



# The Lyon's Legacy (The Lyon's Den Connected World)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Sometimes, passion is impossible to ignore.

Lady Melissa Thumbridge knows how to move through high society but refuses to play by its rules. When she's summoned as the Prince Regent's mistress, she finds herself trapped in a world of luxury and duty. Yet, her heart beats for another—John Stonebridge, who's everything she's ever wanted. Loving him, though, could cost them both everything. With her sister's duchess title and the survival of the dukedom on the line, Melissa must summon all her strength to break free, with a little help from the infamous matchmaker Mrs. Dove-Lyon and a meddlesome kitten named Angus.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

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April 25th, 1818, at the Royal Palace in Brighton, England

No woman should feel so apprehensive before the act. It should be exciting and fill her heart with desire—the anticipation of the climax should be an overwhelming sense of liberation and a high unlike any other.

It should.

Except that Melissa thought otherwise, as she had to plan it carefully. It was expected of her and just another item on her list of duties. Like everything else, she had to perform at her best. Again.

This would not be about her pleasure, mutual attraction, or all those other feelings described in the books she loved to read. No glory existed in what she anticipated a night serving the regent would bring. This would be transactional, skill-based—she tasted acid—professional.

After her lady's maid shut the door, Melissa stood alone before the three angled looking glasses in a lavishly decorated bedchamber that was not hers. A crystal chandelier cast a regal glow over the patterned Persian rugs and Melissa felt bland by comparison. Like every part of the Royal Palace at Brighton, this bedchamber featured sumptuous silk drapes in rich red hues, an exquisite four-poster bed adorned with golden accents. The flickering light, the dizzying swirls of the rug, and even the rustling of the cover made Melissa wish she could exchange all this luxury for a walk outdoors along a simple gravel path. Preferably alone.

But the mirrors were relentless in showing she was not dressed for a leisurely walk in

nature. She looked all but natural with the tight curls atop her head, and the rouge on her cheeks couldn't hide the pallor that betrayed her apprehension. Plus, these mirrors showed the truth of her station, which had been degraded to a function—another one of Prinny's luxuries at the palace.

She inhaled, but the corset constricted her ribs, so even the simple breathing wasn't satisfying. Walking in the fresh air would be, but Melissa was stuck—not merely at the palace but by circumstances.

Her burden was crushing—the debts her late husband left behind threatened to unravel what little stability remained. Once a symbol of her advantageous marriage, the estate loomed as a daunting shadow over her life. If she didn't resolve the debts, her father or perhaps her brother-in-law may be implicated in the debts of the husband she'd only been married to for a few months.

Prinny's offer hovered in her mind—a beacon of financial relief, yet she hesitated to accept. His promise to untangle her financial woes came with conditions that left her uneasy. The thought of becoming his mistress for security churned within her because she'd secretly given her heart to another man.

She twisted her back—she had arranged these mirrors at just the right angles—so she could see herself entirely from behind. When she looked over her shoulder to see the long line of ribbon tied in a crisscross along the back of her chemise, a tight contraption just like the expectations of her, a young widow, first daughter of an earl, beautifully set up for Prinny's pleasure. It was an elaborate garment that accentuated her waist. In the back, it was covered with satin ribbon that had a pleasing effect of elongating her silhouette. Her figure looked just like the drawings at the French seamstress on Regent Street, but none of it pleased her, and none felt right.

She'd been summoned to the prince regent's estate in Brighton. They'd called it a pavilion, but it was more than a palace near the seaside. Melissa had never been to the

beach before and noticed how different the air smelled upon her arrival. The briny fog didn't help either.

It wasn't the chemise or the air, though—it was deep inside; she feared the night even though she'd had the chance to reject it. But who would not want to be with the prince ? Well, she hadn't thought it all through. Now that she'd been brought here at the prince's will, she had a chance to untangle her late husband's debts and ensure her position in society. The prince said he'd help her, but Melissa wasn't too naïve to see that this was a quid pro quo. A woman like her, widowed and in good standing in society, would risk everything her family had worked for generations if she refused him tonight—not because she'd reject the prince, but because she couldn't pay off the debts and her family's fortunes were at stake. At the cost of one night, she couldn't be so selfish as to bring her bad luck to her family, so she decided to please and fulfill the regent's every wish. And yet, Melissa feared nothing more at that moment.

A knock.

The door opened, and three footmen rolled in carts with polished silver domes.

Melissa watched them, but they paid her no attention. They were probably not allowed to look at the prince's mistresses.

Melissa felt instantly dirty.

Her late husband had never truly ignored her; he'd merely left her to her musings during their short marriage of four months. Nobody had ever mistreated her per se. She and her younger sister Lexi were usually the belles of the balls, as their mother called them, and had to be perfect.

“Perfect,” Melissa mumbled to herself and rolled her eyes as the levied servants left.

The door remained open, but Melissa paid no attention to the goings-on. The pavilion was so busy she'd quickly given up eavesdropping and trying to understand what was hushed in the halls.

"Are you hungry?" A deep voice thundered through the room, and Melissa shrieked.

"Your Highness." She curtsied, her heart beating as she imagined a fawn's would when looking at the mouth of a hunter's rifle.

"You are most beautiful, Lady Thumbbridge. I knew your late husband, and he was a fine man."

But her husband had died of lung fever in the first winter of their marriage, so she didn't know him all that well. That was nearly four years ago, and her inheritance and station had paved the way for Melissa to mingle among Prinny's entourage.

"Thank you, Your Highness." Melissa straightened slightly but let her head hang for fear of making eye contact. She'd spoken to the prince before, but this was different. Now, she'd become his prey.

The prince was tall with a prominent nose and curt smile. His dark hair was short and wavy. Even his boots had large, polished buckles. Someone had polished everything for his pleasure. The presentation was flawless, including her.

"Have you eaten?"

Oh, she'd forgotten to respond. "No, Your Highness."

The prince lifted the cloche from one of the trays. "Ah, lemon tarts. My favorite. Have you tried them before?"

“No, Your Highness.”

“Lady Thumbbridge, speak freely, please. I am a guest in your chambers tonight. Forget you are a guest at my court.”

Melissa curtsied, but the sigh of relief barely escaped her barely concealed chest audibly.

There was a rustling of fabric, and he stood before her when she rose. His hand came to her chin and lifted her gaze. “Look at me.”

She did but couldn’t hide the hesitation and fear throbbing within.

“You are so beautiful. I couldn’t help but summon you, darling. Fear me not, please.”

“I am at your service, Your Highness.” Her heart thrummed so vehemently that he must have been aware.

“And I shall be at yours tonight.”

Whatever he meant by that, Melissa rather wished he weren’t. But before she could determine his meaning, he picked up a lemon tart and held it out to her.

“Try one. Tell me what you think.”

Melissa reached out to take the tart, but he didn’t give it up. Instead, he brought it to her mouth. Oh no, he wanted to feed her.

Melissa felt like a deer forced to eat from the hunter’s hand.

Reluctantly, she took a bite. The pastry dough was flakey. In her embarrassment, she

exhaled heavily, which made it worse; the light flakes of the dough flew out of her mouth, and the prince's dark blue velvet coat was sprinkled with them.

Melissa froze. It hadn't been her intention to ruin the Prince's visit even though she didn't want him to visit her alone at all. Still...

He looked down and broke into laughter. His chest shook in mirth.

Melissa joined with a smile as she forced the bite of creamy lemon custard down her throat.

"You're not used to being seduced, are you?" He chuckled, brushing off the crumbs as if it were naught that Melissa had inadvertently spat at the regent. He just seemed like a man, not a legacy of the English Crown.

She put a hand on her forehead. "No."

"Well, if you allow me to change that, I believe you'll find the experience most satisfying."

"Unlike the lemon tart?" Melissa wanted to bite her tongue, but she couldn't stop speaking when she was nervous.

The prince's eyes shot to hers, and he gave her a crooked smile. "Do I strike you as a lemon tart, darling?"

Overcome by the moment's tension, her half-nakedness, the mishap, and now his jest, Melissa broke into laughter and tilted her head back in mirth. The tension made her laugh so forceful that she couldn't help herself.

He stared at her and then looked away.

Melissa stilled and faced him.

“You have a little gold in your teeth,” he said.

Melissa swallowed, unsure how to react to that. Had she overexposed when she laughed?

“I apologize, Your Highness. I didn’t mean to expose—”

“Tell me about them. How did the gold get in your teeth?” He reached out and signaled she should come closer. “Open up.”

Melissa’s stomach churned. This was worse than she’d expected. She feared an intrusion into her privacy, but having the prince inspect her teeth was an embarrassment she hadn’t expected.

She swallowed, but then she obeyed.

He rose again and took her face in both hands as he looked intently at her teeth.

“Tell me who did this.”

“My brother-in-law, Your Highness.”

“When?”

“A few weeks ago.”

“Why?”

Melissa cringed. “I beg your pardon?” She withdrew her face from his gentle grip,



crossed her arms, and stepped back.

“Tell me.”

“My... ahem... in my family, this is a problem. My father has lost many teeth. My sister and I feared to suffer his fate and the pain.”

“It can be harrowing, I’m afraid.” The prince’s mien was dark with a mix of curiosity. “Your father has a dentist?”

“He doesn’t go there. He prefers the pain.”

“And was this painful? The gold?”

“No, Your Highness.”

“Let me see again.”

“Your Highness,” Melissa spoke after he took another look.

“I’m sorry if I am making you uncomfortable, Lady Thumbbridge. I haven’t slept in a long time, enjoyed no food, found nothing to dull the pain.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “You see, this lifestyle comes with certain consequences.”

Melissa arched a brow but remained silent. She’d understood. Even the prince regent could suffer from toothaches.

“As head of the military, I had the privilege”—he waved it off to emphasize the sarcasm—“to have the first and foremost treatment before my troops. Too much of it

at times.”

He remained silent.

Melissa tried to smile politely but couldn't muster it. “I am sorry for your affliction.”

“Oh darling, how old are you?”

“Four and twenty.”

He hissed a laugh. “I'm twice as old, dear. And I have had plenty of adventures and luxuries in my life. But let me tell you, this pain in my mouth is ruining it all. Even with a woman as beautiful as you, I cannot—” He stopped. Then he stilled. “I beg for your forgiveness, Lady Thumbbridge. I don't know what came over me; I forgot myself.” He tugged at his collar and looked into her eyes.

Suddenly, Melissa no longer saw the regent. He no longer looked like a predator who would feast on her. Instead, he appeared to be an aging man in pain, burdened by his position. Melissa thought he reminded her of her father. “Your Highness, do you wish to see a dentist?”

“No!”

“Perhaps a trustworthy one?” she continued. “My brother-in-law is a dentist. He trained in Edinburgh and then Vienna, and he's been to India for more apprenticeships.” Melissa continued when the prince narrowed his eyes. “He carved little grooves in my teeth to take the caries out, and this will leave me healed for a long time.”

“Did it hurt?” he asked again. It must be important to him, Melissa thought.

“No, he said it wouldn’t, and it didn’t—”

“Why?”

“Because the cavities were not deep, he said. So it was a little uncomfortable, but he gave me clove oil and a rolled towel with something that smelled lovely and put me at ease. It wasn’t so bad at all. As my sister predicted, it was only in the very back, and now the decay has been stopped for the future.”

“What does it have to do with your sister?”

“She’d seen him first. My sister is healed as I am. Except you can see the eight gold fillings when I laugh.”

“Your laugh is enchanting, Lady Thumbridge. Never let anyone tell you otherwise.” He ogled her mouth. “And your sister has gold teeth?”

“No, just a few fillings. You can barely see it unless she shows them. I have more fillings, even if they are smaller.” Melissa shrugged. There was nothing to be done about her family’s affliction of caries. And she was glad she’d sought Dustin out for treatment. She said she could easily live decades without losing a tooth or suffering pain—more than Father could say.

“When my father dies, I will be crowned king.”

Melissa nodded. Why would he tell her that if everyone in England knew? It was merely a matter of time before the prince ascended to the throne he was already controlling.

“And I shall sit for portraits that will go down in history,” he added.

Oh.

Melissa tried to smile politely but was self-conscious that he'd peruse her teeth again. This evening was growing increasingly curious.

"I mustn't sit for a portrait without teeth nor in pain. It will show."

Now she understood. It wasn't an odd fetish of the prince; he genuinely feared the pain of losing his teeth, and he was in pain now in need of medical care. And he was vain.

"I'm sure your brother-in-law cannot help me anymore."

"His mentor works in London," Melissa said before she'd fully considered what it would mean for the doctors on Harley Street if the prince regent came for treatment.

"Aha," the prince said with resignation, and Melissa thought his tongue darted into his cheek, where she suspected a sore tooth.

"May I speak out of turn, Your Highness?"

"Yes," he mumbled, his tongue obstructing his speech.

"My brother-in-law merely took over the practice of his mentor when my sister met him."

"Good for your sister. I heard that she married the long-lost Duke of Duncan. She has my congratulations on her nuptials."

"Thank you, but the practice is on Harley Street in Marylebone. There are several doctors in residence."

“Lovely,” he said, now rubbing his cheek with his hand.

“Your Highness, the doctors on Harley Street are masters of their craft. They can make it look like nothing had ever happened.”

“What do you mean, as if nothing had happened?”

“I have only seen it in a book he wrote, with drawings. When my sister and her husband left, he returned to his practice. You should go to him. He can make teeth whole and white again.”

“I am not going to the dentist. I told you I’ll sit for portraits and cannot be there without teeth. I have seen dentures made from the teeth of fallen Waterloo soldiers. Can you imagine if the king wore the teeth of his fallen troops?” He looked disturbed, and his temper began to show. “It’s macabre.”

“I can make arrangements for you to seek treatment in privacy. I will ensure you are the only one at the practice with the doctors there. They are friends of the family and will do me the favor.” She waited but he didn’t react. “I’ll ensure you are the only one at the practice,” she repeated, her voice steady even though her pulse quickened. “They’re friends of the family and will do me the favor.”

The prince’s eyes held hers for a beat longer than she expected, as though trying to read between her words. Then his shoulders lowered slightly, the tension in the room easing—not disappearing, but shifting. He glanced downward, the faintest crease of thought forming between his brows, and when his gaze lifted again, there was something else there. Was it hesitation? Curiosity? She couldn’t tell, but it made her breath catch.

“I’ve seen artists ruin reputations when favors are owed,” he said at last, his tone quieter now but still defensive. “What is it you would ask of me in return?”

Melissa's heart raced, but she didn't flinch. She hadn't expected to get this far.

What would a single favor from the prince change for her?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

Dear Lady Thumbbridge,

You did me a great favor, indeed. The doctors on Harley Street performed a miracle on my mouth. Like you, I now have a few gold fillings, but mine are larger than yours. As you had predicted, he placed crowns on top made of white porcelain. I dare say my smile hasn't looked this fine since I was a lad.

Lady Thumbbridge, I owe you a great favor. You are precious, and you shall remain ever mine, untouched by the claims of any other.

In everlasting gratitude,

George IV.

Melissa pressed the letter with the now broken royal seal to her chest and then stuffed it back in her reticule as she entered the notorious Lyon's Den . With the letter folded over twice, it seemed like no more than a piece of paper, but it held her future.

Prinny owed her a favor but he still claimed her as his. What a dilemma.

If she played her cards well, it could be a favor from the regent. The problem was that the favor she wanted from the prince was not to be his favorite; she wanted to be free. And where else could she gamble with a treasure as great as her life and heart but at the Lyon's Den ?

It became a final option, like many visits to Mrs. Dove-Lyon, but Melissa couldn't let go of the hope the intimidating Black Widow of Whitehall provided.

Thus, Melissa held her breath while a well-dressed woman led her through the hall of the notorious gambling den, up a flight of stairs, and around the corner to a door. The woman, one of Mrs. Dove-Lyon's wolves, knocked unceremoniously then opened the door, and Melissa entered. She winced when the door clicked shut behind her. She was alone in the same chamber where she suspected her sister had been. The air seemed thick with anticipation, as though the room conspired to swallow Melissa's future whole. This was the place where desperate women came in the hope of one last chance at a match. Fallen girls, ruined heiresses, and widows like her sought the expertise of the reigning queen of London's nights, vices, and, some might say, the puppeteer of the Ton.

Melissa willed her pulse to stop racing. She was in the den of a lioness indeed and ought not to show the fear thrumming in her stomach. Mrs. Dove-Lyon wasn't a woman to trifle with, and yet Melissa had come to make her demands and to put in a specific request for love. Plus her freedom from Prinny and a chance with the man of her affection. Perhaps these were too many demands at once but the truth was, Mrs. Dove-Lyon was Melissa's only hope.

"Lady Thumbridge," the older woman's voice held a note of command as she gestured with an imperious wave toward the far end of the room.

Despite the weight of unspoken possibilities pressing upon her, she moved forward, each step resonating with a determined grace.

Her hostess wore an impeccably tailored black gown with long sleeves and intricate gold embroidery. Although, her hair showed the evidence of a skilled lady's maid who'd piled the curls atop her head, most of it remained hidden beneath a black lace veil that was pinned to her hair.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Dove-Lyon," Melissa curtsied.



“Hot chocolate?” Her hostess asked sweetly as she approached a coffee table facing the fireplace. She pointed palm-up to a settee at a right angle from the high-back armchair she already sat in. “Your sister likes it and it’s my favorite, so I took the liberty to have some readied for your visit.”

“Thank you ever so much,” Melissa sat and eyed the steaming pot. It had a charmingly rounded silhouette painted with elegant blue scenes of children playing in a meadow. And suddenly Melissa envied the children, for she’d rather wished to trade places with the fictional images of merry children.

“Your sister told me you had a special wish, and you’d be willing to pay the price for my service?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon got right to the point.

Melissa clutched the letter to her chest with her gloved hands. “I have a favor.”

“Then you’ve come to the wrong place. I run a business, and favors are not a commodity for sale.”

“Love is, then?” Melissa asked but immediately regretted doing so when Mrs. Dove-Lyon arched a brow. “Pardon me. I mean, I have a favor to call in, but it is rather delicate, and I need help with it.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon raised her chin and eyed Melissa. “Are you bearing the prince regent’s child?”

Oh, so she knew that she was Prinny’s mistress. Well, at least she didn’t have to explain herself then. Everybody just assumed the worst of her now.

“No.”

“Are you certain?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hmpf!” Mrs. Dove-Lyon leaned forward and poured herself, and then Melissa a steaming cup of dark brown hot chocolate. It was impolite not to pour for the guest first, and Melissa knew—she wasn’t a guest; she was a client. And Mrs. Dove-Lyon hadn’t accepted her demands yet. “So you wish for a match?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“But you are spoken for...”

Melissa clutched the letter in her reticule as if she could draw courage from it. “I need to leave the royal court to have a chance with the man I ahem... I—”

“Darling, I’m a matchmaker, not a matchbreaker. And I’ve been alive for long enough to know that our regent will not let me interfere with his choices of mistresses.”

“But he owes me a favor.” Melissa produced the letter.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon unfolded it, and Melissa saw her eyes trailing over the lines as she read the words.

“This is real. I recognize his hand and the broken seal.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon let the letter drop onto her lap. “But I cannot help you.”

Melissa felt the warmth draining from her face. “I don’t wish to return to society but must gain independence.”

“And what makes you believe this to be a difficulty?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon spoke with her chin raised again.

“Some girls at the court in Brighton face social ostracism and financial difficulties once they leave. None I’ve heard of ever found love.”

“I heard that the prince paid ?500 in annuities until Mary Robinson received a pension.”

“Yes, she’s an exception. I’m under no illusion that the prince is in love with me. Not even close.”

“But you are in love?”

Melissa nodded.

“With another man?” her hostess pressed on from under the black veil.

Only Melissa had nowhere to hide and deflated.

“Who?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon pressed on.

Melissa hesitated because she was certain Mrs. Dove-Lyon would recognize the name. And yet, if she didn’t tell her who she loved, how could Mrs. Dove-Lyon make the match? Or at least make it possible?

“John Stonebridge.” There, it was out. For a flicker of a moment, Melissa took heart and felt relieved that she’d admitted it. She’d never told anyone how she felt about him.

“Your brother-in-law?” Now, she had Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s unwavering attention.

“Cousin. He’s my brother-in-law’s cousin. We’re not actually related... b-but acquainted. I’d like to deepen this acquaintance with him.” Melissa’s skin prickled as

a cold sweat slicked her brow, her breaths turning shallow and uneven.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon cleared her throat. “Lady Thumbridge, you completely misunderstand the nature of my service. Women come to me with little to no prospects and either a man in their hearts or the wish for a certain kind of man. I make matches—”

“Love matches, Lexi said. And Shira, the nurse.”

“You spoke to Shira?” The older woman’s voice came shrill.

“And Mrs. Ada Stein.” Ada was a trump card. And now Melissa had let Mrs. Dove-Lyon know that she knew three other women who found love matched at her hand. After all, Melissa had the training and breeding of an earl’s daughter and knew when to leverage connections in society. It was no different in letting Mrs. Dove-Lyon know that Melissa had spoken to the other rather unconventional matches she knew about. “I want what they have with the man I love,” Melissa added for good measure.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon took a slow sip from her cup and sat it on her coffee table. Of course, Melissa had used Ada Stein’s name deliberately. Ada was the wife of one of the doctors on Harley Street, and she’d grown up under Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s watch. She was almost like a daughter to her.

“They were exceptions. I make matches when my clients are hopeless. Love is a happy accident.”

“I want to be one, too.” Melissa squared her back to show her decision had been made. She’d gladly be an exception of how to return to society with grace rather than an example of how not to fall from grace.

“What if he does not love you? Do you still want me to press for matrimony?”

“No.” Melissa hadn’t considered it, but she certainly didn’t want that. “I’m asking you to make the match possible. Love is something I have to take care of myself.”

A moment of silence followed, and then Mrs. Dove-Lyon gave her the letter.

“My fees are rather high. Can you afford them?” Despite her slightly hunched back and narrow shoulders, Mrs. Dove-Lyon spoke with the transactional sobriety of an experienced businesswoman. But Melissa had already gained some experience, too. A few weeks at the royal court had been even more educational than all her years at finishing school.

“I have a large fortune at my disposal; my late husband provided well for me, but his title will revert to the Crown since we had no heirs and nobody else in his family.”

“I see. If the prince disagrees, he’ll take your fortune.”

“And my home. So why not spend it on a chance to love?”

“Before he claims you—which he has in some ways.”

Melissa pinched her lips and nodded.

Even though her husband had thought through what would happen if he died and an heir existed, nobody expected his demise so soon after their wedding. Now Melissa was stranded. Hers had been what every titled marriage ought to be—a sparkling shell of wealth and splendor—but Melissa was ready to look beyond the packaging and get to the core of what life was about. And she had high hopes that John would lead her there.

“Have you posed for any of Cosway’s paintings when you were in Brighton?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon inclined her head as if she were taking Melissa’s measure for one of

Cosway's famous portraits.

"No."

"Any other artists at the palace?"

"Never," Melissa assured her.

"Hmpf!" Mrs. Dove-Lyon pursed her lips as if she were devising a plan, giving Melissa hope. A rush of excitement washed over her, and she held her breath, waiting for the older woman's next question.

"I have one condition," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

Well, that was a little unexpected. "Whatever it is, I shall accept it."

"Without hearing what it is?"

Prinny will claim me as a mistress in earnest and my fortune as a bonus the next time I return, but it's only John I want. Nobody else.

"I trust your expertise and will follow your guidance. This is my last chance for love, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. I'm four and twenty and already widowed, appointed a mistress, and there's little left for me to but wait to be discarded like some of the others."

"You've met them? The other mistresses?"

Melissa was not going to answer about the goings-on at court. It was an unspoken rule to honor Prinny's privacy once one was accepted into his inner circle, especially his bed. "Have you ever worked with any of the former mistresses? Maria Fitzherbert, perhaps?" It was well-known that she'd married Prinny, but the marriage

hadn't been accepted as valid because she was Catholic, and he would have risked the throne.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon inhaled profoundly and gave Melissa a sterner once-over that made Melissa shiver. "Very well, not every question needs to be answered." She crossed her arms. "And you are absolutely certain you wish to liaise with the duke who lost his title?"

Melissa wanted to say yes or no and give her consent, but none of that would do justice to the feeling in her chest. She wished to stand on a mountain, spread her arms wide, and scream at the top of her lungs.

"I love John."

"It was you who sent him to my family's dinner. You brought him into my life—"

"He was meant for your sister," Mrs. Dove-Lyon interjected.

"Never suited her, though." But he suited Melissa. As soon as she'd seen his dazzling smile, intelligent eyes, and impeccable manners at the dinner table, she'd known she was falling for the man who'd been sent as her sister's match. Melissa stepped back, but her sister loved another, and John lost his title as the duke. It was a long, complicated, tale that revealed John's true character. Instead of being envious of his cousin, who'd taken on the title, John had helped him establish himself. He'd welcomed Lexi and Melissa to his castle and looked after the transition. John Stonebridge was a man who was strong, righteous, kind, and strikingly handsome. "He suits me, and I would like nothing more than a chance to show him."

"You're risking much for a chance," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said with the tone of a mother who'd been won over but wasn't convinced it was the best course of action. "What if he doesn't reciprocate?"

Melissa had no answer. It was possible but unlikely. He'd been so attentive to her, kind, welcoming, and she could swear his gaze lingered on her back when she left a room. Perhaps that was all. He might not even have her, a used woman, a fallen one. Or perhaps he felt about her as she did about him.

“So? Are you certain this isn't a mistake?”

“I won't know unless I try.”



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

John shook his head when the carriage pulled through the opening between the round boxwoods. He'd been waiting in the hall of Eton for his son and reread the letter he'd received earlier that day. His stomach twisted as his eyes skimmed the lines he wished he'd never seen.

Dear Mr. Stonebridge,

With a sense of duty and respect, I write to you regarding your esteemed position within the House of Lords.

Your services are no longer required in your current capacity. This decision comes not from any inadequacy on your part but rather due to the rightful succession of your cousin, who is now prepared to assume the responsibilities and privileges associated with his birthright.

Your contributions during your tenure have been recognized and valued, and your dedication to your duties has not gone unnoticed. However, the time has come for the natural order of succession to be restored, ensuring that the legacy of leadership continues as intended.

I wish you every success in your future endeavors.

With respect and appreciation,

Edward Harrington

Clerk of the House of Lords

A whirlwind of thoughts flooded John's mind. How quickly his life had changed—again. But before he could complete his thoughts, his son appeared—just as disheveled as the courier who'd delivered the letter.

“Are you speaking with yourself rather than me again?” Herbert suddenly tugged at his coat, which was heavily embroidered for John, the duke—a position that felt heavier without the title than with it. “You didn't have to collect me from Eton if you didn't wish for my company.”

“I always cherish your company, son.” With more time on his hands now, no longer the Duke of Duncan, John hoped to be more present for Herbert. This newfound freedom could be his chance to be a better father—though he wondered if it was enough without a title to pass on. “You should be home for your birthday.”

“I'll be thirteen this month, Father. I'm not a little child anymore.”

“Yes, you are. And you will always be to me.”

His freckled face and unkempt hair made him look like a child indeed—and the dearest one, making John's heart soar in a way he couldn't say. And like a child, Herbert groaned and shifted in his seat during the entire ride home.

And yet, as soon as the carriage came to a stop, John breathed easier. They were home. Oh how he loved Starcliff Castle.

The staff had lined up in front of the main entrance.

It was truly odd coming home without being in charge of the estate but it was still good to be home. In the center stood Dustin, the reigning Duke of Duncan, with his new wife, Lexi. And next to her—John swallowed hard—was her beautiful sister, Melissa.

An unexpected visitor.

John's gaze lingered on her for just a moment too long, tracing the curve of Melissa's cheek before darting away, his jaw tightening as he fought to steady himself. His hand twitched at his side, as though resisting the urge to reach out, and he pressed his foot harder into the floor, grounding himself against the pull she always seemed to have on him.

Initial greetings and a warm welcome were exchanged, and John placed a brotherly kiss on Lexi's hands. "How nice to be welcomed by my family, Lexi. I see that you're flourishing in your position as Mistress of Starcliff Castle."

She reddened, and Dustin wrapped an arm around her waist. "She's doing a marvelous job, John. I'm not sure I can say the same."

"I've been gone for less than two weeks," John gave Dustin a stern look. "What happened?"

It was uncanny, truly. If John's father hadn't been born a year after Dustin's, he'd be the heir, not the spare. And he wouldn't have to feel like a guest in his home since Dustin and Lexi moved back in as the duke and duchess.

And he'd know what to say to the beauty—Melissa—who was once again there to visit her sister. John hadn't seen her since Dustin and Lexi were married.

"Lady Thumbridge," John bowed more deeply than he ought and tried not to linger as he kissed Melissa's gloved knuckle. She was spoken for by Prinny—or better yet, reserved by him. No wonder the prince took the cream of the crop—not that any crop could ever create something as perfect and gorgeous as Melissa.

That was the problem, of course; the prince had the right to claim the nation's most

beautiful women for himself, but he was also keeping the most intelligent ones. Although John couldn't explain why it irked him so, he rather wished Melissa were not at the castle. It was enough that she'd been on his mind constantly since she'd walked down the aisle in the chapel of Starcliff Castle.

John swallowed hard. He had to do something about his hard body and drifting mind these days. Having less work didn't behoove him, and his thoughts trailed to Melissa too often. She'd had white lilac braided into her hair, and ringlets of her lush hazelnut curls cascaded over her laced cleavage. It was so hard to look away and not stare, that it pained John.

"Herbert, come on, I have something to show you." Dustin led Herbert into the castle and John followed along with the others. Cousin Dustin had set up a small doctor's office with two chambers. In the larger one, there was a bed and a large cupboard filled with medicines. He'd organized an apartment within the castle for the doctors from 87 and 91 Harley Street to visit the estate for a few days at a time so that they may mix business with pleasure, offering various treatments to the local farmers and villagers. John had also arranged for the shepherd's wife to be taken to London for surgery, but the others had received care at the estate. It had all been agreed upon when John donated to the new Rehabilitation Center at Cloverdale House in London, where the doctors from Harley Street treated patients who needed time to recover, reserving a room for any of his tenants to always have space there.

"Are you making me watch again?" Herbert asked, shrugging his school uniform coat and pulling up his sleeves.

John followed his son, who was dragging his feet as he followed Dustin. Lexi and Melissa were behind them, but in front of John, he noticed how gently Melissa wrapped her arms around her sister. He knew she was an excellent big sister—better than he was for Dustin in every way. Not that John wasn't a big sister of course, but he should be like a brother to Dustin and hoped he could fulfill his responsibility.

Although John didn't begrudge Dustin the prestige but didn't know what to do next. And what would Herbert do if he was no longer the heir?

At the same time, John worried that Dustin was better prepared to run a small hospital than the estate.

"You don't need to watch; you may assist," Dustin said, and John heard Herbert gasp.

"Really? During a surgery?" Herbert leaned forward, his eyes gleaming.

"It's not a big one," Dustin said in a low voice as if to rein in Herbert's enthusiasm, though a faint smirk played at his lips.

"Can I stitch the incision up?" Herbert asked eagerly, his fingers already twitching as if he could feel the needle in his grasp.

"Do you even know how to tie a surgical knot?" Dustin tilted his head, his tone carrying a mix of skepticism and amusement.

John watched them carefully, his unease growing as Herbert's zeal for the task seemed to overshadow the weight of what they were doing. Dustin's confidence was sharper now, less forgiving, and it left John wondering if he was witnessing the start of something reckless—or revolutionary. Whatever it was, he had the sinking feeling it might be beyond his control.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

A few weeks ago at Starcliff Castle just after Dustin and Lexi's wedding...

John stood alone at the dining table after Dustin and Lexi's wedding breakfast, stirring the milk in his tea with methodical precision. The rich aroma of freshly brewed tea mingled with the scent of baked pastries, but the gentle hum of conversation had already faded from the room. He forced himself to focus on the task at hand, his fingers tracing the rim of the porcelain cup. However, his eyes betrayed him, constantly drifting to the figure of Melissa, Lexi's older sister, who had just returned after briefly leaving the room with her parents. John had pretended to oversee the staff, but his eyes wandered to the door, waiting for Melissa to return.

She stood with effortless grace, her auburn hair catching the soft morning light streaming through the grand windows overlooking a cliff on the Scottish border. John's body reacted to her presence, an undeniable pull he knew he must resist. His duty-bound heart chastised him, reminding him of the responsibilities that always came first.

Melissa's gaze met his, and she began to walk toward him, her movements fluid and confident. John's pulse quickened, and each step she took echoed like a drumbeat in his chest. When she reached him, her eyes were warm and inquisitive.

"The view is spectacular," Melissa started, and John followed her gaze to a sight he'd seen countless times: The River Esk sparkling in silvery dots, the heavy mist lifting the lush green landscape as if it were reluctant to leave its rugged beauty. John couldn't have been prouder of the landscape, it was his home and well-suited for the beauty speaking to him.

“It’s a lovely view,” John said, but he couldn’t take his eyes off Melissa. Perhaps he’d seen her often, but he’d never tire of looking at her.

Melissa glanced around the room, a wistful smile playing on her lips. “It’s a beautiful morning. Dustin and Lexi look so happy.”

“They do,” John agreed, his voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s wonderful to see them together.” But he noticed that she furrowed her brows and seemed forced to smile. “I don’t think I can ever have this.”

“A wedding?” She’d had a wedding, and from what John had heard, she’d been the most beautiful bride of the year and had only become more so.

“Oh, I’ve had a wedding. It’s not what I mean. What they have is love.”

Her words stung deeply because he’d imagined what it would be like to give this to her: the wedding, the day of celebrations, the love. All of his love. But she wouldn’t have it by the sound, nor should he permit himself to fantasize about being the one to provide it to her.

Melissa’s eyes softened as she looked at him. “You’ve been rather quiet today. Is everything all right?”

John hesitated, the words he wanted to say caught in the maze of his mind. But Melissa’s gaze was patient, inviting honesty. He took a deep breath and decided to share a piece of the weight he carried.

“It’s difficult,” he began, his voice tinged with melancholy.

“Watching Dustin marry Lexi and knowing that this castle, this life, is now truly

his?” she asked. Melissa’s expression turned to one of understanding, her eyes mirroring his unspoken grief. “You were duke for quite some time. It must be an adjustment to relinquish all the power.”

“It is,” John admitted. “But more than that, it’s the memories. This castle holds so many of them. But they seem so long ago, as if I’d lived another life. Now, it’s all changed.”

Melissa reached out, lightly touching his arm in a gesture of comfort. “I’m sorry for your loss, John. I can’t imagine how difficult it must have been to remain here and serve as the duke without your duchess. Has she been gone long?”

John nodded, the familiar ache surfacing at the mention of his late wife, but a jolt of heat emanating from Melissa’s touch surprised him. “Marianne was my love. Losing her... it felt like losing a part of myself.” Melissa’s eyes glistened with empathy. “To pour my heart so completely into someone was to risk its loss—and I’m not sure I could endure that pain again.”

Especially with you. I don’t think I could recover from losing you.

John’s gaze returned to Melissa, her presence a beacon of warmth in the cold corridors of his heart. “It’s hard to imagine starting anew, especially when the past surrounds me.”

“And yet, she will remain a part of you.”

“Is that how you feel about your late husband, Lady Thumbbridge?”

“No!”

The directness of her response surprised him.



“I mean—” She inhaled and paused. “It was different.” She folded her hands primly as if she’d delivered a rehearsed speech. “I wish he hadn’t left me with quite as much responsibility. Surely, you understand. Everything around us here exists thanks to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lexi told me that you saved the estate and protected what was left. You restored what had been lost, and if it wasn’t for you, Dustin said he wouldn’t be the duke of anything. You’ve given so much to others. Isn’t it time to give something to yourself?”

John considered that for a moment. It was true; he’d lost happiness when Marianne died, but he had Herbert. However, he’d never promised her not to remarry—his promise to look after their son was implicit.

“When you were still duke, it was Mrs. Dove-Lyon who introduced you to my sister.” John nodded. It had been a matter of pride and some murmurs in parliament that led him to agree to the match. He hadn’t expected that Lexi had already fallen for his cousin and that he’d... John gulped and tried to find a better angle behind the buffet to hide the physical evidence of his attraction to Melissa—for it was her who’d caught his eye the moment he saw her. And yet, even when he urged Mrs. Dove-Lyon to release Lexi from her promise, he hadn’t admitted that he’d fallen for Melissa. He hadn’t admitted to himself that he loved again after losing his wife. But with time, he’d come to see that he could try to hide from the truth but not his feelings.

Melissa’s voice brought him back to the present. “Tell me more about your time as the duke. It must have been demanding.”

“It was my responsibility,” John replied, his voice steadying as he recounted his duties. “I had to step up when Dustin pursued his studies abroad. My duty was to

maintain the family honor and ensure the dukedom's stability."

"And you did," Melissa said.

"I did." John felt a hint of pride quickly fading into that bitter weight he'd carried inside for so long. "But it came at a cost. My responsibilities consumed me so much that I neglected those I loved. Marianne... she paid the price."

Melissa's eyes held his, a silent promise of understanding and support. "Guilt is a heavy burden to carry, John. But you can't change the past. You can only shape the future."

John sighed, the weight of her words sinking in. "That's easier said than done."

Melissa's smile was soft and encouraging. "Perhaps you're not alone in this."

Her words wrapped around him like a comforting blanket, offering solace in a way he hadn't known in years. For the first time, he considered the possibility of a future unburdened by the past, where he could find joy once more. Maybe the wedding spirit at the castle or the summer winds from the coast could spark some hope in John, especially in Melissa's presence.

"Too bad none of this can ever exist in my future," Melissa said, turning toward the puff pastries left from the buffet. "Do you mind if I take another?"

John's heart dropped at her words, but the only response he could formulate was a platitude. "As many as you like, please, you're my guest—" John swallowed the rest of his words. She wasn't his guest; she was the guest of the duke and his new duchess. "You're always welcome."

Stupid words he'd never uttered.

“What I mean is that you are always welcome here .”

“Have you ever lived elsewhere?” Melissa asked with a smile he couldn’t characterize. A glance in her sister’s direction showed that Melissa would never leave Lexi’s side. Or was she at the castle for another reason?

“You mean when I was at Oxford?”

“No, as a family.”

“I was born here and only ever lived here. But we have a townhouse in London. Perhaps you’d like to visit when you go back next time?”

He knew she was Prinny’s mistress and surely danced at the most dazzling balls in Town. Now that John had lost his title, however, he couldn’t expect to be invited again. She was a sparkling star of perfection and kindness, and he could only be in her orbit if she came to grace him with a visit, here at Starcliff Castle or in London. Melissa was out of reach, and he knew he mustn’t try to reach for her—except that he couldn’t think of anything else.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

Three months later...

“Of course, you can stay here as long as you wish,” Lexi said when Melissa sat at the vanity table in her guest chamber and began to pull out the pins that held her bonnet in place. “We could use the help, you know.”

“With what?” Melissa allowed herself to shut her eyes with relief for a moment. Perhaps she could inform Prinny that she was needed for the family business and couldn’t return to resume her duties in Brighton until after the summer. A dukedom with a family business may just be scandalous enough for Prinny to wish to sever ties with Melissa—wait! That would be bad for Lexi and Dustin. She needed another idea.

And everybody knew that Prinny didn’t frequent Brighton much in the fall, much less during the winter. She clung to the hope that he wouldn’t summon her to London, but she knew it was, in reality, only a matter of time. This fleeting moment at Starcliff Castle, a place she’d come to adore in her time with Lexi, was a pause Melissa needed from the many familiar faces in society at court more than even her other duties.

“It’s the pomp and circumstance of being a duchess,” Lexi said, wringing her hands as she used to as a child when she’d spilled her mother’s expensive perfume or broken an heirloom vase.

Melissa deflated. But the duties of a big sister never ceased. She buried her face in her hands and mumbled, “What do you need, Lexi?”

“Well, it’s just that I don’t have the energy to give the castle the flair of a new duchess. Dustin said that I would be expected to remodel or renovate, but I find the chambers rather well-appointed, and all I want sometimes is to lay on my side—”

“Wait!” Melissa rose and went to face her sister. “You are tired? You ?”

Lexi gave a sad nod. Melissa narrowed her eyes. This was most unusual for her younger sister.

“Are you sick?” Melissa asked.

“Only if people put food before me.”

“For how long has this been going on?”

Lexi shrugged and wrinkled her nose. “A month and a half, perhaps two?”

“And you’ve been married for three months?”

Lexi nodded again, her gaze cast low.

Melissa raised her brows.

Then Lexi tore her eyes wide open and locked them with Melissa. “No!”

“Perhaps, yes.”

Lexi clasped her belly with both hands, then her mouth, and then her chest as if she didn’t know where to put her hands. “Is it possible?”

“If you have to ask me that after three months of marriage with a dashing doctor like

Dustin, I worry about you,” Melissa spoke with the pride and resignation of a big sister. Lexi was adorable sometimes, even though she was all grown up now. She hadn’t lost her sense of naivety, and Melissa secretly hoped she would never lose it. Not even if she would have a baby before Melissa ever got the chance.

“Lexi, dear, you might be pregnant!” Melissa tasted the words as if they were bringing a new reality to their family, one in which Lexi took the lead as a duchess and soon as a mother. It felt like something had popped, and she suspected that it was her younger sister, who was now all grown up—something Melissa found difficult to grasp. When she saw Lexi draining of color, she pressed on. “Have you had your courses?”

Lexi shook her head.

Oh, darling sister.

Lexi swallowed visibly. “What do I do now?”

Melissa’s eyes burned with tears—probably of joy because this meant there’d be a baby in the family. Melissa had expected to be the first to have a baby because she’d been the first to marry, but if it weren’t to be, then she’d be there for her sister. Perhaps Mrs. Dove-Lyon would help and give her a second chance at love with John.

She could do this. Yes, Melissa was ready for a baby, and she’d expected to have one by the time she was four and twenty, but life hadn’t entirely turned out as she’d hoped. “This is what I’m going to do: I’ll be there for you as much as possible and never leave you alone.”

Lexi wiped a tear from her cheek and slumped against Melissa, who relied on her to be caught in a hug, just as they used to as children. But they weren’t children anymore, and the next generation was underway.

“I have to tell Dustin!” Lexi called as if the thought were a new revelation and jumped backward.

“Yes, go.” Melissa smiled.

Lexi gave her a tight hug and then darted off.

Melissa thought to herself, a baby in the family, wondering what to do with the new information. It made her smile, even though something tugged at her heart.

She sank back onto the chair before the vanity and picked up the silver brush with special boar bristles to make her hair shine, as her mother had taught her. One hundred times, every morning, and every evening, so that a man would be pleased when he undid her hair—a privilege reserved for her husband. Except that he hadn’t been too interested in anything besides his ledger, and he’d never given her true pleasure. Then, after the diagnosis of the grippe came in their first winter, he’d lost hope and dwindled like a candle without air.

One, two, three... Melissa swept the brush over her strands.

Hopefully, Mrs. Dove-Lyon could find a way for Melissa to free herself from the “privilege” of being at Prinny’s court before she had to give him the privilege of being in her bed. She’d been born with every advantage, wealth, and luxury but she’d never quite felt as though she could truly enjoy life. Yet beneath the finery, a tightness curled in her chest, an ache she couldn’t soothe. She smiled too often, agreed too quickly, always seeking that flicker of approval from those around her. It was easier that way, to meet their unspoken demands, to be who they wanted her to be.

But there were moments, stolen and fleeting, when her mind wandered. What would it feel like to make a choice that wasn’t carefully curated for someone else’s benefit?

To wander unfamiliar streets without the weight of duty pressing on her shoulders? She hadn't dared to find out, and that truth—more than all the demands placed on her—was what tugged at her the most. The life she carried wasn't one she held; it was one she performed, her own desires buried somewhere she hadn't yet dared to look.

It was exhausting constantly to be ready for him and hope he wouldn't come. It was terrifying.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen...

John. The thought of him wasn't just a longing—it clawed at her chest, a quiet ache that begged for more than she should give as long as Prinny wished for her presence at Court. Yet, John made her feel something indescribable, something entirely hers. But even that came with chains.

Prinny's attentions loomed, sharp as claws grazing too close to her skin. Shaking him off without insult felt impossible, and the favor she held wasn't meant for her escape from him.

Then there was Mrs. Dove-Lyon, spinning her dangerous webs at every corner of society. Melissa shivered. Her thoughts returned to John—his voice, his smile, the calm that settled her when he was near. She'd been bold enough or stupid to risk it all for him and didn't know what Mrs. Dove-Lyon had in store.

Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two...

The life of a high-born daughter was wearying. Even at a young age, she'd been dragged to morning calls with her mother or forced to sit with a tight-lipped smile during afternoon teas with matrons of the Ton. And now, she had the reputation of a woman with far more experience than she truly had, while all she wished for was true



love.

Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty...

Lexi needed her now more than ever. The new task of duchess in Lexi's condition would keep them both busy for six or seven months. If Prinny allowed it, Melissa wanted to remain at Starcliff Castle with her sister.

Melissa tied her hair into a loose bun with nothing but a violet ribbon and stepped to the window. She could overlook the eastern side of the estate, where the stables were and a side entrance... what was that?

A young girl carried a little bundle and peeked up. A baby?

Melissa squinted. The girl was young and dressed modestly but clean from Melissa's vantage point, at least. She'd walked, so she must be from the nearby village.

Then, from the main house, Dustin emerged next to John, followed by Herbert. They took the girl to the stables.

What were they doing with the baby?

Melissa dashed out of her chambers and ran down the stairs, through the corridor, and out of the same door closest to the stables.

And what she saw there couldn't have surprised her more.

A baby lay on a wooden table covered in crisp white linens, but it was not a human one. It was a little white and gray kitten with brown stripes, no more than a few weeks old. The kitten made an adorable squeal and rubbed its light pink nose against the girl.

“Is he weaned?” Dustin asked. John stood to the side, his arms crossed.

“Not yet, Doctor. Ahem, milord. Your Grace,” the girl stuttered, but neither Dustin nor Herbert seemed perturbed by her lack of formal address.

How refreshing compared to Prinny’s court.

Only John arched a brow, but it seemed to melt into a warm gaze when he saw Melissa.

Melissa stepped closer. Dustin gave her a nod, acknowledging her presence, but Herbert only narrowed his eyes.

The girl cradled the small tom cat in her arms, and Melissa instinctively approached it, touching its feather-soft fur. He barely lifted his gray-brown and white striped head, his soft purrs replaced by faint, pitiful mews as he tried to find comfort. His snout was white, but his ears were dark gray. What lovely coloring this kitten had—unusual and unique.

“May I?” Melissa asked. “I grew up having cats in the house. I’ve always loved them.”

And this was an exceptionally pretty one indeed, with chocolate-brown stripes, light gray hues, and tiny white paws. But Melissa’s heart constricted when she realized something was amiss. His pink nose was dry and warm, starkly contrasting with a healthy cat’s usual cool, damp feel. She gently tugged at his back skin, and it was slow to return. “He has a fever.”

Dustin reached for him and rolled him into his back.

The kitten lay listlessly on the table, his blue eyes dull and half-closed. He allowed

Dustin to touch his belly, but when Dustin pressed down near the belly button, the kitten screamed.

Melissa winced.

“It’s a hernia of the umbilicus. It happens often in animals,” Dustin said. “We will need to make an incision and push the protrusion back, then suture him up and make sure he cannot scratch the spot. Would you like to leave him here until we remove the stitches?” Dustin spoke, but the children eyed him with expressions that nearly made Melissa laugh if she hadn’t been so concerned for the kitten.

John, however, looked disapproving.

“And then you can take the kitten home. We’re not a hospital,” John said.

“What he is saying, I believe, is that you could bring the mother here, and we will keep the kitten’s wound clean until we know the surgery went well before you take the kitten home,” Melissa added.

Dustin’s eyes shot to her, and she pursed her lips. She didn’t mean to overstep, but she’d translate “doctor language” into “child.”

“M-my father could bring the mother in his cart,” the girl said, searching Melissa’s eyes as if she were an authority figure. But then she frowned, and her lips quivered.

John tsked, but that earned him a frown from cousin Dustin.

“This has to remain an exception,” John said. “The duke is not a veterinarian.”

“I’m a dentist,” Dustin said lightheartedly as if it didn’t matter what species his patients were and who he operated on—typical Dustin—he just wanted to help if he

could.

John deflated. It was scandalous to have a duke with a vocation—besides the dukedom. And it had kept him busy for years; how would Dustin find the time to run his little clinic here while running the estate?

“Dustin, a word?” John stepped to the back corner of the stable, and his cousin followed him, the little kitten in hand.

“I know what you’re going to say—” Dustin started, readjusting the kitten that fit into one of his hands. “But he needs help quickly. It’s a simple procedure and can save his life.” Dustin held the kitten to John’s face, bringing the tiny blue eyes to his level.

“A duke operating on a kitten,” John said, shaking his head. His view of his cousin was blocked by the sad little face, with the nearly transparent whiskers sticking out on either side of his snout. Then he meowed faintly, like a whimpering baby. As the kitten’s soft cries weaved through the air, a delicate tremor loosened the stone-like clench of his jaw, and John sighed. “It’s unheard of, Dustin.”

“Well, first of all, that’s not a bad thing. And second, I don’t have to operate; Herbert can do it.”

“What?” He was a child. He didn’t have medical training. And what if something happened to the kitten? How would Herbert feel? John reluctantly accepted Herbert’s interest in medicine—secretly welcomed it, even. That was why he’d invested with the Rehabilitation Center at Cloverdale House as soon as Dustin had told him what the doctors on Harley Street were planning in London. It was an excellent place for an apprenticeship if Herbert wished to pursue one while helping their tenants in the meantime. But performing an operation on a living creature at age thirteen?

“I’ll guide him. It will go over well and quickly.” With these words, Dustin handed

John the kitten and walked back to where Melissa stood with Herbert and Laura, spreading a clean muslin cloth over the makeshift table. Cradled in the expansive warmth of his hands, the tiny kitten burrowed deeper, its delicate purr vibrating against his palms. At that moment, John's eyes met Melissa's, and her face brightened with a knowing smile.

Yes, I'm too lenient. Soft-hearted even.

He handed her the kitten, patted it on the head once more, and nodded to Herbert. His son instantly sprang to action.

"What do I have to do, Uncle Dustin?" Herbert asked as he pushed up his sleeves.

"We are preparing for the surgery, but we must ready a hospital bed for the kitten," Dustin said. "The recovery is just as important as the procedure itself."

"I have a basket in my chamber," Melissa said. Then she blushed. "In the chamber assigned to me while I am a guest here, I mean. There's a wicker basket, and we could drape some extra curtain fabric over a pillow. He could stay with me."

"You're staying?" John asked, trying not to betray the hopeful excitement in his voice.

Melissa blushed. "If I may?"

Melissa was surprised when John's eyes sparkled, and he gave her a bright smile as if she'd said something that made him incredibly happy.

"You can stay, too," Herbert said to the girl. Dustin cocked his head, and his eyes met Melissa's. Herbert's invitation sounded rather hopeful that the girl would stay.

Melissa suppressed a sigh. Herbert still had much to learn about women; offering them a spot in his stables was not something... argh!

“I’ll be here to help. You may visit every day,” Melissa said, translating the boy’s clumsiness for the girl. They were at that awkward age. She gently touched the girl’s shoulder to reassure her that she would keep an eye on the kitten.

The girl gave a wistful smile. “Thank you.”

Dustin put on a waxed apron. He must still forget that he’s the duke and not merely the doctor—not that anyone was merely a doctor or a duke. But there was something about the way he carried himself in his doctor’s coat, hands steady and voice calm, that felt unshakable. He took command of the room without effort or pretense, as if he belonged in that role more than anywhere else. Yet, when he sat stiffly in the duke’s fine, tailored attire, surrounded by elegance and expectation, his assuredness seemed to falter. To Melissa, it was clear—he wore his title like a suit that didn’t quite fit, but his role as a healer clung to him like a second skin. That was why Melissa recognized Dustin’s qualities and was happy for her sister when she found such a lovely husband. He was more than lovely.

Melissa thought about John. He was so much more than lovely, too. And perfect for her.

“I thought you were just a dentist?” Herbert said when Dustin gave the kitten a spoon of medicine. It was an amber liquid, and the cat shook when he swallowed it.

“When I studied, the first two years were general medicine and chemistry. I didn’t know yet that I’d specialize in the mouth and tried to see as many surgeries as I could. Sometimes, I assisted.”

“Is that why you decided to focus on the mouth then?” Melissa asked, reaching out

for the cat's head when his head drooped. The kitten's sides rose and fell unevenly with each labored breath, his tiny body exhausted. She suspected the spoon of laudanum would make the animal sleepy.

"It was because of my father's mistakes, but my path took me in a different direction," Dustin said as he seemed to prepare his four-legged patient with skill and care. He positioned the kitten on its side and gingerly spread its skinny legs.

"What's his name?" Herbert asked the girl.

"Angus." She blushed, and Herbert blinked his boyish eyes, but there was a manly glimmer that Melissa rather thought she recognized before he did. "And I'm Laura Smith." It was plain for Melissa to see Herbert smitten with the girl.

Dustin covered the kitten's legs with a clean white muslin. The cat protested slightly, but then the girl put her face to the cat's and soothed it with a gentle humming. Melissa noticed Herbert's eyes darting to hers and glistening.

"That's what my mother sang for me." His voice cracked.

Melissa and Dustin locked their gazes, and Dustin mumbled something about speaking to John about growing up and boys, but Melissa thought it better not to comment. It was plain to see that Herbert was in the process of giving his heart away for the first time—something equally special and precious, fragile really, just like the little kitten on the table.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

Later that day, John sat at his desk with several open ledgers and rifled through the pages when his cousin entered, blood splatters on his waxed apron, followed by—John gulped—Melissa cradling a tiny bundle in a white towel. The bundle had two dark gray ears peeking out from the top. He dearly hoped it wasn't a donkey.

“What is this?” John asked when Melissa set the bundle down on her lap. She was sitting in the far corner of the room on the stool next to the window, the drapes drawn.

“This morning's umbilical hernia, don't you remember?” Dustin handed his apron to a footman who'd appeared with more clean towels and carried away the wash basin in which Dustin had washed his hands.

“The umbilical hernia?” John tried not to grimace. “Is that—”

“Our first patient today. Angus, the kitten.”

“But why is Angus in my office?” John tasted the absurdity of a duke operating on his tenants' cat in the shed of the main estate. He shook his head.

“Well, you can let it recover here. We were not able to move it much after the stitches,” Dustin said, rolling his white shirt sleeves down as if he'd look more ducal once he washed the blood off his hands.

“We?” John glanced at Melissa in the chair. “I thought you'd look after the feline patient.” She was lovely in the low light by the window, and his heart lurched when she cradled the tiny animal in her arms with such tenderness that it was as if it were a



human baby.

“He needs his mother, so Herbert and Laura went to fetch her.”

“In the carriage, I suppose?” John could see the headlines in the gossip columns in London. The Duke of Duncan’s Carriage Reduced to Livestock Duty.

When Dustin moved back to Starcliff Castle, John had reassigned a maid to wash the medical equipment and a footman to tidy up his workspace. Still, John hadn’t expected to run a small hospital in the main building and a veterinary clinic from the stables.

“Dustin, a duke has a certain responsibility to the people on his land. They are tenants—” John sighed and rubbed his temples with his index fingers. “Why do I have to explain this to you?”

“You don’t,” Dustin said, picking up the vest and coat on the back of the chair facing the desk.

“Then why are you occupying the chair reserved for guests rather than this one?”

From the back of the room came a snort followed by a giggle. Melissa apparently pretended to pay attention to the little bundle but seemed to hear everything. John rose from behind the desk, but Dustin came to his side and pressed down his shoulder.

“Because this is your place, and I’m eager to learn from you, not replace you.”

“You already replaced me; it’s your birthright.”

Dustin inclined his head and briefly surveyed the ledgers on the desk. “I told you, it’s

a job for both of us. I don't know the details as well as you, and if I devoted myself entirely to the business of running everything, I wouldn't have time to look after the patients," Dustin only buttoned his vest and left the coat open, sat in the chair across from John and picked up the fountain pen.

"You are the duke, Dustin. You ought to run the estate, not operate on every runt of the litter." John sighed. "Not that you can let an animal die, Dustin, but this is our family responsibility. It's our legacy."

"It includes every runt of the litter born on our grounds." Dustin exhaled heavily. "I'm doing my best, but medicine is what I do best. Please let me!"

John didn't need to look, but he felt Melissa inclining her head and waiting for his response. She had an air of the new duchess's big sister as if she were ready to take the reins any moment and merely bit her tongue. And he loved that about her.

The hairs on John's neck pricked up every time she looked at him, and her gaze must have been intent on him, for everything stood alert—everything indeed. He remained seated at his desk to avoid the embarrassment of showing his reaction to Melissa. She'd come to help her sister, and now she was playing nurse for a kitten. No wonder Prinny liked her; she was everything: intelligent, caring, well-bred, beautiful—and staring at him right now.

"Dustin, you're the Duke of Duncan now."

"But you're running the estate so much better than I ever could. Why should I do everyone and everything to whom I owe such grand responsibility, as you say, disfavor by taking your job away?"

"You're not taking the job; you're still making me do it. It's the title you got," John mumbled, embarrassed that Dustin spoke of this in front of Melissa. Even though she

knew, it made John feel as though his most vulnerable flaw was exposed.

“I already had a job when I became the duke,” Dustin mumbled. “Sometimes I wonder why I needed another with all this added responsibility.”

“Because it’s your prerogative. You were born for this.”

“I disagree. I think you were born for this.” When Dustin said that, John felt Melissa’s gaze on him. She was watching him most intently.

“You can’t just be a figurehead!” John lost his patience with Dustin. “Sometimes you’re stubborn like Herbert.”

Dustin smiled. “About that, John. I think you need to talk with him.” Melissa let out another noise as if she agreed with Dustin. This time, John couldn’t help but look over his shoulder. She smirked.

He’d gotten to know her well in the three months that Dustin and Lexi had been married. She was a fiercely loyal sister and a scintillatingly beautiful woman who preoccupied his thoughts.

“Why? What has he done now?” Don’t think you can change the subject and get out of balancing the ledgers, but we can table it while a lady is in the room.

“Well, he seems to be taking to Laura.”

“Taking what? He knows not to drive the landau without one of us.”

“Well, he has. But he is talking to her. He likes her. In a way that a boy likes a girl.”

John’s mien fell, but it was his heart he felt dropping to his stomach. “I beg your

pardon?”

Dustin shrugged. “Just an observation.”

“You mean a diagnosis? Lovesickness? My baby boy?”

Melissa sighed in the back of the room, and John felt the energy of her smile. It was terrible how attuned he’d gotten to her body language, and he sincerely hoped she didn’t know about his infatuation with her. It had grown impossible to ignore and exhausting to hide.

Dustin grinned. “First, he’s not a baby; he’s almost thirteen. Second, it’s only just beginning, so he isn’t lovesick. And third, I will be the only one with a baby soon.”

John swallowed hard. “What?”

Dustin took a wide stance and nodded. “You heard me.”

John turned around, and Melissa was now smiling brightly.

“A baby?” John barely managed. “Did you know about this?” John asked Melissa.

Dustin was so obviously smitten with his lovely wife, and she was blossoming into a duchess with all the poise and grace he’d expected, but only a few months after their wedding, she’d already given him a baby. John wasn’t jealous, but something inside of him ached. He neither begrudged any of it to his younger cousin nor did he wish for anything but his absolute and everlasting happiness; it was just that... he didn’t feel old and yet was thrust into the position of a near grandfather who’d abdicated his throne to let the next generation rise to power. It was too soon at nine-and-twenty. Plus, he recognized the signs he’d only ever felt before. His affection for Melissa had matured into undeniable... John sighed. He never thought he’d feel like this again

after his wife died, and now everything in his life was changing, and he feared he was changing, too.

John had no words, so he closed the distance and hugged Dustin. He patted him on the back.

“It seems that I will need your help again, in more ways than one,” Dustin said, wiping his eyes with the backs of his hands. He would be a good father. At least he’d always have bandages and antiseptic ointments ready if the child scraped a knee or got a splinter.

“I will always be there for you. And Lexi, of course. And the baby. All of them.” John choked. He meant every word. It was a wonderful thing to have Herbert back in the castle, women fussing over vases of flowers, and the staff was busy with dinner for a family. Soon, the halls would be filled again with babies’ cries, and nothing was more invigorating.

Except, perhaps, the lovely brown eyes of the woman watching him.

Melissa had tried to keep to herself until Dustin left the room with seemingly little success.

“I can tell that you wish to speak,” John said after a moment of silence when Dustin left the door open as he exited the study.

Melissa shrugged, bit her tongue, and hugged the sleeping kitten in her arms. Angus’s gentle purring was a soft, rhythmic lullaby that reverberated through her like the distant hum of her thoughts.

“Lady Thumbridge, I know you have something to say. Please allow me to be privy to your thoughts,” John said as he rose and walked toward her.

Melissa traced the subtle curve of the kitten's spine, feeling the slight rise and fall with each contented breath as he slept on her.

"I knew about the baby," Melissa said wistfully. I want one, too.

The kitten shifted slightly, its tiny paws kneading against her sleeve as if testing the comfort of a silken pillow. Melissa's lips curled into a soft smile, the kind that spoke of secret joys and unspoken promises. She lowered her cheek to rest against the creature's small form, drawing in the faint, milky scent that spoke of innocence and new beginnings.

John squatted next to her chair and put a hand on Angus's furry back. He eyed Melissa for a moment, and it seemed as though a million thoughts had passed through his mind, like a wave of unspoken words.

"A baby will change everything," he finally said as if it were the only logical admission he could make.

But when he stroked Angus with such tenderness, his hand so close to Melissa's chest, she felt the burning desire to tell him how she felt. Everything. From the moment she saw him to the sleepless nights pawing over him until now—sitting in his study and holding a kitten. But it had become so easy to imagine a baby in her arms and his tender gaze on a bundle wrapped in white lace.

"I think the vows at a wedding are about sharing," she said. Her mien fell instantly when she realized she'd spoken before thinking. He must think her a dim-wit indeed.

"To love and to hold?" he asked.

Melissa's eyes darted to his, and he blinked a tear away. Could it be that he saw right into her heart, or had she misinterpreted?

“I thought it meant to love and to hold each other when I married my love,” John said.

“I made the same vow and never lived up to it. When my husband was on his deathbed, he sent me away. I think he didn’t want me to see him die.”

John shifted but remained squatting next to her, looking up. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think that he was about to propose. But that was nonsensical, of course. Silly woolgathering.

“When my wife died, I was the only one left to love and to hold my son. He wept and sobbed, and I just held him. At first, I tried not to cry and be strong for him. But then I just rocked him like I did when he was a baby, but this time, I cried with him.” He sighed deeply. “I never admitted it to anyone, Lady Thumbridge, but it’s different with you.”

Because you love me? Do you trust me?

“Why?” she croaked, seeing his raw emotions exposed and feeling guilty for not suffering the same way when her husband died. Melissa swallowed hard. She didn’t want to admit that she had mourned her husband’s death for the customary year, but she hadn’t grieved. She didn’t love him, so the loss was—what was the right word?—bearable. A relief from a transactional marriage that looked better on the outside than it felt on the inside.

“Because you’ve been widowed so young, I think you can understand me better than anyone,” he said.

Melissa wanted to take his hand, squeeze him in support, and draw him to her. But she didn’t dare. If he merely saw her as a widow, as Lexi’s sister, or worse, as Prinny’s mistress, she wouldn’t bear it.

“So to have and to hold applied even after your wife died?” Melissa said. John rose and looked at her intently. “I mean, you love Herbert and held him to help him grieve his mother.”

“I should have, Lady Thumbridge. But I was too cowardly.” He turned away from her and walked to the window. “When Herbert went to school, I buried myself in work. It wasn’t until Dustin came to London at about the same time that I met you and your family that I fled from my feelings.”

“And what are your feelings?”

He remained silent, drawing his lips in as if he didn’t want to say.

“You are holding Angus like a baby. Have you ever held a human baby?” he asked.

Melissa nodded.

“I always thought there’d be more children. I missed so much in Herbert’s life because I wanted to redeem the dukedom and our name so that he could inherit a title with wealth. But now, I wish I could give him a family.”

“I wanted a family with many children, a cat, a dog, a parrot from Africa, and grounds with livestock.”

He turned back to her with a half-smile. “A parrot?”

“Yes, a red, green, blue one with a bright yellow beak. They can learn to speak.”

“You want many children, a menagerie, and a speaking parrot?” He pressed his lips together in jest.



“No, you know what I want.”

He cocked his head. “I have the grounds, the livestock, and I suppose I could find a parrot for you.”

Melissa’s heart leaped. He could indeed give her everything she’d ever wanted.

But did she dare take it?

“Father!” Herbert called from the hall.

“For you, I’d even make him speak.” John looked at Melissa, and she felt a jolt of heat rise from her head.

“Papa?” Hebert stood at the door.

The moment was over, but Melissa’s questions were beginning to form.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

As the sun dipped lower, the rhythm of the day began to shift.

“Where’s the list with the fabric selections for each chamber?” Melissa mumbled to the kitten she’d been carrying, trying to ensure he wouldn’t scratch the area underneath his bandage. Well, truth be told, she enjoyed holding his little warm body against her aching heart. It was rather difficult to be near John and not blush when he smiled at her, especially now that Lexi and Dustin had left for London. Melissa could think of a thousand corners, moments, and reasons to steal a kiss from John, but he remained stern and steadfast in his role as Dustin’s replacement duke—although it had an air of being the other way around.

“Oh, Melissa!” John jumped up from his desk when she entered. “Lady Thumbridge, I mean. How do you do this morning?” He bowed, and Melissa clutched the kitten to her chest.

“I ahem... My apologies for disturbing you. My sister said she’d left a list of the curtain fabrics she liked, so I may order swatches for them.”

“Over there in the cabinet,” John indicated the bottom row of cabinets underneath the mahogany shelves that lined the walls. “Feel like at home, Lady Thumbridge.” And with these words, he left the room.

As the door clicked shut behind John, Melissa stood rooted to the spot, a peculiar sensation washing over her. Her fingers grazed the polished wood of the cabinets, yet her mind was elsewhere, caught between the strangeness of his abrupt departure and the lingering warmth that seemed to blossom in her chest.

She sat Angus down on the parquet, and he found the fringes of the rug, instantly getting his thin white claws stuck in them. “Oh darling, no!” Melissa freed his paws and produced an old tassel that the butler had given her as a toy for Angus. While the kitten turned on his back and played with the tassel, Melissa squatted and turned the key to one of the cabinets. Ledgers and leather binders tied with tattered ribbons were stuffed in the cabinet shelves. Oh, where to start , Melissa thought. Lexi had mentioned a leather binder with all the notes for the renovations. “It has everything you need,” she’d said.

What I need is not a list of fabrics. What I want—who I want—has left the room, and now I have to find the list among this enormity of documents.

Just then, a double-folded set of papers caught Melissa’s eye. It was stuffed between the ledgers. That must be it , she thought and began to read.

London, July 15<sup>th</sup> , 1818.

Dear Mr. Stonebridge,

We extend our heartfelt gratitude for your generous contribution to the Rehabilitation Center at Cloverdale House. This correspondence serves to confirm that a dedicated wing for lung patients shall bear the distinguished name of the late Duchess, Marianne Stonebridge, Duchess of Duncan. May her esteemed memory, coupled with the blessing of your generosity, serve as a beacon of hope and healing for countless patients. If and when your son chooses to join us for an apprenticeship upon completing his studies in medicine, we are certain that the late duchess would be very proud.

With profound appreciation,

Lady Philippa Folsham and Dr. Nick Folsham

Cloverdale House, Abbotsberry Road

Melissa's chest tightened at the lines she'd read. John seemed so aloof, almost disapproving of Herbert's interest in medicine, yet he'd already secured an apprenticeship position with Dustin's friends, the founders of the Rehabilitation Center. If John approved of his son's interest in pursuing a career like the doctors on Harley Street, why did he not admit it?

But before Melissa could complete this thought, she glanced over the second page. It was quite a bit more tattered and yellow at the edges. Then she noticed the date:

Starcliff Castle, February 21st, 1814.

Dearest Marianne,

A week has passed since you left us, and our dear Herbert's tears have yet to cease. Your funeral drew more souls than our wedding breakfast; all gathered to bid farewell to the kindest duchess they have ever known. They expressed gratitude for our efforts to lift them from poverty, assuring me of your pride, yet I feel naught but foolishness. Had I returned to you sooner, placing our family above the estate, perhaps I could have spoken these words to you in person.

If you can hear me from beyond, I implore you to send me guidance, for I am lost without you, my love.

Ever yours,

John

"Where did you get that?" John's voice came from behind Melissa.

She rose and expected him to be cross with her, but instead, he held out his hand to help her up.

“I am so sorry. I was looking for the list Lexi had left me, when your letters caught my eye.” Melissa handed him the papers. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s not a secret.” John looked at the papers as if they held lousy news he didn’t wish to share and yet had to. “I should have put them away, but—” He sighed. “Where does one file away love?” He folded the letter he’d written to his late wife into quarters. “And where should I put this for the future?” He held the letter about Herbert’s apprenticeship at Cloverdale House.

Melissa’s throat felt tight when she saw the pain in his eyes. “I think you did the right thing, putting them together.”

“The future and the past are at odds, I’m afraid. But I shall assist you in finding the list you were searching for.” He gently touched Melissa’s upper arm as if he would guide her to another cabinet, but she took his hand instead and held it with both of hers.

“The future and the past belong together; they are not at odds.”

“What do you mean?” He arched a brow, and Melissa broke out in goosebumps under his intense gaze, pained but loving. He was truly a man who’d borne the burden of loss, not merely of his wife but also of the estate that he’d nurtured. “I don’t know how to put these together.”

“I don’t think you have to. Herbert will forge his path, and it seems you’ve already begun to ensure he can pursue his passion. Is there any better way that you could honor the love for your wife than by continuing to look after your son?” Melissa swallowed hard when she said it. She loved John more and more the more she learned

about him, and yet, at the same time, he seemed further out of reach. He looked so youthful and strong that she'd never considered that his heart had been broken when he lost his wife, and she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to help him heal it.

“Thank you, Lady Thumbridge. Not only for your understanding but also your compassion and friendship.” He reached out in the cavalier way of a duke—regardless of his lost title—and Melissa's upbringing helped her to automate the movement to offer her hand. She'd been frozen by the closeness to him and the depth of the emotions she'd uncovered.

Melissa's heart skipped a beat as John stepped closer, his presence enveloping her like a warm breeze on a cool morning. Her breath caught slightly when he gently took her hand, his grip firm yet tender. Deep and unwavering, his gaze locked onto hers, and she felt a familiar heat rising to her cheeks.

As John's lips brushed against her knuckles, sensations rippled through her. The softness of his touch sent a shiver racing up her arm, settling as a delicious warmth in the pit of her stomach. Her skin tingled where his lips had been, a gentle reminder of the moment they shared. She swallowed, trying to steady the flutter that had taken residence beneath her ribs.

Melissa's hand lingered in his, feeling the steady rhythm of his pulse, a reassuring presence that contrasted with the erratic beat of her own heart. Her senses heightened; she was acutely aware of the subtleness of his scent, fresh wind mixed with something uniquely him. It was intoxicating, drawing her closer despite the proper distance she tried to maintain.

There was a yearning there, nestled beside the uncertainty, both vying for her attention. Yet, at this moment, all she could truly focus on was the way John's touch made her feel alive, as if awakening a part of her that had been dormant, waiting for this very connection.

“If there is anything you need during your stay at Starcliff, please don’t hesitate to let me know,” John said a bit hoarsely when Melissa pulled her hand back when she heard the delicate scuffle of tiny paws against the carpet’s fringes.

“Oh Angus, not again!” She rushed to the kitten, again untangled his thin claws from the fringes, and held him in her arms.

“He seems a little agitated,” John observed. “Is he hungry?”

“Perhaps so.” Melissa hadn’t considered it, but John eyed the kitten with the gaze of an experienced father. “Until his mother arrives, perhaps we can find him something else?”

John’s gaze was drawn to Melissa, who’d remained on the settee with the sleeping kitten in her arms after she’d fed him milk from one of Herbert’s old baby bottles. He shuffled papers on his desk—Dustin’s desk—oh, it didn’t matter. They sort of shared the responsibilities of the dukedom, even though the men’s egos didn’t quite grasp the concept.

The butler knocked. “Your Grace, Lord Herbert has returned with Miss Laura.”

“Thank you, Fletcher. But you don’t need to call me that. I’m just Mister now.”

The older man in his impeccably tailored coat inclined his head and walked out of the room backward, mumbling, “You’ll always be Your Grace to me, milord. You’ve earned the respect in all the time I’ve known you since you were a boy.”

John sighed and rose from his desk. He looked over to Melissa, and she smiled wistfully. With Dustin and Lexi in residence from the wedding until they left for London, it was less awkward between them. Now, the air was thick with unspoken words, and John didn’t know how to brace the subject—any subject truly. All he

could think about was how lovely, kind, and intelligent Melissa was. He feared the day she'd leave. The mere thought felt like a dagger to his chest.

"He will want his mother when he wakes up." Melissa shifted.

"You've been sitting here holding a sick cat for over two hours," John said. He went toward her once the butler had left and reached forward. At first, he hesitated, but when Melissa lifted her elbow, signaling that she'd welcome his help to rise slowly, he put his hand under her arm and helped her up—but he fought the impulse to pull her close and kiss her. He mustn't.

John shook his head.

He wanted to.

With the gentle touch of a father, John supported the kitten's head.

"Herbert brought the mother, so the little one will soon want to drink more."

Melissa accepted his help carrying the sleeping kitten to the stables, where Herbert and Laura were already waiting. A larger cat, dark gray with an equally pretty pattern of markings but yellow eyes, sat in a basket on a torn blanket. Laura must have brought her from the farm.

"Hullo Laura, how do you do?" John asked as he entered the stable, bearing the little bundle in his arms. He commanded the space in a way that Dustin hadn't. Although Dustin had respect, he was hands-on, ready to treat a feline patient. John was a ruler.

A gentle and kind one, considering he'd earned the servant's respect and even the tenants.



Melissa watched the stable boy helping Herbert while Laura thanked Herbert profusely and offered to bring him a cheese she'd made herself when she'd returned later that day with the kitten's mother in her father's carriage.

"You don't need to give me anything," Herbert said, visibly awkwardly rubbing his arm against a stable pillar. Laura blushed, and Melissa tried not to stare, but it was impossible. There was no way not to look at what was unfolding; it was too sweet and clumsy.

The kitten awoke and crawled groggily toward his mother.

She sniffed his head and followed him down to his belly, where he was wearing a bandage larger than his wound to ensure he couldn't scratch it.

But then something terrible happened.

When Angus approached his mother's underside and licked in search of comfort, she jerked back.

Laura furrowed her brows. "What is the matter?"

"Feed your kitten." Melissa gave the mother a gentle nudge. "He needed help. He's still yours."

John deflated visibly but merely stood by and watched. He saw Herbert's mien darken when he realized what was unfolding—recognized even, although it had been different when Herbert was little.

Laura pushed the mother cat toward Angus. "He needs milk." When the kitten meowed faintly, Laura's lips trembled. The mother cat gave Angus a long lick over his head, and Melissa's heart constricted. She was saying goodbye.

“What is going on?” Herbert asked. John stepped to his side and put his arm around him.

“The mother can probably smell us on her son. She’s letting him go.”

“Go? Where?” Herbert asked, the terror in his voice clear. He’d lost his mother too soon and was not attuned to the cruelties in nature even though he thought of himself as an adult.

“I was afraid this would happen,” Laura said as she gathered the mother cat, who lay with her head furrowed in the blanket folds in her basket. “When a kitten is away for too long, the mother sets it free.”

“But he needed the surgery to live.” Herbert protested as much to the way of nature as to the tears welling in his eyes. “We saved his life, and now Angus will lose his mother?”

John’s arm melted away, and Melissa gasped. The opposite should have happened. John should have taken his son into his arms, but he stood frozen as if he’d witnessed a terrible horror.

Herbert couldn’t stop the tears and wiped his face. Laura eyed the kitten sadly but seemed to stand by the mother cat. Herbert dashed out of the stables.

“What now?” Laura mumbled.

“Can Angus stay here? I’ll continue to look after him,” Melissa said to John. He nodded faintly, but his gaze was glued to the screeching wooden door Herbert had left banging against the simple frame of the stable walls.

“I will not leave you in the stables,” John protested, ever concerned with propriety.

But Melissa didn't have any of it. Her instincts were similar to his, John realized, protecting the family first and at any cost.

"Was he with his mother when she died?" Melissa asked.

John nodded. Until I returned from London, yes. I found him crying in bed with her when she'd gone cold already.

Melissa shut her eyes and clutched her chest. "Go after him."

"What can I do? What do I say?"

"Nothing. Just be there for him. He watched another baby lose his mother—"

"Herbert knows he's not a cat," John mumbled, but he realized that the point was mute. The parallel was striking.

"He needs you."

"Come with me. I need you by my side."

Melissa's eyes darted to him as if he'd startled her.

She opened her mouth, but no sound emerged. So when John opened the door, she followed with a kitten in her hand.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

A lone, Melissa found Herbert kicking pebbles under a tree and cursing under his breath. John had been held up by some important matters regarding the Duchy or so he claimed.

“Is that the vocabulary they teach you at Eton?” Melissa asked when she was within earshot.

He didn’t pay her any heed.

“When I was at finishing school, I lost the privilege of dinner for speaking like that once.”

No reaction.

“Don’t you want to know what I said to get punished?” Melissa tried to get his attention, but he turned his back to her and kicked another pinecone. “Herbert, look, cats are different.”

“Pfft!” He kicked another pinecone, and it flew at least five feet through the air.

“Herbert, your father allowed me to look after the kitten; he’ll be all right.”

“You’re not his mother!”

“Of course not; I’m not a cat.”

“You can’t look after a baby anyway; you’re a mistress.”

Melissa's breath hitched. Her impulse was to scream.

I don't want to be Prinny's mistress. I want your father.

But Herbert was too young to understand... or was he?

"I beg your pardon?" Melissa said as calmly as she could muster.

"Aren't you merely at court at the regent's pleasure? You're a doll, not a mother, not even to a cat."

Melissa swallowed. Her reputation wasn't news to her, but she hadn't been ready to hear these words from a child, not here, not today. And if she were to have a chance with John, she had to win Herbert over, too. This was not something Mrs. Dove-Lyon could help her with; she had to manage it on her own.

"A woman can look after a child, whether it is her own or not. Angus needs a mother, and if I can help him, I'll do just that. Regardless of my feline nature or lack thereof!"

"You can take the cat, but not me. You'll never be my mother, just so you know!" Swish! He kicked another pinecone. This one nearly hit Melissa. "I'm not stupid, Lady Thumbridge. Father is different around you. I haven't seen him like this since... my real mother was well!" He heaved and wiped another tear from his eyes. Then he faced her, and his angry gaze lacked any sentiment of childhood when he spoke. "You don't belong here. My father doesn't see it; he never does. He only sees what he can do better in the world, but we're running an estate, not a charity for discarded mistresses. I may not be the heir anymore, but that doesn't mean we aren't respectable people. We don't want you!" With these words, Herbert ran off.

Melissa forgot to breathe. She leaned against the rough bark of the pine tree, feeling the sharp press of needles through the thin fabric of her dress and shift. The sensation

grounded her, a reminder of reality amidst the swirling emotions inside her.

Her eyes followed Herbert's retreating figure until he disappeared beyond the bend. The air felt cooler now, a gentle breeze brushing against her flushed cheeks, carrying with it the earthy scent of the forest floor. She inhaled deeply, the crispness of the air filling her lungs, yet it did little to calm her nerves.

Tears fell from her cheeks, and she blinked toward the lovely castle. Lexi belonged there with her duke, but Herbert was right. She was fallen, and she'd sunken too low for John, for he surely thought she'd been in at least two men's beds. Yes, in society, Prinny's mistress—as long as she held that position—had value. But for people in the country who looked beyond the Ton's facade, she was a wanton woman. Herbert was at the age to understand just enough of the workings of the world but naive enough to blurt out the truth without sugarcoating it.

More tears rolled, and her arms felt so heavy that she didn't even want to wipe them away.

How should she have been so naive as to think that Mrs. Dove-Lyon could manage to break her free from Prinny without considering her reputation would follow her wherever she went?

Melissa had to leave. She already had a place at Prinny's court. If she left soon enough, perhaps she could manage not to soil Lexi's chances for a happy life as a duchess. Perhaps, if Melissa played her cards right, she could serve Prinny until he'd let her go to a cottage in the country to live out her life in solitary shame. But her family wasn't shielded from the shame she'd brought upon them unless she found a way to redeem herself.

Shame... shame on the shame, she thought. Melissa had only ever tried to please everyone. She'd done better than anyone else at finishing school; she'd excelled in

her studies of Latin. She'd produced watercolors that her mother had displayed proudly, and those had been considered true works of art. She'd danced with the grace that not even Queen Caroline of Brunswick, Prinny's wife, had mustered at the winter ball. She'd married well, kept her wits when she had to arrange her late husband's funeral, and she'd kept her head high when the newspapers called her the fastest-moving widow of the season the year after she came out of mourning.

She hadn't given up then, and she hadn't lost her self-respect.

But she saw herself through Herbert's eyes for the first time. Was this what she'd become?

An impostor trying to steal the position of his late mother?

Had Melissa fallen so low as to pick up the crumbs of a family that wasn't even her own?

If it wasn't enough to have a reputation for using her body for favors, she was now threatening to step into a family that wasn't hers.

No, she wouldn't allow this blemish to take over Lexi's chances as a duchess.

She couldn't bring such shame upon her family.

She had to get away from John; he was too tempting. More than that, he'd won her heart and was deliciously handsome... well, the rest.

The best course of action was to return to London to her parent's house for as long as she could until Prinny called her to do as he asked. Melissa nearly convulsed at the thought of touching any other man besides John, but she knew she mustn't.

First, she had to stop what she'd set into motion with Mrs. Dove-Lyon.

The earthy scent of hay mingled with the tang of leather and horses as John stepped into the stables. Though he had panicked and given Melissa an excuse about not being able to join her to speak with his son, he couldn't help but find them and witness what had occurred between them. To say he was shocked, was an understatement.

Strands of sunlight slanted through cracks in the wood, catching dust motes in their glowing trails. Herbert's small figure was just ahead, shoulders straight, his boots crunching against the straw-covered floor. A stable hand murmured a greeting, but Herbert ignored him, his chin jutting forward like a boy too eager to seem like a man. John felt another pang of disappointment, heavier than the sting of an ungrateful glance or rude word.

"Herbert," he called sharply, his voice cutting through the muted whickers of the horses. The boy stopped, his back stiffening as he turned, eyes defiant. At thirteen, Herbert was no longer the tousled-haired child who used to crawl into John's lap seeking stories. Yet, John couldn't quite reconcile the boy before him—a boy who seemed to be constructing walls far too quickly. Walls John didn't yet know how to scale.

"You've disappointed me," John began, stepping closer to his son. The simple words struck the air like a whip, making it reek of tension. "Your behavior toward Melissa was unacceptable."

Herbert's brow furrowed, his lips flattening into a hard line. "She's not a guest," he spat. "She's a mistress. She doesn't deserve our hospitality."

The words hung in the air like smoke, acrid and suffocating. John froze for a moment, his pulse drumming in his ears. He fought against the red heat rising in his chest, his



fists clenched at his sides until his knuckles ached. When he spoke again, his words were measured, though they held the weight of barely contained anger.

“First,” he said, his voice low but sharp as the crack of a whip, “Melissa is our guest, and while she is under this roof, she will be treated as such. Royal mistresses speak to the Regent directly, so if it’s not manners and decency that persuade you to treat her well, it should be her current station. Second, she is the Duchess’s sister. She deserves the same respect as anyone in this family.”

Herbert’s face twisted with indignation, blotches of color flaring across his pale skin. “She’s not family!” he shouted, his voice breaking with the strain.

John took a step forward, his boots firm against the floorboards. “She is Lexi’s family,” John said steadily. “She isn’t related to us, no, but that means nothing. Everyone deserves our respect. Every man, woman, and child, even animals—especially a woman as intelligent and kindhearted as her.” His voice softened with raw sincerity. “Haven’t you seen her care for the injured kitten? She has more patience, more heart, than a room full of titled men.”

For a moment, Herbert hesitated, his expression flickering with something like doubt, but then he snapped back, his nose wrinkling. “She’s truly beautiful, Father,” he said, his tone biting. “That’s why she’s Prinny’s mistress.”

The words struck like a blade, forcing John to exhale slowly to keep himself in check because he wished Melissa could be his instead. Hearing his son speak of her the property of another man angered John in so many ways. A tremor ran through his hands, curled tight into fists at his sides. But instead of lashing out, he bent down, lowering himself until he was eye-level with his boy. He placed steady hands on Herbert’s thin shoulders, gripping him just firmly enough to hold his attention.

“Listen to me, son,” John said, his voice quiet but carved with steel. “You were

almost the heir to the dukedom. And perhaps you will still be if Dustin and Lexi have only daughters. But none of that will matter—no title in the kingdom will matter—if you don't learn to straighten out how you see the world.”

Herbert frowned, his confusion cracking through his earlier defiance. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s about how you treat people,” John explained. “Being an aristocrat isn’t only a privilege; it’s a responsibility. You mustn’t belittle others. Never think you’re more because someone else is less—less wealthy, less educated, less powerful, young, old, or anything else. Respect isn’t given, Herbert. It’s earned. And if you keep acting this way, there won’t be a dukedom in all of England that will make you respectable.”

John wondered how he could give his son the advice to invest his whole heart in something if he knew the risk of heartbreak loomed everywhere. Every time John dared to give his whole heart, whether it was Marianne, the dukedom, or perhaps Melissa, it was as though fate worked swiftly to wrench it from him, leaving only emptiness where hope had once been. And yet, he couldn’t prevent the risk in Herbert’s life—he could only support him and try to help him through the hardships in life. “When you work to earn respect, you’ll love it. It can be Eton, a cause, a person...”

“Laura?” Herbert asked innocently but John exhaled. Oh the risks of fragile first love!

“Yes,” John mumbled.

Herbert blinked, his lips parting to respond, but whatever thought he had seemed to die before it reached his tongue. Instead, he asked, almost timidly, “Is that what Uncle Dustin is doing? Earning respect as a doctor for the tenants?”

John sighed. There was a weariness to the sound, a weight that came from carrying

answers he wished he didn't have to give. "No," he said, his tone gentler now. "It's his way of looking after people and reconciling that he was gone for so long. And that's what you must learn. People need you—they need us."

"Two dukes of Duncan," Herbert reminded him. Herbert's mouth twitched, not quite a frown but something softer than before. "But I'm short-changed," he muttered after a beat, his hands fidgeting with the hem of his jacket. "I don't have anything."

"You have a family," John said firmly. "That's worth more than any title will ever be. And if you treat the Duchess and her sister with the respect they deserve, you'll have even more."

A faint rustling sound broke the pause that followed. John's head turned instinctively, his eyes narrowing toward the far door. It was barely ajar, just enough for a stray shaft of sunlight to spill through, but there—at the edge of the gap—he caught a glimpse of auburn curls. A head of hair he'd grown far too familiar with in recent weeks.

Melissa.

John's throat tightened as his gaze lingered on the door. She must have heard their conversation; the delicate silence in the wake of her departure told him as much. He could only hope she'd heard the right words—the respect, the regret, the intention. Not the ugliness of a boy's misunderstanding or the harsh truths of a man struggling to be a father.

When he turned back to Herbert, John noticed the boy watching him with sharp curiosity, his defiance beginning to ebb. John swallowed, determined to ensure this moment wasn't lost in the cracks. "Do you understand me, Herbert?"

"I... think so," Herbert murmured, his young voice softer now, almost unsure.

“Good,” John said, standing and resting a hand briefly on his son’s shoulder. “Because the way you treat people will define you, not the title you carry.”

Nor should he allow circumstances to dictate his future. John’s heart ached for Melissa, but the cost of being with her was too steep. To pursue her—Prince Regent’s mistress—would be like stealing from the palace itself, or treason, and a scandal that could ruin his family. Dustin would lose the Royal Family’s favor because it happened at his estate. That in turn would cut off the Harley Street doctors who cared for the tenants at Starcliff Castle. The tenants’ trust would crumble, and the estate’s future would falter. Worst of all, Herbert had lost enough, first his mother, then the chance to be the heir, and if John wasn’t more careful, even the chance to learn more about medicine.

John knew he needed to explain—Herbert had been wrong, but so had he. Yet as much as his better sense urged him to resolve the matter cleanly, to ensure Melissa left the castle as she ought once she needed to return to Prinny’s Court, he couldn’t deny the quiet, stubborn longing that refused to be silenced. Deep inside, he wished he could find some way to keep her here, even just a little longer. The thought was reckless and dangerous, but it clung to him with an iron grip.

Despite the conflict raging within him, John straightened his coat, his determination sharpening. He took one last glance at the door and prayed Melissa would give him the chance to explain—if it came to that. More than anything else, he needed her to see who he truly was. Not just a man burdened by title or duty, but a man who, with all his heart, wanted to be worthy of her. Consequences be damned.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

The walls outside the stables felt colder than they should, though the day itself was warm. Melissa pressed her back against the rough wooden surface, her breath shallow as she heard the voices inside—John’s low and firm, Herbert’s young and cutting. The boy’s words sliced at her like tiny shards of glass, lodging deep before she could even process them.

Her throat tightened as she listened, the knot in her chest growing heavier with each sentence. “Less.” That word echoed louder than anything else, bouncing around her mind in a way that made her stomach churn. Herbert, barely thirteen, already saw her as less. Less deserving. Less respectable. Less worthy of even common decency. And wasn’t he right?

She swallowed hard, her fingers trembling at her sides. Of course he was. Melissa was always trying to be more, always reaching upward to some imaginary place where things would feel steady. She had grasped for so long, tried so hard—attending every ball in her first season with desperate, aching smiles and words polished to please. She had made herself agreeable, pliant, everything a man might want. And it had worked, hadn’t it? She had gained a husband, but never his heart. He’d been proper and kind enough, formal in public and distant in private. A marriage of convenience for him, and for her? A shallow victory.

Melissa clenched her jaw, her nails scraping lightly over the rough surface of the wall. Somewhere along the way, in trying to find meaning, she had begun giving—too much and too often. She gave her smiles, her time, her favors. It wasn’t long before Prinny had become part of that pattern. At first, she didn’t even know how the line had blurred, how she’d slipped. One day she was an earl’s daughter, an amusing presence at court. The next, she was... was this.

Her chest burned with shame. She hadn't thought about it that way before, not with such clarity, but standing here now—listening to Herbert dismiss her, hearing how little she seemed—it twisted something inside her. She'd tried so hard to be more, but wasn't that the cruelest irony? She had ended up being even less.

Her fingers lifted to her cheek, brushing at a tear she hadn't noticed falling. And then another. When her shoulders quivered softly, she felt the air press against her as if even it wanted to push her away. Herbert's opinion shouldn't matter. He was just a child. But it wasn't really his voice that hurt. It was her own—the echo of every doubt, every private fear hidden beneath brave smiles and gracious nods. It wasn't about how Herbert saw her. It was about how she saw herself.

But John.

She closed her eyes tightly for a moment, as if shutting off the outside world would somehow stop the storm inside her chest. She had overheard it all—his voice, filled with such weight and resolve. He had defended her, insisted she was worthy of respect, family, kindness. But was it enough? Did he truly believe that, deep down? Or had he said it only because she was Lexi's sister, a kindness done out of duty, not conviction? Her tears streamed warmer now, faster. She wanted—no, needed—to believe that John meant it. Because she could bear many things, face many judgments. But not his.

The door creaked lightly in the distance, and Melissa startled, stepping away from the wall instinctively. The quiet thud of John's boots filled the air as he stepped out of the stables, still guiding Herbert along beside him, their voices low now. She waited until they were far enough, out of sight, before pressing her hands tightly to her mouth to stifle a sob.

It wasn't just John's voice that shook her—it was the fear clawing inside her chest. She had already made herself less in her own eyes. But what she couldn't bear, what

would truly undo her, was being seen as less by him. John's respect mattered in a way no one's had before. For the first time in a long time, she wanted to stop fighting against herself. She wanted to believe... that she could be more—not for the world, but for him. That hope, fragile and precious, terrified her.

So she ran toward the house without looking back.

Tears continued to slip silently down her cheeks as she turned away, nearly sprinting back. The sunlight glinted softly on the grass, but she barely noticed, her thoughts circling too tightly. She would take this moment—the hurt, the shame, the hope—and hold it close, letting it settle like a stone in her chest. Only later would she decide whether it would weigh her down, or help her find her feet once more.

Time to stop this, Melissa decided when she arrived in her chambers.

She glanced down, brushing a stray blade of grass from the hem of her dress, a small, idle gesture that gave her hands something to do as her thoughts unraveled. London. She needed to return to London and stop Mrs. Dove-Lyon's plan. There was no other choice. Staying here, close to John, would only lead to heartbreak—for both of them. Her love for him, quiet but fierce, was the very reason she had to leave. His life, so carefully built, couldn't afford the scandal that clung to her like shadows. She crossed the room to her writing desk, her steps steady despite the tremor in her chest. Melissa reached for a sheet of paper to send word to Mrs. Dove-Lyon, but her fingers faltered. It was then the cold realization struck her—the painter had already been hired. The plan she thought she could quietly undo had already moved beyond her grasp. Pressing her lips together, she shut her eyes for a brief moment, forcing herself to stay composed. Time was running out, and now, her escape would have to be even swifter.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

“I need to pack,” Lexi declared as she came into Melissa’s bed chamber without as much as a knock to announce herself just when Melissa had inspected her face in her looking glass. The red dots from crying under the tree had faded. Good. Nobody liked a fallen woman wallowing in self-pity. “Did you hear me? We’re going to London.”

“Yes, I’m going to London.” Melissa surveyed the room. With the help of a maid or two, she could pack her things in only a few hours, and she could speak to Mrs. Dove-Lyon in the morrow.

“No, I’m going to London,” Lexi said. “Dustin and I, of course.”

“When?”

“Tonight,” Lexi said. “Can you stay here and help me?” Lexi plopped onto Melissa’s bed just as she used to before everything happened—before Melissa’s coming out, her wedding, and all the other disasters that followed. Even though her younger sister could be a tad annoying from time to time—or frequently, actually—the effortless closeness and trust had lasted since their childhood. Sometimes, Melissa thought, it had grown larger.

Melissa took a deep breath and blinked a few times. She’d wanted to escape and tell Mrs. Dove-Lyon the matchmaking— or match breaking—was moot. But then Lexi had swept in and depleted the wind from her sails, so Melissa remained frozen and stared into the room. The sun hung high, and her south-facing windows did little to shield her from being in the day’s prime light.

“What am I supposed to help you with?”



“The estate. Dustin is needed in London. Apparently, Prinny has reserved the entire Harley Street practice for the week. For his family.”

“The whole week?”

“Yes. I’m not supposed to say, but he’s bringing Prince Frederick, too.”

“The Duke of York?”

“And Princess Sophie.”

“Why? For treatment?”

“It’s a very private affair, but yes. Felix sent a messenger and asked for Dustin’s help. He cannot do it on his own. Nurse Wendy and Nurse Shira even asked if I could assist them in the aftercare.”

“A duke and a duchess working to treat the royal family?”

“Well, I’d entertain them with tea and ice, I suppose. Several of them are coming. Alfred and Ada have also reserved treatment rooms at 91 Harley Street. I’ll be receiving the royal family as the Duchess of Duncan.” Lexi grimaced as if she were readying herself for an examination in arithmetic.

“This is rather grand, don’t you think?” Melissa rose from the bed and paced the room.

“I don’t even know how they found out about the practice and why they asked for Dustin and Felix, two dentists, to be present.”

I did that. I’ve sent the prince regent to Felix and Dustin.

This could bode well because it would keep Prinny busy and give Melissa more time before she had to return to court. But it could also spell disaster. A shiver traced an icy path down her spine, the weight of unspoken worries settling heavily upon her shoulders like an unwelcome shawl. Mrs. Dove-Lyon must be involved in setting this all up.

“Well, it seems that Prinny is rather insistent on the discretion of the doctors and the nurses, so there is nothing we can do but oblige.”

“And Dustin will treat their teeth?”

Lexi arched a brow.

Oh dear, she’d said too much.

“Melissa?”

Melissa stood before Lexi, who remained seated on her bed. “I told him to go.”

“Oh, Melissa!”

“I know, I know. I didn’t think it through. I was scared and shy and embarrassed, and when I realized his affliction, I clung onto the only thing that could give me a reprieve.”

“But you sent him to my friends. My husband...”

“I didn’t know them all at the time. Not yet, at least because it was before your wedding; I didn’t intend to risk the practice only to send a man who needed a doctor to get the cure he needed.” It went without saying that the slightest displeasure of any royal family member could ruin the practice forever.

I was selfish; I tried to distract him from me.

Lexi swallowed visibly and gave Melissa a stern look. It was a new one in her repertoire that said, “I’m grown up and understand, so let’s keep our nerves and handle the problem.” If Melissa didn’t feel such remorse for causing the problem, she’d be proud of her little sister’s cool head and resilient management of the impending crisis. But she’d sent Prinny to the doctors on Harley Street and could make or break them.

“Do you think it’ll be a crisis at all?” Lexi asked and folded her hands in her lap. She straightened her back and awaited Melissa’s answer. Melissa’s chest swelled with pride for her sister, and it overshadowed her sense of remorse for an instant. Lexi was already a duchess, not merely in title but also in deed.

“I see it this way: There are patients coming who need care, and there are doctors willing and capable of offering it. The patients will pay for their service, and the doctors will go about their usual work thereafter.”

“Except that these patients are rather eccentric.”

“I know. Who else do we know who could be their match?”

A mischievous glimmer in Lexi’s eyes betrayed that she was willing to move mountains for her friends on Harley Street, whose success depended on paying clients from the Ton. And the one person who ruled the Ton was Mrs. Dove-Lyon.

“No!”

Melissa placed a hand on her chest, hoping the nausea wouldn’t grow, as did her dread. “Please don’t!”

“She’s the only one who knows all their secrets and doesn’t fear leveraging them.”

“And how do secrets help with the pain of eye surgeries, dental fillings, or other treatments?”

“They don’t; They help ensure that the healing and the success of the treatments will get the attention they are due afterward . Felix said that the apothecary, Alfie, is already preparing a selection of mixtures to ensure the patients’ comfort and good rest. All the doctors will do their best, but they will keep their patients’ confidentiality.”

“I’m not following how this differs from what they usually do...”

“This time, we need their patients to spread the word about their success. Imagine this: Princess Sophie might have to wait her turn or wait until her brother is finished—for the day. I’m certain her treatment will take several days. Who’s to ensure her pride doesn’t get the better of her and that she comes out of the practice with the right way to look at things?”

“Manipulating the royals is a precarious game, Melissa. I wouldn’t dare—” Lexi grimaced as if she were watching a carriage accident and couldn’t look away.

“But I would. And so should you, Duchess. They are our peers.”

Lexi furrowed her brows, but when she lifted her chin, Melissa knew she’d see her and raise her one.

“I’ll ask Mrs. Dove-Lyon for tea every day. Her knowledge of their affairs will hang like a threat over them, and they won’t dare cross her once they see how close she is to Ada, Alfred Stein, and some of the other doctors on Harley Street.” Dr. Alfred Stein was a pediatrician married to Ada, who was almost like a daughter to Mrs.

Dove-Lyon.

“She won’t come for tea. But she will for hot chocolate and a visit with Ada and her little twins.”

“Fine.” Even Mrs. Dove-Lyon had a soft spot for babies, as it seemed.

“Let me know when to be there.” This would be Melissa’s chance to ask to stop the arrangement she had with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. She walked to her armoire and opened it, considering whether any of the gowns she’d brought would suit an afternoon with Mrs. Dove-Lyon and the princess. For Prinny, any gown would do as long as she could show sufficient cleavage.

Lexi came to her side. “I need your help here .”

“Of course, I’ll be there.” Step one was to speak to Mrs. Dove-Lyon, step two was to avoid Prinny for as long as possible, and step three was a life resigned so she could wallow in her heartbreak—for it would surely break if she couldn’t ever fully give her heart to John. An involuntary gasp escaped her lips as her heart plunged, a stone cast into the fathomless depths of her fear.

“No, Melissa. Here. I need you to do what the duchess ought.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Dustin mustn’t go to London without me. I can be more useful to him there this time around. But there’s much to do with the estate having a duchess for the first time in over twelve years. Please help me; I cannot vacate my position when I’ve just assumed it.”

“I’m not the duchess, Lexi. You are.”

“Yes, I know. But I can’t trust anyone else to maintain my reputation among the locals in my absence so soon after my arrival.”

“You are in charge, you know. Duchesses rule the staff and—”

Lexi shook her head. “That’s not how John has been running the estate. He built a community of trust. He’s been working with the locals. The farmers speak freely with him, and he never charges them more than he needs. That’s why everything is in such profitable margins. Haven’t you looked at the ledgers?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, of course not. But Dustin and I have. John has created a symbiosis between the duke and the tenants. It’s a fragile system of trust, and I mustn’t risk it.”

“You’re entrusting me with the diplomacy of your new—”

“I’d entrust you with my life, Melissa. You know that! All I know is because of you.”

Melissa slumped. She was just a guest at Starcliff Castle, and there was no reason for her to snoop around, but she wasn’t a guest in her sister’s life. And now that Lexi was the duchess of this estate, Melissa could hardly escape it.

She had a sinking feeling that she wouldn’t be able to leave for London and speak to Mrs. Dove-Lyon, but she could think of no other way.

“What do you mean?” Melissa asked Lexi. “What’s all because of me?”

Lexi rolled her eyes. “You don’t know?”

Melissa shook her head.

“First, you were the best at finishing school. You have more polish than Lady Grandhal, and she was the strictest of all the teachers.”

Melissa remembered Lady Grandhal as a bit of dragon, ready to spit fire if she made the tiniest of mistakes, too low of a curtsy or too long of a smile.

“And then you accepted a courtship with the poise of a princess. At your wedding, everybody mumbled that they’d never seen a more regal and beautiful bride.”

Oh, Lexi, outward perfection is not the same as inside. I’m not as good as you think, sweet sister.

“And then, when you stood ramrod in the first row at his funeral, you remained elegant despite a stroke of fate that you didn’t deserve.”

“But now I’m fallen, I’m Prinny’s mistress, and you had to rush into a marriage—”

“Nothing like that! At first, I thought so. I was rushed. What did I know.” Lexi brushed her naivety off as if it had been years ago, not just a few weeks.

“Lexi, it’s because of me that—”

“It’s because of you that I ever had the courage to even fall in love. I was so busy checking off items from a list and trying to be perfect that I was too afraid to find someone that wasn’t titled, let alone a working dentist. I was so stupid.”

“I am so stupid,” Melissa replied.

“You? How could you ever say that? You are so brilliant that even the prince asked you to come to his court. I completely understand that it’s not just your beauty he was after, don’t you?”

“I’m not the diplomat you think I am.”

“I don’t think it; I know it.”

She was the one who’d selfishly distracted Prinny from her body and suggested—she swallowed hard—that the prince regent seek treatment for his own ailments and imperfections. And now, her sister had to leave her new post as duchess to ensure that Melissa hadn’t promised too much. However, the royal family had a reputation for being easily displeased. These patients could destroy the practice if any of them as much as flinched.

“Please stay in my lieu. I promised Dustin that I’d add a feminine touch to the castle. Much has gone neglected since John’s wife has passed away.”

Including him, Melissa thought.

Thus, Melissa had to stay behind and protect her sister’s new position as duchess. No matter her feelings, this was about her family, which was more important.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

John grew impatient with his family's antics in the study. He didn't like where this was heading. Herbert had a small knife in hand, and there were needles and thread on a wooden tray.

"This is a very sharp blade; don't take it out of the leather etui unless you absolutely need to use it. Keep it clean," Dustin said as he slipped a tiny knife into a pouch of medical tools. "Keep practicing what I taught you while I'm gone."

"What am I interrupting?" John came to his desk—ahem—their desk. The desk. Herbert jumped backward. He was doing something forbidden and avoided his gaze. "Dustin?"

"Herbert will remain available for emergencies while I'm in London," his cousin declared.

"He's just a boy, he can't replace you!" John protested.

Dustin quirked a brow. "The duke or the doctor?"

"You're a dentist," John mumbled, realizing that Dustin had bested him at his own argument.

"With two years of general medical training, yes. And I'm not suggesting that Herbert knows what I do, but he can clean a wound and close a suture," Dustin winked at Herbert, who beamed at him.

Irritating, truly, that after all he'd done to set an example for Herbert, the boy took

after his cousin.

“When are you leaving?” John asked.

“As soon as Lexi has packed everything she needs. The carriage is ready. We have some important patients this week, and Felix requested my presence.”

“Felix?”

“Yes.”

“The dentist at Harley Street requested your presence, so you, the duke, are going there?” John tried to control his voice, but it was impossible not to let his anger show.

“Like an audience or an appointment?”

“Don’t start again.”

“Again?” John combed his finger through his hair. “Are you jesting? I never stopped!”

Dustin blew out his cheeks slowly as if he were the one with a modicum of right to be frustrated.

“You only just arrived and brought a new duchess to the estate. Have you even met with all the tenants yet? Have you looked through the ledgers? Did you notice that the cost of seed is rising? Where’s that money going to come from? And what about wood for the winter? If we are all to be in here at Starcliff Castle this winter, we’ll need to heat it.”

“Am I coming home during the school holidays again?” Herbert asked as he tied the instruments of the etui.

“Perhaps.”

“If Uncle Dustin is here, I want to come home.”

“Oh for him you want to come home, but for me not?” John felt heat rising to the top of his head. He feared that his face would flush crimson, just like his father’s did in fits of fury, and he knew without a doubt that it already had.

“I want to help Uncle Dustin with the surgeries.”

John let out an angry growl. “Herbert, leave us.”

“No!” His boy didn’t merely look like Dustin; he behaved more like him than John. How was it possible that he had two boys to deal with now, one immature child who thought he was an adult and one immature duke who’d rather play doctor?

“Get out!”

Herbert harrumphed, lifted his chin, and carried the instruments out of the room as if they were a trophy he held.

“That’s your fault!” John hit his fist on the desk, no matter whose it was.

“How’s you shouting at your child my fault?” Dustin narrowed his eyes.

“Hah!” John tried not to let the sarcastic laugh slip, but it had. “You’re a child just like him, chasing a dream of healing the world. Are you mad?” Dustin gave a sardonic brow, but John remained unimpressed. “You’re the Duke of Duncan. Act like it!”

“Why do you act like it? You’re just screaming or poring over ledgers, and

everything we do makes you unhappy.” Dustin crossed his arms.

“I’m not the duke! Don’t you realize it? I’m not—”

“I do realize it. I have no idea what you’d be called since I have the title, but you are the better man for the job.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes!” Dustin unfolded his hands and leaned on the desk. “Well, the tenants I have met may have lush orchards and fertile land, but they’re in pain, John. I’ve treated more in just a few weeks than in a year in Vienna, did you know that? They’ve been neglected.”

“Negl-... argh! How dare you?” It was getting hot. Purgatory hot.

“How dare I? How dare you? They are humans, just like you and me. They need medicine, they need treatment, and a whole slur of it! If I go to London now and help my friends, they will return the favor. We can’t bring Thomas Pritchard, the shepherd, to Nick for eye surgery, but I’m certain he needs it. If you let him shoot the fowl, he needs to see better. He shot at his neighbor’s chimney. Chimney, John! That’s not a pheasant, and nobody can eat it.”

John formed an “o” with his lips, but Dustin didn’t let him speak.

“Laura Smith has cavities, do you know that? She’s only thirteen like Herbert, and I promised to treat her when I’m back with more gold from London. I need to have the jewelers flatten it into sheets. I don’t have time to treat all these people and pour over the ledgers and roll my own gold foil.”

“Nobody asked you to check the farmers’ children’s teeth!”

“I didn’t need to check. They came to me. Do you know that there’s a line of people outside the back door of my clinic room every morning? William Haversham was with little Frank this morning; the boy needed stitches. I suspect he stumbled because his legs are not straight. We need Alfred here to fit him for splints so his legs grow straight.”

“Alfred Stein, the pediatrician?”

“Yes, and Andre, the orthopedist. Christopher Crenshaw injured his shoulder when he slipped on the ice last winter, didn’t he tell you? It keeps popping when he cuts the wood. This is not a trifle.”

John squared his back. “He never mentioned it to me.”

“Well, you didn’t ask.”

“Ahm...”

“You’ve served as the duke and redeemed our name, John. I’ll never forget that, and I know you’re a great steward now, but if I’m to be the duke, I need to know my people. And I can’t get to know their ailments without wishing to treat them. That’s just not me.”

“When there’s a problem, you want to fix it,” John mumbled. It was why Dustin had seemingly abandoned the dukedom, but John knew nothing was further from the truth. He’d left the estate in John’s capable hands and tried to avenge an injustice that had brought shame upon their family name. Dustin was ducal, just not in the traditional sense but he had a heart of a great man who’d serve his people.

“Here, this is what I wrote down so far.” Dustin walked around the desk and picked up a rather new-looking leather-bound ledger. He opened it and started reading:

“Crenshaw family at 42 Sutton Cottage: Christopher’s shoulder needs Alfie’s arnica ointment, and Andre should take a look at how it healed. His wife is due with their fifth child in about four months, by my calculation, so perhaps Phil and Shira could be here during the late autumn months and treat a few patients while they are ready for the birth. Meanwhile, I need about fifty-two casts for gold inlays for George Whitaker, his two sons, his wife, and her sister. That’ll be at least two weeks of work, if not more. Herbert is helping me with—”

“Wait, Herbert?”

“Yes, he’s very helpful. He has a steady hand and a resilient stomach, so I was thinking he could help with the smaller lacerations, stitches, and perhaps wound care of day-to-day operations.”

“Wound care? He may be good with his hands, but he’s certainly never helped me.”

“He told me you only ever wanted to show him the ledgers. He thinks it’s boring,” Dustin said. John arched a brow. When Herbert was the heir, it was important to understand the estate’s finances. Now, it wasn’t his business anymore—not if he wouldn’t be the heir anymore.

“Emma Hughes nearly cut off her fingertip yesterday, and Herbert cleaned her wound in the kitchen. He didn’t even need me, and his work was flawless.”

“Emma, the kitchen maid?”

“Yes, she sharpened a knife, and it was an accident while he was there.”

“Why was Herbert in the kitchen?”

“I beg your pardon?” Dustin looked up from the ledger. “Are you not listening? It’s

good that he was; he saved her finger. And now it's healing well, so there won't be an infection. These people need help."

John sucked his lower lip in. Dustin made a fair point, but those people were there to serve them, not vice versa. Although... couldn't it be a give-and-take? Just because he never knew how to offer medical care, it didn't mean that Dustin couldn't offer it now.

John leaned with both hands on the desk and perused the list of names, ailments, and the doctors, nurses, or apothecaries he'd assigned them to.

"What's wrong with Henry Clarke, the blacksmith?"

"Rheumatism. I'd send him to Andre to rule out that it's not another injury to the joints."

"And Edward Cooper, the shepherd?"

"He needs me."

"And his wife?"

"Susan is not his wife; she's his second-eldest daughter. She needs Nick. I don't think she can see well and that's why she can't read."

"His brother, George, needs Alfred and me."

"Hm."

"Understood." John sighed in resignation.

“You see, if they are to grow up as loyal tenants, you need to look after them.”

“I have been...” Although John doubted that he’d done a good job. Yes, he’d restored the fortune and the functionality of the estate, but Dustin would clear their name. Could it be that Dustin was going to be a worthy duke after all?

“Well, you did it your way. Now I’ll do it my way.”

John flipped the page, and there were more names listed. More names stared back at him, each one a silent accusation. His tenants. People who’d relied on him, trusted him. It wasn’t his responsibility to care for his tenants like that as a duke. But they ought to make it their duty with Dustin, a duke with medical training, and several doctors willing to help.

John’s fingers trembled as he flipped the page, the paper whispering secrets he wished he could unhear. A knot tightened in his chest, guilt clawing at him with every heartbeat. These were not just names; they were lives, stories intertwined with his own, and he had let them down.

He read their names and recognized them but the realization that these people had gone years without medical attention struck him like a physical blow. He could almost feel their silent suffering, the quiet endurance of those who had no choice but to carry on. His mind raced, searching for excuses, explanations, anything to ease the burden of his remorse, but found none.

“I failed them.”

“No, you didn’t. You made sure they had homes, food, farmland, and a future. Without you, they could have all died of starvation, or they might have left to work in the cities. And then nobody would tend to our land,” Dustin said.



John swallowed hard.

“But if you want them to keep working at full capacity, they must be healthy. That’s where I can help.”

“And the other doctors and nurses from Harley Street.”

Dustin shrugged. “Consider it a house party when they come.”

That made John laugh. Dustin had an easy way of looking at physical ailments as something that could be treated rather than a crippling condition. He only ever saw solutions, not problems.

“You’ll need a lot of time to treat all these people. And the other doctors will need some space.”

Dustin’s eyes shot to John’s.

“I’ll have your back as your steward, Your Grace.” John bowed. “We are humbled to serve you.”

Dustin boxed John gently in the arm. “Stop that!”

“All right,” John laughed. “Let me know what I need to do while you are away then.”

“Well, look at this list of supplies I need: bandages, thread, cotton, and gauze. Could you have Melissa order these items here when she picks out the new curtains?”

“Lady Thumbbridge? Why is she ordering curtains?”

“She’ll take over some of Lexi’s tasks while we are in London.”

Now John felt lightheaded and wished to sit. “She’s staying here?”

“To help Lexi and take on some of her tasks. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.”

Everything.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

Melissa sat in the drawing room at the castle and clutched the letter with both hands.

Dear Lady Thumbbridge,

It is with utmost urgency that I write to you regarding a matter of great import. The prince regent's portrait, depicting him alongside his family, will be completed before the year's end. Regrettably, Her Royal Highness declined to sit with her husband for the painting.

As a favor that may advance your own ambitions, the esteemed artist has agreed to study your form so that you may occupy her place in the portrait, as your form is closest to the princess. While I cannot mitigate the potential disgrace of having your visage replaced at a later stage, I assure you this arrangement is far less mortifying than the alternatives you face. I have secured His Royal Highness's assurances that this is the last favor he'd ask of you, but he requests to keep the sketches.

Sincerely,

D-L

The last favor... This was her chance to leave the Prince's court and be free. Mrs. Dove-Lyon had set the plan in motion.

"Lady Thumbbridge, you have a visitor," the butler said, and Melissa tucked the letter away, but her mind was still on Mrs. Dove-Lyon's words. She was being used for her body after all, albeit not in the way that she'd feared. Mrs. Dove-Lyon had come through; she'd found a way out for Melissa. What Melissa had neglected was the

ruined reputation because a former mistress had less respect than a current one. There was no way to salvage her name.

Angus jumped onto Melissa's lap as if she were his personal chair and stretched his little neck. Melissa understood and complied, rubbed his soft head, and when her finger trailed over the tips of his ears, he twitched them.

"Perhaps you and I can find a cottage nearby so that Lexi can come to visit us with her child." Melissa didn't hide her sadness from the kitten. But the letter didn't say anything about the debts being forgiven. Melissa could be free from the man she didn't want, but she still couldn't be with the one she wanted. Would Angus be her only companion in the years to come? Melissa couldn't fathom how she could have fallen from grace so quickly. The bride of the year, the match of the season, and then the next thing she knew, she was widowed, stuck in mourning for a year, and then coveted in high society. It had been a whirlwind of the mood swings of the Ton, and she'd lived through too many in too short of a time to wish to return.

The afternoon sun's soft glow illuminated the drawing room, casting warm hues over the rich tapestry and plush furnishings. Melissa sighed as she watched Angus, the mischievous kitten, play with a leftover ball of yarn. The curtain and fabric maker had left mere moments ago, leaving behind a colorful array of samples for the new castle curtains.

Just as she was about to untangle Angus from his yarn predicament, the butler entered, clearing his throat with practiced elegance.

"Lady Thumbridge, may I escort your guest in?" he asked.

Melissa nodded politely and looked up in surprise. She gently placed Angus on the settee, watching as he attacked the yarn with renewed fervor.

“Mister Richard Cosway, royal portraitist,” the butler announced and stepped aside, revealing a tall, lean man with an artist’s smock and an air of creative disarray. His dark hair fell in unruly waves, and his piercing blue eyes sparkled with intrigue.

“Good afternoon, Lady Thumbbridge,” he said, bowing slightly. “I am Cosway. Mrs. Dove-Lyon sent me.”

Melissa’s heart raced. Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s arrangement promised a solution to her predicament. She didn’t want to return to court as a mistress, but she also didn’t want to remain near John while Herbert constantly reminded her of her disgrace. Her ties to Prinny were a predicament she could handle with Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s aid but Herbert’s disgust with her reputation was a disgrace she didn’t want to bring into a relationship with John. It was too much to bear such embarrassment under the same roof with the man she desired more than she’d ever met before. If she could only erase John’s memory—but that was wishful thinking.

If only her heart could cease its yearning. But the ache was relentless, binding her thoughts to John as if her very soul was tethered to him. Did he share even a sliver of the feelings that consumed her? Or was she just a foolish girl weaving fantasies from his kindness? The uncertainty gnawed at her, more excruciating than the prospect of enduring Herbert’s judgment. To lose John entirely—to never know the warmth of his affection—was a pain she couldn’t fathom. Her chest tightened at the mere idea, and a hollow, unbearable fear settled deep within her.

“Yes, the painting,” she said, trying to sound composed despite her sudden nervousness. “Please, have a seat.”

Melissa stood, feeling the cool air from the high ceilings in the drawing room. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows, casting a warm glow over the tapestry-covered walls.

Cosway moved confidently, his presence filling the space as he set up his easel by the window. His eyes, red-rimmed and observant, seemed to take in the room's every detail before settling on her. "Shall we begin? The light is perfect here," he said, his voice a gentle invitation. "Please disrobe."

"I beg your pardon?" Melissa felt a flutter of apprehension, her pulse quickening at the thought. The prospect of being his nude subject was even more intimidating than being the prince's mistress. Her gaze drifted to the easel, imagining the blank canvas coming to life under his skilled hands, but she didn't want to be the vulnerable subject exposed to her flesh.

At that moment, John stepped in. "I heard a visitor had arrived." He surveyed the room, and Melissa felt the heat rushing to her face.

"The regent has sent me for a study to produce a portrait." Cosway opened a small wooden box with charcoal sticks and sat down on a chair he'd pulled to the easel.

"In the nude?" John shot him a nasty look that made Melissa's skin prickle. He stepped toward Melissa and met her gaze.

"Yes, I must."

John's mien darkened, and she saw the fiery jealousy in his gaze mixed with defiance and the hurtful resignation of a man who'd lost his title, thereby his footing to refuse the regent's wishes. "Don't do this," he pleaded, and his voice came like a dagger to Melissa's heart.

Of all people, she didn't want John to see her as just Prinny's mistress. An object...

But this was the moment to test how he truly felt and whether it warranted the embarrassment of being painted. Was there hope?

“Perhaps not entirely nude,” she said, a hint of ice in her tone. Her fingers brushed against the delicate folds of her gown, seeking reassurance, when she raised her chin and gave Cosway a steely stare. “He will chaperone.”

The painter nodded, an understanding spark in his eyes. “A sheer cloth, then,” he suggested, motioning to a gossamer fabric draped over a nearby chair.

Melissa agreed with a subtle nod, feeling the shift in her resolve.

Several minutes later, after the servants had brought in a room divider and Melissa needed to disrobe.

At first, her hands trembled as she reached for the hem of her gown, her fingers hesitating on the edge of the fabric. A flush burned across her skin, the weight of her decision pressing heavy on her chest. Disrobing in front of anyone would have been humiliating, but in front of John, it felt like baring her very soul. Her cheeks flamed as she glanced his way from behind the room divider at an angle that blocked the painter’s view but seemingly not John’s. She caught the flicker in his expression—a strange mix of confusion and yearning that jolted through her like lightning. For a fleeting moment, her embarrassment threatened to send her fleeing behind the safety of the divider, but then she saw it.

It was subtle, but unmistakable—a dark intensity that turned his eyes almost black, like storm clouds heavy with rain. He stood frozen, a man teetering on the edge of an abyss he couldn’t drag himself from. She’d never seen him so unguarded, his emotions etched so plainly across his face. It gave her strength. For once, she wasn’t the only one laid bare.

Melissa nodded faintly, signaling her acceptance of whatever unspoken battle they had just begun, and turned away without another word. Behind the divider, her hands steadied, though her pulse still raced unevenly. Peeling the fabric away, she couldn’t

stop herself from imagining how his eyes might linger on her—a mix of desire and something deeper, something she dared hope for. When she stepped out, draping the sheer cloth around her shoulders like a fragile shield, her resolve had hardened. If this was her only chance to learn the truth of his feelings, she wouldn't waste it.

Dragging the flimsy fabric behind her like a trail of spilled lava, she moved toward the settee with purpose. Her heart thundered, but she refused to falter. When she sat, the flowy material whispered around her, pooling at her feet in a manner she hoped seemed artful, though every angle had been calculated. Only her breasts and midsection were covered and she remained, vulnerable, but there was power in it too—a challenge that hung in the air between them.

Once she'd taken her place on the settee as the painter instructed, Cosway draped the regal red fabric over her and arranged the folds so they'd catch the right light. The fabric cascaded over her body in an almost royal manner as if Prinny's claim clung to every part of her body and yet she felt more powerful—as if she were an actor on a stage. She felt a thrill of excitement and trepidation; the idea of being painted was both exhilarating and unnerving, not because of the painter but because John had entered the room and stood in the corner with his arms folded as if he were deciding whether to throw the painter out or to shoot him.

She met his gaze as he turned fully to face her. The shadows of the room softened his features, but nothing could hide the raw emotion in his eyes. He looked like a man who was trying—desperately—to cage something wild within himself. Melissa's mouth curled into the barest trace of a smile, the tiniest flicker of triumph warming her. For all her shyness, she knew her effect on him now. She was sure of it.

“You look uncomfortable, John,” she said, her voice soft but laced with a daring edge. She smoothed the cloth over her thighs with slow, deliberate movements, tilting her head slightly. “Surely, you don't need to watch over my virtue.” Her tone betrayed nothing of the trembling ache in her chest, but inside, she braced herself for



his reaction like a duelist preparing for the first lunge.

His jaw worked, the muscle tensing as though he bit back a dozen unspoken words. He shifted slightly, the broadness of his shoulders blocking the wan light at the window. “Melissa,” he said, her name raw and low, sending a shiver through her that she prayed didn’t show.

“Hmm?” she answered, feigning innocence while her pulse thudded like the wild beat of a drum. She would push him. Just a little further. She had to know.

But he didn’t reply. Instead, he stayed locked in place, his eyes burning into hers, his restraint fraying before her eyes. That was all she needed. Embarrassment melted away, replaced by a boldness she hadn’t known she possessed. If this moment was all she could claim of him, she would make it unforgettable.

Cosway carefully unfolded his easel, its wooden legs creaking slightly as he adjusted it to the perfect height. He then retrieved a thin, delicate piece of charcoal from his artist’s toolbox, its dark, almost sinister surface promising the first lines of creation. Melissa watched with bated breath as he glanced up at her, his eyes capturing the rays of sunlight filtering through the damask drapes. She tried to remain as still as possible, acutely aware of the red fabric draped over her, its lustrous surface shimmering with hues of gold and orange. Each fold caught the light differently, creating a fascinating interplay that made the room feel alive with warm tones.

And in the back, standing behind the painter, was a red-hot glowering Adonis of a man whose eyes trailed from the sketch to her and back.

She couldn’t see the sketch and remained still, but it was scandalous, judging from John’s demeanor.

Thus, once she’d posed for several minutes, she felt the tension in her limbs ease,

replaced by a quiet confidence—not because the painter’s pencil moved with purpose, probably capturing her form with every stroke, but because John’s gaze lingered upon her. The sound of graphite on paper was steady, almost like a heartbeat, grounding her in the moment.

She tried not to move so the fabrics kept her covered in all the right places. Melissa noticed John’s foot tapping rhythmically against the wooden floor, a subtle yet persistent sound punctuating the silent room with increasing urgency. Each tap resonated like a distant drumbeat, a sign of his mounting impatience.

The sunbeams advanced, tickling her face and adding a hint of warmth to her cheeks, which she hoped would not be too noticeable in the portrait. Her senses were keenly attuned to the moment, the smell of the charcoal blending with the slight tang of fresh paint wafting from Cosway’s chalks and charcoal and the other painting materials he took out of his valise one-by-one. She could hear the faint rustle of his smock as he moved, positioning himself just so before making more of the scritch-scratching sounds of the charcoal and brushes.

Fine particles of orange and gold dust seemed to dance above the paper affixed to a simple wooden board but Melissa’s attention was on John. As the artist fussed over his sketch, John’s fingers drummed on his thighs, the rapid movement a restless cadence. For some reason, he was frustrated with the sketch.

Well, Cosway was sketching her as he’d imagined her nude, and it was part of regaining her freedom from court and her financial independence from her husband’s debts. If John didn’t like it, then Melissa would still not pack and return to Brighton because the painting served another purpose. Even though Mrs. Dove-Lyon hadn’t told her the details, she knew it was vital to her goal. And that was John.

When Melissa looked at John, she had another thought: What if he liked the painting and wanted to see more of her?

For once, she wanted to live up to her reputation as a vixen, so she held her head high and was as patient as she could be.

John's jaw clenched tightly, the muscle flexing beneath his skin as his gaze bore into the artist. He exuded a controlled energy, his eyes narrowing with each seemingly unnecessary stroke of the charcoal.

"Why aren't you drawing her face?" John growled.

"It's not of importance at this time, milord," the artist continued without stopping to look at John.

But Melissa did.

She caught a glimpse of John's hand gripping the back of his chair, veins prominent and fingers curled with a forceful grip. It was as if he held the chair to ground himself, preventing his growing agitation from spilling into the room. And then something else entirely spilled into the room.

Melissa's heart pounded with a mix of embarrassment and dread as she watched Cosway work. The sight of John, looking so intensely at the sketch that she couldn't see, only fueled her inner turmoil.

"Melissa," John said. His voice was tight with contained emotion. "What is the meaning of this?"

Melissa turned, her eyes widening. "John! I—"

"Don't move, milady," The artist peeked out from behind the easel and gave her a stern look, his charcoal-sullied hand pointing upward to signal a halt.

“I am merely preparing a painting as commissioned. This is a study—”

John cut him off, his eyes never leaving Melissa. “You’re missing the point.”

“I beg your pardon?” Cosway set down the charcoal and rose to face John. “I’m appointed—”

“I don’t care what you’re appointed to do. You’re missing the point with the painting.” He eyed the sketch and narrowed his eyes. “Your study is not doing your subject justice.”

“Explain this, milord.” The older man turned beet red and looked up at John, who was a foot taller and yet took a menacing stance.

Melissa remained as calm as needed, sure the artist would return to finish sketching the fold of the fabric, when she noticed a tiny gray-striped paw tugging at the end of the fabric.

“Where’s her head?” John swung his arms out in frustration. “Where’s the sparkle in her eyes? The sheen in her golden-blond curls? The brightness of her smile?”

Melissa glanced to John.

Sparkling eyes?

A tug at the red fabric sent a shiver down Melissa’s spine. Instinctively, she moved her arm and held the fabric covering her legs, but her attention remained on John.

“You haven’t even spoken to her, so how do you plan to capture her essence in a sketch? There’s no background, no context. You’re completely overlooking her intelligence, her wit, her kindness.” John grimaced. “This is flat. Incomplete.”

“Milord,” the artist muttered, scratching his forehead and thereby spreading the charcoal over his face.

“Meow!”

Melissa quickly looked to the side, but Angus was nowhere to be seen.

“Isn’t it the task of a portraitist to capture the essence of the subject?” John pressed on.

The artist harrumphed and plopped back onto the stool behind the easel. “I’ve been trying to capture—”

“You didn’t capture anything except the perfection of her silhouette.” John shrugged and pointed at the sketch.

Melissa felt heat rising to her face, and she was sure that her complexion was even redder than the makeshift robe when the sheer fabric that had covered her was suddenly gone.

Of all the strange things that were happening at Starcliff Castle, this was at the top of John’s list. A lady was being painted. That was still acceptable, except that she was only draped in a sheer cloth.

Not any cloth, but a curtain sample.

He’d never look at the window dressings the same again now that he’d seen the most beautiful woman draped in them.

And the painter had been sent with an order from the prince regent.

John blinked at the odd order and pursed his lips when he considered that Melissa didn't reject the scheme. There was more about her than met the eye, some secret that had him captivated.

And then more did indeed meet his eye.

John stood transfixed on the charcoal sketch in front of him, angry about the injustice the sketch did to Melissa's beauty. He couldn't quite explain it, but anyone who didn't see how precious and perfect she was irritated him. The artist had captured the contours of a woman's form with striking precision, each stroke of the charcoal bringing life to the paper. But as John studied the artwork, a noise startled him, leaving him momentarily breathless.

A sudden, loud meow shattered the silence, followed by a rustle and an unexpected shriek. John's head snapped up, the world around him becoming a whirl of motion and sound. There, upon the settee, stood Melissa, her skin glowing in the soft light, utterly bare and caught in a struggle with a mischievous kitten. The tiny creature dangled from the end of the red satin she clutched desperately.

"Let go! Bad kitty!" Melissa's voice filled the room, a blend of exasperation and horror, as she attempted to rescue the fabric from the kitten's playful grasp.

Naked.

Melissa was completely naked.

For an instant, John's mind froze as if the dazzling perfection had numbed his ability to think. But then John's instincts took over. She was a lady, and he was the chaperone. A terrible idea, but the truth of the matter.

Without a moment's hesitation, he approached the old artist, who seemed more

amused than concerned by the unfolding chaos. Ignoring the man's protests and the comical kicking of his short legs, John lifted him effortlessly and carried him to the door. The artist's objections faded as John deposited him outside, the door closing with a definitive thud.

Back in the room, John found the key, turning it with a quiet click.

"Angus! No!" Melissa shouted, still standing naked and fighting for the fabric as if it were the last shred of decency.

As John approached Melissa, he shrugged off his coat, offering it to her as a shield against the moment's vulnerability. It was the best use for the far too elaborate coat he owned, and he finally saw it for what it was—a cloth to warm. She accepted it with a grateful nod and allowed him to wrap her in the warm wool around her shoulders; her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and relief.

"I'm so sorry." She looked down over her exposed chest and pulled the coat over her, wrapping it like a kimono.

She was slim and shivering, and her face blushed.

And John was sure he'd never been harder or more stomped by the sheer brilliance of her... smile?

"Ba-a-a-d kitty!" Melissa suddenly shouted in a dark voice in the direction of the armchair. "Angus! That was—"

John left his hands on her sides, but the moment overcame him, and he shook in mirth. "Brilliant kitten, Angus. Good boy."

Melissa looked at him and gasped, her eyes wide open.

She batted her lovely long lashes, and John smiled. How could he not?

What Angus had achieved might have taken him months if he were to ever succeed in seeing the woman he thought about every night naked.

John approached, seeing how delicate Melissa's frame was in his coat, the fabric heavy and hiding her perfect skin. Yes, he'd peeked. How could he not?

"Thank you," she murmured, her voice a mix of gratitude and something else, something deeper. She glanced around, half expecting Angus, the mischievous kitten, to dart into view, but they were alone.

John's fingers lingered at her collar, the briefest touch that sent a shiver through her. "Are you all right, Melissa?" His voice was low, rough-edged with concern that only seemed to heighten the intimate air between them.

She nodded as the space between them seemed to shrink.

Their eyes locked, a silent understanding passing between them. Without another word, John leaned in, his lips capturing hers with a suddenness that made her gasp. The kiss was a torrent of sensation—her mouth soft and cool, the taste of her intoxicating. Her hands found their way to his chest, feeling his heart beating fast beneath her palms.

A soft sound of pleasure escaped her, and John responded in kind, deepening the kiss, his hand moving to cradle her face. The room around them seemed to fade, leaving only the two of them and the soft rustle of Angus somewhere in the shadows.

When they finally parted, breathless and wide-eyed, Melissa let out a shaky laugh. "I apologize for causing such a distraction," she said softly, teasingly.



John smiled, brushing a thumb across her cheek. “A most welcome one,” he replied, his voice filled with a warmth that promised more than just words. She had distracted him indeed, not just in this moment but in life, too. Everything that had caused him pain seemed to fade when Melissa was near. With her, the air was crisper in the morning, the sun brighter at noon, the tea sweeter in the afternoon, and the nights hotter in his dreams. Yet, this was no dream. She was real, and he wouldn’t let her go.

At that moment, the study felt like the whole world, a place where time stood still, and a kiss had unlatched newfound hope within him. He’d woo her and untangle her from the attachment with the prince. The question that lingered in the air was how.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

Dinner without Dustin and Lexi was an ordeal, and John had no appetite. The castle's dining room echoed softly with the clink of silverware, but the conversation was stifling. John sat at the head of the table, his gaze flickering between his son, Herbert, and their guest, Melissa. The candlelight played over the fine china and crystal goblets, casting a warm glow that softened the tension lingering in the air. Dustin and Lexi's chairs were empty, and the first course was cleared while the room remained devoid of the usual friendly chatter between Lexi and Melissa or Dustin and Herbert. John felt at sea even though he was the host in his home.

He cleared his throat, breaking the momentary silence. "Lady Thumbbridge," he began, his voice steady yet edged with a hint of regret, "I must apologize for Herbert's earlier behavior after the kitten's surgery. He was rude to storm out of the stables, and it was uncalled for. I assure you, it won't happen again." He watched a delicate blush spread across Melissa's cheeks, her eyes lowering to her plate in modest acknowledgment.

Herbert shifted in his seat, his youthful face a mix of defiance and discomfort. "Father, I was only—" he started but stopped abruptly as he caught the warning in John's eyes. The boy's gaze dropped; instead, he muttered something about his mother. John saw Melissa's complexion shift, the color draining from her face as if the very mention had struck a chord.

He wished he could say something and explain it, but he had no explanation for his feelings. How could he make it understandable for Herbert if he didn't even dare act on his feelings and speak his heart?

The rest of the meal passed with a quiet undertone, the usual banter replaced by a

more subdued atmosphere. When dinner concluded, John stood and offered Melissa his arm, guiding her gracefully from the room. The corridor leading to the stairs was dimly lit, the flickering sconces casting elongated shadows that danced along the walls.

As they reached the stairs, John hesitated, his hand resting on the railing. He was acutely aware of Melissa's presence beside him, the faint scent of roses lingering in the air between them. He longed to reach for her hand, to offer comfort, perhaps more. Her fingers brushed against his, a fleeting touch that sent a spark skittering up his arm. She withdrew, but not before he felt the hesitation, the lingering connection that seemed to hang between them.

"I'm so sorry, Lady Thumbbridge."

"Melissa, please."

"My apologies, Melissa. I'm inconsolable."

"That I'm here?"

"Not at all." Please don't leave. "I apologize again on behalf of my son."

"Don't," she seemed to wish to speak but then sucked in her lips and withdrew her hand. John didn't let it go and clasped hers gently between both of his. Then she looked up but not at him.

When John realized what had captured her gaze, he invited her to join him in front of the portrait.

"This was painted when Herbert was two years old. It was an anniversary gift for my late wife." John pointed at the artist's signature of a life-size painting in the hall. It

showed him standing behind his great-grandfather's armchair, his late wife seated in front of him, and Herbert on her lap.

"She was beautiful," Melissa said in a mousey voice.

"Yes. She was a wonderful mother."

"You must miss this very much."

"What do you mean?"

"The family."

Yes, I do.

"We never actually sat like this. Do you know that?"

Her eyes darted to him.

"Herbert didn't keep still. The painter completed the entire background, the chair, and the fabrics first; then, my wife sat for a portrait when Herbert was with his nursemaid or with me. I sat without them, and I am not certain how the painter managed it, but Herbert looked a little like that, just with a dash more mischief."

Melissa laughed, and her demeanor relaxed.

"It is over ten years ago."

"And he is thirteen already." John tasted the words and eyed the baby in the painting. "This was a different life, and it feels as though it were a lifetime ago. I was the duke, and my duchess was there, and Herbert, the heir. Now I'm just the steward, and

Herbert is... he's... impossible sometimes. He told me what happened. He's just so—"

"Just as a boy his age ought to be."

"I'm so sorry he's been so rude to you. You don't deserve any of it."

"He only spoke the truth." A sadness colored her voice that made John want to lift her into his arms and carry her to safety even though he was merely standing with her in the hall.

"You must have been very disappointed when my sister married your cousin instead of you." She crossed her arms and hugged herself as if to brace herself for his response.

"Not at all."

She looked away, avoiding his gaze. It would have been rude had he been the duke, but as matters stood, she was higher in station than him. And beneath all that, she was a young woman in pain.

"Lady Thumbridge, if I tell you a secret, will you promise me to keep it from your sister?"

She eyed him over her shoulder with an arched brow. Oh, she was so beautiful. "I don't keep any secrets from my sister."

He pursed his lips and gave a crooked smile. "That sounds unlikely, but you'll certainly wish to keep this from her."

She turned to him and raised her chin. "It depends on the secret."

“As soon as I stepped foot in your parents’ house and I saw you, I only ever wanted you and never your sister.”

This was the moment Melissa had dreamed of. She’d hoped John might return her feelings—oh, and how she’d longed for him. But now that he said it, and the way he did, she frowned.

“I’d never take a man from my sister,” Melissa said, crossing her arms as she stepped back from John.

He narrowed his eyes. “You didn’t. She loves Dustin. She already did when she met me at dinner at your family’s house.” Melissa swallowed hard. “Please hear me out. I was sent to meet your sister. An introduction was made for us at the behest of a certain Bessie Dove-Lyon,” John explained.

So he knew.

“She never fails to make a match.”

John raised his chin and eyed her with that ducal look he hadn’t shown in a while. “And she promised me the woman of my heart.”

Melissa arched a brow. “I spoke to her, too.” Melissa cringed at her own admission but she didn’t want anything to be between her and John. And that was exactly what Mrs. Dove-Lyon was supposed to help with, eliminating obstacles to love.

“As did I,” John said.

“No!” Melissa held her right hand out, but John came so close that instead of pushing him away, her hand landed on his chest. She felt his heart beating fervently, and he put his hand over hers. “You want a match?”

What about me?

“I told her not to bother with me because I already found the woman I desired,” he whispered. “It wasn’t clear to me what I needed. I was still heartbroken when my wife died.”

If this was an attempt to woo her, Melissa thought it was meager at best.

“But it’s not the broken heart part I needed to worry about, but the healed one,” he continued.

Oh, this was awful and getting worse.

“You needed a wife to produce a spare for the heir.”

“At first, that’s what I thought. It was why I agreed to meet Lexi. I regret to admit it—no, wait—I don’t regret any of it. It’s how I came to meet you. And then everything changed.”

“You weren’t the duke anymore, and you didn’t need a spare for the heir?”

“True, but no. I didn’t need to marry anymore, but I wanted it very much. I fell in love.”

Melissa held her breath.

Had she misread his kiss then? And his kindness? If he was in love, then there was no time to waste and Melissa had to stop Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s plan. The fabric of Melissa’s existence unraveled with an unrelenting force as she imagined that John didn’t return her affection after all. Had she misunderstood his kindness all this time? Or was he speaking about her after all?

As crude as his explanation was, she couldn't help the surging warmth inside and the tingling in her chest. Could she be so lucky? Did he love her?

"Melissa, you ought to know that I was struck with your beauty the moment I saw you. But it wasn't just the way your eyes catch the candlelight or how your shoulders shift just before you decide to speak out of turn. It's not the slight dimple on your right that appears a moment before the other one when you smile, and it's not just the sweetness of your gaze when you bat your lashes and eye me critically, just like you do now."

Melissa swallowed again but her heart forgot to beat.

"W-what is it?"

"Everything about you!" John looked up and around as if an angel could send him the right words. "You are a fierce big sister for Lexi, and you've been helping her come into her own as a duchess. I've seen your love for her, and I know you'd sacrifice your happiness for your family. Not just them but even little Angus despite his mischief."

"He needs me," Melissa mumbled.

"So do I. Consider me the runt of the litter, wounded not by surgery but fate, and it's my heart only you can heal. Only you can—"

"I mustn't, John. The prince has a claim on me—"

"Then he must relinquish it."

"He'd never do that without forcing me to pay my late husband's debts. I can't force my family to pay them. It would ruin them, and Lexi—"



“I’ll pay them.”

Melissa laughed. “You can’t afford it.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

John exhaled heavily. “Lexi shouldn’t share the information from the estate’s ledgers with—”

“She didn’t. I asked Dustin before. There’s not enough. I won’t—”

“But I won’t share you with the Crown, not if you tell me that you want my protection.”

“Your son wouldn’t wish it; I can’t stand between you.”

“Does this mean you’d want me? My protection?”

Melissa couldn’t speak the words, for they were selfish. But her body betrayed her, and she nodded.

Melissa’s heart lurched in a way that felt both thrilling and terrifying. John’s presence, warm and steady in front of her, beckoned with promises she longed to trust. Yet, as he reached out, the weight of her family’s peril surged forward, a reminder of the stakes she faced. She wanted to lean in and sink against John, kiss him again, and let him hold her and anchor her to the life she wished—but the one she had pulled her back. Prinny had to forgive the debt lest her family face ruin. It would affect Lexi and implicitly the dukedom, along with John. And now, it was John’s heart at stake, too.

Melissa couldn't stomach the burden, so she turned away, her skirts whispering against the floor like secrets of her shame in the dark. Her feet moved swiftly, and the solid thud of her shoes on the wooden floor kept time with the wild beat of her heart.

"Melissa?" John called from behind her, but she didn't dare look at him.

The stairs loomed ahead, and she grasped the banister as if it could anchor her against the tide of emotion. Each step upward was a battle waged against the tears threatening to spill. The shadows lengthened in the hallway, wrapping around her like tendrils of doubt.

Reaching her chamber, Melissa closed the door. The gentle click was a finality she both dreaded and needed. She sank onto the bed, and her tears flowed freely now, warm and unchecked, tracing a path across her cheeks. Each sob shook her frame, a testament to the turmoil she could no longer contain. Her mind replayed the moment with John, his eyes full of a promise she yearned to grasp but dared not risk.

Alone in the dim light, Melissa grappled with the truth: love and fear tangled together, each demanding a piece of her heart. The question she couldn't answer was how to reconcile the two if it was possible at all.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

By the evening's end, the weight of decisions hung heavily in the air. Melissa woke up in her bed. She must have cried herself to sleep. It was late, and the house was quiet. Melissa felt as though she had nobody to speak to now that Lexi and Dustin had left for London. Her lady's maid had gone with Lexi, and Melissa didn't need much help from a maid. Best to let the staff finish their usual work if they were also going to help her work through the long list of things she had to do during Lexi's absence.

First on the list was to plan the treatment room for... Melissa preferred not to think about why so much gauze, bandages, and thread would be needed. Surgeries made her queasy. Dustin had requested to set this treatment room up similarly to the one at 87 Harley Street, and since only she and Lexi knew what it looked like, the task had now fallen upon Melissa to give the staff directions.

But then she thought about Herbert, Dustin's eager apprentice. Her mind was spinning with thoughts of what John's son had said; she was a fallen woman. If a thirteen-year-old boy didn't respect her, then John surely wouldn't either—not for long at least. She had to keep her head low and hope that Mrs. Dove-Lyon would let her out of the arrangement. Yet, Melissa had promised Lexi to look after her duties as a duchess, and she couldn't disappoint the only person who saw her for who she was, her sister, a person, a woman—not merely an earl's daughter, a widow, a mistress.

Melissa needed some warm chamomile tea with honey before bedtime. She couldn't sleep. Not with him a few doors down from her chamber.

She sneaked into the kitchen, and to her utmost surprise, there was a large oil lamp on the wooden counter. She expected a servant, but it was Herbert, who was hunched

over a porcelain plate of grapes. Several servants tended to their work, and nobody paid Melissa much heed beyond polite greetings.

“Hullo, Herbert,” Melissa said reluctantly, wishing to escape the boy as soon as she had her tea in hand.

“Hmpf!”

She came closer. “What are you doing?” The sharp utensils he had spread out on the table spelled trouble, and she couldn’t get herself to leave.

Melissa’s eyes widened as she drew nearer to the boy, drawn in by the strange sight before her. On the counter, illuminated by the flickering oil lamp, lay a cluster of grapes, each one sporting fine stitches that starkly contrasted with their verdant skin. Herbert, wearing an expression of utmost concentration, manipulated a delicate needle and thread with surprising precision for a boy of thirteen.

The kitchen, usually filled with the warm aroma of baking bread or simmering stews, now held the pungent, clean scent of alcohol—a necessary antiseptic for his unconventional practice. The sharp tang mingled with the sweet, fruity scent of the grapes, creating an oddly medicinal atmosphere.

Though still smaller than a man’s and soft, Herbert’s fingers moved deftly, piercing the grape’s delicate flesh and drawing the thread through with a steady hand. Each stitch pulled the green skin taut, a tiny bead of juice sometimes escaping, glistening like a miniature jewel under the lamplight. His brow furrowed in concentration, and his tongue peeked out at the corner of his mouth.

“What are you doing?” Melissa repeated, more softly this time, her curiosity piqued.

Herbert glanced up briefly, the intensity of his dark eyes softened by the light.

“Practicing surgical sutures,” he replied, his tone matter-of-fact. “Uncle Dustin says a good surgeon must have steady hands and precise movements. Grapes are perfect for practice because their skin is so thin.”

She watched as he tied off a knot, the tiny thread disappearing into the grape’s surface. It was a world away from the games other boys his age played, but seeing him so absorbed, she couldn’t help but feel a surge of admiration for his endeavor. Even in the dim light of the kitchen, the promise of his future skill shone brightly.

“Who will you be permitted to stitch up?” a voice thundered from the doorway.

“Father!” Herbert rose, and the chair screeched. A grape rolled off the table.

Melissa bent down to pick it up, but as she straightened again, John reached for her again. Her breath caught at the unexpected sight of him standing there.

John seemed even taller under the low ceiling of the kitchen, his athletic build evident beneath the loose white linen shirt that clung to his broad shoulders. The flickering light danced across the fabric, accentuating the muscular contours of his chest and arms.

Melissa gulped when she realized she could see his neck and the top of his chest peeking out from the open laces of the shirt.

He had a way of steadying her, reaching for her elbow as if it were just a tad more personal than her hand and still far enough from the rest of her to remain within the bounds of propriety—well, loosely, perhaps like the late-night dances after the balls at the royal court when most guests had gone.

“Herbert, leave us,” John spoke, but his eyes were locked with Melissa’s. She stood right in front of him now and could smell the delicious scent of amber or musk...

neroli perhaps... no, he smelled like rolling around in a meadow of flowers next to an orchard of fresh peaches, ripe for harvest. Melissa shut her eyes for a moment.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with him,” John started. “He’s following Dustin around like an apprentice and fancies himself a future surgeon.”

“Why is that so bad?”

“It’s not. But it’s different from what I had envisioned for the heir... which he may not be much longer if Lexi bears Dustin a boy.”

“Sometimes different can be good. I’m different.” Melissa pressed her lips tightly into a line. Herbert fancied her a fallen woman whom one ought to be ashamed of. “He’s a good boy, my lord.” She stepped back and looked down at John’s hand, which still lingered on her elbow.

“I’m not a lord and wish you’d just call me John.” He glanced over his shoulder as if to check that Herbert had left. “What do you think I should do about his education? He doesn’t want to return to Eton.”

He’s probably keeping an eye on me to ensure that I won’t overstay my welcome.

“He’s smart and will find his path, with or without a gentleman’s education.”

“He’s not the heir anymore.”

“He might be if Lexi and Dustin only have daughters.”

John’s serious demeanor faltered, and his mouth cracked into a bright white smile as if the youth and fun were finally emerging after a long day as an adult.

And as much as Melissa wished to bid him good night, she didn't want to leave his side. Just one more moment with his hand on her elbow, a moment she could tuck away deep in her heart and feast on for the rest of her life.

John's smile was contagious, and Melissa smiled back.

"He might wish to stay for Laura."

"No!" John tore his eyes wide open. "What do you know?"

"Nothing more than what I observed. But they blink at each other, and she blushes, then he runs away... it's rather sweet to see."

That gave John pause, and Melissa felt the scrutiny of his gaze. He was worldly, masculine, about a foot taller than her, and still, a boyish mischief sparkled in his eyes when he looked at her like that.

"My cousin warned me that something is flickering there." John waved it away as if he needed to brush the thought of his son's first love away. "But why have you avoided me after dinner?"

Melissa stepped back, and he let go of her elbow but only slowly, letting his hand drift over hers just before breaking the contact. For an instant, Melissa wanted to flex her index finger and hook her hand back into his, intertwining their fingers and pulling him close. But she didn't dare.

She was a fallen woman, and he was... She sighed. He was everything she'd ever dreamed of. And yet, now that she was close, she didn't take him for fear of dragging him down.

Still, if the world saw her as Herbert did, she didn't want to give the wrong

impression of a woman he could take liberties with, especially not now when they were unchaperoned.

Not that it mattered much for a widow from Prinny's arsenal of mistresses. She had little to lose, but her family could lose everything if they had to pay her late husband's debts. It would drag Lexi and Dustin into new debt, and Melissa couldn't allow that. John had redeemed the estate's finances, Lexi was the new duchess with Dustin by her side as the new duke, and Melissa would not be the one to destroy all of their fortune.

"Melissa?"

He used her given name. They were alone. And he smelled so lovely.

Only once Melissa wished she could be impulsive and give in to her instincts. Yes, people thought she did that every day, but the truth was that she never did anything that wasn't expected of a noble woman. Right in this instant, she should run away, scandalized at the mere inches between her heaving chest and his strong muscles peeking out from under his shirt. In the low light of the candles, he looked almost illuminated.

And surely a kiss from him would be enlightening.

"I don't know what you wish for me to say."

"That's exactly what you said when I came to dinner to meet your sister in London. Your father introduced you as his daughter, and my—" John gripped the shirt over his chest until it was squished into a ball of wrinkles. "I thought you were the daughter I'd been sent to meet." He tried to reassure her once again.

"And your sister, whom I've never had interest in, already loved my cousin, so it was



a moot point.”

“But Mrs. Dove-Lyon doesn’t make mistakes.”

“Neither do I.”

And with these words, John closed the distance and leaned in. And just for a flicker of a moment, Melissa wanted to pretend that all would be well. Perhaps Mrs. Dove-Lyon could make it possible for Melissa to follow her heart without losing it?

He should have paid more attention to Dustin’s ramblings about the art of seduction he’d learned about in India, but now it was too late.

When John’s lips touched Melissa’s, something happened that took him off guard. Similar to the jolt that went through his body the first time he saw her when she extended her hand for him to kiss her knuckles at her parents’ house in Mayfair. Except that it had only been a fleeting moment then until he realized that it was the other sister he was supposed to pay heed to. Truth be told, he was relieved when Dustin claimed Lexi.

And he was even happier to feel Melissa parting her lips to welcome his kiss.

She was so warm and lush, sweet like a grape, and yet they sent a heady feeling as if they were the finest wine.

She exhaled into his mouth, and her hands came to his chest. Oh, she knew how to kiss, there was no doubt. John dared to take the plunge into a realm he had only dreamed of. His hand slid up her arm, tracing the curve of her shoulder, before finding its place at the nape of her neck. He pulled her closer, the heat between them intensifying with every heartbeat.

Melissa's fingers spread across his chest, grasping the fabric of his shirt as if to anchor herself as close to his heart as he'd let her—didn't she know he'd let her in all the way if she wished? Her breath mingled with his, sweet and intoxicating, an invitation that he could not resist. John's lips pressed upon hers, capturing them in a tender and demanding kiss.

Their mouths moved together in a dance of exploration—soft, then urgent, teasing and tasting. John marveled at the softness of her lips, the way they molded so perfectly against his. Melissa responded with an eager fervor, her tongue darting to meet his in a sensual duel that left him utterly breathless.

The world around them fell away, leaving only the two of them in a cocoon of burgeoning passion. John's other hand found the small of her back, drawing her even closer until there was no space left between them. He could feel the rapid beat of her heart echoing his own, a rhythm of mutual longing that spurred him onward.

Melissa's nails grazed his skin through his shirt, sending shivers of pleasure down his spine. Her kisses were a blend of innocence that surprised him and boldness that he hoped he could match, each one igniting a fire within him that he feared would consume them both. She tilted her head, deepening the kiss, and John was lost to the exquisite sensation of her—her taste, her warmth, her very essence.

When they finally broke apart, gasping for breath, John pressed his forehead to hers, savoring the intimacy of the moment. Their eyes locked, and in the depths of her gaze, he saw a reflection of his own desire, his own need. It was a promise, unspoken yet undeniable, that this kiss was but the beginning.

"I've thought of nothing else since I first kissed you," John confessed, his voice a rough whisper filled with the weight of his longing. The corners of Melissa's lips curled into a soft, knowing smile, her eyes never leaving his.

“Then you kept me waiting too long,” she teased, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw, sending sparks of sensation through him. The playful challenge in her tone only fueled the fire within him.

He captured her hand in his, pressing a kiss to her palm before tugging her closer once more. “I’m not in the habit of missing a chance twice,” he murmured, his breath warm against her skin.

Melissa responded by closing the gap between them, her lips brushing against his in a featherlight caress that promised so much more. John’s hands roamed her back, feeling the delicate curve of her spine beneath the fabric of her gown. Each touch was deliberate, each caress a testament to the desire that had simmered between them, now finally unleashed.

They kissed again, deeper this time, their passion no longer held at bay. John’s world narrowed to the sensation of Melissa’s body pressed against his, her lips parting eagerly beneath his own. He could taste the sweetness of promise on her tongue, feel the heat of her need in the way she clung to him.

Time seemed to stretch and bend around them, the burdens of the world forgotten. It was just the two of them, wrapped in a searing and tender moment. John’s heart pounded in his chest, every beat echoing the truth he couldn’t formulate despite its magnitude: he was irrevocably, undeniably lost in her.

When they drew apart, their breaths ragged and mingling in the cool night air, John rested his forehead against hers once more. And as they gazed into each other’s eyes, they knew they were poised on the brink of something wonderful, something rare and precious that neither of them would ever let go.

“Melissa,” he breathed, her name a reverent whisper on his lips. “You and me...”

Please don't say it.

"There's so much I want to tell you, ask you, show you," John continued.

But Melissa's heart sank as reality set in. She wasn't his to claim, and if he did, the prince might retaliate.

"Mrs. Dove-Lyon," Melissa whispered.

"What?" John stepped back.

"I... ahem... she... oh John!" Melissa didn't dare tell him for how long she'd wished for this moment, and now that it had happened, all she could think of were the repercussions of her actions. "Lexi and Dustin would be ostracized in society if anyone found out that you and I... that you took the prince's mistress—"

John stepped back and put a cool distance between them.

He closed his mouth, and the hunger from his eyes dwindled into a subdued, cool stare. "You're not mine to have, I know."

"That's why I asked for her help. Mrs. Dove-Lyon—"

"With what?"

"My freedom."

John crossed his arms and cocked his head.

"I've wanted this since the moment I met you, too. That's why I didn't want to return to court. I promised Lexi I would help so I wouldn't need to go back. I tried to be

close to you.”

“He’ll think I stole you from him.” John couldn’t help but fear the prince regent’s wrath.

“Not if Mrs. Dove-Lyon can help.”

“He’ll retaliate against Dustin if he finds out...”

John turned his head away from Melissa, appearing insulted.

Her heart hitched.

“Why can’t you break free from Prinny?” he asked, his voice edged with desperation he couldn’t quite mask. “Just tell him you don’t wish to return to court.”

Melissa met his gaze, her eyes steady yet filled with a sadness that pierced him. “John, it’s the debts,” she said quietly. “I know you offered to pay them and it was sweet but I won’t allow it. It’s not how I want this... us... to start. I’m not for sale. My late husband left me with more than I can bear. Prinny would have to forgive them, and he won’t if I don’t return and please him. If I stay with you, the burden will fall on my family, also Lexi, and the dukedom.”

John swallowed hard, his mind racing through the implications. He had poured everything into restoring the estate, day by day reclaiming his family’s name and fortune. The thought of it crumbling under the weight of another’s obligations twisted within him like a cruel jest.

“It can’t be that much,” John said. “Please just let me pay the debts if it means I can be with you.”

“John, it’s more than the estate can produce in ten years. From what I gathered since I’ve been helping Lexi here, it would take decades to repay those debts.”

“But you’re ruining your life! If it was his debt, why should you—” He combed both hands through his hair and exhaled deeply. “Melissa, this is not right.”

“But it is my prerogative to protect the people I love from ruin at the hand of my late husband’s debt.”

“You said you barely knew him! You didn’t love him!”

“But I love you, and you’ve worked too hard to see it all undone because of me,” she continued, her voice barely a whisper now.

At her words, John put his hands on her shoulders. “Melissa, please let me help!”

“No, Lexi and Dustin deserve a fresh start, free from the past and free from my mistakes.”

“You didn’t know about his debts when you agreed to marry him?”

“No, he was the perfect candidate, and I wanted to be—”

“Perfect.”

She nodded sadly. Perfection wasn’t real; John knew that now, but it was an insight that only time could teach.

He watched as she stood still, the firelight flickering over her features, highlighting the determination etched there. Despite the ache in his chest, he understood. Her resolve mirrored his own, a fierce desire to protect those they loved.

“Melissa,” he began, reaching for her hand, needing the connection, “I never wanted my legacy to be a cage. I just wanted...” He trailed off, knowing that no words could capture the depth of his longing.

She squeezed his hand, her warmth seeping into his skin, grounding him. “I know, John. I want it, too. But not at the cost of everything you’ve rebuilt. The dukedom isn’t merely the title for your family; it’s a home and holds so much promise for the future.”

Silence wrapped around them, heavy yet tender, as they stood together, bound by love and fate’s cruel design.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

The next morning, the pale light of dawn barely pierced through the heavy curtains of her bedchamber, casting a cool glow on the familiar surroundings. Melissa immediately felt that something was amiss. Where was Angus?

Her heart quickened as she scanned the room. She checked under the settee with the fringed hem, her fingers grazing the cold floor. Nothing. She then hurried to the pile of pillows in the basket near the fireplace, digging through them with increasing dread. Still, nothing.

“Angus?” she called softly, her voice trembling with unease. Pushing herself off the floor, she wrapped her nightgown tighter around her, seeking comfort in its warmth as she opened the door.

The castle’s vast hallways greeted her with their intimidating silence, the only sound being the distant patter of an early summer’s rain against the windows. She hesitated, feeling the weight of the grand estate pressing down upon her. It was her sister Lexi’s life she was living, not her own. No matter how much she wanted to help, this wasn’t her place. She felt like an impostor, undeserving of striding down the elegant, curved staircase that led to the main hall. And yet, she couldn’t go to London because if she left John behind, she’d leave her heart with him.

Determined to find her fluffy friend, she padded down the stairs, her steps echoing softly.

“Angus? Kitty, kitty,” she called, her voice barely above a whisper. He could have gotten into mischief—or worse, trouble? But he was still wearing the bandage around his stomach, and perhaps it had gotten caught on something. Perhaps he’d seen a



spider and followed it into a small space from which he couldn't escape? "Angus!" Her breaths came out in uneven puffs, matching the erratic beating of her heart.

She surveyed the hall, but nobody seemed to be awake yet. Perhaps the servants had started their day in the kitchen, but breakfast wasn't for another three hours. Melissa's thoughts drifted to John and how he'd merely kissed her even though she'd been stark naked when Angus had pulled the red fabric off her.

But where was the mischievous little kitten?

She reached the bottom of the staircase and looked around, took her pelisse, and thought that the castle's grandeur would swallow her whole as she buttoned the top. It was all so elegant, and she should belong, the daughter of an earl and a lady, but despite the opulence in her life, she felt insignificant, a fallen woman whose only companion was a missing kitten.

"Angus!" Her voice cracked as she ventured further, the cold stone floor sending shivers up her legs. She checked the drawing room and the library, each empty room amplifying her despair.

Melissa's search led her to the front door. She glanced outside and saw the rain cascading down, washing the gardens in a somber gray. A lump formed in her throat as she pushed open the door; the cold raindrops hit her face. The wet grass beneath her boots sent the cold seeping through the soles to her skin. Still, she pressed on, calling for Angus in the drizzling rain.

If she couldn't even keep a kitten safe, how could she possibly deserve anything more? A family? A child? John would be able to give her everything her heart desired: a husband with a son, the promise of a bigger family, responsibilities... Her thoughts spiraled, the shame of her past tightening its grip on her heart. She was beginning to believe the whispers about her, that she was an impostor, unworthy of

love, respect, or redemption. When a former classmate from finishing school had given her the Cut Direct at a ball, Melissa had turned the other way. Now, she wasn't so sure there was anywhere else to turn.

"Angus, please," she whispered, her voice breaking as the rain mingled with her tears.

She wandered the garden, her pelisse over the nightrobe clinging to her, soaked and heavy. She tightened the sash as if she could warm up by sheer will to keep the layers together. Each step felt like a step closer to surrender.

Her eyes searched, and she blinked away the tears that had started to mix with the rain. She licked some drops off her lips when she saw something moving in the cherry tree about a hundred feet away. She ran to the tree and looked up, its petals drooping under the weight of the rain. Beneath one of the branches, clawing against the trunk, she saw a small, trembling figure.

"Angus!" Relief flooded her as she reached out, unable to reach the frightened kitten about five feet above her head. "I'm coming!"

She tightened the sash of her robe around her waist, the soft fabric clinging to her skin, damp from the mist. Her eyes, wide with worry, scanned the garden until they focused on Angus, her beloved kitten, marooned high in the blooming cherry tree. Even the fragrant blossoms looked gray in the rain, dripping with cold, relentless rain as if the floodgates to Melissa's fears had been opened and came pouring from the heaven above.

"Angus! Come down," she called, her voice almost drowned by the patter of rain on the leaves. The kitten meowed plaintively; a tiny sound of distress pierced the rhythmic drumming of the rain. Each drop splashed against the foliage, sending a cascade of shimmering droplets to the ground and into Melissa's face. She blinked

the raindrops away and reached for Angus.

Melissa hesitated only a moment before deciding. Despite the slick, muddy ground beneath her bare feet, she approached the tree, the ancient bark rough and welcoming under her fingers. It was a great tree for climbing, like the ones outside the townhouse she'd grown up in. She had scaled many trees in her childhood. The pelisse she wore over her nightrobe fluttered like a poor excuse for armor against the increasing weight of the rain.

She gripped the lowest branch, feeling the sturdy wood beneath her palms, and hoisted herself up. The bark was cool and damp, sending shivers through her body. The higher she climbed, the branches swaying gently under her lightness. As she ascended, the rain grew heavier, fat drops splashing onto her face, obscuring her vision.

"Hold on, Angus. I'm coming," she murmured, her voice now a muted whisper amidst the heavy rain splattering onto the tree's leaves. The kitten's fearful cries spurred her onward, each step more precarious than the last. The air was thick with the smell of rain, fresh and invigorating despite the danger it brought.

Melissa reached a slender branch where Angus cowered, his fur matted and soaked. His tiny body trembled, his big green eyes wide with fear, and his damp whiskers twitched with each gust of wind. The branch trembled under her weight, but she steadied herself, extending a hand toward the frightened feline. She could feel the kitten's wet fur just as a gust of wind blew, making the branch quiver violently.

"Almost there, little one," she tried to soothe him, her fingers brushing against Angus's tiny body.

He wasn't fluffy at all but rather drenched. Devoid of the volume of his soft fur, he looked even smaller and more vulnerable than usual. His bandage seemed to have

gotten stuck on a twig. When Melissa reached him, Angus's big, round eyes appeared even larger and more expressive, glistening with droplets and—it seemed—an appreciation that she'd come to find him.

"I promised to look out for you, my little sweetheart. I'm here now." He cowered at her soothing words, his whiskers drooping slightly, weighed down by the moisture. When Melissa unwrapped the bandage, the kitten shivered gently, its tiny paws leaving faint, wet prints as it moved. Despite the rain, there was a certain charm in its vulnerability, a mix of innocence and resilience as it sought warmth and comfort from Melissa, and her motherly instincts surged. Angus was her baby even though she wasn't a cat, as she'd told Herbert. She was his family and wouldn't let anything harm him.

She cradled him close, his tiny body wet and shivering against her chest. "It's all right, you're safe," she murmured, her tears mingling with the rain. At that moment, holding the vulnerable creature, a glimmer of hope sparked within her. Maybe, just maybe, she could find a way to protect what she loved despite her past.

With Angus nestled against her, her foot slipped, and she lost her balance. Panic surged through her veins as she felt herself lose grip, the slick surface offering no refuge. The world tilted, a blur of rain, leaves, and blossoms swirling around her. She plummeted, branches scraping her skin.

The last thing she saw before everything went black were Angus's wide, terrified eyes and the blurred canopy of the cherry tree above, its blossoms trembling in the rain and the drops falling toward her like small avalanches bursting in her face.

Five minutes earlier, about one hundred feet away...

John's mare moved with a steady gait across the newly plowed land, the rich, wet earth muffling the sound of hooves. The early morning rain was a gentle patter at

first, one he welcomed to accompany his thoughts as he surveyed the fields. He had taken up his stewardship duties with a renewed sense of purpose, an effort to bring order amidst the chaos of his heart—there was nothing distracting himself from lovesickness like a good day’s work. Or a week. Perhaps a year.

No, Melissa was not a woman he could get over, John feared.

While she was at the castle, he mustn’t touch her. But when she’d go back to Prinny, John would surely go mad with jealousy. He had barely reined himself in when she stood in the study naked. Yes, he’d kissed her, but he wanted to do so much more. Years of pent-up energy soared through him. He thought he could never love again, but he did. So much! And he didn’t want Prinny to have her back.

It was preposterous to be jealous of the royal, but he was.

Nobody deserved Melissa, not even him; she was so precious and wonderful that John’s heart ached when he thought about it.

As he glanced toward the distant manor, a flash of white caught his eye, swiftly moving across the grass toward the cherry tree. His breath caught in his throat. For a fleeting moment, he thought he saw the ghost of his late wife, her ethereal form gliding through the mist. Could she be telling him something? But then, a voice shattered the illusion—a voice he knew well, calling out with urgency.

“Angus!”

It was Melissa. She wasn’t merely calling; being with her was his calling.

John urged his horse forward, curiosity and concern propelling him. As he drew nearer, he saw her climb into the cherry tree, her lithe figure disappearing among the branches. The rain began to intensify, heavy drops bouncing off his hat and cloak, the

smell of wet earth and blossoms filling the air.

He heard a scream, piercing and desperate, followed by the sharp crack of a branch breaking free. Panic tightened around his chest as he spurred his horse into a gallop.

“We’ve got to save them!” John spoke to his mare as mud splattered from his horse’s hooves as they raced toward the tree.

When he reached the base of the cherry tree, it was too late. Melissa, his beloved Melissa, was falling. In a heartbeat, he was off his horse, arms outstretched to catch her, but the ground met her first. He knelt beside her, scooping her frail, muddy body into his arms despite every instinct screaming at him to keep his distance. Angus jumped out of her grasp, and he picked up the shivering kitten, too.

“Melissa, can you hear me?” he whispered hoarsely, his voice barely audible over the pounding rain. Her eyelids fluttered, and he pressed his lips to her forehead, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath the cold rain. Relief and fear battled within him as he held her close, the rain pouring down, soaking them both.

Her eyes flickered open, and she looked up at him, confusion and pain mingling in her gaze. “John?”

“I have you,” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion as she nestled against his chest.

The rain continued to fall. He cradled her gently, his heart pounding with a mixture of terror and love, knowing that this moment, drenched in rain and fear, was one he would never forget. Surely, Prinny wouldn’t ever forgive if he knew how hard John’s body was as soon as he held Melissa’s hot body wrapped in the cold, soaked layers of sheer clothes against his chest. John was supposed to serve the Crown. He may have lost the title, but not his loyalty. And yet, all he could think of when Melissa was near

was what he wished for—it was her.

But as he held her, a gnawing fear gripped him—he knew he mustn't lay a hand on her. Yet, at this moment, all he cared about was her safety. The lines blurred, making it impossible to discern duty from desire. She meant more to him than anything else in the world, and he wanted her vibrant and fierce again, not cold and limp.

“John, I...” she began weakly, her fingers clutching his coat. “Where’s Angus?”

Something meowed from underneath his coat, and John spotted the drenched kitten in his pocket. Soaked to the bones, Angus was even smaller than usual.

“There’s the little fur ball,” John handed Angus to Melissa, and she cradled the kitten.

“He was... and I tried t—”

“Shh, don’t speak. Save your strength,” he whispered. The rain poured harder, their bodies cold and wet, but her presence burned like a brand upon his soul.

John’s heart pounded as he rose to his feet, holding Melissa in his arms. The mare, sensing the urgency, had bolted toward the stables at John’s command. John carried Melissa to the castle, mud squelching under his boots.

Melissa clung to Angus, the tiny kitten shivering against her chest. Her arm, now clearly visible as she wrapped it around John’s neck, was swollen and bruised. She winced with each jolt, but John knew there was no time to tend to her injuries here. The rain came down in torrents, cold and relentless.

“Almost there. Hold on,” he urged, his voice trembling with emotion. He tightened his grip, feeling the softness of her body against his own, the warmth that defied the cold rain. Her presence was both a comfort and a torment, a reminder of what could

never be.

The manor door swung open, and servants rushed out, their faces pale with concern. John crossed the threshold, the warmth of the house a stark contrast to the raging storm outside. He laid Melissa gently on a settee in the drawing room, his fingers reluctantly releasing her.

“Fetch the arnica ointment from Dustin’s cabinet,” he commanded, his voice firm despite the turmoil within. As the servants scurried to obey, he knelt beside her, brushing a damp lock of hair from her forehead. “You’re safe now, Melissa,” he murmured, though his heart continued to race with fear and longing.

In the dim light of the drawing room, he watched her, the most precious and beautiful woman he had ever known. The rain still pounded against the windows, a relentless reminder of the storm both outside and within him. Holding her had felt like holding the world, yet it was a world he knew he could never fully possess.

Time to try something else.

Even though he was only about three inches taller than her, she crouched next to him on the settee like a shivering young girl who’d fallen from a tree—the damsel in distress the prince wanted to save. And yet, John knew he was not the prince with the right to claim her—but did he indeed? Wasn’t it Melissa’s decision and only hers?

Her hair dripped and lay flat, curly strands making a full loop over her shoulders, curling as if it wanted to turn back and return to her beautiful face.

And she was so beautiful indeed that John’s heart longed to tell her. Melissa was so good in the most elemental sense of the word that she’d climbed a tree in the rain to rescue a kitten. She’d forgiven Herbert’s antics, remained at the castle, and shown nothing but loyalty to her sister and her family. She was the sort of woman who put



John in awe of her selflessness, and all he wished was to serve and please her.

That was selfish of him, he thought, because giving her pleasure would give him even more.

She shivered.

“I’ll ring for tea,” he mumbled, removing the crochet throw from the back of the settee and opening it up to drape it over Melissa. She shook her head and held her arm out to take it but then flinched.

“Ouch!” She dropped her right arm to her side and brought her other hand over the back of her shoulder.

“Is this where you fell?” John hesitated to touch Melissa, but when she furrowed her brows and looked at him over her shoulder, he realized that she needed his help. She gave a faint nod, and he gently brushed her wet hair off her shoulder. He had permission to proceed even though he wasn’t sure how far.

The fabric of her soggy pelisse and the equally wet white muslin of her—he swallowed hard—nightgown fell off her shoulder. There was her bare skin.

In the dimly lit room, with the rain on the windows quieted to a soft crackling of the fire in the hearth, John stood spellbound by Melissa. Raindrops adorned her like crystals on dew-touched blossoms, especially one daring droplet that danced along her shoulder. John’s heart skipped, observing its delicate trail, a physical echo of the storm swirling within him.

Driven by an irresistible urge, he reached out, his fingers trembling as they brushed the droplet away. Melissa’s body subtly shivered at his touch; a silent dialogue sparked by their fleeting connection. Her eyes, dark and fathomless, ensnared his,

conveying depths of emotion he dared not name. The slight parting of her lips seemed to him a silent sigh, stirring the space between them with the jolt of unspoken desires.

His fingertips, barely grazing her shoulder, discovered a softness that beckoned his soul. Their locked gazes needed no verbal exchange. Through his eyes, John saw a reflection of his deep-seated desires mirrored in Melissa's. Each heartbeat, each breath was the permission he'd hoped for.

"Melissa," John's voice broke the silence, a low murmur barely rising above the gentle patter of raindrops around them. "I..." Words failed him, lost in the depth of her eyes.

Her reply was a breath, a whisper to match his own. "John," she said, her voice carrying the weight of an unspoken invitation while her eyes seemed locked onto his mouth.

John could feel the heat radiating from Melissa's skin, drawing him closer until only a breath remained between them.

When he was so close that he could already feel the warmth from her mouth, he paused.

"May I?" he asked, his voice a mere wisp of longing and hesitation. It was a question of permission, of crossing the threshold between them beyond the kisses they'd shared. This was an admission of devotion beyond mere sentiment.

Melissa's response was not in words but in the gentle tilt of her head, an unspoken assent that sent waves of relief and desire coursing through John's veins.

Slowly, achingly, he closed the distance, his eyes never leaving hers until the last moment before their lips met. The touch was soft and tentative at first. But then, the

hardness of his body seemed to narrow down to the sensation of her lips against his, warm and yielding, sparking a fire that threatened to consume him whole.

Their kiss deepened a slow dance of lips and breaths, exploring the newfound intimacy with a reverence that made John's heart swell. Time lost meaning, suspended in the space where only they existed.

Pulling back slightly, John searched Melissa's face, looking for any sign of regret, any hint that he had misread their silent conversation. But all he found was warmth, a soft glow in her eyes that mirrored his feelings.

"This is madness," he whispered, the words tinged with wonder and a trace of fear for the implications of their actions.

Melissa smiled, a fleeting, beautiful curve of her lips seeming to chase away any shadows of doubt. "Perhaps," she agreed, her voice laced with a warmth that filled John with a boldness he hadn't known he possessed. "I'm willing to risk it for you."

At that moment, with the rain softly serenading them and the world held at bay, John realized some risks were worth taking. He would brave any storm for a chance at a love that defied convention and circumstance.

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*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

It had gotten dark outside, and the fire needed to be stoked again. Had they been kissing for so long? Melissa touched her lips, hot and swollen. She already missed John.

But after the servants finally interrupted the kiss with a tray of ointment, hot tea, and a blanket, a maid escorted her to a hot bath. Now Melissa felt refreshed, warm, and stupid.

She slammed the door of her bedchamber with a sigh, the weight of her frustration making the simple act feel more rebellious against herself than the situation. If they hadn't been interrupted, she would have gone further with John. All the way to hell because she wasn't free from Prinny yet. She did the right thing; she withdrew to her chambers. Then why did she feel as though it were a mistake?

Her hair, still damp from the bath, clung in unruly tendrils around her flushed face. She freed her tresses to cascade down her back. The cool air against her scalp was a brief balm to her simmering anger. She should have been shivering cold and clad in wet clothes, but she was hot and bothered. Angry. But primarily steaming.

"Angus, where are you?" she called softly while she pulled on dry undergarments, scanning the room for the one creature that accepted her without judgment. And he was the culprit who'd brought her into this situation in the first place.

A small gray-striped blur darted across the room, and Angus, with his sky-blue eyes, gleamed mischievously when he began to bat a ball of yarn across the polished wood floor that peeked out beyond the edge of the large rug in the center of the room.

“I need to brush you; come here!”

Melissa’s thoughts churned as she paced the room, the slight swish of her stockings and garters matching the turmoil within her. She had fumbled another kiss with John, letting the moment slip through her fingers like sand. John’s gaze, filled with assumptions about her experience—false assumptions—burned her pride. Was it possible that he thought her a mistress seasoned in the art of seduction, yet she was as inexperienced as a young bride? The very notion made her cheeks flame. She wasn’t a bride, especially not his, even though she wanted to be.

Stop! First, be free of Prinny!

Melissa swallowed hard and tried to open the ties of her corset, but her arm felt bruised from the fall. The air was stifling, and she broke into a sweat.

Bride.

She’d been one; why did she wish to repeat the embarrassment of the wedding night?

Because it would be wonderful with John.

She ran her hands through her uncooperative curls, hoping they wouldn’t dry into a frizzy mess like her life. If only managing her emotions were as simple as taming her hair, though. Melissa walked to the dressing table and picked up her boar’s brush, slowly brushing her hair while calling for Angus.

“Where are you hiding, little kitty?” She followed a trail of yarn to the bedpost on the far left. She followed the trail and remembered her wedding night. The discomfort, the embarrassment in the dark. Her husband’s uncomfortable grunting. It was awful, and she’d been able to avoid the displeasure often, but not always. Mother had said it was her duty and the only way to produce an heir.

Suddenly, Angus's playful meows broke her reverie, and she turned just in time to see him entangled in the yarn.

"Angus, you silly creature," Melissa murmured, her voice softening. She knelt to free him, the yarn now ensnaring her left ankle. She tugged at the tangled mess, her movements growing more frantic as Angus's distressed cries grew louder.

"Hold on, dear. I'm right here," she assured, bending low to peer under the bed where Angus had taken refuge. In her haste, she lost her balance. With a graceless thud, she landed on the floor, her cheek pressing against the cool wood.

Melissa laughed ruefully, the sound mingling with Angus's plaintive meows. "Well, at least one of us is having fun," she said, her voice tinged with self-mockery.

She untangled herself with some difficulty, finally pulling Angus into her arms. The kitten nuzzled her neck, purring contentedly, and for a moment, the world seemed a little less complicated.

"At least you love me unconditionally," she whispered, pressing a kiss to the kitten's head.

Then there was a knock. Perhaps the maid had arrived, her presence a silent reminder of Melissa's dire need to prepare for the evening. She sighed. Oh, how could she face John after all this?

But as she stood, cradling Angus and smoothing her disheveled hair, a new resolve took root within her. She might have fumbled the kiss, but she would not fumble the next opportunity. She would face John with her head held high, determined to show him—and herself—that she was more capable than he probably imagined. And soon, she would be free from the prospect of having to sleep with Prinny. Only ever wanted to be John's.

With a final pat to Angus, she readied herself, her heart beating with a newfound determination.

At that moment, she tripped with her right foot over the yarn that was still tied around her left ankle and landed sideways on the bed. Angus darted off, the ball of yarn in his mouth, and the web caught her tightly, so she struggled like a fly in a spider's web.

Downstairs in the study, John was reeling from the kiss. Servants had swept Melissa away, and he felt lightheaded—no, empty altogether without Melissa in his arms. He'd let the maid draw her a bath, of course; Melissa needed to get warm. But now John was hot and furious for letting circumstance steal his moment with her.

John paced the length of the study, his hands clasped tightly behind his back, as if holding them together could somehow restrain the chaos within him. The taste of Melissa lingered on his lips, a cruel reminder of what he could never have. He shut his eyes, but the image of her—her flushed cheeks, her teasing smile—only burned brighter in his thoughts. His chest ached with yearning, a sensation that felt as though it might split him apart, but he forced himself to focus on the colder, heavier matter of reality.

What kind of fool was he? Pursuing Melissa was akin to stealing from the palace, as she was the Prince Regent's mistress. To even entertain the idea of more with Melissa was madness, reckless and selfish in the extreme. It wasn't only his reputation at risk. No, it was the entirety of Starcliff Castle and all who depended upon it. If he yielded to his heart's foolish demands, he would drag down everything in his family's grasp.

How could he protect the estate if he allowed such a scandal? The Prinny's good favor for Dustin, the new Duke of Duncan, was the strongest shield they possessed. Without Dustin's protection, the tenants who relied on their provisions, their medicine, their very safety, would be abandoned to uncertainty. The doctors from

Harley Street would only make regular visits, ensuring old wounds healed and children survived the winter's chill, if Dustin helped their London practice thrive. That arrangement existed only because of the Royal Warrant that Dustin had made possible, and the estate stood to secure it. Any hint of dishonor, any risk of John's dalliance bringing shame to the Duke of Duncan's name, and it would take just one whisper—a single breath at court—to sever everything.

And Herbert was his anchor in the storm. That boy represented hope for Starcliff's future, for its legacy. How could John rob him of the life he deserved? If the Dukedom fell into ruin, if the tenants abandoned their loyalty, what sort of life would remain for Herbert? He couldn't study medicine and he'd certainly lose the chances to learn from the doctors on Harley Street—not to mention the apprenticeship at the rehabilitation center at Cloverdale House. No family, no heritage, no respect safeguarding his future. The sacrifice was unthinkable.

Yet deep in John's mind, another voice whispered, cruel and insistent. What of love? What of the fire that Melissa had awoken in him? Was he meant to walk through the rest of his life untouched? Unmoved? Was duty his only master? But what use was love if it burned all else to ash around him? He curled his fingers into fists, his nails digging into his palms as though the pain might ground him. He could not be selfish—not with so much at stake.

When he opened his eyes, there was no clarity, only the same torment twisting through him. He wanted her. He wanted her with every breath in his body. But John tightened his jaw, steeling himself, determined to push this yearning deep into the corners of himself where it could not harm anyone else. Melissa could never be his. To pursue her would be to choose destruction.

No matter what his heart argued, he could not lose sight of that.

Suddenly, he heard a thud, and his heart skipped a beat. He was already on edge, but



this noise from Melissa's room propelled him into action. He rushed to her door, knocking urgently. A sharp yelp pierced the air, but there was no response. He knocked again, louder this time, and balled his fists as he fought the instinct to burst into her room.

"Melissa?" he called out, his voice strained with worry. Still no answer.

Then, a yelp, something fell over with a metal clank, and another thud followed.

After a moment of hesitation, he grasped the doorknob and pushed the door open. His eyes widened at the chaotic scene before him—a web of yarn sprawled across the room, from the chair to the bedposts, looping around the legs of the table and the tools by the fireplace scattered on the floor. It was an absolute mess. He wished he could laugh; surely the kitten was responsible for this, but his breath caught in his throat when he saw Melissa.

She stood amidst the tangle, dressed only in garters and a corset because her shoulder hurt too much to slide it into the robe, her hair cascading wildly down her back. She was tied by the foot, bent over in an attempt to unknot the yarn. John's body stiffened, his heart pounding as he took in the sight.

A gentleman would turn around, call the maid, and prepare for dinner. He ought to erase the image of the siren tangled before him, but it was just too good to be true.

"I'm not decent!" Melissa shrieked when she tugged at the web of yarn.

"Milady!" The maid who must have heard the commotion came rushing through the hall.

"Leave us!" John said.

The maid froze, a stack of neatly folded garments in her arms. “B-but the—”

“Leave us. Now. Please take the afternoon off and enjoy the nice weather.” John didn’t manage to peel his eyes off Melissa. Her eyebrows were high, but her gaze was hungry—just as it had been downstairs.

“It’s raining.”

“Then have a cup of tea and enjoy the quiet inside. Take any of my novels. Read.”

The maid hesitated, but then she set the gown on the chair near Melissa’s dressing table, cleared her throat, and left.

John winced as she shut the door. It was obvious what he’d do, untangling the half-naked beauty in his house. But this was his home, his mess, his yarn, and most importantly, he wanted the beauty to be his with all of her caring nature and loyalty.

“John, I—”

“Shh!” He reached for one long strand of yarn, connecting the bed posts with—he suppressed a groan—her delicate and most certainly naked ankle. It was a lovely ankle indeed, leading to an equally lovely leg dressed in only a sheer light stocking and topped with a lace garter. The other leg flexed and showed her strength—or the strong effect she had on him.

No matter.

He’d withstood every trial fate threw his way, albeit his lingering suspicion that fate had come in the shape of Mrs. Dove-Lyon this time. He didn’t act on his impulses when the kitten had stripped Melissa of the red satin cloth, then when the kitten again had caused Melissa to fall from a tree, and he’d carried her shivering in his arms, but

he was just a man, and enough was enough.

Pushing reason and propriety aside, he darted forward to help her.

“Melissa, I’m going to get you out of this mess.”

“The yarn or the other one?” Her eyes met his, and John looked at her—deeply searching her expression for any remorse that he’d found her in such dishabille. But instead of reservation or anything akin to shock that he’d found her as she was and sent the maid away, she smiled.

It wasn’t like any smile, but a warm and welcoming one that old friends shared after they had been apart for a long time. She was full of warmth, and he was burning for her. It was purgatory but there was no way to escape.

John offered his arm and looked down at her ankle in a tightly knotted web. She steadied herself with one hand on his arm, reaching for her ankle and pulling her foot out.

As he reached for the knotty yard to lift it off, the kitten suddenly appeared, leaping onto his shoulder with startling agility. John jerked back in surprise and stumbled, but not before Melissa instinctively grabbed him to steady him with both hands. The kitten then dashed over the bed, dragging the yarn with it.

This cat!

In the chaotic scramble, the yarn seemed to develop a life of its own, tying John and Melissa together and connecting them both to the bedpost at the foot of the bed. They ended up in an awkward, tangled embrace. John could feel the heat rising to his cheeks as he looked into Melissa’s eyes, both of them trapped in a mess that was, somehow, much more than just a tangle of yarn.

With a final warning gaze to Angus, she set her back and looked down at her heaving breasts. She was blushing fiercely.

The air between them crackled with unspoken tension. Melissa's eyes widened, and she bit her lip, seemingly waiting for him to make a move. John's breath caught in his throat—this was it. Would he risk everything for a chance at what his heart desired? Would he dare to act on his impulse this time? Only one thing was certain: whatever happened next would change everything.

This was different.

Melissa had been tangled in a mess, but she didn't expect the tangles to materialize and tie her to John. Angus dashed off with only a small bit of yarn and tugged it so tight that Melissa inhaled sharply. She couldn't help but press her body against John's as they were both standing straight, tied together by the mischievous kitten—or was he actually a brilliant one?

It was all a bit literal for her taste, especially considering that she'd thought about tying the knot with John and the impossibility of it all—until Angus tied the knots around them.

And now her stomach was in knots. Oh, she had to stop using mixed metaphors lest she speak one out loud.

“Well, what a tangle,” John said.

Melissa lost control and burst out laughing.

“If anyone needs us right now, we have to tell them that we're tied up,” Melissa could barely speak as she was shaking in mirth and couldn't even lift her hands to cover her mouth.

“I don't mind being tied to you,” John mumbled.

What was that?

“I’ve been quite in knots over you for a while,” Melissa mumbled back. A truth barely voiced but heard.

But then she decided not to question the lucky card Mrs. Dove-Lyon had dealt her. Especially not where John had sent the maid away, which made it clear that she wasn’t going to return.

Something bulged against her thigh and twitched.

Oh dear!

She looked down and saw her half-naked legs in nothing but lace garters and stockings pressed against John’s. It would have been scandalous, but it wasn’t as though she could jump away and feign embarrassment.

When she looked up, John’s piercing gaze had turned black. His lovely dark eyes complemented the blond hair, but he was changed. Gone was the strictly combed hair, the clean shave, and the aristocratic supercilious glance he’d had the first time she saw him. Now, his hair had dried in an unruly mess, and there was a slight stubble on his jawline. Saving her in the early morning had most likely derailed his usual morning routine. He looked unkempt, wild, and bewitchingly handsome.

“How did this happen?” he rasped, looking around the room at the utter disarray.

“He likely got a ball of yarn when I came upstairs and then—”

“No, I don’t mean Angus. That’s obvious. I mean this.” John pressed his middle against her and brought his arms to her back. Only his legs and his back were tied, his arms free.

Melissa sighed.

I fell in love with you and made a mess. I am not sure how it happened, but I can't deny it either.

John's breath was warm against her face, sending a shiver down her spine. Melissa's heart pounded as she struggled to find the right words. She felt the heat of his body, the tautness of the yarn binding them together, and the unmistakable desire that surged between them.

"I don't know," she whispered, her voice trembling. "One moment we were merely acquaintances and the next... it's like something changed, and now, here we are."

John's grip on her tightened, and Melissa could feel the hard muscles of his chest pressed against her softer curves. His eyes bore into hers, searching, questioning, perhaps seeing more than she wanted to reveal.

"Melissa," he said softly, his voice thick with emotion. "This cannot be."

She nodded, unable to tear her gaze away from him. "Yes, but what if it's also destiny?"

He let out a soft chuckle, the sound vibrating through their entwined bodies. "Destiny has a strange way of making itself known in the form of an older lady in a blue building at St. James, doesn't it?"

Melissa shrugged. "A little help from a friend is not forbidden."

John exhaled and gave her a knowing stare. "Did you ask for me?"

Yes.

But she decided it wise to make sure he was speaking about what she was thinking. If

his mind wasn't exactly aligned with hers, this situation would quickly grow unbearable.

"For you to what?" Melissa's voice had come out too high, betraying that she feigned ignorance.

He narrowed his eyes. "I mean, did you ask for me?"

Melissa swallowed.

"As a person?"

"Aa a man. A husband."

Yes, their minds were aligned. There truly wasn't anywhere to hide, so Melissa couldn't tell but the truth. She bit her lips and considered her choices. She could say yes, and this would grow terribly awkward in a spiffy, or she'd say no, and he'd untangle himself and leave her standing naked and embarrassed—or worse—jilted. And that wasn't at all what she'd wanted to do.

"John," she murmured, "I never meant for this to happen. I never thought you would—"

Oh!

There was an idea—a twitching one that reminded her of its presence.

So she lifted her shoulder, freeing her right arm just enough so she could slide it into the tightness between her belly and John's middle.

His stomach muscles tensed, but he didn't move.



So she slid her hand lower until she found his waistband.

“Melissa,” he rasped, his eyes fixed on her nimble fingers.

He seemed to hold his breath, still motionless.

Her gesture was crystal clear. And he didn’t object.

So she ventured lower, past his waistband, into the warmth of his middle, and then she found his manhood—a hard club that could have been made of marble if she didn’t feel it throbbing with life and heat.

He let out a guttural moan and shifted, as if he tried to give her better access. Encouraged by his unspoken permission to proceed, she wrapped her hand around his shaft. How could its skin be so soft and yet the muscle so rigid?

Melissa searched his eyes, but only she could see warmth and black hunger. His only free hand moved slowly, tracing the curve of her back, sending sparks of sensation through her. She bit her lip hard, trying to control the whirlwind of emotions inside her. There was a rawness, an intimacy, a closeness that stripped away all pretenses.

The sexual tension between them was palpable, a living, breathing entity with power of its own.

“I don’t know how to untangle this,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

“Neither do I,” he admitted. “But perhaps we don’t need to. Perhaps we need to tie the knots tighter, however unconventional it might be.”

Melissa’s eyes fluttered closed as John’s lips brushed against her forehead, a tender gesture that spoke volumes. There was only the two of them, bound together by fate

and circumstance—otherwise known by the names of Angus and Mrs. Dove-Lyon.

Their plays on words quickly became a play with fire. John's heart skipped a beat at her touch. He had dreamed of this, but feeling her now seemed surreal and too good to be true. Still, he felt liberated by the admission; it had to come out, and now that some of it had, he wished he could say it all. And that growling voice of reason had to be stifled for now.

But then Melissa tensed her shoulder and looked strained. Because of the yarn, she didn't seem to have the free range of motion her hand needed to fully explore him. John grabbed a bunch of the yarn without regard for where it led and where the knots sprang from. He twisted his hands to grab more and put tension on them. Melissa was nudged further against him, and he cherished her closeness, but he wanted her to be in control, not the yarn.

So he tore it. His hands burned for an instant, but they finally heard a rip, and the sections he'd held gave way. Melissa gasped and immediately reached for his hands.

"Are you hurt?"

He shook his head and instantly missed her intimate touch down there as soon as he lost it, but it was replaced with genuine concern. She cared for him in a way he hadn't dared to hope for, and that meant much more.

Pieces of yarn sank lightly to the floor all around the room. She was no longer forced to stand as close to him as she did, but she didn't withdraw when he put his hands back around her waist.

"See, now you're no longer tied to me," he said, trying to mask the sorrow in his voice because he wished nothing more than to be tied to her in return—tightly and permanently.

She tensed her forehead and pressed against him, her missive clear. She sought his closeness, too.

He searched her eyes for signs of protest, but when none were evident, he placed a careful kiss on her lips. In return, she rewarded him with a smile, and she brought her arms to the back of his head.

“John,” she began, her voice trembling, “what if this doesn’t work?” She dropped her gaze, and he realized that his breeches were still untied.

“It definitely works. I’m not that old, you know. Not even thirty.”

She chuckled and then sucked her cheeks in as if he’d given her a decadent menu of dessert options. “But what if we’re making a mistake?”

He pulled back slightly, looking deeply into her eyes. “We’ll never know unless we try. I tried to step away from you and couldn’t. I don’t want to. Life is full of uncertainties, but one thing I am certain of is my feelings for you. I am willing to face whatever comes, as long as it’s with you.”

Tears welled up in Melissa’s eyes. He knew it wasn’t from sadness but from the overwhelming surge of love and hope as her chest filled with air and she pressed herself against him. Despite the chaos surrounding them, despite the absurdity of their situation, there was a clarity in John’s words that resonated with them both.

“Because of my situation, I didn’t think you would—”

“Would what?” he interrupted gently. “Care for you? Desire you? Melissa, I knew you were different from the moment I saw you. And now—” He leaned closer, his breath mingling with hers. “Now, I can’t imagine a life without you. I’ve fallen so deeply in love with you.”

She nodded, a small smile forming on her lips. “Then let’s face uncertainty together because I love you, too.”

John’s heart pounded in his chest as he pressed Melissa against the ornately carved bedpost, his hands splayed across the bones of her stays, feeling the warmth of her body beneath.

Her breath came in shallow gasps, each exhale brushing tantalizingly against his ear. He slid his hands up her thigh, marveling at the softness of her skin above the garters. His fingers traced the elegant curve of her bottom, a wave of sensations sending desire straight to his core.

But it had all been there for a while already.

Melissa’s eyes locked onto his, a mixture of longing and uncertainty within their depths. Her lips were slightly parted, her cheeks flushed with a beautiful shade of pink that heightened her natural allure. John felt an overwhelming urge to kiss her, to claim those lips as his own, but he held back, savoring the anticipation that hung between them like a charged current.

It was different now. They’d opened their hearts, and there was no rush. Their future, however complicated, was theirs to claim.

As was this moment.

Slowly, almost hesitantly, Melissa’s hand moved to his waist. He sucked in a breath as her fingers found the opening of his shirt and slid in. The touch was featherlight, almost tentative, as if she were testing the boundaries of this newfound intimacy. John’s stomach and chest muscles tensed in response, a low groan escaping his throat as her hand slipped further beneath the fabric.

The sensation of Melissa's fingers brushing against his skin sent jolts of pleasure coursing through him. Her touch was gentle yet insistent, her fingers exploring the contours of his abdomen with a curiosity that made his pulse race. He forced himself to stay still, to let her take the lead, even as every fiber of his being screamed for more.

John's grip on her back tightened involuntarily, his fingers digging into the soft flesh just enough to anchor himself in the moment. He could feel the rapid beat of her heart against his chest, a rhythm that matched his own frantic pulse. The intimacy of the contact, the closeness of their bodies, created a heady mix of desire and tenderness.

Melissa's hand ventured lower into his breeches, her fingers grazing the hard length of him. John's eyes closed, a shudder running through him at the exquisite sensation. He could feel her hesitation, the slight tremor in her hand as she wrapped her fingers around him. The touch was real and grounding, a reminder that life with her would be exciting and so wonderful, as if his heart had a second wind.

He opened his eyes, finding her gaze once more. There was something profoundly intimate in how she looked at him; a vulnerability mirrored his own.

Melissa's thumb brushed over the tip of him, eliciting another low groan from John. The pleasure was almost overwhelming, a crescendo of sensations that built with each purposeful stroke of her hand. His breath came in ragged gasps, his body straining against the restraint he had imposed upon himself.

"Melissa," he whispered, his voice rough with emotion. "You're driving me mad."

She smiled, a shy yet confident expression that only intensified his yearning. "Good," she replied softly, her fingers continuing their slow, deliberate exploration.

John leaned in, pressing his forehead against hers. The gesture's intimacy, combined

with her hand's thrilling touch, created a moment that felt suspended in time. He wanted to remember every detail—the warmth of her skin, the scent of her hair, the way her body molded perfectly against his.

He shifted slightly, his hands moving to cup her face. The tenderness in his touch contrasted with the raw desire coursing through him, a duality that defined their relationship. He kissed her then, his lips capturing hers in a passionate and reverent kiss.

Melissa responded eagerly, opening her mouth beneath his to deepen the kiss. Her sweet and intoxicating taste fueled the fire within him. Their tongues danced together in a familiar and thrillingly new rhythm.

Despite the raging desire, John controlled his movements, his hands caressing rather than claiming. He wanted to savor this moment, to prolong the exquisite tension that made every touch, every kiss, a heady mix of pleasure and emotion.

When they finally broke apart, both gasping for air, John rested his forehead against hers once more. Their breaths mingled, the closeness of their bodies a comfort as much as it was a source of longing.

"I've never felt this way before," she admitted in barely more than a whisper. Melissa's eyes softened, her hand still cradling him with a gentleness that belied the intensity of their feelings.

At that moment, with yarn around them as if they'd been caught in a web, John knew that what they had was rare and precious.

They stayed like that, wrapped in each other's arms, the world outside fading away. In the intimacy of her chambers, they had found something beautiful and enduring—a connection that transcended mere physical desire and touched the very essence of

their souls.

Every kiss was a promise, a beginning, a new chapter in their lives. And they didn't go any further. There was no haste.

The future seemed less daunting as they stood there, wrapped in each other's arms. They would face it, side by side, bound by love stronger than any yarn.

But the mess they'd gotten into still had to be untangled...

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

That afternoon, the consequences of the day's choices became clearer. John sat at the large oak desk in his study, enveloped by the comforting chaos of ledgers, ink pots, and stacks of parchment. The scent of aged paper and the faint musk of wood smoke lingered in the air, providing a sense of familiarity as he meticulously balanced the estate's accounts. His quill scratched against the paper, calculating the costs of maintaining the estate and managing the yield from the surrounding orchards.

With winter slowly approaching, he doubled the firewood order. Lexi's pregnancy meant she had to always be comfortable, and the house must be kept warm for her and the baby. This baby—his first niece or nephew—was of the utmost importance in his heart.

John paused, the ink blotting on the paper as his mind wandered. Would they be four or five this winter? His thoughts inevitably turned to Melissa. Would she stay? Could he dare to hope? After all that had perspired between them, he had to somehow find a way to extricate her from Prinny without causing Dustin and everyone else trouble. Wasn't there anyone who could help in such complicated matters where love was at odds with Society?

Oh!

John took a clean piece of paper.

Dear Mrs. Dove-Lyon,

I am aware that there may be certain arrangements concerning Lady Melissa Thumbridge, of which I am only dimly aware. However, if there is any way for my



voice to be considered in this matter, I earnestly implore you to help obtain her freedom necessary for us to be united in marriage.

John crumbled the paper up and started again.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon,

I am coming to London to discuss the details with you so that I can help free Lady Thumbridge from His Royal Highness so that I can seize the woman I love and pave the way for our future...

He set the quill aside. He had no words for what had happened. Melissa was trapped, and if Prinny didn't let her go, their families would suffer financial and societal ruin. And neither he nor Melissa would risk that. The finesse required for this situation was a different diplomacy altogether, one entirely dependent on Prinny's whims.

A burst of laughter from outside interrupted his thoughts. Curious, John rose from his chair and moved to the window. He pulled the heavy curtains aside and looked out onto the meadow that stretched between the estate and the stables. The heavy rain had left a lush green landscape in its wake, dried by the day's sun rays. There, bathed in the golden afternoon light, were three figures running and laughing with unrestrained joy.

Herbert, his son, was among them, accompanied by Laura, the farmer's daughter, and Melissa. Melissa wore a simple cream dress with surprisingly sensible boots for an outing. She moved with the same exuberance as the children, her arm raised high as she chased after Herbert, who clutched a piece of the old kite.

John's breath caught in his throat. Herbert hadn't brought out that kite since his mother passed. How had Laura managed to coax it from him? The sight of his son playing so freely tugged at John's heart, filling him with melancholy and joy.

With its colorful ribbons trailing behind, the kite caught the wind and soared into the sky. The children's laughter, carried on the breeze, reached John's ears. He couldn't help but smile as he watched the kite dance through the air, buoyed by the wind and the children's delight. Melissa's laughter rang out, clear and carefree, making the meadow seem more beautiful than ever.

Unable to resist, he pushed open the window, leaning out to better hear their joyous cries. The cool air rushed in, mingling with the warmth of the study. He watched as Melissa guided Herbert and Laura, her movements graceful and assured as she tugged on the line of the kite. Her presence had brought something back to his life that John hadn't experienced in such a long time—happiness.

John's mind raced with questions, but his heart soared with the scene before him. The sight of Melissa with Herbert, the way they interacted so naturally despite how difficult Herbert had been, filled him with a deep sense of contentment. He knew then that he wanted her to stay, not just for the winter but all the seasons to come.

"Father!" Herbert's voice pierced John's thoughts. "Father, come on out!"

John leaned over the window sill and saw Herbert and Laura waving, but Melissa tugged at the strings to hold the kite. The breeze carried it high. "Come on!"

Whatever challenges lay ahead, he knew he could face them, as long as he had his family—and perhaps, if luck was on his side, Melissa—by his side.

John took heart and shrugged off his coat. It was altogether too stuffy to dress a duke, especially because he wasn't one anymore. Then he left the study and went outside.

Melissa had her hands full—literally—grappling with the kite's spirited pull, and it didn't help that John was now emerging from the main house, probably asking her if she'd lost her sense in making such a display of herself in child's play. Its vibrant

fabric fluttered and snapped in the wind, the strings twisting around the wooden handle as if possessed by a life of their own. She fumbled to unwind them, her fingers slipping and scraping against the rough wood in her haste. The air was thick with the joyous cacophony of children's laughter and excited shouts, but amidst the chaotic symphony, Melissa felt a twinge of overwhelm holding onto the kite by herself.

The kite tugged harder, its pull almost lifting her off the ground, and suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed John coming closer with a purposeful stride. His black Hessian boots rustled smartly in the grass, and his tight breeches accentuated his powerful, muscular legs. Melissa's breath caught at the sight of him clad only in a linen shirt and waistcoat, his cravat conspicuously absent. The closer he came, the less she could look away from the taut and prominent muscles on his neck, highlighting a physique carved from the finest marble. She couldn't get enough of him.

In her distraction, she almost missed the kite's sudden, violent lurch. The string ripped from her hands, the wind snatching it away with a greedy ferocity. Her fingers stung from the friction, the sharp bite of the string burning against her skin. "Oh no!" she gasped, her heart plunging as she watched the kite soar uncontrollably upward. Herbert, frozen in a scream of alarm, mirrored her panic.

John sprang into action, his body a blur of coordinated motion. He dashed forward with the grace and speed of a tiger, eyes fixed on the errant kite rising higher as the rest of the string unwound itself from the spool. The world seemed to slow as he leaped, arms outstretched. His fingers closed around the wooden handle mid-air, just moments before the kite could ascend beyond reach. His grip was firm, the muscles in his arms flexing as he pulled it back from the brink of escape.

Melissa's eyes widened, taking in the raw athleticism and precision of his movements. The kite plummeted to the ground with a disheartening thud. Herbert's joy turned to anger. He directed his frustration at Melissa, his voice quivering with

tears.

“You let go of the kite!” he yelled, his freckled face twisted in accusation. “Aren’t you good at anything? Mother never let it go! I thought you’d—” He licked the tears off his cheek as they reached the corner of his mouth. “You’re not good for anything!”

“Stop it!” John shouted. “How dare you?”

His authoritative voice intimidated Melissa for a moment until she realized that he’d come in her defense. I meticulously researched the medical techniques and tools featured.

“She almost lost Mama’s kite!”

“It’s your kite, your responsibility! You ought to be pleased with our guest’s generous entertainment of your games, Herbert. I heard you laughing, and you had fun!”

The boy sucked in his lower lip and gave a glowering stare. Melissa couldn’t help but notice the resemblance to his father. Laura came to Herbert’s side and whispered something.

Melissa’s heart ached at the harshness of his words, but her gaze locked on John. A mix of admiration and something deeper stirred within her as she beheld him, a real man in the midst of chaos, his presence became the only sanctuary in the storm.

Herbert left indignantly, and Laura followed him only with a moment’s hesitation out of feigned propriety.

“She likes him.” John grimaced as he watched them run toward the stables.

Melissa raised her eyebrows. “You may need to have that talk with him before there are more than kittens—”

“Oh no, please!” John rubbed his eyes. “Can you do it for me?”

“It’s the job of a parent.” Melissa pressed her lips into a line. She didn’t want to intrude upon John and Herbert’s lives, but she wished to be part of them nonetheless. Except that she’d hoped she’d be invited in rather than fill the void Lexi had left. What would she do once Lexi returned?

“I can’t do anything right as a father.” John’s arms fell limply next to his body as he walked slowly, and Melissa joined him. “I lost my wife because I was too focused on the estate. Herbert never grieved properly, and I was grieving too much to be there for him. Then I lost the connection with Herbert when he was at boarding school and spent the season in London, where parliament was in session.”

Melissa wanted to say something, but she sensed that there was more he wished to share.

“Did you grieve very much when your husband died?” he asked.

Melissa inhaled deeply and tried to find the best way to broach the subject. “He did soon after our wedding, and we had a short courtship.”

“Then you must have loved him very much, too.”

“Not at all.”

John stopped and gave a deadpan stare.

“It was all perfect, you see. He was a suitable match, and my father and he came to an

understanding quickly.”

“You married for convenience?” John asked.

“Not exactly. It was my first season, and my mother was proud that I received a proposal from the most eligible man that year. So it was a marriage for propriety and—”

“I understand. I’m no fool, but it’s not how it was for me. We had been in love since”—John furrowed his brows—“we were thirteen. Our first kiss was at the stables just over there. On a day when I had a fight with my father.” He sucked his cheeks in.

Melissa knew what he was thinking and probably weighing in his head: to burst in and interrupt Herbert with Laura or not?

“See, I’m not good for anything. I don’t even know what to do with Herbert at this age. He’s not being groomed to be the heir anymore.” He kicked a pinecone just as Herbert had done when he was angry. “I’m such a failure. You should stay far away from me.”

“I most certainly will not!” Melissa put her hands on her hips and stopped walking alongside him. That got his attention, and he looked at her. “You may have a broken heart because your wife died and because you lost the dukedom, but you’re too blind to see what you’ve gained in the process. That’s your failure, John. The rest is just life.”

“Gained?” He grimaced again. Oh, why didn’t men understand?

“Your son is home and finally opening up to you.” Melissa enumerated on her fingers. “The cousin you thought dead has returned and assumed his birthright. You

have Dustin back in your life. And he's grateful, can't you see? He knows none of this would be there for him to take back if you'd lost it."

"Hmpf!"

"And he's in love. With my sister no less, so consider your entire family lucky!" Melissa wagged her index finger in front of John's face. "She's the sweetest person you'll ever encounter in this forsaken land, governed by gentlemen so full of themselves that they stand in a meadow in full bloom on an estate larger than most with a woman who wants them beyond measure, and all they do is complain."

Silence.

John cocked his head.

"What did you say?"

Melissa swallowed hard. "Ahem, that you're full of self-loathing."

"Before that."

"The meadow's in bloom?"

Was there a chance he didn't hear the part in between?

"Melissa," John started, but instead of speaking, he rubbed his face with both hands as if he could wash the problems away with the fresh air on his estate. I can't take what belongs to the Crown. You ought to know I want you more than I want all of this, but it's not mine to jeopardize. Can you imagine what the prince would do if I married his mistress?"

“I’m not a parcel or a piece of property.”

“But the prince regent has laid a claim.”

“Actually, he hasn’t yet.”

John narrowed his eyes.

“I beg your pardon?”

Melissa straightened her back. “I mustn’t say. Discretion, you know.”

“About the happenings in his bed chambers?”

“Also.”

John quirked a brow. “Do tell.”

Melissa shook her head. “There’s nothing to say.”

John pivoted, pulled his hair, and paced along a path of dandelions. “This is driving me mad!”

“What is?” Mellissa snapped.

“Explain that, please.” She’d heard many stupid things men said to her. Most tried to land in her bed, but this was new indeed.

“I don’t know what to do with you.” John’s face reddened.

“Do I need something done to me?” Melissa jerked her head back.



“Yes, very much. You need kissing, holding, pleasuring, and I don’t know how to go about it until Mrs. Dove-Lyon frees you from the regent.”

Melissa swallowed hard.

“You’re worldly in that regard. I mean, of course you are, look at you!” There was pain and perhaps jealousy in John’s voice. “No wonder the Crown wants you, and he doesn’t even know your qualities beyond your beauty as I do. Painters between the Renaissance and today would flock to you en masse if they knew such beauty existed. I certainly didn’t see it coming.”

“That was either the clumsiest compliment or the most egregious insult. Do you know which?”

“Perhaps both.”

“Now that’s stupid.”

“I am stupid. Very, very stupid, and completely ignorant for a man of nearly thirty years of age! Can you imagine that I have only ever been with one woman?”

Melissa scratched her chin. Hopefully, this was a rhetorical question. Truly, it was all this strange fight was lacking. A monologue in three acts of a frustrated gentleman.

“Why don’t you just ask me what I want?”

“Ask. You.” John drew his eyes so wide open they nearly popped out. “That’s madness.”

“So it suits your diatribe here well then?”

“What’s your meaning?” John closed the distance to her.

“Well, imagine”—she exaggerated the hand swirls in the air as if imagination could be caught by an airy whirlwind—“if you were to try to pleasure... ahem... pleasure me. You might come to realize that my presence and cooperation would be required, and thus, you’d have the opportunity to request my opinion on your progress.”

John’s mouth fell open, and he stood slack-jawed in the meadow. It would have been sweet if Melissa had not been so angry.

“I want you so very badly that I don’t know where to begin.”

Yes, it was a clumsy compliment. Terribly clumsy.

But it worked.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

Still standing on the meadow and discussing the art of love...

A slow smile spread over Melissa's face that made John's insides churn.

"I'd be much obliged to have the opportunity to provide the feedback you sought for... I mean, as to your progress once it comes to it," she said.

The ground must have been wet because John felt as though he were sliding. Or was this what it felt like when one's knees grew weak?

All he heard was sex. Lots of sex. Uninhibited and sweaty sex of the exact sort he'd been burning for since the day he'd met her. But since he'd kissed her... and seen her naked, he had all but combusted with desire.

"Did you just say you'd..."

She gave a bright smile, and her eyes sparkled brighter than the dew drops on the poppies swaying in the meadow.

"Your kisses made my knees melt, and I want to know what else you will do," Melissa said quietly.

John considered that for a moment, and it seemed like a brilliant idea.

"But you're so much more experienced than me." He feared this might be an understatement.

“Am I?” She quirked a brow and came closer.

“You are widowed,” he tested.

“Yes.”

“And you were called to Prinny’s court as his... ahem...” This he’d rather not say aloud.

“Mistress.”

“Yes,” he croaked. He could feel her warm breath when she placed a hand on his chest. But he allowed the intimate contact, looking at her hand. “And you have been royally—”

“Nothing.” She batted her lashes.

“What?”

“I have been called to court. As have many others. I actually made my debut with Lady Rochester. Did you know that her husband died on their journey to their honeymoon?”

“I’m sorry, what are we talking about?”

“I’ve been called to court. Even to his chambers once.”

John groaned.

“Wait! Nothing happened,” Melissa interjected.

“What?” John bit his cheek.

“We talked.” She shrugged ruefully.

“With words, or do you mean you communicated in a carnal sense?” he asked.

Melissa seemed to stifle a laugh, but a tiny snort came out. “He was in need of medical attention, and we talked. As it turned out, I had just the connections for him.”

“Dustin?” Now it dawned on John and it also explained why the doctors on Harley Street were earning their Royal warrant.

“I shan’t say.” Melissa held his gaze.

“You don’t need to. When you were here for the wedding, Dustin was called to London, but Felix stepped in, and the entire building was reserved for the prince for three days.”

She shrugged.

“You mean, he never...?”

She shook her head.

John raised his chin.

“You’ve never...?” His voice cracked like Herbert’s.

“I’ve never.” Melissa pursed her lips.

He furrowed his brows. “Ever?”

She shook her head.

“Not even with your husband?” John pressed on.

“No. Not pleasure of the sort Lexi spoke about, at least.”

John narrowed his eyes, gave her a once-over, and then nodded.

Sure, women talk. Especially sisters.

“Why?” he managed.

“I don’t know. It wasn’t at all what my sister makes it out to be.”

John inhaled deeply and gave her a calculating look. Then he unbuttoned his coat slowly. He loosened his cravat.

And with a swift motion, he bent down, swept her in his arms, and carried her away. She let out a delicious yelp.

“What are you doing with me?” Melissa laughed out loud as John tightened his grip and held her in his arms as if she were a bride carried over the threshold.

“Oh darling, I’m going to do what a beauty like you deserves. If you’ll allow it, of course.”

Her arms wrapped around his neck, her trust in him evident in the way she clung to him.

It was all he needed as a response.

He carried her as if she were the most precious treasure, each step measured, his breath mingling with the scent of her hair. Melissa's long amber curls, with their hints of copper, brushed against his chest, a tantalizing reminder of what he could barely fathom in his excitement.

As they reached his bedchamber, John carefully nudged the door open with his foot. He stepped inside, the warmth of the room was a sanctuary, bathed in the golden glow of light that cast dancing shadows on the walls.

John set Melissa gently on the plush bed, her body sinking slightly into the soft covers. For a moment, he simply gazed at her, taking in every detail. Her dress, pale blue and delicate, contrasted beautifully with the rich tones of her hair and the flush on her cheeks.

He turned back to the door, closing it with a resolute click. The sound seemed to seal them off from the rest of the world, creating an intimate cocoon where nothing else mattered but the two of them.

Returning to the bed, John knelt beside her, his gaze never wavering. He reached out, his fingers brushing gently against her cheek. Melissa leaned into his touch, her eyes closing briefly as if savoring the sensation.

"Melissa," he murmured, his voice low and filled with promise. "Tonight, you will feel truly cherished."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide and luminous in the soft light. "Anything with you."

His heart swelled at her words, the simple declaration of trust fueling his determination. "I want to be with you," she said.

“Me too.” His simple declaration became an irrevocable promise.

He began to undress with slow, deliberate movements, wanting her to see every inch of him, to understand that he was doing this not just out of desire but out of a deep emotional connection.

First, he shrugged off his shirt, baring his muscular chest and the taut lines of his abdomen. Perhaps she’d seen more of the prince, but John knew he had much more to offer in the realm of a masculine build. He saw Melissa’s eyes widen slightly, a soft gasp escaping her lips. The sight of her appreciation sent a thrill through him, but he remained focused, taking his time to ensure every moment was savored.

Reaching out, he took her hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing each fingertip tenderly. His touch was reverent, worshipping her very being. When he brushed her wrist, he felt the rapid pulse beneath his lips, a rhythm that mirrored his own.

Slowly, he guided her hand to his chest, allowing her to explore the contours of his body. He reveled in her reaction when she glanced down and took him in. Her fingers traced the lines of muscle beneath his skin. The sensation was electrifying, a mix of tenderness and desire.

John leaned in, capturing her lips in a passionate, teasing kiss. He wanted her to feel every ounce of his devotion, to understand that this was more than just physical pleasure. Their tongues danced together, exploring, tasting, each movement deliberate and filled with intent.

He pulled back slightly, his lips brushing against her ear as he whispered, “Shall I continue, Melissa?”

“Yes,” she breathed, her voice a mere whisper.



With that assurance, John began to undress her, his hands moving with a gentle yet purposeful determination. He untied the delicate laces of her gown. As the dress slipped from her shoulders, he couldn't help but marvel at the beauty before him.

Her skin was soft and warm under his touch, each curve inviting and perfect. He placed a trail of kisses along the line of her collarbone with his fingers, his touch featherlight as he explored the expanse of her bare skin. The sight of her in the low light took his breath away, her long curls cascading over her shoulders like a waterfall of gold and copper. Although he'd seen her naked before and knew she was perfect, this was the first time he'd been allowed to look.

"Melissa," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion, "you are absolutely exquisite."

She blushed at his words, her eyes lowering shyly. John lifted her chin, compelling her to meet his gaze. "You are," he reiterated softly, his eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that allowed no doubt. "Not only because you are incredibly beautiful. You are brilliant and fierce, and I love you in a way I never knew I was capable of." She gasped, and he followed up with a tender kiss on her shoulder. "So sweet." Then he almost kissed her on the lips but didn't. He withdrew when she parted her lips, ready to receive him, but he half-turned his head. "So eager."

He continued to undress her, his movements slow and deliberate, ensuring she felt cherished with every touch. When she was finally bare before him, he took a moment to admire her, the curves of her body, the softness of her skin, the vulnerability in her eyes.

Melissa melted into him, her body relaxing as she gave herself over to the sensation and lay on the bed. He felt her so deeply; he was attuned to her every reaction. Each kiss, each touch, was a symphony of pleasure and emotion, building slowly until she was trembling.

John's hands roamed over her, his touch firm, sure, yet infinitely gentle. He kissed his way down her neck, lingering at the sensitive spot just below her ear, eliciting a soft moan from her. The sound sent a shiver of delight through him, spurring him on.

As he moved lower, his lips and hands worshipping her body, Melissa's breath came in shallow gasps. John could feel the tension in her, the anticipation building with each passing moment. He wanted to take his time, to ensure that every touch, every kiss, was a step toward the fulfillment that had eluded her for so long.

When he reached her breasts, he took one of her nipples into his mouth, suckling gently. Melissa arched into him, her fingers tangling in his hair as she moaned softly. His other hand caressed the soft curve of her waist, his thumb brushing over the sensitive skin just below her ribs.

John continued his exploration, his lips and hands moving lower, tracing the lines of her body with a reverence that made her heart swell. When he finally reached the apex of her thighs, he paused, looking up at her with an intensity that took her breath away.

"I need you now." Her voice quivered with urgency.

"Melissa," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion, "I want to make sure you feel every moment, every touch. Trust me."

She nodded, her eyes filled with a mixture of anticipation and hunger. John kissed her inner thighs, his touch gentle and teasing. He could feel the heat radiating from her, the way her body responded to his touch, the way her breath hitched with every kiss.

He took his time, but when he finally reached her core, he kissed her there too, his tongue teasing her, exploring her, tasting her; Melissa's moans grew louder. She arched into him as he brought her closer and closer to the edge.

John could feel the tension building in her, the way her body trembled with anticipation. He wanted to prolong the pleasure, to ensure that when she finally found release, it would be like nothing she had ever experienced before.

He continued to tease her, his tongue and fingers working in perfect harmony, building the tension higher and higher. Melissa's moans became desperate, her fingers clutching at the sheets as she teetered on the edge.

"John," she gasped, her voice pleading.

He looked up at her, his eyes dark with desire. "I'm right here for you."

With those words, she pulled him up.

From the moment he laid her down on the soft bed, Melissa's body tingled with anticipation as John's fingers traced delicate patterns across her skin. Each touch sent shivers down her spine, a mix of excitement and vulnerability that left her breathless. It was a new experience, and she couldn't help but marvel at what her body could feel.

John was the right man.

He was so right.

In her heart, and with his touch.

John's hands moved slowly and deliberately, exploring every inch of her as if committing her to memory, and she had nothing to hold back from the man she loved. His touch was gentle yet firm, caressing her curves with a reverence that made her heartache. He leaned in, his breath warm against her ear as he whispered, "Trust me, Melissa."

Oh, how she did!

Even if she wanted to, she couldn't. The way he touched her, challenging her body but holding her close, was as if he was cradling her soul with all the love she'd longed for all this time.

She nodded, her eyes closing as she surrendered to the moment. Her senses were heightened, every touch, every kiss magnified in the quiet stillness of the room. John kissed his way down her neck as he lay his middle on her stomach. His lips left a trail of fire in their wake. Melissa moaned softly, her fingers tangling in his blond hair as she arched into him.

The sensation was exquisite, a blend of pleasure and need that left her trembling. John's other hand caressed her waist, brushing over her sensitive skin. She wanted more, needed more, but she also wanted to savor every moment, but she thought she might burst with desire for him.

As John continued his exploration and kissed his way down her stomach, his touch was teasing and tantalizing. When he finally reached the apex of her thighs, he paused, looking up at her with an intensity that took her breath away.

"Melissa," he murmured, his voice thick, "may I?"

Her heart pounded in her chest, a mixture of fear and excitement coursing through her. She nodded again, her trust in him implicit as his fingers entered where his tongue had been before.

The pleasure built steadily, a slow, torturous climb that left her breathless. John's hands held her steady, his touch firm and sure as he guided her toward the brink. Melissa's cries became desperate, her fingers clutching at the sheets as she teetered on the edge of something she couldn't quite name.

“John,” she gasped, her voice pleading.

He looked up at her, his eyes dark with desire.

With those words, he redoubled his efforts, his touch more insistent as he brought her to the brink. Melissa’s cries grew louder, her body arching into him, and she froze. Her insides throbbed.

“I need you now!”

His hand stilled, and he looked up at her. Disheveled, licking his lips, he rose to his knees and then climbed off the bed. “Are you quite sure?”

She nodded, reaching out for him.

“What if you... I don’t have any...” John stuttered.

“Then we have a baby?”

“You’ll marry me?” he asked.

She nodded, now propping herself up and grabbing his face to kiss him.

“Promise?” he asked again.

“Yes,” she spoke into his mouth while his gorgeous smile appeared, and she felt him making rushed movements to position himself between her legs. “I want all of this with you.”

His hard member stuck out as he climbed onto her. All of the sadness, mistakes, and the weight of the loss they’d both suffered had melted away in the heat of their

passion—or was it the pureness of their love? Never had she felt prettier, and never had she been more certain of what she wanted.

He parted her folds gently with his fingers, his kiss unrelenting.

And then she felt it.

Not his fingers, nor his mouth. It was larger, blunt, hard, and she inhaled deeply as he gave a little push. Melissa forgot the kiss for an instant and tensed.

“Does this hurt?” he asked.

“No.”

He propped himself on his hands and tilted his hips, suddenly altering the angle of his manhood.

Just when Melissa’s insides quivered at the invasion, she felt him pushing further.

It wasn’t much that he needed to enter her because she was slick with desire. As if her entire body were watering with an appetite only he could satisfy, Melissa welcomed him so deeply that she thought he’d touched her heart.

For that was how he felt inside of her.

Slow, steadily exerting pressure as he entered until he was buried to the hilt, Melissa relaxed again and pulled him back for a kiss. He complied, but on the way up, he gently nibbled her breasts as if they were a treat he couldn’t forgo.

By the time their mouths reconnected, he’d pulled out and pushed back, establishing a slow but steady rhythm.

She closed her eyes and pressed her head backward into the soft bed. John brought one hand to the back of her head, cradling her, holding her, keeping her safe on the wave that carried her.

The room seemed to spin around her, the sheer intensity of the pleasure overwhelming her senses.

Ripples of tension and exquisite perfection with his every thrust washed over her in waves, each more intense than the last. As his movements grew more urgent, he let out a guttural roar and then pressed deeply into her, twitching inside of her as his warmth let her know that he was reaching his peak with her.

John continued to kiss her, drawing out the sensation until she was left trembling and breathless, her body spent and sated.

As the aftershocks of her climax subsided, John moved up beside her and held her close. Melissa nestled against him, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she tried to process the overwhelming pleasure she had just experienced. The steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek was a comforting rhythm, grounding her in the present.

She blinked, unable to find the words for what had just occurred.

“So, was this your first?” John asked, a proud grin building on his face.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice filled with emotion. “Thank you.”

“Thank me?” He snuffed and brushed the hair out of her face as he climbed back over her. “As my wife, you’ll never have to thank me.”

“So, how do I tell you when I want to do this again?” Melissa realized she’d gotten her teasing tone back and was almost ready to experience the pleasure again. Now

that she knew what she'd been missing, she didn't want to waste another minute without John's lovemaking.

John kissed her forehead, his lips lingering against her skin. "You deserve to be cherished. I'll strive to do that for as long as I live."

"You do make me feel alive in a way that I have never... I mean—"

"Me too," he said, lowering his mouth onto hers. His hand found her folds again. "Are you sore?"

"No," she whispered onto his lips. "I'm ready."

"Then there is something else I'd like to show you." John gently drew Melissa closer, his right leg slipping over her own, guiding her into a snug position against him. Their bodies became a seamless tangle of warmth and connection as they lay sideways. His hand found its place in the curve of her thigh resting atop him, gently drawing her nearer. He pressed his chest against her back, a comforting weight that seemed to meld them together, enveloping her in his protective embrace. The sensation was one of profound closeness, each breath and heartbeat shared, creating a cocoon of intimacy and quiet contentment.

They lay there together, wrapped in each other's embrace, the world outside fading away. In the intimacy of her bedchamber, they had found something beautiful and enduring, a connection that transcended mere physical desire and touched the very essence of their souls.

They made love all night, with short breaks to catch their breaths, until Melissa finally fell asleep in his arms when the day broke.

The night had been everything she had hoped for and more, a promise of the love and



passion they would share in the days to come. Now, she just had to ensure nothing stood in the way of becoming John's wife. But every step hinged on the fragile threads of her plan with Mrs. Dove-Lyon—threads that could snap if she made even one wrong move. Her happiness was only part of the gamble; failure might cost them both everything. Pressing a trembling hand to her lips, she forced herself to focus, though doubt gnawed at her. The question wasn't just if her plan would work—she realized with a chill—it was whether she could bear what would happen if it didn't.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

The next morning, John decided to clean the silver box that held his grandmother's large ruby ring. He had retrieved it from the Duncan family vault and placed the cleaning solution for the box and a cloth on his desk.

"What is this?" Herbert asked when he entered the study without so much as a hello.

"My grandmother's ring. It's a very valuable ruby, and this ring has been in our family for over one hundred years."

Herbert narrowed his eyes. "So why do you need it now?"

"Look here," John took the ring from its velvet cushion, a faded shade of orange that was now more of a sandy ocher but still soft and plush to keep the precious ring safe. "On this side of the shank, there's a small seal. Can you see it?"

Herbert took the ring and held it close to his face. "This little swirl and the shape?"

"Yes, it's how our family crest looked back then. And it's stamped into this ring."

"Why?"

"Because the woman who receives this ring will join the Dukedom, the Duncan family. Every woman who wore this lived a long, happy life. It's a family tradition."

"So why are you taking it out?" Herbert's tone grew a bit indignant.

"I want to give it to Melissa." John paused when he saw Herbert's face drain of color.

“To ask her—”

“You can’t do that!”

“Why not?” John asked. He’d loved with everything he had before, only to watch it slip through his fingers, a cruel pattern life seemed determined to repeat. There was no way John would let anyone take Melissa away from him.

“It’s not your decision.” Herbert stomped his foot.

John drew a slow breath, reining in his initial reaction. He leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees as he met Herbert’s gaze, his voice steady and kind. “Herbert, I know this isn’t easy for you. None of this is. Losing your mother—losing Marianne—it left a hole in both of our lives that nothing and no one could fill.”

Herbert’s jaw tightened, a flicker of emotion crossing his young face. “Then why are you trying to replace her?” he asked, his voice low but edged with pain.

John softened, his shoulders relaxing as he reached out, placing a gentle hand on Herbert’s arm. “I’m not trying to replace her, son. No one could ever take her place. Your mother is part of who you are, and part of who I am. She’ll always be with us—through memories, through everything we carry forward. But that doesn’t mean we stop living, or close ourselves off to the possibility of finding happiness again.”

“I don’t believe in happiness without Mother. Neither should you!”

“Do you really mean it?”

“Yes. You can only love once. Marry once. It’s forever.” Herbert dropped his gaze to the floor, uncertainty flickering in his expression. “And only with Mother. Melissa isn’t her. She’s... she’s not Mother.”

“No, she isn’t,” John agreed softly, his tone unwavering. “Melissa is her own person. But she’s also someone who cares deeply for this family. Someone who could bring joy back into this home, not as a replacement, but as someone new to love. We deserve love. Even if it’s new, it doesn’t have to be wrong.”

Herbert’s brows furrowed as he wrestled with the idea. “It’s just... it feels wrong, like I’m forgetting Mother if I’m nice to Melissa. Like you’re forgetting her.”

John leaned closer, his voice growing even softer. “I will never forget her. And even Melissa knows that. She’s not here to replace her. But I hope she’ll join us. She wants to love us, as we are, with your mother’s memory still firmly in our hearts. Can’t we give her that chance? A chance to be part of this family?”

“I don’t want to. I’m loyal to Mother even if you aren’t.” Herbert crossed his arms as if to shield his heart from even the idea of Melissa.

“Perhaps you’ll learn to love more freely. These chances don’t come often in life and I want to take mine.”

Herbert was silent for a long moment, his lips pressing into a thin line. Finally, he lifted his eyes, searching his father’s face. “And if I can’t? If it’s too hard?”

John smiled faintly, his own eyes brimming with understanding. “Then we’ll take it one step at a time. No one is asking you to feel anything you’re not ready for. But I’ll be here, every step of the way, Herbert. We’re a family, no matter what. You have my unconditional love, son.”

Herbert nodded, his shoulders relaxing slightly. “I... I’ll try to be a little nicer.”

“That’s all I ask,” John said, his smile deepening as he gave his son’s arm a reassuring squeeze. “And no matter what, your mother would be so proud of you.

You're an incredible young man, Herbert. Don't ever forget that."

Herbert didn't respond, but for the first time in the conversation, his eyes held a glimmer of ease, his walls lowering just enough for hope to peek through. "What if she says no? She's spoken for. She belongs to Prinny; isn't she going back to Brighton?" Herbert uncrossed his arms, and John noticed he was still holding the ring.

"She's not a piece of property; she doesn't belong to anybody but herself," John said.

"And yet, she's spoken for." Herbert hissed. Herbert was particularly testing this morning. "Why do you care so much about a ring?" But as John spoke, dread rose in his throat as he realized that Herbert might indeed have the intention—as absurd as it may seem—to use this ring himself.

"I'll give it to Laura someday."

"Laura Smith?" John tried to stay calm, but he was angry and ready to laugh at the same time. If Laura got a ring with such value, her father could easily sell it at half its value and buy a portion of land larger than the Duncan estate. "Herbert, listen to me. An estate with as much history as ours is often backed by a fortune that either matches or exceeds the value of the land we are responsible for."

"So if you give this ring away, what will I have? I am not the heir anymore. What will I have to give her if you lose it all before I ever grow up to have a chance?"

John's heart dropped. "Is that what you think of me? I lose everything? Because with Melissa, I think we'd gain everything." Granted, he was risking much to be with her but that was neither here nor there in deciding whether to propose to Melissa. That wasn't a question anymore, John wanted to love Melissa forever and make this castle her home, too. And although John's resolve didn't waver, he worried about how to

accomplish the goals he'd set for himself.

Herbert's eyes grew red and glistened in a way John hadn't seen since his wife had died. It was as if he'd always had to look into her eyes, for Herbert's eyes were exactly like his mother's. And when Herbert cried, it was as though he saw her cry.

Meanwhile, Melissa was on her way to John's study when the butler brought her a note.

"Lady Thumbridge, there's a special courier for you from London."

Melissa's heart skipped a few beats. A special courier from London could mean several things. Her parents may call her home. Was one of them ill?

Her chest tightened.

Or perhaps the prince called for her. Her heart sank, and her arms felt heavy as she sat on the gilded chair in the hall.

The butler handed her the note on a pewter tray.

"Thank you, Mr. Fletcher."

But as soon as she saw the gold-embossed head of a lion on the paper, she knew who'd sent the note—and that she had to comply with whatever it said.

Lady Thumbridge,

Meet me at the benches by the pond abutting the estate at the strike of noon. Discretion is of utmost importance.

D-L

She looked up at the grandfather clock on the wall next to the large portrait of the second Duke of Duncan, one of John's ancestors. His cold stare made the blood in her veins freeze, and a chill caught her.

Suddenly, she felt like an impostor again. A guest. She hadn't earned her freedom from Prinny yet and had made John the promise to become his wife. It was time to make good on that promise at all cost.

Only minutes later, without letting John know where she'd gone, she took her sister's carriage that had been reserved for her and proceeded to the pond. Hopefully, it wouldn't take long.

Melissa's heart had raced as she dreaded Mrs. Dove-Lyon's words, and now, sitting alone, she felt a prickling anticipation. Her cloak covered her entirely, its hood casting shadows over her face. She hoped it was enough.

Melissa sat on the wooden bench beneath a sprawling oak tree. She leaned back, then sat up, then leaned back, folded her hands, and clutched the rim of the bench seat—there was still no sign of people.

Something rustled in the branches above, and she glanced up, seeing a small red squirrel balancing elegantly on the thin branch. If only she could balance her life as these tiny creatures knew how to instinctively. With all her schooling and refinement, she didn't know how to manage her life half as well as this tiny fluffy creature.

And what would become of Angus if she had to return to Prinny's court?

If she left now, she couldn't help Lexi; she'd leave Angus behind, and she'd leave John after all that had been said and done. No. Impossible. She wouldn't allow it, and

she'd do anything necessary to be John's wife.

But she couldn't get herself to return to Prinny.

So, she expected Mrs. Dove-Lyon to resolve the matter, break a match to make room for another, and then Melissa would be free to be with the man she loved. Now that Melissa didn't doubt John's feelings anymore, she hoped Mrs. Dove-Lyon's plan would succeed.

And yet, waiting here, life took on a different perspective. She suddenly felt as though she had disobeyed the man in command, in fact, the very man on the top of the chain of command. Oh, and even John could suffer from his rage if he found out.

Indirectly, Dustin could be implicated, and the Dukedom of Duncan would—oh no! What if the doctors on Harley Street all lost their Royal Warrant? What if they fell into Society's disgrace altogether and lost all of their patients as a result of a bad reputation?

Could Melissa's selfishness have ruined the lives of all these people just as she'd feared?

She pulled her cloak tighter around her, the heavy fabric brushing softly against the grass beneath her feet. She recalled the note she had received that morning, the ink neat and precise, the paper smooth and expensive. She could almost feel its weight still in her hands.

She glanced up as she heard the unmistakable sound of hooves on gravel. A black landau-style carriage approached, its polished surface gleaming in the dappled sunlight. The carriage was elegant, with intricate gold trim and the same lion's head on the door as on the letterhead. It's large, dark wheels that moved smoothly across the path. As it came to a stop, a man stepped down, opening the door with a practiced



ease. She'd seen him in London before but didn't know his name. He was tall, with broad shoulders that suggested years of military service. His posture was straight, his movements precise.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon emerged from the carriage, her figure obscured by a thick veil that flowed around her like a shroud, but her posture and self-assurance betrayed the one and only Black Widow of Whitehall. She moved with a grace that belied her years, and the man offered her his arm with a deferential nod. Together, they walked toward Melissa, the man's eyes scanning the park with the vigilance of a soldier.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon wore her signature black veil and she seemed like merely a wealthy elderly lady being escorted for a day in the sunny outdoors, but Melissa knew that she wouldn't make such a visit far from London if it weren't for the highest stakes.

She watched them approach, her heart beating faster. The man released Mrs. Dove-Lyon's arm as they neared but remained a respectful distance away, his stance protective. Mrs. Dove-Lyon took a seat on the bench, her back to Melissa, and the man retreated a few steps, standing guard.

"Lady Thumbridge." Mrs. Dove-Lyon's voice was low but clear, carrying a tone of authority. "I am glad you received my note."

As if there were ever doubts about whether her couriers delivered them personally.

"Yes, Mrs. Dove-Lyon," Melissa replied, keeping her voice equally soft. "Thank you for meeting me."

It seems I didn't have a choice.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon nodded, the veil shifting slightly with the movement. "There's a matter of royal importance and a chance to clear your future if you still wish for it."

Melissa took a deep breath, feeling the weight of her worries pressing down on her. “I only ever wanted John.”

“Then there is a way to clear your obligations to the monarch. But you’ll have to act today. We have mere hours to accomplish the feat.”

With a deep breath, Melissa stood, her cloak swirling around her. The tall escort nodded, looked left and right, then offered Mrs. Dove-Lyon his hand. She walked back toward the path, the future uncertain, but the first steps were now taken. If only Melissa knew what would come next.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

Meanwhile, not far away...

John sat tall on his beloved black mare, feeling the gentle rhythm of his gait beneath him. The morning air was crisp, carrying the scent of dew-kissed grass and the earthy aroma of the estate grounds. He tilted his head back, letting the cool breeze brush against his face, savoring the quiet moments before the estate came alive with its usual bustle.

As he rode, John took in the familiar sights: the meticulously kept hedges, the sprawling fields that stretched out like an emerald sea, and the occasional chirp of a bird flitting from branch to branch. The horse's hooves made soft thuds against the dirt path, a comforting sound that grounded him.

His routine morning rounds were a cherished ritual. The solitude gave him time to think, to clear his mind before the day's demands took over.

But John's mind wandered to Melissa as he rode through the estate. He recalled their night together, the memory vivid and intense. He could almost feel the warmth of her body pressed against his, her skin soft beneath his fingers. The way she fit against him felt like the most natural thing in the world, their bodies moving in perfect harmony. The scent of her hair, a mixture of lavender and something uniquely her, lingered in his nostrils. His heart quickened at the thought, a rush of desire and tenderness flooding him. He remembered the quiet gasps, the shared breaths, the connection that went beyond mere physicality.

John's grip on the reins tightened as he pushed the memories aside, focusing on the path ahead. His love for her drove every beat of his heart. The desire to marry her

surged within him. He didn't know how to extricate her from Prinny's grasp, but he knew he must. His hand instinctively brushed against the pocket where he kept the ruby ring. He wanted to see that ring on Melissa's finger, then kiss her hand, her arm, and every inch of her gorgeous body.

He pictured her beautiful face, the way her eyes sparkled when she smiled. Every time he remembered her yelp of surprise when he had playfully thrown her over his shoulder, carrying her just beyond the hedges after she had fallen from a tree in the rain. The memory of her gasps as he entered her for the first time and her scream of pleasure when he gave her her first orgasm made his pulse quicken.

Herbert would understand one day.

It was just that John couldn't get enough of Melissa, and a life together would barely suffice to show her how much he loved her. His vision grew blurry with desire, the need to be with her overwhelming his senses. He had to go back to the castle to find her, to hold her in his arms.

Just then, something out of the ordinary caught his eye. On the horizon, from the path leading to the main road, he saw a stately carriage approaching. A black landau with something painted on its door he couldn't make out from the distance. Its polished exterior gleamed faintly in the morning light, standing out against the rural backdrop.

John frowned. Such carriages were a common sight in London, but farmers' carriages were more typical here in the countryside, and he couldn't recall any reason for this carriage to be there. As the steward, he would know. Curiosity piqued, he gently urged his mare forward, her pace quickening.

As he approached, the carriage rolled slowly down the road, a cloud of dust rising in its wake. John raised a hand to shield his eyes, squinting through the haze. The wheels creaked and groaned, clearly not made for the uneven country roads.

His heart gave a slight jolt as he noticed a figure by the window. A woman, her face partially obscured by a cloak, stared out at the passing landscape.

John's breath hitched. Something about her posture, the way she looked away when their eyes almost met, sent a pang of worry through him. He rubbed his eyes, trying to clear the dust from his vision. When he looked again, the carriage was moving past him, the woman's face still hidden beneath the cloak's shadow.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of a painted head on the carriage door—a lion, perhaps. The emblem seemed familiar, stirring a vague memory. But before he could place it, the carriage disappeared down the road, swallowed by the distance.

John sat motionless for a moment, the image of the cloaked woman imprinted in his mind. Why did she seem familiar yet so elusive? With a determined set to his jaw, he guided his mare home. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss.

Inside the black carriage rumbling along the dirt road toward the village, Melissa felt as though something terrible was about to happen.

"So," Mrs. Dove-Lyon started as soon as the carriage began to roll along the dirt road. Starcliff Castle was large behind them but quickly became smaller as they put more distance between them. The further Melissa ventured from it, the lower her heart sank. She sighed.

"You love him truly, then?" Mrs. Dove-Lyon pressed on.

Melissa nodded, for there were no words. How could she begin to take something tiny as strings of letters to even begin to explain the magnitude of feelings John evoked within her? She loved him so much more than words could say.

"Lady Thumbridge, it won't take long, and my carriage shall return you to him. You

will be free—”

“Why are you doing this, Mrs. Dove-Lyon?”

“You asked me to. You paid the fee.”

“But this is not a match with an aristocrat, and it’s breaking a match for Prinny. You said so yourself, and yet you’re here. You came all this way from London for me?”

The older woman inhaled audibly and lifted her veil. “You know the doctors on Harley Street?”

“Yes, my brother-in-law, the Duke—”

“At 87 Harley Street, yes. But there are more at number 91.”

“I met them.”

“Ada Stein and her husband, Dr. Alfred Stein.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon spoke with the pride of a grandmother, and Melissa remembered that Lexi had told her Mrs. Ada Stein must be very dear to the older woman. “She had twins...” She sighed in a content sort of way. “I’ve known Ada and looked after her; now it is my privilege to look after all of them. Dr. Phil Rosen is also at 91 Harley Street. They are... oh, what can I say?”

“Family?”

“Not by blood.”

“That often doesn’t need to be a factor in how close you truly are to a person,” Melissa said. And Herbert came to her mind. He would never be her son, of course. But he’d be family, and she’d look after him no matter how little he wished to have

her in his life. She'd earn his friendship over time, perhaps more.

Then Mrs. Dove-Lyon smacked her lips. "Anyhow, it is paramount to ensure that the doctors on Harley Street, and all of them, receive the Royal Warrant."

Melissa nodded.

"You are rather instrumental in ensuring this."

Melissa frowned. "Why me? I only made the connection."

"Because you've become a bit of a bargaining chip, as much as it pains me to admit it, dear. When I saw your note from the regent, I put certain things into motion to ensure you get the match your heart desires. But it came at a price."

Melissa felt a tightness in her chest. She didn't dare ask, and the Black Widow of Whitehall continued her explanation without requiring another nudge. "Ada Stein is heavily invested in the clinic at 91 Harley Street. I shall spare you the details, but suffice it to say that the Royal Warrant that your brother-in-law can secure for the doctors at 87 Harley Street now that he's the Duke of Duncan will indirectly extend to Ada's husband, Dr. Alfred Stein, and the others there."

Understood. She was important because she was useful. A tool in a fight between the prince regent and Princess Caroline. She'd take on the task the princes didn't want, and, in return, Prinny would grant her freedom. If she failed to oblige, the scandal could be rampant. But if she did, then she'd be free.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

John arrived home feeling that something was wrong. He tapped his inside waistcoat pocket several times, making sure the ring for Melissa was there. But when he burst through the front doors, Fletcher, the butler, looked astonished.

“I didn’t expect you back so soon, Your Grace.”

“I didn’t complete my day’s tour of the—” but then John noticed that Melissa’s pelisse was not hanging on the stand at the entrance. “Where is she?”

“Lady Thumbbridge received a message via special courier and took the duchess’s carriage, Your Grace. She hasn’t been back.”

“When was that?”

“While you were out in the morning.”

John saw the grandfather clock in the hall; it was nearly afternoon. Quietly, the little kitten appeared and affectionately rubbed against John’s ankles.

“Angus, not now,” the butler said, but John bent down and picked the kitten up before the butler could.

“Meow-eee!”

“What is it, little one?” John saw the kitten and felt it was trying to communicate with him. His tiny triangular nose was pink with gray speckles, and his whiskers seemed so long that it seemed as if he still needed to grow into them. But there was an



intelligence to his eyes that caught John off guard. Angus made a demand.

And John knew what it was. “I’ll bring her home to us. Do you know where she’s gone?”

Angus thrashed around and skipped out of John’s grasp. With an elegant jump, he landed on his front paws and started into the study, followed by the butler and John.

“Angus?” John called out and followed the kitten.

And when he found him atop the pile of folded curtain samples. “Oh no!” Fletcher exclaimed when Angus tugged at a fabric in the middle. It was a red satin folded into a much thicker rectangle. As soon as the kitten got his tiny sharp claws stuck in it, Fletcher hastened to catch the other fabrics from falling, and John knew. It was the fabric Melissa had been covered with when Cosway painted her.

“There’s an inn in the village. Isn’t that where the painter who came here to sketch her ladyship was?” John asked, but he didn’t wait for a response from the cat or the butler. He had to get to Melissa if she was with the painter.

Whatever reason she had to sit for a portrait for Prinny’s royal portraitist, John wouldn’t allow anyone to paint her in the nude. But as he stared again at the sketches Cosway had offered him, unease prickled at the edge of his thoughts. The details were exquisite—the graceful curve of Melissa’s shoulders, the delicate slope of her neck. Yet her face, the very essence of her character, was but faintly outlined, almost an afterthought. Why would a painter of Cosway’s renown, lauded for capturing the spirit behind the eyes of his subjects, choose to neglect the most expressive part of her?

John’s fingers tightened imperceptibly on the edge of the paper as the kitten brushed against his ankles. Cosway’s study of Melissa from a few days ago troubled John.

Was this simply a matter of artistic preference, or was it something more deliberate? Cosway had been generous in describing Melissa's form, speaking of shadows and contours in a way that made John's skin prickle, but he'd offered no explanation for why he hadn't captured the radiance of her face. He'd brushed off the question when John had asked, mumbling something about revisiting the study later—after another sitting.

It didn't seem right. Melissa's beauty was more than physical. It was in the lift of her chin when she met a challenge, the warmth in her eyes when she smiled. Cosway had ignored all that, and John couldn't help but wonder why. Was it a matter of time, or was there something he wasn't saying?

John bent down to stroke Angus between his ears and the kitten purred. But John's jaw tightened as urgency settled in his chest. Whatever Cosway's reasons, John intended to find out. If there was any hint of disrespect—or worse, impropriety—he would not hesitate to confront the man. Melissa was going to be his wife, his partner in life. No one would reduce her to anything less than she deserved to be. And yet, he had a feeling that this may have to do with her most recent confession: She'd asked Black Widow of Whitehall for help.

This would be trouble.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

At the inn in the village, Melissa felt everything but freedom when the painter positioned her in front of a backdrop of dark brown velvet drapes.

“It’s just a few hours,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said from her perch on an armchair, watching Melissa undergo what seemed like the worst embarrassment of her life. On the easel was a stretched canvas nearly the size of her. The dark background was meticulously painted, but there was a silhouette of a man, and she knew just the one. In the sketched spot reserved for his wife, Melissa was to fill in as a model for the body. What she hadn’t expected was that she’d wear the princess’s dress.

“And she knows about this?” Melissa asked, trying to pull the bodice up for the tenth time. Clearly, the Princess of Wales filled this dress out more than she did—in every part.

“You’re doing her a favor by keeping her from sitting with him,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. “She can’t forgive his transgressions, and he needs her in this portrait. With your help, I can please them both. In return, you’re free to leave his court, and I will return with this painting completed.” The emphasis on “completed” couldn’t be missed.

“To secure the Royal Warrant?”

“It’s the doctors and nurses with all of their talents and devotion to medicine who will secure it. I’ll merely supervise the execution of the documents and their safe delivery.”

“Could you remain still, please?” The painter admonished Melissa as if she were a

schoolgirl dressed up for a play. She felt as though she were on stage indeed. But this was boring. All three hours of sitting motionless.

Every time Melissa tried to speak, Cosway raised his hand, holding up a paintbrush as if the flag to beg for silence. When the sun finally hung lower, he sighed and sat back. “We might have to finish this in Brighton. I don’t have enough light.”

“I’m not returning to Brighton,” Melissa said to Mrs. Dove-Lyon more than the painter. She knew he had little influence.

The older woman rose from her armchair and opened the drapes. “You have another hour or so of daylight. This has to suffice.”

“But it’s just the first layer, the underpainting. I need at least another two, if not three, until—”

“You have an hour with the subject, Cosway. Commit her to memory and finish this when we get to Brighton,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon commanded.

At first, the older man snuffed. But then Mrs. Dove-Lyon arched brow and he cringed visibly. This woman truly ruled Society from the shadows and Melissa began to admire her prowess.

Cosway proceeded to walk around Melissa, holding up the wooden end of his long bristled brush as if he were measuring her shoulders and décolletage. He came uncomfortably close and Melissa held her breath. She may be the subject of the painting but she wasn’t an object.

“Is this truly necessary?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon seemed to try to help, but the man was unperturbed by his mental measurements.

“Indeed, it is.”

Melissa cringed when he held the long paintbrush horizontally over the level of her nipples as if he were checking that they were even.

“I must ensure that the prince will be pleased when we finish this in Brighton,” the painter said at the exact moment the door swung open and hit the wall with a thud.

John stood breathless, his boots muddy and his gaze stern. “What is the meaning of this?”

But what felt worse was that his anger seemed directed at Melissa.

“You agreed to be my wife,” John spoke the words before the thoughts fully matured in his mind. He saw the hunched-over painter staring at Melissa’s chest as if he were judging her. Red-hot anger raged through his veins. She may not be naked, but she was posing for another man, and it irked John more than he could say. Melissa stood there in a red and white dress that was clearly too large for her, and next to her, an older woman dressed in black turned to John.

His heart skipped a beat.

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon?” He shut the door behind him as he entered the room and invaded the space between the painter and Melissa.

She’s my love .

“Your Grace,” the older woman curtsied. It was a simple gesture of respect even though he’d lost the title. She was showing him, not telling, that she meant no harm.

Still!

“You!” was all John managed. Melissa’s eyes were wide, and she remained motionless next to him as he spoke to Mrs. Dove-Lyon. “You promised me a wife and then stood by as she was snatched away from me.”

“I thought you never cared for Lexi!” Melissa cried out before John knew what he’d said.

“That’s true!” He turned back to Mrs. Dove-Lyon, who was now giving him a look sharper than that of a viper ready to strike. “But I met you and imagined a life beyond merely being alone.” His voice trembled with anger, but there was something else he didn’t wish to acknowledge. “And when I was stripped of my title, I had nothing left to offer you. Without the title, I couldn’t even approach the prince and ask him to release you. For me, Melissa. I still can’t—”

“I received your request. That’s why we are here,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, pulling back the sheer curtains to let more light into the room. And you’re wasting the little daylight we have left.”

Melissa sat back on the stool, a solemn look on her face. She blushed and avoided John’s gaze.

“Stay still, Lady Thumbridge,” the painter said with a self-indulgent grin at John.

“What is this even?” John eyed the painting and felt his chest tighten when Melissa remained ramrod for the painter to continue.

“I can explain.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon pulled him toward the armchair and sat down. “Hear me out!”

“No!” John shouted, eyeing Melissa’s half-exposed chest in the odd dress that was not even hers. “I won’t stand by! I let everyone steal from me. First, my wife, I

couldn't save her. Then, I nearly lost Herbert because I was too blind to see his grief beyond my own. The title. But not her! Not this time!" He went to Melissa and bent down on one knee. "Melissa, please, come with me. Whatever she has on you to force you to be painted and return to Brighton, I will find a solution."

"She already has one," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said from behind him, but he waved her off.

"Melissa, please come with me." His voice was a plea against heartbreak.

"Only a few minutes of daylight, John. Then I'm free to go," Melissa said.

"Come with me now." He reached into his waist pocket and retrieved the silver box. He pressed the lever down and opened it.

"Just a few more—" Melissa said, but then John rose, speechless. The box was empty.

"This has my family's heirloom, a ruby, and the crest and..." he choked on his words. The image of Herbert earlier in the study came to his mind. He wouldn't have stolen the ring to give it to the farmer's girl, would he?

"Come with me!" John reached for Melissa's arm, but she didn't extend her hand. "Melissa? I have to go and find the ring. Please!"

"If I can't finish this tonight, we shall continue in Brighton," Cosway said.

Melissa inhaled sharply and looked at John. She shook her head ever so faintly, her eyes glistening with tears. John's heart crumbled into pieces, devastated by Melissa's silent refusal that cut through him more deeply than words ever could. Her tear-filled eyes mirrored his own sorrow, enveloping him in a profound sense of helplessness and isolation.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

Melissa remained still even though every fiber of her being had wanted to throw herself into John's arms. While the painter's brush scratched on the canvas, her heart grew heavier with the thoughts of John's earnest proposal. His voice had trembled with sincerity, each word a plea wrapped in hope. He had knelt before her, eyes filled with a longing that made her chest tighten. The antique box he presented was beautiful yet bare, its emptiness mirroring the void she feared lay ahead for them both if she didn't remain still for the painter.

Her eyes had met his, and she had seen the flicker of hurt cross his face, a momentary crack in his steadfast demeanor. She wished he could understand the turmoil swirling within her, the duty she felt bound to fulfill with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. The promise she had made to lend her form to Princess Caroline's figure in the painting weighed on her, a silent chain that held her back. Melissa felt the truth settle in her chest like a leaden weight; she could not offer John a future built on an empty promise, much like the box he had held wasn't a token of their engagement until everything fell into place.

"This has to suffice," Melissa said when the sun had nearly set. Mrs. Dove-Lyon had flicked on the gas light in the room, but the painter had started to squint, and Melissa couldn't sit still for another moment.

"Milady, I don't think I can finish—"

But Mrs. Dove-Lyon rose from her seat and held out her hand. "Change into your own gown and take my carriage. I will settle this and make sure you are free."

Melissa's breath hitched. "Truly?"



Mrs. Dove-Lyon gave a soft nod. “I saw it in his eyes and heard every word. If you go now, you may still catch up with him.”

Melissa squeezed Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s hand. “Thank you!”

“This is what I do. I told you, I make matches; I don’t break them.”

“You’ve set me free!” Melissa’s voice quivered with tears.

Her hands trembled as she changed into her own dress, reveling at the exact fit. When she got to the black carriage, the driver held the door open for her and helped her in.

The air was crisp with freedom.

She was finally able to return to John head-high, no longer a mistress but the woman he promised to marry.

But when she sat on the dark velvet bench and the carriage set into motion, she hoped he’d still have her. Had the price she paid been too high? Was it too late?

Melissa’s mind turned faster than the landau’s wheels on the gravel road, but then the carriage came to a halt. She looked out the window, not expecting to see anything in particular, when her heart stopped.

A small carriage had turned over, and she heard cries for help. A large black mare pawed the ground, her ears flicking. John’s horse.

Before even the driver could catch up with her, Melissa pushed the door open and ran to the carriage. “John?” she shouted.

She reached the carriage, turned on its side, and saw John crouching behind it.

“What happened here?” she called.

“I’m losing him,” John mumbled. “Losing everything.” He was in shock, banging his foot against the bottom of the carriage, which had now become the side. “He’s stuck, and I can’t get him out! My boy!”

The door was stuck indeed, bent and cracked but unmovable. “How long have you been like this?”

“Melissa?” Herbert’s voice came from inside the carriage.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“I can’t get out.” Herbert’s voice was muffled by something in the cabin.

“I know, darling, I’m trying to help.” A child needed her help. Nothing else mattered in the moment. “John, break the glass! Now!”

John unbuttoned his coat and took it off, wrapping it tightly around his elbow with a sense of determination etched into his features. Melissa braced herself for the blow, her heart pounding as she stood beside him, the carriage lying precariously on its side, like a giant beast felled by an unseen force. She could see the panic in John’s expression; it was that of a man who’d suffered loss and feared it more than anything else.

“Herbert, turn your head away from the door. Cover your face, do you hear me?” she called.

“Yes!” Good, he was listening to her. Finally.

Using all his strength, John shattered the glass panel of the door with a powerful

elbow strike. The sound of shattering glass was sharp, piercing the tense silence, and a rush of relief surged through Melissa's chest as she watched John create an opening. His eyes, usually so calm, now blazed with a fierce panic. They worked together in unison without the need to discuss what to do. They were of one mind and one heart, and Melissa worried for Herbert as if he were her own.

John leaned into the carriage, trying to reach his son, but his broad shoulders strained against the narrow confines.

"Melissa, I can't fit," John said, his voice a mix of frustration and desperation. "He's just beyond my reach."

Without hesitation, Melissa placed a reassuring hand on his arm. "Let me," she insisted, her voice steady and resolute. The time for fear had passed; all that mattered was the boy.

John nodded, stepping aside just enough to allow her slender frame to weave through the jagged opening. She took a deep breath, feeling the cool breeze against her skin, and crawled into the dim interior. The air was filled with the scent of overturned earth and the faintest hint of smoke, enveloping her as she moved forward.

Her eyes adjusted quickly, landing on the small figure huddled amidst the chaos. "Melissa!" Herbert cried, and her heart ached with both relief and urgency.

"I'm here. Hold on tight," Melissa whispered, her hands reaching instinctively for Herbert. She felt his hands grasp hers, no larger than hers, the connection a lifeline amid the turmoil. Carefully, she maneuvered him toward the opening, every motion deliberate and protective.

"Melissa, I thought you wouldn't come back to me!" John's gaze was tense and his eyes black with confusion.

“I’m back. And I never truly left.” With these words, she removed her pelisse and arranged it around the sharp edges of the opening of the door. She climbed into the carriage halfway, reaching inside with both hands.

Herbert’s leg was stuck in the dislodged seat. “Take a piece of the glass to cut your foot out; I can’t reach it,” she called to him.

It was growing too dark to make out his expression, but he seemed to hesitate for a moment before she heard the ragged sound of fabric shredding.

Then, a sigh of relief.

And then the truly unexpected happened. Herbert reached for her hand—not merely for purchase but to actually hold her. So much could be expressed with a simple gesture.

As she emerged into the light, feeling Herbert against her, John’s strong arms encircled them both, pulling them into a protective embrace. It was a birth of a family, and Melissa’s breath hitched. Relief flooded through her, a silent prayer of gratitude echoing in her mind.

“We’re safe,” John murmured, his voice a soothing balm as he held them close, the shattered glass glistening like ripples in the water in the sunlight, as if the fear of the moment just before could be washed away if only they were together.

John had never felt more useless in his entire life—nor more proud—or relieved when he witnessed Melissa dragging Herbert out of the carriage. Herbert climbed onto the side of the carriage, and John stood before him, his arms outstretched as he used to do when Herbert was less than two years old and wanted to jump off the bed. As if his son remembered, he reached out to John and cried, “Father!” and jumped into his arms just as before.

Melissa shook out her pelisse, pierced by the broken glass with irreparable damage. But John never felt more healed. “I’ll buy you as many new ones as you’d like. Just come here now; it’s where you belong.” John held his son tightly with his right arm, pressing him against his chest, and wrapped his left arm around Melissa. “We belong together.”

“Wait!?” Herbert suddenly jumped back. “The ring!”

He patted his pockets, then his breeches, and looked in alarm. “I must have dropped it in the carriage.”

“Why did you take it?”

“I wanted to give it to Laura before you could give it to...” He furrowed his brows. “I was wrong.” Then he turned around and tried to rattle the carriage.

A little later, Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s driver and John, with what seemed like a little help from Herbert’s boyish strength, managed to turn the carriage right side up. With little ado, John tore the door out of its hinges, and Herbert climbed in.

“I know it must have fallen out here,” his voice came muffled from the cabin.

“You didn’t come with me, and I didn’t think you’d be back,” John whispered to Melissa. “Thank you for saving my child.”

Melissa wiped a tear away. “You’ll never have to thank me as your wife.”

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

“Father, I cleaned it as best as I could.” Herbert walked into John’s study with a solemn look that John immediately knew meant he had been engaged in some mischief.

“I told you to keep it for someone special. It belonged to your grandmother, and you should give it to a woman you love.” Then he saw Laura appear from behind the doorframe. “But only when you grow older and are ready. Do you understand?”

Laura turned beet red.

But Herbert came closer. “This belongs to you, Father. I was wrong to try to keep it from you.”

“No, you were not. A ring like this is a symbol. I was amiss not to explain that it makes up a part of our fortune, and that includes you, of course.

“I should go,” Laura whispered.

“You are always welcome here, Laura. Please understand my disapproval; it is merely that you are both very young and should give yourselves the chance to grow up. If you still feel in the future as you do now, you shall have my blessing indeed.”

“Thank you, milord.” The poor girl was so red and wrung her hands that John thought it best to spare her any more wisdom.

“So are you, Father,” Herbert said when Laura gave him a nod and disappeared into the hall. She already knew her way well around the castle.

“Am what?”

“You are young and have a heart full of love to give. I shan’t be the one to stop you.”

“Shouldn’t,” John cringed when he heard himself correct his son.

“You should ask her to marry you and give her this ring.” Herbert gave a nod in the same way Marianne used to when she indicated that she was ready.

John swallowed hard, but he could have sworn that his eyes were most likely growing red-rimmed. “We have other rings, you know. There’s a sapphire in the vault—”

“No, this is for Melissa. When I’m all grown up, I’ll come to ask you which ring I may give Laura.”

John bit his lip. He certainly didn’t want to cry in front of his son. He hadn’t even when Marianne had died.

“It’s a family affair, like you said.” John rubbed his eyes before a tear could spill. “Let’s do this together, shall we?”

Melissa sat in her bedchamber at Starcliff Castle, the soft glow of the firelight casting a warm hue across the room. She absently stroked the velvet cushion on her lap, lost in thought. The echoes of her recent argument with John still lingered in her mind, making her chest tighten with regret and uncertainty even though they’d reconciled. Apologies could mend but not erase what had been said.

Angus, her little gray kitten, padded into the room, his tiny paws barely making a sound on the polished wooden floor. Melissa smiled softly at the sight of him, her heart lifting slightly. Angus had been her constant companion, a source of comfort and amusement in the tumultuous waters of her emotions.

The kitten leaped onto the bed, approaching with a determined air. “What is it, my sweet fluff ball?” Melissa murmured, reaching out to scratch him behind the ears. Angus began to paw at his neck, and Melissa noticed a small ribbon tied around it. Her brow furrowed as she leaned closer, thinking it was perhaps a new bandage. Herbert often worried over the smallest things, the kitten, and she wondered if he had tended to Angus without her noticing.

But then, something glinted in the firelight. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized it wasn’t a bandage. It was a ruby ring, secured with a white silken ribbon around Angus’s neck. Her heart began to race, and she gently untied the ribbon, carefully holding the ring between her fingers as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

“John?” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

At that moment, John stepped out from the shadows of the doorway, his face a mixture of hope and apprehension. Next to him was Herbert, looking as if he’d spilled the milk. Then he left.

John hesitated at the threshold, his usually confident demeanor replaced with a rare vulnerability. “Melissa,” he began, his voice soft but steady. “I know we quarreled, and I can only hope you will forgive me. I thought perhaps Angus might soften your heart toward me.”

Tears welled in Melissa’s eyes as she looked at him, the sincerity and humility in his expression piercing through her defenses. She stood, clutching the ring to her chest as if it could anchor her racing emotions.

“John,” she said, taking a step toward him. “You have my heart, always. There is nothing to forgive.”



Relief washed over his features, and he closed the distance between them in two quick strides. Taking her hand in his, he knelt before her, his eyes never leaving hers. “Melissa, you are the light of my life. From the moment I met you, I knew there was no future for me without you in my life. But only you had the bravery to make it happen, and I was too stupid and proud to see it. I love you with every fiber of my being. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

The room seemed to hold its breath as Melissa gazed down at him, her heart full to bursting. “Yes,” she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. “Yes, John, I will marry you.”

A radiant smile spread across John’s face as he slipped the ring onto her finger. He rose, pulling her into his arms, and they shared a kiss that sealed their promise to each other. In that moment, all doubts and fears melted away, leaving only the pure, unshakable certainty of their love.

Angus meowed softly, reminding them of his presence, and they both laughed, the sound echoing joyfully through the chamber. Melissa held John close, feeling the warmth of his love envelop her, and she knew that whatever challenges lay ahead, they would face them together as one.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:09 am*

A letter from Lexi arrived:

Dearest Sister,

I trust this letter finds you in the best of spirits. I have the most delightful news to share with you! The prince regent himself has bestowed a Royal Warrant upon our friends, the esteemed doctors at 87 and 91 Harley Street. Their exemplary service has not gone unnoticed, and it is truly a moment of pride for all of us. The dedication and skill of these physicians have set a standard that others shall strive to meet, has it not?

On a related note, I must tell you about Mrs. Dove-Lyon's recent visits to Dr. Alfred Stein and his charming wife, Ada. She seems to transform into a clucking, cheerful grandmother every time she steps through their door and sweeps their twins into her arms. Her presence brings such warmth and joy that I am certain is at odds with what we've seen when we visited her, you know where, in the blue house.

Before I conclude, I am overcome with curiosity about a particular matter. It appears the prince regent has taken a special interest in ensuring that you and Mr. John Stonebridge have his blessing for your impending nuptials. This gesture is most intriguing, and I am eager to hear how this came about. Do share the details at your earliest convenience, for I am beside myself with curiosity.

Awaiting your reply with bated breath.

Yours affectionately,

Alexis, Duchess of Duncan

“Are you going to tell her?” John asked when Melissa handed him the letter that had arrived from London earlier that day.

“It’s a long story,” Melissa chuckled, trailing more kisses on her handsome John, who lay stark naked underneath her. “I have my hands full at the estate with the steward.”

John let out a deep, resonant growl of satisfaction. “There is much to be done at Starcliff Castle, my love. You pledged to Lexi that everything would flourish under our watchful eye.” With a firm yet tender embrace, he drew Melissa over his middle, their bodies seamlessly becoming one. “Our families have entrusted us with this great responsibility.”

“And so much depends on the care we bestow upon the estate,” Melissa affirmed, her voice a soft yet resolute promise.

“Indeed, it is a legacy of which we are inextricably a part,” John murmured, his head sinking back into the pillow as Melissa enveloped him completely. The world around them seemed to hold its breath, the castle’s grandeur a fitting backdrop to their union.

“Our family is your legacy,” she whispered, sealing their destiny with a promise as infinite as the green hills beyond Starcliff Castle, illuminating the path of their shared future.

She stood at her vanity, fastening the last tiny pearl button on her dove-gray dress, the fabric soft against her skin. Her reflection revealed a faint blush on her cheeks as she glanced at the open door. The seamstress would arrive soon, and they’d begin the fittings for her wedding gown. The very thought sent her heart flitting like a bird in the hedgerows, a mixture of excitement and nerves.

Just as she reached for her glove, a warm, familiar hand gently closed over hers.

“Melissa,” John murmured, his voice low and steady, the kind of tone that always seemed to root her in place. She turned, and before she could manage a word, he pulled her close, one hand resting lightly at the small of her back, the other still clasping her fingers.

“What are you doing?” she asked, though the smile tugging at her lips betrayed her feigned indignation. “I’m getting measured today.”

“Not letting you rush off just yet,” he said, his dark eyes soft yet smoldering as they searched hers. “There’s something I need to do to you first.”

Her protest caught in her throat as he leaned in, his lips brushing hers with a tenderness that made her breath hitch. The kiss deepened, not with haste, but with infinite care, as if John were unwrapping something precious—a treasure he thought long lost. His thumb traced a slow, lazy circle over the back of her hand, anchoring her in a moment she didn’t want to end.

When they finally parted, Melissa’s voice came no louder than a whisper. “You’ll make me late.”

“Good,” John said, a teasing quirk to his smile. “I’d rather your seamstress waited than waste a single moment of this. Of you.”

Her heart swelled, the weight of the years they had endured lightening with every soft word he spoke. She brushed a hand along his temple, fingers sliding through his dark locks now kissed with the faintest silver strands. “You’re insufferable.”

“And yet, you love me,” he replied, a huskiness in his voice that melted any chance of pretense.

She tilted her head, studying him, words tumbling from her lips as if her heart

insisted on speaking them aloud. “I do. More than I imagined possible.”

His hands framed her face, his thumb brushing along her cheekbone. “Melissa, I wake up every day knowing that this—our life together—is worth every risk I never thought I’d have the courage to take.”

Her throat tightened, emotion swelling in her chest as his words sank into her bones. She nodded, letting that truth hang between them like a promise.

Finally, she was the one to kiss him this time, laughter spilling softly between them when they pulled apart. “Fine,” she said, her tone deliberately resigned. “But if my dress is delayed, I’m holding you fully responsible.”

“I’ll take the blame,” John said, his grin widening. “But for now, I think I’ll steal you for just a little longer.”

Locking her fingers with his, Melissa allowed herself to follow him, her worries forgotten as joy and love filled every corner of the room. Together, they stepped into the day, their lives tangled in a story that had finally come home to the moment it was always meant to reach.

Five years later...

John had commissioned a painting and couldn't wait to see it finished. The afternoon sunlight filtered through the tall mullioned windows of the drawing room, that Lexi and Melissa had expertly redesigned, dappling the patterned Persian rug with soft golden swaths. The air carried the scent of the portraitist's oils as usual. But this time, he was painting John's entire family, all of his love and pride.

The Chesterfield armchairs had been relocated to make space for the ornate settee, now central to the scene, flanked by high-backed chairs set in balanced symmetry. Cosway, with his thin mustache and sharp gray eyes, adjusted his palette with deliberate precision near the fireplace.

John stood at the edge of the room, his hand resting on the carved mahogany post of the chaise lounge. His gaze trailed over his son, seated on one of the burgundy damask chairs meant for the portrait. Herbert, nearly a man now, bore the sharp lines of his late mother's face and the quiet intensity of his stepmother's raised brow when caught in thought. His hair, dark and thick, caught the light as he bent toward his uncle Dustin, who'd already served as Duke of Duncan for half a decade and turned out to bring excellence to everything he started.

"And so," John said, leaning in just a touch to ruffle the boy's shoulder lightly, "at Oxford, you'll learn the weighty matters of laws and taxes."

Dustin interrupted him. "But would it be such a loss if you also acquainted yourself with a little chemistry? Perhaps put anatomy on the list of courses?" He grinned lazily, broadening his posture before Herbert could raise reasoned protest. "I may

need an heir for the estate and the clinic.”

Herbert smirked, though he tried to disguise it behind an exaggerated nod. “If Father permits, Uncle. Medicine courses would be—”

“Extras.” John narrowed his eyes briefly. “If it comes to it,” he mused, his voice even, though the corners of his mouth hinted at amusement. “One never knows what questions running an estate as large as ours might raise. If not for your own betterment, think of your future laborers’ well-being. Diligence at every level matters.”

Herbert’s chin tilted upward slightly—a gesture John recognized as pride but also challenge. They had spent countless hours studying tenant contracts and the intricacies of crop rotations. To John, the boy’s confidence now spoke volumes about his readiness to take the next step. And it no longer seemed to matter whether there would be male heirs or not, Herbert came after John and was ready to support his family and the Dukedom in every way.

“When I come home in the winter, I’d like to take one of the rings for Laura.” Herbert sucked in his lips and met John’s gaze.

“Once you’re ready, son. It’ll all be there for you.”

The settee across from John creaked softly as Lexi adjusted her position, twin daughters tumbling and giggling at her side. Their identical blonde curls glinted in the sun, and their lace frocks bunched at their knees. She tapped one gently on the nose to discourage wriggling, her expression calm but her tone firm. Despite her busy days as Duchess, she carried motherhood as naturally as any duty she had performed for the family.

Nearby, Melissa sank into a chair, her movement graceful despite her rounded belly. She wore a soft green gown that suited the calm she seemed to bring into any room.

Marianne, their first-born daughter, named after Herbert's mother, toddled up to her side, her chubby hands stretched skyward for attention. Melissa scooped the girl up and settled her onto her lap, stroking the toddler's dark curls as her laughter bubbled.

John's chest tightened—not with pity for what had been or regret for what might have come if paths had changed earlier, but with the fullness of now. The family, in every form they had become, occupied this space together. Marianne already shared an unshakable connection with her older brother. Herbert teased the child, projecting little acts of brotherly affection, though John suspected this loyalty grew as much from devotion as from the boy sensing her connection to his late mother.

"Father," one of the girls called, yanking Dustin's sleeve when he remained standing too long at the room's edge. "Angus is stealing my cushion!"

Sure enough, the oversized cat, with fur as thick as winter velvet, had sprawled dead-center on the largest seat, eyes blinking lazily at the fuss surrounding him. Someone chuckled—Dustin, most likely—and there was no need to shoo the creature. Angus wouldn't move unless he truly intended.

Joining Melissa near the chairs, John laid a hand across hers when she momentarily switched her attention to him. "Are you comfortably settled?"

Melissa glanced toward his eyes, a soft knowing there even after all these years. Her cheeks, rosy from the room's warmth, lifted into a light smile. "The baby and I are just fine, though at this rate Marianne might outrun my abilities."

John laughed quietly, though full from the sound. "If this one carries half as much spirit as her siblings, we shall have a proper hurricane of a household."

Cosway cleared his throat as he demanded stillness from his subjects for at least five minutes, though chuckles persisted, naturally from the little girls. Little Marianne curled on her mother's lap. All settled—John on the central chair with Melissa to one



side, Herbert on the other standing behind John, the twins nestled against Lexi, and Dustin on the other side. There was no Duke in the center, as they'd agreed. Dustin couldn't run the estate without John and John wouldn't have anything to run without Dustin, so they shared the responsibility. Even Angus held still, his large paws hanging off the edge of the central cushion like a spoiled king.

John straightened, brushing the cuff of his jacket where it settled at his wrist, and allowed his gaze to wander one last time across the company. Oxford loomed for Herbert, and another child awaited its debut. Yet, standing in the doorway of tomorrow's changes, he felt no apprehension. Instead, there was a grounding peace that settled low in his chest, thick and sure as iron tethered to the earth.

The world might shift again, as it had so irreversibly before, but this—a family knit as tightly as winter's wool—was unshakable now. This was theirs to face together.

"I need to sketch the two Dukes of Duncan first," the aging painter announced.

Dustin cast John a warm smile.

"We're ready," John told Cosway. "Make this moment last for eternity." And he wished he could.