit one of the targets?”

He considered it and then nixed the idea. Victoria wouldn’t be shooting any arrows, and neither would he. Instead, he had an idea of what he could do for her rogue lesson. She might not consider it something a rogue might do, but he’d convince her. “I cannot very well give you another lesson if I’m taking part in the contest, can I?”

She arched a brow. “And my next lesson will take place during the archery event?”

“No,” he said. “Your next lesson will take place the entire day.” He motioned to everything. “What do you see here?”

“Servants,” she said. “They are placing the hay bales, the targets, even setting the bows on a table over there for guests to choose from.”

“What else?” he prompted.

She sighed. “Why don’t you just tell me what I should be seeing and save us some

time?”

David grinned. She was becoming surly. “This all takes a lot to prepare. You won’t be participating in any of it, will you?”

“Of course not.” She snorted. “It’s not as if my brother will oversee these events, and he’d remind me I am the one that wanted this party. Therefore, I must see to the details.”

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. “A good rogue,” he began. His voice husky as he spoke. “Would do something that would ensure his lady could enjoy herself.”

“And how would you manage that?” She tilted her head to the side. “I can’t very well leave or give this task to someone else.”

David had to handle this with care. She wouldn’t want anyone to see to those details. Victoria didn’t like ceding control on anything. That was why she wanted these bloody lessons to begin with. “If you could shoot,” he began. “Would you?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps.”

“There is no perhaps about it,” he said. “You love archery.”

Victoria glanced at him, surprise in her gaze. “How...”

“I remember,” he said. “You told me once.” He’d listened and stored every little bit of information she’d shared with him. “I’d like to see if you’re as good as you once claimed.”

Victoria grinned. “I would wager I’m better now.”

“Then we will do just that,” he said.

“Do what?” Confusion spread over her lovely face. He ached to gaze upon her beauty and not be able to tell her or kiss her. She wouldn’t welcome his attentions.

“Wager.” He grinned. “That’s a part of being a rogue. Though we will explore that in more detail later.” He motioned to the field. “What we are doing now is something else entirely.”

“All right,” she said. “You will have to explain all of this to me.”

David nodded. “I will. Give me a moment.” He went over to a servant and gave him some directions. The servant went to do his bidding. David went over to a table and picked up a bow and a quiver filled with arrows. Then he went back to her side.

“What is all of this?”

“The archery doesn’t begin for another hour.” He held out the bow and quiver for her. “You, my dear, are going to shoot now. The servant is going to fetch a target for you.”

“Is he now?” She stared at the targets already in place. “And what is wrong with those?”

“They’re not nearly challenging enough for an expert like you.” He held out his arm to her. “Come with me.”

The servant came out with a few green tomatoes. They were a decent enough size for what he had in mind and probably would have been delicious in some sort of stew, if left in the garden to ripen. David took them from the servant and thanked him. Victoria stared at him in confusion. He looped her arm with his and lead her over to

the targets. He placed one of the tomatoes on the very top of the bale of hay. Then he led her back to where they were to stand to hit the targets. "Can you see the tomato from here?" he asked.

"Of course," she said.

"All right. This lesson is a bit of a dual one." He trailed a finger down her arm. Tiny bumps formed over her skin in its wake. "I, as a rogue, want all of your attention. I'm making myself indispensable to you and providing you with something that you desire." He leaned over her. "What a rogue desires most of the time, is the lady. He needs to prove to her that he can be everything she wants, and by any means at his disposal."

"And you're providing me with a target because I want to shoot?" she supplied. "And what is the second part of this lesson?"

"That's a lady can also get something she desires in the bargain." He grinned. "I propose a simple wager."

"And what shall we wager, then?" she asked.

"I have three tomatoes," he told her. "If you hit this one, I'll replace it with another."

"And?" she prompted.

"If you manage to hit a tomato," he told her. "I'll remove an item of clothing." He met her gaze. "One article of my choosing for the first two. If you hit the third one, you may choose."

She swallowed hard. "And if I miss? Do I have to remove anything?"

He shook his head. "I'd never ask you to do that. At least not where anyone could witness it." He grinned. "Besides, this is a lesson. Let's see if you can shoot when you are distracted." He trailed that finger over her soft skin. "and that's what I intend to do. Because I don't wish to lose."

Victoria nodded. "Then let's begin." She nocked an arrow and took a deep breath. After a moment, she let the arrow fly, and it sailed through the tomato with ease. She turned to him and grinned. "I believe you owe me something, my lord."

"Indeed," he said. He hadn't even tried to distract her on the first shot. He wanted her to be overconfident and at ease. He wouldn't try on the second attempt either. He had something special in mind for the third. He tilted his lips upward and considered what piece of clothing to give her. David untied his cravat and pulled it free. When his shirt fell open around his neck, she stared there for several moments before she took his cravat. "Now I'll go replace that tomato."

He jogged out and replaced the tomato. So far, his plan was working well. He had liked how she'd stared at his neck. Perhaps she wasn't nearly as immune to him as he'd believed. He could have taken off his waistcoat, but that had been far more advantageous.

David returned to her side. He grinned. "Let's see you do that one more time." He didn't plan on allowing her to win the third time. He needed her to lean into her arrogance, though. If she thought she'd never lose, then she wouldn't believe it when she did.

"Easily," she said, and nocked another arrow. It struck the tomato. She was beaming with pride, and yes, that would be her downfall. "Another item, my lord." This time he did peel off his waistcoat. He handed it to her and she set it with the cravat on the lawn. He replaced the tomato and was back at her side quickly.

“Now,” he said. “We can make this a little more interesting.”

“You have already lost twice, my lord.” She lifted a brow. “I don’t think you want to lose another piece of clothing.”

He grinned. “I’m not afraid to be naked, love.” It was his turn to arch a brow. “Are you?”

She frowned. “But you said...”

“And I meant that. Perhaps you can wager something else.”

Victoria grinned at him. She was so sure of herself. She had no idea that she was playing into his hands. David wanted her to be comfortable and assured she would win. Because then he would win. He’d get what he wanted. What he desperately craved. “What do you have in mind?”

“A kiss,” he said. “If you win, you have to kiss me. At a time of my choosing.”

“A kiss?” she asked. “But...” She frowned again. “Is that necessary?”

“Consider it part of your rogue lessons. If you want to seduce a man, you will need to know how to kiss him.” He smiled. “Besides. Do you think you will lose?”

She shook her head. “No. I will hit the tomato.”

“Then is it a wager?” he asked.

Victoria nodded. “It is.”

She nocked another arrow and aimed. David knew exactly when she was about to

release, then stepped behind her. He blew lightly on her ear and the arrow went wide, missing the tomato. “That’s not fair...”

“Everything is fair to a rogue, love,” he said, then grinned. “That’s one lesson you should never forget. When they want something, they’ll do anything to have it.” David retrieved his cravat and waistcoat from the lawn. “I’ll have that kiss. But not now. You’re not ready.” He bowed. “Until later, love.”

He walked away from her, satisfied. David had given her a lesson she wouldn’t soon forget, and he would have that kiss from her. A part of him had wanted to claim it immediately, but he couldn’t. He hadn’t lied when he said she wasn’t ready for it yet. Soon, though, she would be. And when that time came, he’d savor every moment of it.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

Some days were better than others, and some days nothing could go right no matter how much she tried. Victoria was having one of those days. The sort where she just wished she'd stayed in bed, or she could retire for the evening and wake the next day. All fresh and hopeful that it would not be a repeat of the disasters of the day before. She'd survived the day. The archery contest had gone well. At least the one that she had not personally participated in.

That one... It was best not to think about it.

But she'd thought of little else. He'd distracted her. She should not have allowed that, or at the very least, she should have brushed off that attention. How was she supposed to seduce him when he constantly kept her off balance? And now she was supposed to kiss him. What did that even mean? Why would he push for that? Did he want to kiss her? If so, why would he hold back?

Victoria had never been more confused in her entire life. When she had started this scheme, she thought she understood what she wanted. She thought she would seduce him. Then she'd forget about the Earl of Foxcroft and move on with her life. She didn't need him to find happiness. But she had to admit, at least to herself, that she would prefer to be happy with him. That had always been her dream. But dreams do not come true and she gave up girlish fantasies years ago.

She strolled into the conservatory and headed the back. There was a special place there she went when she needed to think. The flowers there would be in full bloom too and she intended to indulge in some girlish behavior. Why not? What did she really have to lose by giving into some whims? It might help wash away the day and the anxiety she'd been carrying around with her since well before the guests had

arrived.

In the back of the conservatory, a small settee had been set against a wall. It was a dark red plush with a few pillows thrown on it, more for comfort than fashion. It was an older settee and if some dirt or plants landed on it. Well, it wouldn't hurt it. On each side of the settee were beds of peonies in red, pink, white and yellow. Victoria loved peonies. They were little balls of lovely fluff. At least that is how she always thought of them. All those soft and billowy petals, and they smelled divine... She plucked a yellow peony and sat on the settee.

Victoria brought the peony to her nose and breathed its scent. As wonderful as she recalled... She sighed and stared at the sunshine yellow flower. It made her think of happiness and how much she wanted that for herself. There was only one man she'd ever wanted to share her life with, and she feared she could never truly have him. Giving into that whimsy, she plucked one of the vibrant petals and let it float down onto the settee. The contrast of yellow against red was almost startling. She stared at it and said, "He loves me." Then she tore off another petal and dropped it. It joined the other petal as she whispered, "He loves me not." Such a childish thing to do, but she couldn't stop herself. Victoria kept pulling off those yellow petals until she was down to the last one. "He loves me..." It joined the fallen petals on the settee. They were no longer a ball of fluffy scented flower, but several petals without a home. If she still believed in fanciful notions she'd have smiled contentedly. According to those yellow petals, he loved her. What rot.

"What did that flower do to you?"

She glanced up and met Lord Foxcroft's gaze. Her heart beat rapidly inside her chest. How long had he been there? Had he been watching her destroy the bloom? Had he heard her words as she played that silly game? Dash it... She shouldn't have given into that urge. The flower lied anyway. He didn't love her. He'd never loved her, and likely never would. The best she could hope for was a passionate encounter, and if

she were fortunate enough, more than one. But she would gladly take one. Victoria blinked up at him and reminded herself that she had the fortitude to see this through. She tossed what remained of the flower on the settee and stood. “Good evening, my lord. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“It’s hardly been pleasurable.” He winked. “But we could rectify that lapse given enough time.” He rolled his gaze over her. “If you’re willing.”

She sucked in a breath. This was a side of him that she’d never been privy to. The rake of legend. The scoundrel that had been absent for several years now. Apparently, once a rogue, always a rogue, at least to some degree. He’d not lost his touch. Never where she was concerned... “Darling,” she said in a breathy tone. “I’m always willing with you.” Victoria had passed her flirting lesson and had moved on to more provocative suggestions. He might not be able to resist this side of her. At least she hoped so. She lifted her hand and trailed a finger over his forearm. If only it wasn’t covered by his shirt, she might be able to caress his bare flesh. “Would you like for there to be more pleasure between us?” She fluttered her eyelashes and coyly.

He grinned. “That’s a good start, love.” He leaned in a little closer. “Perhaps now is that time you can show me another skill of yours.”

“And what would that be?” She arched a brow. It felt as if she’d been waiting for this moment her entire life. She wanted him. Oh, how she wanted him...

“Kiss me,” he ordered.

She swallowed hard. Victoria could do this. She’d never kissed a man before, but surely it wasn’t that difficult. She stepped even closer to him. He didn’t move one inch. He wasn’t going to make this easy for her. She stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his. He did nothing. She moved her lips over his. Still nothing. What kind of kiss was this? She frowned and stepped back, then stared up at him in confusion.

It took everything inside of him not to pull her into his arms and kiss her properly. She was clearly a novice, but he found something enticing in her lack of skill. In some ways, it was the most alluring kiss he'd ever had. Because it was her. Everything she did sparked desire inside of him.

"You didn't kiss me back," she accused him. He held back a grin.

"Was I supposed to?"

"Yes," she demanded. "Isn't that how a kiss is supposed to be?" She furrowed her brow.

"Sometimes," he agreed. "But that wasn't our agreement, now was it."

She opened her mouth, then closed it. "I suppose not." She sighed. "It's not how I thought it would be." Victoria blew out a breath and stepped away from him. He stared down at the ruined flower and frowned. What had she been doing there? He had walked in while she stared at the mess she'd made. Something had almost seemed broken in her as she studied the yellow petals. He'd wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss away her concerns. He didn't have that right, though, so he'd held back.

"I'm here to offer another lesson."

"So soon?" She turned to him. "Didn't I already have a lesson today?"

"Do you want the lesson or not?" That kiss had been a revelation and he found he didn't want to part with her yet. "I have much to teach you." He had to win her heart and this might be the only way he could do it. She couldn't find another man. Not when there was one there willing to claim her. He could not rush this. It had to be right or he'd lose her before he even had a chance with her.

“What is this lesson,” she said in a resigned tone.

David grinned. “The game room is unoccupied. Join me there and I’ll explain.”

“The game room?” She frowned. “I’m surprised Blake isn’t using it.” She shrugged. “I’ll come with you, but if my brother decides to play billiards, you’re explaining it all to him.”

“Blake is otherwise occupied.” He didn’t tell her about the cabin the rest of the gentlemen had gone off to. This was the first night they could make use of it. David had only wanted her, so he’d stayed behind. “He’ll not interrupt us.”

They walked together to the game room. He’d ensured that the oil lamps were lit before he’d gone in search of her. The room was aglow with light. Perfect. He gestured toward a table with cards already laid out on top of it. “Please,” he said. “Have a seat.”

Victoria sat at the table and then glanced up at him. “Are we to play cards, then?”

“We’re going to do far more than that. A rogue is an expert gambler, or at least attempts to be.” He motioned toward the cards. “There are many ways one can gamble. For tonight, we will start with cards.” David grinned. “And spirits.”

“Spirits?” She arched that brow of hers. “No sherry or ratafia?”

“Would you prefer that?” he asked. “Or perhaps a good claret.” He did not want her to be uncomfortable.

“No,” she said. “If I’m going to be a rogue, I can’t have a lady’s drink.” Victoria grinned. “I will have some brandy.”

“All right, love,” he said, then chuckled. “Brandy it is then.” This might not be a wise course of action, but he would see it through, regardless. He poured brandy for the two of them and then carried the glasses back to the table. He set one in front of her and then sat across from her.

“Now,” he began. “What card games do you know how to play?”

“Vingt-et-un,” she said. “Whist, Piquet...” She frowned. “Though I’m less skilled at the latter.”

“And whist really needs two more players,” he added. “It doesn’t seem fair to play those. At least not when stakes are involved. Vingt-et-un it will be then.” He shuffled the cards and then set the deck on the table. “Now that we have decided on the game, we must also choose our stakes.”

“What do you suggest?” Victoria sipped his brandy. “As you’re the current rogue in the room. I’m to follow your lead.”

David’s lips twitched. He had been one of the biggest rakes in the ton once. He had not been that man in some years. But he wouldn’t explain that to her. When he had taken responsibility for the title, he’d had to take a hard look at his life and the decisions he’d made. He hadn’t been happy with what he discovered about himself. That didn’t mean he had forgotten what it was to be a rogue. It was almost distressing how easily it had all come back to him. “What are you willing to lose?”

“Everything,” she said. Then took another sip of her brandy. “I’m a wallflower, darling, or I need remind you of that. This was my last season. I’m firmly on the shelf. I really have nothing of true value to lose.”

“You’re wrong,” he said in a firm tone. “But we’ve already discussed that.” He tapped his fingers on the cards. “We’ll play a set amount of hands and the one with

the most wins will determine who prevails in our wager.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “How many hands will we play?” Victoria met his gaze and held it. “And what will be the prize?”

“We will play five hands.” David wanted to claim her. But instead, he suggested, “How about another kiss for the prize?”

Her lips tilted upward into a wanton smile that went straight to his groin. “Oh, yes,” she said in a sultry tone. “A kiss is most definitely acceptable.” God help him. He wanted to skip this game and go right to the prize. David picked up his brandy and swallowed a healthy gulp. The burn down his throat gave him a momentary reprieve from responding to her.

“Would you like to deal first?” he asked her after he found his voice. He took a smaller drink of his brandy this time. He stood and retrieved the decanter from the bar and set it on the table. It would be much easier to fill being close.

“Not at all,” she said. “You can have that pleasure.”

He took the cards off the table instead of responding vocally. David shuffled them, then placed two cards face up in front of her. It showed a five and a ten. He flipped up a card in front of him, and one face down. So far he had a knave, and an unknown. “What would you like to do?” he asked.

She tapped her chin and then glanced up. Her expression was not helping his libido. With each sly glance, his desire grew exponentially. “I’ll take another card.”

“Are you certain?” he asked.

“Of course.” She smiled. “With the card already showing for you, I probably will lose

anyway. I might as well take a chance.”

“Very well,” he said. He flipped over a card and it was a two. “Would you like another one? That’s only seventeen.”

She frowned. “I suppose I already tested my luck with that one.” Victoria shook her head and leaned back in her chair. “I’ll stay.” She lifted her glass and drained the rest of the brandy and then set it down. He refilled it for her. Because he was gentlemanly like that.

David flipped over his other card. It was a four. He played another card and turned over a six. “That’s twenty,” he said.

She sighed. “You win. I expected as much.” She motioned toward the cards. “My deal.”

Victoria dealt the cards and they played through the hand. He won again. She drank more brandy. “You should slow down on the brandy, love. You’ll be too foxed to play soon.”

“Isn’t that part of being a rogue?” she asked. Her eyes were bright. “I want the full experience.” She wasn’t slurring her words. Yet. But it was a near thing.

They played the remaining three hands. David won in the final hand. He lifted a brow. She’d had three glasses of brandy to his one and a half. She went to pour more, but he removed the decanter from her grasp. “I think that’s enough, love.”

“You won,” she said. “You can kiss me now.” Her words were unquestionably slurring now.

David shook his head. “Not tonight.” When he claimed his kiss, he wanted her to be

fully aware. "Let's get you to bed." He took her glass away from her and set it on the table.

"I don't want to go to bed." Victoria pouted. She was adorable. "Unless you're coming with me."

He closed his eyes and groaned. "Not tonight," he said again. He wanted to say yes. Lord, did he want to say yes. "But when you're no longer quite so inebriated," he began. "Ask me that again and I might be more willing."

"No, you won't," she said. "It's all right. You don't have to be nice." She stumbled and he caught her in his arms. "I know you don't really want me."

Victoria was leaning into him now. He could feel every inch of her against his body, and his cock wanted to get even closer to her. He groaned. Again. This was one hell of a torturous night. "I'll take you to your room."

"But you won't join me," she said. Victoria almost sounded disappointed. He sure as hell was, and he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

"I can't," he said. She stumbled again and he kept his arms wrapped around her. "I better carry you. I don't trust that you can walk up those stairs on your own." He lifted her into his arms and she snuggled into him. If only this was a different time and he hadn't encouraged her to drink brandy. But then again, she might not have invited him to her bed if she hadn't been foxed.

He carried her into the bedchamber and laid her on her bed. "Will you be all right here, love?" he asked softly.

She waved her hand. "Just ring the bell for my maid. She can undress me." Victoria opened her eyes and met his gaze. She licked her lips and then smiled. "Unless you

would like to.”

Was she trying to kill him? He clenched his hands into fists but didn't respond to that. Instead, he rang the bell as she had suggested and quickly left the room. He would not think about removing her dress or sliding his hands over her gorgeous curves. He most certainly would not imagine what it would be like to see her gloriously naked and waiting in that bed for him. But now that she'd suggested it, he could think of little else. It was going to be a hell of a long night...

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

Victoria rolled to her side and groaned. In all her life, she could not recall one moment where her head had ever hurt so bloody much. She cursed. Why had she thought drinking so much brandy would ever be a brilliant idea? Overindulging in any sort of spirits showed a lack of intelligence, and she'd willingly ignored her own exceptional acumen in favor of foolishness. She had regrets. So many regrets, she'd lost count.

She stared around her room and blinked several times. A small stream of sunlight crept its way into her bedchamber through a crack in her heavy curtains. Even that small amount seemed too bright. Victoria groaned again and blocked the light with the back of her hand. Then she sat up as a thought managed to slide into her pain muddled brain. How had she found her way back to her bedchamber. More importantly, she stared down at herself, how had she found a way out of her dress and stays? She never would have been able to do any of that on her own. Suddenly, she had many questions. So many she was afraid of what those answers might be.

With a sigh, she forced herself out of bed. She stood, swayed a bit, then grabbed the bedpost to keep herself upright. Victoria closed her eyes and took a few deep fortifying breaths. She needed to ring the bell for her maid. If she had any chance of surviving the day, she had to have a hot bath and help dressing. She reached for her dressing robe and quickly donned it. As she tied it securely around her, a knock echoed through the room. Who the blazes could that be?

Victoria opened the door a crack and peeked out. The earl stood there looking well rested and more gorgeous than he had a right to be, and she almost hated him for it. "Why are you here?" She narrowed her gaze. "You should know better than to come to a lady's bedchamber."

“But I’ve already been to yours,” he answered in a congenial tone. “Consider this another rogue lesson.” He grinned. “Let me in love,” he coaxed. “You know you want to.”

“You have not been in my bedchamber,” she said. Had he? She still did not know how she’d made it to her room the night before. “Go away before someone sees or hears you.”

“Come now, love,” he began. “Open the door and let me in. But if you want to draw attention to my presence, all you had to do was ask. I’d be glad to moan as if in throws of blinding passion. That’s sure to draw a crowd.”

“You wouldn’t dare...” She glared at him. Victoria did not need this. Her head ached and he was not helping. At all.

“Don’t you know already?” He winked. “A rogue dares anything.”

He wasn’t going to disappear. There was no helping it. She’d have to allow him inside. Slowly, she opened the door wide and then yanked on his coat to pull him behind the door. She shut it and turned to him. “Why are you here,” she asked again?

He held up a small basket. How had she missed that he’d been carrying that? “What’s inside?”

“That, love, is a surprise.” He strolled to the other side of the room and lounged in a chair. He crossed his legs and set the basket on the floor. “Are you ready for another lesson?”

“I’m still recovering from the last one.” She lifted her hand to her head and moaned. “I am uncertain if I can survive another one of your lessons.”

He nodded. "I understand," he replied in a soothing tone. "You've decided against this folly. I'm glad." The earl stood. "If you're ready to admit it's all too much for you, then I'll gladly leave you to rest."

"No," she said. "Don't go." Victoria couldn't allow him to believe she would ever admit such a thing. She would not give up. She would not lose. "I want the next lesson." He would not convince her that she shouldn't become a rogue, or more importantly, that seducing him would never work. She fully believed she could have him, at least as a lover if not as her one and only love.

"Very well." He nodded. "If your head is paining you, I can suggest a few remedies that may help."

"Oh?" She was curious. "Are these remedies a rogue might find useful?"

"Some," he said cautiously. "But I should warn you. They're not pleasant."

She didn't like unpleasant things, but she couldn't very well tell him that. Victoria was supposed to be working her way towards becoming a rogue. She had to attempt to sound enthusiastic about these remedies. "Tell me." She motioned for him to continue. "I wish to know what they are."

"All right," he said. "Some gentlemen believe raw eggs with a little garlic will cure what ails you."

She wrinkled her nose. "Why that's..."

"Disgusting?" he supplied. "In that I agree."

"I was going to say rubbish. I don't believe for one moment someone would willingly consume such a thing." She narrowed her gaze. "You're mocking me."

“I assure you I am not.” He grinned. “I’ll have the concoction sent to you from the kitchen if you’d like.”

Victoria didn’t believe him. He was right, though. It did sound disgusting. She did not want to even think about putting raw eggs into her mouth. She nearly gagged at the very idea, and it did not help the queasiness that had already settled into her stomach. “I will have to decline your very generous offer.” She placed a hand over her stomach. “Food of any kind doesn’t sound appealing.”

He stared at her hand that she still held over her stomach. It had tightened her dressing robe over her breasts. His eyes almost appeared a little glassy as he stared. Then he shook his head as if clearing something away. “That will pass,” he said. “Your appetite should return soon.”

“I’ll have to take your word on that.” She frowned. “Was there a reason you felt the need to attend me in my bedchamber?” Then a thought occurred to her. “How did I make it back here last night?”

“Oh,” he said, then shrugged. “You stumbled mostly. Until you almost fell. Then I had to intervene less you break your neck.”

That did not sound as if she’d been graceful in the least. She was horrified. “And what precisely did you do?”

“Well,” he said casually. “I carried you.” He picked up the basket and headed to the door. He’d said that as if it were perfectly normal for him to carry her anywhere. She wished she could remember it. “Dress quickly, Victoria. Then meet me in the foyer.” He opened the door, then turned to her. “Dress for walking. We’re going on an adventure.” With that, he exited the room, leaving her reeling from the entire encounter. She forgot to ask him how she’d come to be undressed. What if she’d missed him removing her gown. Now that would be a tragedy...

David strolled down the stairs and reminded himself that he couldn't kiss her yet. She had been so adorable and clearly suffering the ill effects of too much brandy. The bright sunshine would not help her in the least; however, they were still going on this adventure. She'd enjoy it once she started to feel better. Her discomfort should ease as the day progressed. He kept the basket firmly in his grasp as he headed to the kitchen. He hadn't actually added anything to it yet, and he'd been thankful that she hadn't asked to see what was inside it. The basket had come from a maid he'd encountered as he strolled toward Victoria's bedchamber. The maid had gladly retrieved it for him. Now that he'd had a little time with Victoria, he knew exactly what to include inside the basket.

He strolled into the kitchen and found a kitchen maid. "I need a few items for a picnic."

"Of course, my lord," she said and took the basket from him. "We have some fresh bread, a bit of cheese, and berries picked fresh this morning. Is there anything else you'd like to add?"

"Is there any cold chicken?" They'd had that the night before for dinner. "Lemonade and a bottle of claret." It was much safer than brandy and he wanted her to have options. "Do you think you can add that?"

"Yes, my lord." She curtsied. "I'll have it ready for you straightaway." She wandered off to gather items he'd asked for. He did not know how long they would be away. David wanted to ensure they'd have plenty of food and drink. Just in case their little adventure ensured they remained gone for the entire day, and perhaps even the evening. This was an important rogue lesson. Perhaps the most important one that she could learn. The art of seduction... He had decided that it would be necessary to fully complete these lessons. She had to be his, and she needed to be convinced. He'd gladly do just that.

The kitchen maid brought back the basket and handed it to him. “Will there be anything else, my lord?” she asked.

“No. Thank You.” David smiled at her. “You’ve been very helpful.” He nodded at her and then left the kitchen. Hopefully, Victoria would be ready to go on their adventure. Not that it would be much of one. It wasn’t as if he could take her on a real excursion or even a voyage. At least not anytime soon. Perhaps sometime in their future he could. If all went well...

Victoria strolled down the stairs. She wore a cornflower blue day gown. Her dark hair had been plaited in a simple style and wound around her head and secured almost like a crown. David was tempted to unwind the plait and let her hair loose over her shoulders. He’d never seen it that way, and he was desperate to run his fingers through those glorious locks. Even this morning it hadn’t been loose, and that had surprised him. Perhaps she had been too inebriated the previous night to allow her maid to do much with it. He’d likely never know either way.

“All right,” she said in a grumpy tone. “I’m here. Where are we going?”

He grinned. “It’s a surprise.”

“I don’t like surprises,” she told him. She narrowed her gaze. “Tell me.”

“Or what?” He raised a brow. “You won’t come with me?” David shrugged. “If that is your wish. Then, by all means...return to your bedchamber. I don’t need you to accompany me. You’re the one that wanted lessons.”

“Has anyone ever told you how difficult you are?” She glared at him.

“No,” he said in an innocent tone. “But then,” he began. “You would know. As you’re quite difficult yourself.”

“I am not.” She narrowed her gaze. “Are you teasing me?”

“If you have to ask.” His lips twitched a little. “Then perhaps you’re not paying attention.”

“Oh.” She pushed him. “Stop.”

He held out his arm to her. “Come now, love,” he said in a cajoling tone. “You adore me. Admit it.”

“I’ll admit no such thing.” She sighed and placed her hand on his arm. “Take me on this adventure.”

“That I will,” he said. Hopefully, her mood lightened as they walked. He did not like that she was clearly uncomfortable, but she wouldn’t learn not to drink strong spirits if she didn’t try them herself. Some lessons could only be learned through experience. He wanted her to explore everything. Perhaps then she’d realize this rogue wallflower notion was indeed foolish. “I promise,” he said in a steadfast tone. “You will enjoy this.”

“Will I?” She blew out a breath. “Then I’ll have to endeavor to suffer through it won’t I?”

He grinned. “Suffering does not equate enjoyment, love.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Perhaps,” she said in a cryptic tone. “Suffering is what we must do to discover true enjoyment.”

“That is an auspicious outlook,” he told her. “At least you think you might enjoy it. What part must you suffer through? My company?”

“Not at all,” she told him. “You’re the enjoyable aspect of this adventure.”

That took him by surprise. “Am I?” He tilted his lips upward into a smile. “Then I’m glad I’ll be spending the day with you.”

They continued on in companionable silence. He led her through the woods and down a path. There was only one destination in mind, and it was some distance from the main house. It was the marquess’s secret hideaway. The cabin he’d spoken about in hushed tones. They had all been carousing there the night before, but had come back to the manor this morning, all content with their night of wickedness. He’d asked Ardmore if they were returning there again that night. The marquess had said no, and that he was welcome to use it if he needed a night away. Now he was leading Victoria to that cabin. They could explore the cabin, and each other, if they so chose.

He really hoped she desired him. Because if so, he had plans. So. Many. Plans.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

The more they walked, the better Victoria started to feel better. Perhaps he'd had been right to insist she leave her bedchamber and come outside with him. Not that she'd admit as much to him. That would be conceding he might know better, and that was a terrible precedent to start. The man was already too arrogant by far.

"How much farther?" Victoria had a sinking feeling they were headed in the same direction of Blake's little cabin. She did not know if her brother had returned to the manor yet or not, and she did not want to interrupt whatever lecherous activities he'd arranged for some of the gentlemen. She nearly wrinkled her nose at the very idea. Though she had wanted to explore that cabin and this might be the opportunity she'd been waiting for.

"Is this adventure not thrilling enough for you?" He arched one of those perfect brows of his. Why did he have to be so gorgeous? "Would you like me to do something to make it more scandalous?"

"I believe we have already entered that domain, my lord." She stared up at him. "Starting with our tête-à-tête in my bedchamber this morning."

"You make it sound as if we engaged in lewd acts," he said in an amused tone. "When it was far more innocent."

He didn't have to tell her. Looking back on it now, why hadn't he taken advantage of her? He'd carried her to bed and just left her? "Did you undress me last night?" she asked.

"Of course not," he replied in an offended tone. "I'd never take advantage of you in

that fashion.” He almost sounded hurt she’d even asked. “I rang the bell for your maid and left you slumbering in your bed.” He grinned. “You were adorably foxed.”

She did wrinkle her nose this time. Victoria did not want to be referred to as adorable. That sort of sight did not arouse passion in a man. So much for seduction... She was clearly failing in that regard. “I wouldn’t know how I appeared,” she told him. “And I’d rather not know.”

They strolled into a clearing, and a cabin came into view. It was a simple hunting lodge meant for a few people to gather. It had originally been the gamekeeper’s cabin before Blake had been the marquess. The gamekeeper had a larger dwelling now closer to the estate. One meant for a family if the man so wished. Though the current gamekeeper was only a few years past twenty and didn’t appear to be in a hurry settle down.

But this cabin, it was Blake’s pet project. She didn’t quite understand why he’d felt the need for it. But then again, she didn’t understand why gentlemen did a lot of the things they did, and she probably never would. The man walking beside her constantly confused her. She turned to him. “Why are we here?” Please let Blake be back at the manor...

“Because you needed time away from your guests.” He motioned toward the cabin. “And few know of the marquess’s private cabin.”

“You’re correct,” she said. “But that begs the question... Does my brother know you brought me here? I doubt he’d like it.”

“He knows I am here,” he said.

“But not that you brought me.” She shook her head. “He’ll be livid if he discovers this. I hope you’re prepared for his wrath.”

She was almost amused that he had brought her to the cabin. But she had not been lying. Blake would not want her at his cabin. That would not have prevented her from exploring it on her own, but Lord Foxcroft would make a convenient scapegoat. Now she could explore it with a clear conscience.

“We will just have to ensure he never discovers that you were here.” He winked. “But even if he does, I’ll handle it.” He walked over to the entrance and unlocked it. Blake must have given him a key to the cabin. He opened the door and gestured for her to go inside. “Make yourself comfortable while I start a fire in the hearth. It’s a little chilly this morning.” He set the basket he’d been carrying on a nearby table before he gathered the tinderbox for the fire.

Victoria strolled over to the settee and did as he suggested. She curled up on it and pulled a blanket over her shoulders. She was a little cold. The earl made quick work of setting the logs ablaze. She studied him as he fanned the flames. He looked good in the firelight. Quite decadent actually... Her heart skipped a beat. Was this her chance to try her hand at seduction? What would he do if she kissed him? The kiss she’d given him before had been disastrous, though. He had remained unmoved and lacked any sort of passionate response. Perhaps she should just leave things be and allow him to finish these rogue lessons.

He put one more log on the fire, and then he went and opened the curtains on the windows to let in some light. It was surprisingly cozy for a gentleman’s domain. “Are you going to explain why I am here?” she asked him. “My patience is running low.”

“I didn’t realize you had any patience at all.” He grinned. Then strolled over to the settee and sat beside her. “We’re here for your final lesson.”

She arched a brow. “I’m all aflutter with anticipation.” She batted her eyelashes at him. Victoria didn’t know how to lean on any coquettish skills. But she had to try... She wanted to seduce him, after all. “Impress me with your knowledge, my lord.”

He remained quiet for several moments. Anxiety flooded her and she started to fidget. Why wasn't he saying anything? What could be so difficult that he couldn't tell her? What was this lesson?

David probably should not have brought her to the cabin. She was correct that her brother wouldn't be happy she'd been inside. It was supposed to be the marquess's sanctuary. He couldn't find it in himself to care what Ardmore would or would not want. Because all he cared about was her. These lessons had driven a need inside of him he could no longer ignore. His desire for her consumed him.

"I brought you here to seduce you," he told her.

She stared at him for several moments. Then her lips tilted upward into a sensuous smile. "Have you now?" Victoria licked her lips. "Then, by all means, proceed. This is a lesson I wholly support."

He furrowed his brow. That was not a reaction he'd thought he'd receive. David thought she'd argue a little. But this? Acceptance? "Glad you approve." He tilted his head to the side. "But we have all day. There is no need to rush. Are you hungry?"

David moved away from her to go retrieve the basket, but she stilled him by grasping his wrist. "I don't want any food," she told him. "I just want you."

He met her gaze and saw the truth there. She desired him. How had he never saw that before? Had this always been there between them? Instead of questioning it even more, he moved over to her and pulled her into his arms. "Then I think you owe me a kiss," he told her. "That is my prize from our game last night."

"Do you want me to kiss you?" She frowned. "You didn't seem to appreciate my first attempt."

“Then let me show you how a kiss can be.” He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. It was light at first. Like the first taste of heaven and he needed to savor it. Then it became imperative that he deepen the kiss. She wound her arms around his neck as he slid his tongue against hers. The kiss became heated and frenzied.

She moaned as they continued to taste each other. The fire between them burned hotter with each touch of his lips against hers. He needed her closer. David pulled her onto his lap and cupped her breast in his palm. He’d never felt anything so wonderful as her. This wasn’t seduction. He’d lost any finesse he’d had the moment that kiss had begun. There would be no slow burn between them. At least not this first time. There was far too much need.

Victoria pulled away from him and stared into his eyes. “All right, my lord,” she said a little breathlessly. “I admit it. That was a much better kiss.”

He grinned. God, he adored her... “I think it’s safe for you to use my given name, love.” He needed her too. “Can you please call me David now?”

“I’ll consider it,” she said. “If you kiss me again.”

How was he supposed to argue with that logic? David gave in completely. He kissed her as if he might lose her if he didn’t, and hell, he supposed he still could. They hadn’t made any promises to each other. So he’d savor this moment with her, and make the most of these moments. David fully believed that he could convince her to be his. Forever. But just in case, he held her against him as if this might be his only opportunity to do so.

With that in mind, he lowered his head and kissed her neck. He needed to taste her. Every single inch of her delectable body. He needed her naked and at his mercy. As if she could read his thoughts, she wrapped her fingers around his cravat. “I need this off,” she demanded.

“Oh, yes,” he said. She pulled at it until it was loose. He reached up and yanked it free, and tossed it aside. She slid her nimble fingers over his bare neck, then yanked at his shirt until she was able to pull it free from his trousers. David stopped kissing her long enough to yank it over her head and throw it in the direction of his cravat. “Your dress has to go,” he told her. “Stand so I can undo all these buttons.”

She did as he instructed. It took far longer than he wanted it to, but he undid those buttons and pushed the dress down until it pooled at her feet. Her stays were next, until she stood before him in her shift. He lifted her and set her on the settee. He removed her boots first, then returned for her stockings. David slid his hands up her leg and loosened the ties for her stocking and rolled it down her leg. He trailed kisses down her thigh as he slid it off, then did the same for the other one. Her breath hitched as she demanded, “Do that again.”

“I’ll do that and more,” he told her. He laid her down on the settee, then spread her thighs. David trailed kisses from her knee, then up her thigh until he was at her center. Then he pressed a kiss to the top of her mound before he moved farther down to slide his tongue over her sensitive flesh. She moaned as he sucked the nub into his mouth. He pressed a finger inside of her and stroked her as he sucked her. He licked at her as he continued to slide his finger in and out until she broke apart. Her screams echoed through the cabin. It was a damn good thing no one was around to hear her.

“Oh, David...” She moaned. “I...”

He grinned. She’d finally said his name. He stood and removed his breeches. David had left them on, so he didn’t rush to press himself inside of her. This was her first time and he had to make it good for her. At least as good as he could. “Remove your shift, love. I want to see all of you.”

Victoria sat up in languid moves and slid her shift over her head. Her full breasts caught his attention and he wanted to taste them. David joined her on the settee and

pulled her back into his arms. He leaned over and sucked one pink nipple into his mouth. She squirmed against him and drove him mad with desire. He stroked her sensitive nub as he sucked the other breasts. "David..."

"Sssh," he said. "Give in to it. Come for me, love."

She broke apart again. He continued to rub his thumb over her slick flesh. She was as ready as he could make her. He laid her back on to the settee and settle between her thighs. He positioned himself at her entrance. David kissed her as he slowly slid inside of her. He hoped to keep her distracted as he filled her. She wrapped her legs around him and slid her hands over his arse. Their kisses became frenzied and she pulled him into her faster than he'd intended. She inhaled sharply. He'd hurt her. "Victoria," he said between panting breaths.

"Don't stop," she ordered. "It feels so good."

God... He loved her. David had never loved any other woman. It had always been her. He thrust into her over and over again. The frenzy almost overtook him. Her breaths became more ragged as she neared her peak. She must come for him one more time. He had to ensure it... When she moaned and shattered around him, he let himself go and reached his own climax. Everything around him seemed to fall apart and go black. For a moment he became lost, but she brought him back.

David rolled to his side and pulled her with him. She was everything he'd ever dared dream of, and he never wanted to let her go. He'd tell her that. Soon. But first he had to rest and just revel in the feel of her against him. He held her against him as he gave in to his need to sleep.

Victoria woke in David's arms. She grinned at him. He was awake and watching her sleep. That had been more than she could have hoped for. This hadn't truly been about revenge. This was a homecoming. She'd thought that once she convinced him

to become her lover, she could walk away. She knew better now. There was only one place she belonged. With him.

“I should move,” she told him. She almost told him that she loved him. Only one thing prevented her from doing that. What if he wasn’t ready to hear it? Would he leave and never come back? Victoria didn’t want to lose him.

“Don’t you dare,” he told her. “I like you exactly where you are.”

“We cannot stay here forever. Blake will want his cabin back.” Her lips twitched. “And if he comes here and sees us like this, he might very well murder you.”

“Doubtful,” David said in an amiable tone. “I’m a better shot.”

She arched a brow. “I’d prefer you didn’t shoot my brother.”

“So you’d rather he shoot me?” He sighed. “You’re ready to dispatch me already, love. I’m wounded.”

Victoria trailed a finger over his chest. She wanted him to make love to her again. Could she coax him into kissing her? He seemed to like that, and he was damn good at it. She didn’t realize what a true novice she was until he’d kissed her with intention. “I don’t want you to go anywhere.”

“That’s fortunate,” he told her. “As I don’t plan on leaving. In fact, I am considering abducting you. I hear Scotland is lovely this time of year.”

“You want to take me to Scotland?” she asked. “Why?” Then it hit her. “You want to elope?” There was only one reason for them to take an unplanned trip there.

“I always knew you were brilliant, love.” He pulled her closer and kissed her quick.

“I love you. I’ve always loved you.” He cupped her breast as he trailed kissed down her neck. “Now that I’ve thoroughly compromised you, it’s time that I claimed you legally as well. That way no one can ever come between us.”

She laughed. “I don’t recall agreeing to marry you.” Victoria gasped as he pressed his thumb to her sex. He did wicked things with his fingers. “Do that again.”

“Say yes, first, love,” David demanded. “You’re marrying me. As soon as I can arrange it.”

“Yes,” she said. “Always. Yes.” She moaned.

“And you’re going to forget this nonsense about having lovers. You’re mine.” He rubbed her sensitive flesh and she squirmed. “Say it.”

“I’m yours. I love you. I don’t need anyone else. I just need you.” The words came out breathlessly. He stroked her until she shattered.

“That’s it, love,” he told her. “You’re so bloody beautiful. I adore you.” He kissed her. “I suppose there is one more lesson.” He pressed his lips to hers. “One we’ve both learned.”

“And what is that?” she asked as he slid into her. He thrust deep and she moaned.

“That when a rogue falls,” he whispered in her ear. “It’s forever.” The world split apart until it was only the two of them. She lost all sense of reason. When everything came into focus again, she met his gaze and found her happiness there.

Victoria wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. There were no sweeter words than hearing how much he loved her. They had the rest of their lives together. She had everything she had ever wanted, and more. She had the love of her life. The

notion of a rogue wallflower had its purpose, and for her, it had been to win David's heart. Thank heaven it had gone as planned...

One year later...

Victoria sat at her desk and finished writing the last entry. It was a memoir of sorts. One that she intended to publish. She'd gotten the idea for it on her wedding trip, and had been slowly writing it for the past year. They had not gone to Scotland as he had suggested. Instead, they had gone back to the manor and he'd asked Blake for permission to marry her. They'd done everything properly after that. They planned a wedding and had the banns read. Which was a good thing. Considering that Lilah had snared the viscount and they had married by special license. That had sent everyone into a frenzy. She'd liked waiting for her wedding and having it separate from the house party.

"Hello, love," David greeted her. "Is that the book?"

She grinned. "It is." She handed it to him. "Would you like to read it?"

"Are you asking for my advice?" He arched a brow.

"You are the expert rogue." Her lips twitched as she fought a smile. "You might want to add something."

He flipped open the book. The title page read. "A Wallflower's Guide to Becoming a Rogue."

"So far," he said. "It's thrilling. I cannot wait to read the rest. Starting with these rogue lessons promised on the pages." He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. "They're quite important."

“Lessons usually are.” She fell in love with him a little bit more every day. “My favorite was the lesson on seduction.”

“Mine too, love,” he said. “Mine too.” He set the book on her desk and pulled her into his arms. “We should explore that a bit more. I would not want to neglect your education.” He lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the sitting room. There was only one place he would take her now.

“I so adore your lessons,” she said breathlessly. “But it is the middle of the day.”

“That’s never stopped us before.” He grinned. “Why would it now?”

Her laughter echoed around them. Sometimes she wondered if he could read her mind, but then again, they both always seemed to desire each other. So much so, she had something else to tell him. When they reached their bedchamber, he set her down and pushed the door closed with his foot. “Now where were we,” he asked.

“You were going to kiss me,” she told him.

“Oh, yes,” he said in a husky tone. “I wouldn’t want to skip that part.” He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. He was her weakness, and her strength.

“Darling,” she said as she pulled away from him. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He trailed kisses over her neck.

“There’s something I need to tell you.” She hadn’t been certain before that morning.

“You want me to kiss you again?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “But first...” She lifted his hand and pressed it to her stomach.

His gaze flew to hers and his grin widened. Then he lifted her up and twirled her around the room with excitement.

“Stop,” she said as she laughed. “You’re making me dizzy.” His happiness was enthralling.

“I’m sorry,” he said and set her down. He kissed her gently and then lifted his head to meet her gaze. “I adore you and I cannot wait to meet our child. I’ve never been happier than this past year we’ve been together. The best thing that ever happened to me was winning your heart.”

Victoria cupped his cheek. “I’ll love you forever.” Her heart burst with all the love she felt for this man. “I promise. I’m yours.”

He kissed her again and they became lost in each other, as they always did. The rest of the world fell away, and it was just the two of them.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

Lady Cora Stephens happily wandered through the garden at her father's, the Earl of Farrington's country home. She loved the garden and spent as much time as possible there during the summer months. Cora could not imagine a more perfect place, and in her heart, she never wanted to call any other place hers. At 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.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:39 am

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That piquet is a game of chance?” Eli lifted a brow. “In that you are correct.” He refused to admit defeat until he absolutely had to.

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

Eli shook his head and sighed and made his declarations, and they continued on with the game. After they were done playing, he had to confess, “I concede, you won.” He met her gaze. “I’m not saying you are a better player though.”

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

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

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

were like blows that failed to leave a visible bruise. Eli had never been happier when the earl ceased breathing. When the Earl of Dryden dropped dead suddenly Eli had rejoiced, and secretly so had Elena.

“Do you think you’ll ever remarry?” he asked in a noncommittal tone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So you do not believe you will ever willingly give your heart away?” This seemed like an opportunity. Should he take it? Elena had never really given any man a chance, and she had good reason for that. As a widow of wealthy means, she didn’t have to remarry, but she had a past she seemed determined to forget. One he wanted to remind her about in a subtle way. “You don’t have to marry a man if you love him, you know.”

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

“I’ve never been married, love,” he replied. “I cannot marry again when I never have.”

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

“I was hoping to convince you to marry me,” he said in a smooth tone. “You’re the only woman I actually like.”

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

“Now that wasn’t necessary. I’m not revolting.” He frowned. She made a valid argument, though. Eli didn’t wish to bed her any more than she wanted to join him in that activity.

“Darling,” she began as she studied him. “You are passably handsome. I’ve heard many debutantes expound on your breathtaking visage. Apparently, your black hair and green eyes make them swoon with desire.”

“Of course, they do. What they actually desire to be a future duchess, and my gorgeous physique has nothing to do with their admiration.” Eli might be a bit jaded...

“I am not marrying until I absolutely have to, and love won’t be part of the bargain.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She lifted a brow. “Oh?”

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

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

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

He wasn’t worried about himself. Eli had time to find a suitable wife. His concern was for his dearest friend and helping her find a love she deserved. Besides he hadn’t lied, Eli didn’t believe in love, at least not when it came to his own life. Love was for other people. Individuals who had the luxury of accepting that gift into their lives. Eli

would never be that fortunate.