A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a vibrant red, off-the-shoulder gown with a large bow at the shoulder, stands in a grand, wood-paneled room. The room features ornate chandeliers and a large, patterned armchair. The overall atmosphere is elegant and classic.

The
Impossible
Balfours

BOOK 5

What an
Heiress
Wants

GEMMA
BLACKWOOD

WHAT AN HEIRESS WANTS

THE IMPOSSIBLE BALFOURS



GEMMA BLACKWOOD

Copyright © 2022 by Gemma Blackwood

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gemma Blackwood writes historical romance with dashing heroes, brave heroines and the sweetest of happy endings.

She can be found on the sunny southwest coast of England, where she writes in a shed at the bottom of her garden - the only place she can get away from her inquisitive cat.

Sign up to her mailing list to keep up with her latest news and receive a free copy of the prequel to her series *Scandals of Scarcliffe Hall*, as well as an additional romantic short story set in Regency England!

[Click here to sign up](#)



CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

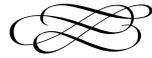
[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Epilogue: Twenty Years Later](#)

[Also by Gemma Blackwood](#)

CHAPTER 1



It was a typical morning in the breakfast room at Whitby Manor. Sunlight was streaming through the windows, fragrant steam was rising from the coffee pot, and the screams of horror from upstairs were barely enough to distract Lucius Whitby from the morning papers.

“Find the smelling salts! Fetch the doctor! Call the parson! Somebody do something!”

Lucius licked his finger and turned a page. All in all, he was glad to be home. His travels around the Continent were sedate by comparison.

Angry footsteps thundered down the stairs, their force enough to rattle his cup in its saucer. Lucius took up the silver tongs and dropped a lump of sugar into his coffee.

When his oldest sister, Evelina, slammed open the door with flushed cheeks and a thundercloud over her brow, he nodded a silent welcome and returned to his paper.

“Where is that girl?” roared his father, voice muffled by the thick carpeting on the floor upstairs. Nobody could deny that the Whitby family enjoyed their creature comforts. Or their melodrama.

Since Evelina’s hands were clenched into fists, Lucius folded up his newspaper and poured the coffee for her.

“Sugar?”

“Thank you,” said Evelina, sounding as though he’d offered her a lump of rat poison instead. Lucius stirred it in,

the tinkling of spoon against cup offering a harmonic counterpoint to the wails from upstairs.

“Toast?”

“Not at present.” Evelina unfurled her fists and accepted the coffee cup, raised it to her lips, and set it down without drinking. She was staring at a particular spot on the opposite wall with such fury that Lucius feared the wallpaper would burst into flame.

It was unlike Evie to cause a ruckus at such an early hour, but Lucius was not inclined to investigate. He’d supplied hot coffee, and therefore considered his brotherly duty done. He picked up the newspaper again and had just found his place when Evelina spoke, biting out the words as though they stung her lips.

“It seems Lord Henry and I will not suit, after all.”

Ah. Now the wailing had an explanation. Lucius lowered the paper to get a good look at his sister’s face. It was tense and pale, her jaw clenched too tightly over a welter of emotions.

“That’s a pity,” he ventured. Evelina made no indication that she’d heard him. “Is the engagement off?”

Her eyes, unnaturally bright, cut to him and then darted away. “There never *was* an engagement.”

“The understanding, then?”

“It appears we both misunderstood.”

“Should I challenge the blighter?” asked Lucius, out of duty rather than bloodlust. Duelling was the province of their hot-headed younger brother, Sebastian. But Sebastian was away with the Navy, and needs must. Even Lord Henry Claremont, son of the Duke of Richmond, could not be allowed to humiliate a Whitby.

“Certainly not,” said Evelina. “It was as much my decision as his.”

The uneven rhythm of their father’s footsteps sounded on the staircase. Evelina took a deep breath, settled her shoulders,

and lifted the coffee cup again with every impression of equanimity.

Lucius relaxed. “Father will soon smooth things over.”

She had time to raise a sceptical eyebrow before their father entered the breakfast room.

“Evie,” Horace Whitby cooed, puffing from the exertion of making his way down the stairs. “My sweet child, what’s this I hear? Have you and Lord Henry fallen out?”

Evie leaned back in her chair and gave a dismissive shrug. “I suppose we have, Father.”

Mr Whitby cleared his throat, tugging on the silken collar of his banyan. His jowly cheeks were reddening, but his eyes remained kind. “These things happen, dear girl! Give it a day or two and all will be forgotten. There was no need to frighten your mother.”

Evelina blew on her coffee. “If it frightens Mother to know that I will not marry Lord Henry, I’m afraid there was every need.”

Her voice trembled a little, but that was the only sign that she was not really as calm as she appeared.

“Now, now, my petal,” said Mr Whitby, his cane tapping on the tiled floor as he approached Evelina’s chair. “Tell your old papa what has happened, and we’ll soon sort it out. Of course you’ll marry Lord Henry.”

The fire flared again in Evelina’s eyes. “I will not,” she said. “I will not now, nor ever, marry that man. And, since he has no intention of marrying *me*, there is nothing more to be said about it.”

Mr Whitby wheezed like a broken harmonica. “Nothing more – nothing more to be said! Now listen to me, young lady!” He bent down, gripping the silver wolf’s head of his cane so fiercely his knuckles whitened. “There is no question that you will marry Lord Henry. I say you will, and so you shall. Do you hear?”

“Father!” Lucius set down his paper so sharply he crumpled the pages. “What on earth do you mean? If Evie doesn’t wish to marry Lord Henry, that’s the end of it.”

He was astonished to find his father’s usually genial eyes filled with a steely glint. “Don’t interfere with things you don’t understand, Lucius. We’re speaking of one of the finest families in England! The second son of the Duke of Richmond!”

Evelina let out a short, bitter laugh. Lucius, sensing she was about to say something unwise, gave her shoulder a gentle warning squeeze as he rose to stand beside her.

“It wouldn’t matter if he were next in line to the throne, Father. Evie doesn’t want to marry him.”

Mr Whitby’s baleful glare turned back onto his eldest daughter. “Then little Miss Evie had better change her mind, and fast.”

That was enough. Lucius took his father’s arm and steered him back into the hallway as quickly as the old man’s limp would allow. “Let’s have a word in private, Father. Evie will not be more likely to change her mind if you spoil her breakfast.” Just before the door closed behind them, he glanced over his shoulder and gave his sister a firm nod, as much as to say, *Leave this to me.*

Evie slumped down at her seat, looking painfully weary, and barely mustered a smile in response.

“Will you stop dragging me about!” complained Mr Whitby, waving his cane as Lucius steered him into the library. “Strewth, but you’ve come back from the Continent with some funny ideas. I sent you off to further your education, not to learn disrespect for your elders. And a pretty penny it cost me, too!”

Lucius rolled his eyes. Yes, his Grand Tour had been extravagant – as extravagant as was expected of the eldest son of an excellent family. His father would have complained more if Lucius had been frugal. Whitbys, he always said, deserved the very best.

He lessened his grip on his father's arm. "It was getting too hot in there for my liking, Father. Much better to let Evie alone for a while to think things over. Let's ring for Ricketts and tell him we'll take our breakfast here in the library. You can give me all the news of the estate, and I'll –" He stopped to steady the old man as he stumbled. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing, my boy." Mr Whitby coughed and fussed with his cane, avoiding his son's eyes. "Nothing at all."

Lucius realised then that he had misread the unfamiliar glimmer in his father's eyes before. It was not anger.

It was guilt.



THE BREAKFAST TRAY sat untouched on the sideboard. Lucius's appetite had been thoroughly spoiled. And judging by the way his father squirmed in the armchair opposite, Mr Whitby had no stomach for it either.

Lucius leaned forward and pinned his father with a look. "Father, be honest with me. What liberties has Lord Henry taken with Evie? I won't let him abandon her if things have gone too far. I don't care who his father is."

Mr Whitby's round cheeks quivered. "Liberties? Not of the sort you imagine, I hope. There were a few indiscretions we overlooked. A familiarity we should not have allowed before an official betrothal. Letters. That sort of thing."

Lucius sat back, relieved. "Then why all this fuss? I understand you and Mother are disappointed, but really! Trying to force Evie into marriage? It's beneath you."

Mr Whitby looked for a moment as if he meant to argue. Instead, he dropped his face into his hands and let out a great shuddering groan. "I'm afraid that unless Evie secures the match, there'll be very little that *isn't* beneath us, my boy." He raised his face, eyes wet, jaw working tremulously around the words. "Lord Henry was our great hope, Lucius. He seemed so taken with her – a love match, through and through! And we

all know how wealthy his father is. There's no price he wouldn't pay to secure his son's happiness."

Lucius felt as though the last candle had been extinguished in an unfamiliar room. He could feel the shapes of the objects around him but was not yet sure what they were.

"Why does Richmond's fortune matter?" he asked, though his father's eyes already confirmed what he feared. "We have never lacked for money. Quite the opposite, in fact. Isn't that so, Father?"

Mr Whitby opened his mouth and closed it again. Lucius exhaled slowly, willing his pulse steady. "How bad is it?"

"You must not tell your sisters," said Mr Whitby hoarsely. "We mustn't frighten the girls about their dowries."

In the dark room of Lucius's imagination, he had lit the candle again. Only to discover that he was not standing in a room at all. He was teetering at the edge of a sheer precipice, nothing but a terrible void below.

"But they will still *have* dowries, Father? Even if they are less than you hoped?"

"Love matches," muttered Mr Whitby, his eyes skittering about from floor to ceiling, wall to wall, everywhere but Lucius's face. His fingers stroked the worn snout of the wolf's head on his cane. "They must all make love matches, Lucius, and rich ones, too. It's the only way. No one will have them for their money when there's no money to be had."

Lucius could no longer sit still. He pushed himself to his feet, startling his father, and paced restlessly along the length of the bookshelves. Neat rows of leather-bound tomes, a collection built up by generations of Whitbys, blurred before his eyes. He reached the window and stared out at the manicured lawn, the expertly trimmed topiary, the gardeners busy at work amid the summer splendour of the flowerbeds.

"All gone?" he asked, taking the final step forwards over the precipice, his foot finding nothing but thin air.

"All of it," said Mr Whitby. Lucius closed his eyes and let his heart plummet over the edge.

A small and nasty part of his mind presented him with a catalogue of expenses from his years on the Continent. The coffeehouses, the parties, the spacious accommodation. The art he'd bought, sculptures and paintings, lavish gifts sent home to friends and family. The fine dining – and by George, the *food* he'd eaten in Rome, Prague, Vienna! The endless supply of wine, books, opera tickets, clothes.

The letters from his father encouraging him to enjoy himself, to make the most of it. To live the life of a wealthy young Englishman to the full.

His eyes snapped open. The sight of the busy gardeners filled him with rage. What were they still doing there? How much did each snip of their shears drain the family coffers?

“*How long –*” He stopped himself, swallowing down volcanic rage, and did not turn back to his father until he trusted himself to be calm. “How long has this been going on? You cannot have lost your entire fortune in one blow. And since my return to England, there’s been no sign of economy. We spent the Season in London! We hosted dinner parties, for heaven’s sake. You threw a ball for Georgiana’s birthday!”

“And it worked!” Mr Whitby protested. “Evie landed a duke’s son!”

“Do you intend to sell your daughters like cattle to cover the cost of your own mistakes?”

He’d spoken too harshly. His father had been fragile since the day he returned from the war, wounded and trembling, when Lucius was only a child. Now old Horace Whitby quailed before him, slumping down like a much older man. “I intend to get them husbands who can provide for them.” He ran a trembling hand over his brow. “Husbands who will not make the mistakes I have made. Lord Henry’s father is one of the few men rich enough to help us with our debts. And he’ll do it, too, to save his son from the disgrace of marrying a pauper.”

“The duke is unlikely to pay anything, since Lord Henry and Evie no longer wish to marry.”

Mr Whitby sighed wretchedly. “Lucius, I like this as little as you do, but the debts come due at the end of the summer. This is the only way. The Duke of Richmond is an honourable man, and when we present him with the letters Evie received from his son, the marriage will take place without delay.”

Lucius sucked in a breath. “No.”

“Of course, it would be better if things do not come to that. I will give Evie time to patch things up. Young ladies are prone to taking offence at every little thing. Perhaps this is merely a lover’s tiff.”

Lucius had always known his father was a proud man. A silly man, too, in many ways. But he had never dreamed his judgement could go this far astray. Never questioned his father’s advice to enjoy himself, never doubted that his future was secure.

That blind trust was rooted in love. Perhaps that was why this new awakening was so painful.

“There is another way,” he said, hearing that pain roughen his voice, and hoping it passed as sternness. “We must economise at once. Close up this house and find a tenant. Send the girls to live with relatives. You must show me the family finances – the *true* state of them – and we’ll see what can be salvaged. In the meantime, we’ll sell off what we don’t need. Last year’s clothes. The art I sent up from Italy and Spain. The wine cellar ought to bring in a decent amount. And the girls can help, too. There’ll be no need for fine dresses next Season if we can’t survive the summer. Mother’s jewellery – everything that she can bear to part with.”

Mr Whitby’s eyes widened in horror. “No, no, no! You cannot be serious. The girls’ dresses? The wine? Have you lost your mind?”

“No, I’ve lost my fortune,” Lucius snapped. “And people without money don’t drink claret. We must do what we can to avoid disaster. No more keeping up appearances. No more frivolous spending. Putting it off will only make matters worse. And, in the meantime, you will give me your word that you will not mention Lord Henry again. I would rather sell

everything we own than see my siblings married against their will.” Even as Lucius spoke, he felt the hollowness of his words.

People without money didn’t drink claret. And nor did they marry for love.

“And what do you suppose will happen when the world knows Horace Whitby has lost his fortune?” demanded Mr Whitby. “That his children are little more than paupers? We’ll be a laughingstock. Who’d take the girls under such circumstances?” Mr Whitby shook his head. “Our only hope is to put on a good show for as long as we can and get your sisters taken care of by the autumn. Since you insist on it, Evie can have a month to repair her romance with Lord Henry. As for Cassie and Georgiana, I have invited several distinguished guests to spend the summer with us.” To Lucius’s dismay, his father gave a wink that he must have thought was cunning. “And not only gentlemen. Georgiana has invited a friend. The heiress, Lady Isobel Balfour.”

Lucius froze.

Isobel Balfour. He hadn’t seen her in years – not since her brother inherited a dukedom. She’d often been about the house as a young girl, Georgiana’s particular friend, as like his spirited sister as the moon was like the sun. And he, their elder by enough years to feel superior, had done his best to either spite her or ignore her, as schoolboys did.

Neither spite nor ignorance came easily. Isobel was not silly, or talkative, or excitable, as Georgiana’s other friends were. No, she was the opposite – *too much* the opposite, Lucius would have said, if anyone had asked him. So quiet as to seem shy, so reserved as to be aloof – and yet neither timid nor haughty. She was a rare creature indeed: a person entirely comfortable in her own company. Hours spent sitting at the harp or the piano, drilling her scales, sending peaceful trills of music through the tempestuous air at Whitby Manor, and perfectly content. The adolescent Lucius regarded her with the inquisitive caution of a naturalist discovering a new species of wild animal.

But he had never thought of her as an heiress, or a conquest, another bauble up for sale on the marriage mart. Though...

He *had* thought of her, hadn't he? Now and again, his mind had puzzled at the mystery of her quiet, pretty face, the way his fingers might fiddle with a Japanese puzzle box, trying to unlock the secret of her shyness that was not shy, her aloofness that was not haughty.

"What do you intend to do with Lady Isobel?" he asked, dreading the answer.

Mr Whitby took stock of Lucius's stony expression and sniffed. "I thought you might get up on your high horse about it. Didn't you tug at her braids once or twice when you were all children? I suppose it's too much to suggest that you think of her for yourself."

"A great deal too much!" Had his father always been so coarse? Distance had softened the memory. "Lady Isobel is a person, not a pack of cards. It isn't right to play her for our own profit."

Mr Whitby tutted, but let it lie. "Well, everyone knows she's to inherit her maiden aunt's fortune, so we can expect plenty of gentlemen callers while she's here. She may have whichever she chooses, and your sisters can pick among the rest. Our loans will last us until the end of the summer, and by then, with any luck, all the girls will be spoken for. And we'll make their suitors pay handsomely for the privilege!" Mr Whitby smacked his lips together as though in contemplation of a delicious meal. "Don't worry, I've taken out enough credit to give our guests a thoroughly comfortable stay. The dinners we'll have, Lucius! The dances! Your sisters will be married before the next Season. And then their husbands will have to buy their dresses!"

His father's heedless chuckling was too much to bear. Lucius took his leave abruptly and kept his mouth clenched shut until he was safely out in the corridor. Then, alone, he let out a bestial growl and slammed his hand against the panelled wall.

How much would that panelling fetch? Would it be better to pry it off the walls and sell it for timber, or keep the decor intact for whomever might buy the house?

“What happened?” A gentle hand tugged at his topcoat. Evie’s wide eyes, red-rimmed but defiant, brought him out of his grim calculation.

Lucius mustered a smile. “Nothing of note,” he said, patting her arm. “I told Father to forget the whole business. You’re safe. No wedding unless you want one.”

Evie’s eyes flickered downwards, momentarily too full of emotion to meet his. “Thank you,” she said, rose up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, and slipped out through the side door into the garden.

Upstairs, their mother was berating somebody. Perhaps Cassie had torn another gown. Perhaps Georgiana had received another letter from an unsuitable admirer.

Lucius’s heart swelled with resolve. He did not know what there was to be done, but he was certain that he would find it and do it.

His sisters would not suffer for their parents’ folly. Evie would not marry Lord Henry. He’d make sure of it.

CHAPTER 2



Isobel was three hours into the last leg of their journey to Whitby Manor when she realised that something dreadful had happened to her Aunt Ursula. Something so unusual, so impossible, and so frightening, that she could not ignore it any longer. Not even the beautiful new string quartet by Beethoven she had brought to read on the journey could drown out the alarm bells.

Isobel could not say at present what the ailment was, but the terrible fact remained: Ursula had been silent for the entire morning. Not as much as a complaint about the state of the roads had passed her lips. It was the longest Isobel had ever spent in the old lady's presence without hearing an impudent remark, a piece of unwarranted advice, or a ribald story from the days of the last king.

And worse still, Ursula had the strangest expression on her face. One Isobel had never seen before. Could it be that the old termagant actually looked... guilty?

Isobel closed her sheaf of music and applied a *pianissimo* to the viola that was trilling in her mind. "Are you going to tell me what the matter is, Auntie, or will you make me guess?"

Aunt Ursula gave a start, then removed a lace-rimmed handkerchief from her duffel bag and dabbed delicately at her forehead. "Really, Isobel. Really. Well, now. What on earth. I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

Isobel smiled. "Out with it, Auntie. You know you won't feel easy until you come clean. What's happened now? Must I

prepare to meet an old paramour of yours at Whitby Manor? Or have you made an unwise bet with one of Mr Whitby's neighbours?" She bit down a laugh and patted the old lady's hand. "I wish you would not try to keep secrets from me. It troubles me when you are unhappy."

Aunt Ursula pinched her lips and developed a sudden interest in the trees passing by the carriage window. Isobel sat back with a sigh.

"Very well. I shall wait to be surprised, then. I must admit I can hardly imagine what –"

"No!" Aunt Ursula cried, raising the handkerchief to her forehead again. "No, I cannot do it! I thought it was best, my dear girl, but now – when I am faced with the consequences – I cannot go on!"

Isobel fought the urge to roll her eyes. "Come now, Auntie. I'm sure it cannot be as bad as all that. Remember how I helped you extricate yourself from that business with Lord Foxby? And your feud with Lady Catherine Winton is hardly spoken of any more, since I managed to explain things to her. It has only been a week since your last intrigue, and I can't imagine you have caused much trouble in that time."

Ursula winced. "I'm afraid you underestimate me, my dear. The fact is that I made a decision some time ago to keep a secret from you. At the time I was quite certain it was the right thing to do. But now..."

"Now, I assume, your deception is about to be uncovered, and you are afraid you will not be able to sweet-talk your way out of it." They were nearing the final turn before Whitby Manor came into view. Isobel began packing her sheaf of music back into her valise, allowing her aunt a little respite from her stern gaze. "Don't worry, Auntie. I have been your companion long enough to be quite unshockable."

Ursula cleared her throat at great length and very noisily. It was either the result of the cheroot she'd cadged from the coachman or yet another stalling technique.

The carriage turned the corner and crested the hill, and the warm sandstone walls of Whitby Manor came into view at last. Isobel's mouth fell open as she took it in.

Not because of the splendour of the place – though it was as comfortable a country pile as anyone could wish for.

No, her astonishment was because the entire household – all the servants, standing in two neat rows, and what looked to be every member of the Whitby family – had come outside to meet her.

But it could not be for *her*, of course, or even Aunt Ursula. They were simply family friends. There had never been any degree of formality about their visits with the Whitbys.

“My goodness, what a sight!” she said. “They must be expecting someone terribly important.”

“I know of only one other guest who awaits us,” Aunt Ursula intoned. Isobel did not rise to her bait.

“Ah. Your old paramour, no doubt.”

“Not *mine*,” said Aunt Ursula huskily. Isobel's fingers tapped a nervous mazurka against the window. It was more than a little intimidating to be faced with such a crowd.

“Yours,” said Ursula. “The old paramour is yours, Isobel.”

Her fingers stilled.

“I don't know who you mean.”

But there was no use in lying. Aunt Ursula knew her well enough to see that the memories of another, very different sun-soaked summer were rising up in Isobel's mind. The shame and confusion of them burned in her cheeks.

She wrenched herself back to the present and scanned the neat rows of the Whitby family standing in the driveway with their guests and servants, searching for the face she had not seen in the longest time.

There he was. No longer merely a memory, but flesh and blood. Every second brought their next meeting closer. The air froze in Isobel's lungs.

He was just as she remembered him. Just as handsome. His eyes just as piercing, his shoulders as broad, his coat as impeccably tailored, his jaw as firm.

He was watching her carriage approach with an unreadable expression.

“Not him,” she murmured. As though by fervently wishing for it, his presence might turn out to be one of Ursula’s embellishments. “Please, no – not him. What is he doing here?”

Ursula was biting down on a tightly clenched fist. “I knew you would not come if you knew,” she explained, around her fingers.

A flash of something hot and bright – rage, perhaps, or fear – tore through Isobel’s chest. “How could you leave me so unprepared?”

“Everything is different now,” said Ursula, leaning forward and whispering urgently. “Your brother is a duke. Your sisters have married so well. And you, my darling girl, you are so much stronger than you were –”

“Enough.” Isobel dragged the curtain across the carriage window. She knew that every particle of pain was all too visible on her face, and she had only seconds to master herself before she had to face him.

“It will be different this time,” said Ursula. “You’ll see.”

Different.

She had only seconds to prepare, but those seconds were enough time to seize on Ursula’s words and make a solemn vow.

Yes. This time, everything will be different.

A shiver of heat tingled through Isobel’s chest. Like a fever, if a fever could afflict someone’s heart. *He* was unchanged. Just as tall, his back as straight, his gaze as clear and penetrating. They were green, those eyes. Green and pale as an unquiet sea. He inclined his head slightly to listen to something Mrs Whitby was saying to him, and his handsome

mouth turned up at the corner in an indulgent smile. Still proud, then. And still so *certain* of himself, of his place in the world, as Isobel had never been.

He was every bit the man she had known in Brighton.

Lord Randall Graves. The man she had loved.

But not anymore.

She forced herself not to meet his eyes. To let her gaze pass over him as though he meant nothing, as though she remembered nothing. She took in her friends without really seeing them – Cassandra standing awkwardly, skirts muddy to the knee – Evelina with red-rimmed eyes and a drawn expression – Georgiana, beaming and laughing as always –

And then, like a lightning bolt crashing to earth, the way forward was illuminated.

It is all different now.

I am different.

And she would do anything rather than give Lord Randall the satisfaction of knowing she remembered him. Of revealing even the smallest hint of the hole he'd burned into her heart.

She walked past him without so much as a glance, following the lightning bolt of her inspiration to Mr Lucius Whitby, whom she fixed with a gaze that approximated the way the cook's tomcat looked at cream. She boldly extended her hand, as though they were dear and intimate friends... or more.

"My, my, Whitby," she said. "It has been far too long."

Lucius Whitby stared at her in frozen astonishment.

Isobel and Lucius were *not* intimate friends. They were barely even acquaintances. He'd spent the past few years gadding about the Continent, and she'd spent them – well. Mourning Lord Randall, for one, blast his eyes. And when she wasn't doing that, she was studying music. Playing, practising, composing.

She was quite certain that Lucius Whitby, frequenter of gentleman's clubs, follower of expensive fashions, and spendthrift heir to a fortune, had less than nothing in common with her.

But none of that mattered, because the most important thing about Lucius was that he was the only eligible gentleman in the vicinity other than Lord Randall "Tear a Girl's Heart to Pieces" Graves. Lord "Smash a Woman's Hopes in the Mud" Randall, younger son of the Earl of Abrington. Lord "Eyes so Green They Haunt her Dreams Still, After All These Years..."

But enough of that. It was a choice between certain death by humiliation, and only *potential* death should Lucius Whitby fail to play his part in Isobel's hastily constructed plan.

Play along, Mr Whitby. Take my hand. Isobel's smile froze as she willed Lucius to understand what she needed from him. Her heart was thumping a military tattoo so vigorous it was liable to leap out of her throat. And then, no doubt, all the world would see Lord Randall's name still inscribed on that sorry organ.

She waited. Lucius stared. The servants stared too. Mrs Whitby's mouth hung open. Georgiana let out a giggle. Isobel could not say what Lord Randall was doing, because she would not let herself look at him.

"Lady Isobel," said Lucius, his brows drawing lightly together. And he either sensed her desperation or understood her unspoken pleading, for he took her hand – no, he clasped it, with both of his own, as warmly as though they were dear, dear friends. "I have been bereft without you."

Isobel remembered how to breathe.

The eyes of the entire Whitby household were still fixed on her, but now she had requisitioned a partner in her impromptu dance of envy and spite. And she was no longer afraid.

Lucius cocked his head to one side, silently inquiring as to what on earth she was doing. She responded by taking his

hand and tucking it into her arm with a slow, deliberate motion that forced him to take a step closer.

She thought she heard Lord Randall cough, but she still did not let herself look at him.

Lucius's eyes were wide. She noticed their colour for the first time – a crisp, clear grey. A strong colour. She felt bold enough to hold his gaze brazenly, keeping the flirtatious smile on her lips. “I hope you will escort me inside, sir. There is so much for us to discuss.”

Hopefully he would not actually expect anything of the sort. Isobel could not think of a single thing she had in common with Lucius.

“Isobel, my dear girl!” said Aunt Ursula, tapping her on the shoulder. “If you wish to eat young Mr Whitby for breakfast, you can at least sit down at the dining table first!”

Georgiana's giggle became a delighted splutter of laughter. The rest of the gathering came back into focus for Isobel. Mr Whitby was rubbing his hands together with ill-disguised delight. His wife was yet to remember herself enough to close her wide open mouth. Cassandra Whitby was frowning, but Evelina was pale and withdrawn, seeming not to notice anything that was happening around her at all.

And Lord Randall Graves stood swinging his arms at his sides as though he did not know what to do with his hands. As if he was wondering why *he* was not the one to whom her hand had been proffered, and to whose arm she clung. The smirk remained, but it no longer reached his eyes.

“Lady Isobel,” Mr Whitby was saying, bowing to her again, “I cannot tell you how delighted we are to have you back at Whitby Manor.” His bright gaze darted from his son's face to hers. “You must make yourself at home here. Our only desire is for you to enjoy the summer.”

Isobel gave Lucius another tomcat smile. “Is that so, Whitby? Is that also your... *desire*?”

She let that last word linger on her lips, emerging hot and damp with her breath. Lucius's arm jerked under her hand, but,

to his credit, he did not show a hint of surprise on his face. He did draw himself up a little more stiffly, holding his arm at an angle so that Isobel was pushed to a chaste distance. It was her turn to take a step – this one backwards, and away from him. “Welcome to Whitby Manor,” he said. His voice was flat and stern.

Cassandra strode forwards with a grimace that suggested the sight of flirting turned her stomach. She pinned Isobel with a glare of pure outrage.

“Hello, Iso. Georgiana and I will show you in,” she said, the underlying meaning clear. *Leave my poor brother alone!*

Isobel squeezed Lucius’s arm before letting go, feeling as giddy as though she’d drunk a bottle of champagne. “Pity.”

She could have sworn she heard a squeak of delight escape Mrs Whitby.

“What’s gotten into you?” Cassandra hissed, as she steered Isobel towards the house.

Isobel merely shrugged. “The carriage ride was so tedious. I am in a peculiar mood.”

“I’ll say.” Cassandra glanced back at her bewildered brother, then towards the rows of curious servants.

“Lordy,” cried Georgiana, catching them up and seizing Isobel’s hand. “Poor Lucius. When Lady Ursula made that remark, I thought he’d shrivel up and die!”

“Girls, girls!” protested Mrs Whitby, waving them frantically back. “We have not yet introduced Lady Isobel to Lord –”

“Randall,” said Isobel, as the three of them halted. Here, with a friend on either side of her and Lucius Whitby staring as though she were a puzzle whose pieces had all turned blank, she felt quite equal to meeting Randall’s eyes. “Lord Randall Graves,” she added, to mitigate the use of his first name.

Those eyes – so green. So deep. So cold. So unlike Lucius’s, which warmed somehow despite their cool grey colour.

“I think I had the pleasure of your acquaintance two years ago in Brighton, my lord,” she said to Randall, as though the memory were nothing.

“That’s right,” he replied. “Though it’s been three years, I believe.”

Isobel gave him a polite nod and let Cassandra and Georgiana turn her away, the two Whitby girls dissolving into laughter as they glanced back at their brother. Isobel didn’t let herself follow their gaze, though every nerve in her body fizzed with the need to assess the confusion she’d wrought.

Aunt Ursula was wrong. Isobel wasn’t going to win Lord Randall back.

She was going to destroy him.

And Lucius Whitby was going to help her.

CHAPTER 3



“Don’t just stand there looking like a smacked bottom, Clarkson,” said Lucius, tugging at his cravat more vigorously than its starch could withstand. “If you insist on staying when I’ve given you clear instructions to depart, you might as well make yourself useful.” He surveyed his reflection in the mirror, taking in the results of his efforts to achieve formal evening attire without Clarkson’s assistance. Topcoat on, black as midnight and exquisitely cut. Shirt collar turned out, cravat tied in a passable barrel knot. His trousers were so beautifully tailored that it would have been difficult for any man to make them look slovenly. Lucius pushed away the memory of the sum he’d carelessly thrown to his tailor on his return to London. Heaven forbid the heir to Whitby Manor should be seen in England with the same waistcoat he’d worn in Milan.

Overall, his appearance was passable. Perhaps not to his valet’s professional satisfaction, but that would swiftly cease to matter once Clarkson was dismissed for lack of money to pay his wages.

Lucius arched an eyebrow at the fussy little man, who was biting the inside of his cheek in distress. “Go on, then. Tell me where I’ve gone wrong.”

Clarkson flexed his fingers, but a glare from Lucius prevented him from reaching out to repair the damage himself. “Your right cuff, sir. It has not been fastened.”

Lucius glanced down. Drat. He’d made a brief attempt at it with his left hand but had abandoned it in frustration. Did

anyone really notice such a thing as a loose cuff?

He took up the discarded cuff link – gold, diamond-studded – and began wrestling with it again, his temper souring. In the mirror, Clarkson’s mouth opened, wavered, and closed again.

“What else?” Lucius asked.

Clarkson cocked his head to one side, choosing his words with caution. “The waistcoat, sir. It’s not what I would have picked out for an important dinner.”

Lucius frowned at himself. The waistcoat seemed perfectly serviceable to him. “It’s a waistcoat, Clarkson. It has all its buttons, a hole for my head, and two for my arms. It performs every task required of it. What has it done to offend you?”

Clarkson shook his head, apparently lost for a suitable way to address his master’s poor education on the subject of *couture*, and took out another waistcoat from the wardrobe. “The white Marcella, sir, lends an aura of elegance that is much more suited to entertaining guests one wishes to impress.”

“Rubbish! No gentleman has ever impressed me with his waistcoat.” Not that it had stopped Lucius giving Clarkson free rein to stuff his wardrobe with as many fine examples of the tailor’s art as money could buy. He ran his eyes over the neat hangers of patterned silk in the wardrobe and let out an involuntary groan.

Clarkson took the waistcoat off the hanger and presented it to Lucius, unperturbed. “No gentleman would notice, perhaps. But there are ladies present this evening.”

Now it made sense. Lucius sighed and pressed his fingers to his forehead in a vain attempt to smooth out the wince of embarrassment. His father’s obsequious idea of welcoming Lady Isobel as though she were the Queen herself had been bad enough to start with. But now that every gossiping servant in the building had seen the way the girl shook his hand...

What on earth had induced her to do that? Isobel Balfour was supposed to be shy. Quiet. Mousy, even. She’d been that

way before he left England. She'd even been the same this past Season in London, he was sure of it.

So who was this golden-haired coquette, and why was she plaguing Lucius with her attentions now? The last thing he needed was a woman's hopes to throw in the gutter along with his family fortune.

As an act of charity, he allowed Clarkson to fasten him into the white waistcoat. The one with the aura of elegance.

At least he'd be able to give the man a glowing reference before he was cast off to find a new position. Clarkson had somehow made Lucius's name as a man of impeccable taste, despite Lucius's utter indifference to his own appearance. In many ways, he'd be lost without the fussy little valet.

Ah, well. Another harsh lesson lying in wait for his future, impoverished self.

"Lady Isobel is merely visiting my sisters, Clarkson," he said, batting the valet away in favour of fumbling pridefully with his right cuff link. *Lady Isobel is bait in my father's foolish trap.* "I've no desire to impress her. To tell you the truth, I'd rather she hadn't come at all."

Clarkson smiled – a knowing, winking sort of smile that made Lucius's heart sink. "Of course, sir." He picked up a cut glass bottle from the dressing table. "A splash of cologne, perhaps?"

Ah, yes. The olfactory exoticism of cinnamon, oakmoss and Sicilian lemons, all for the low price of twice-his-father's-remaining-wealth a drop. Did cologne expire? Lucius had never needed to think about it before. Now, he pictured his future self in tattered clothing in some draughty garret, gingerly uncorking the crystal flask for a whiff of his lost luxuries.

He doubted anyone would want to buy a half-finished bottle of cologne. "Why not," he said, allowing Clarkson to apply it in measured dabs to his wrists and neck.

That was one task he'd never take on himself. Paupers didn't waste their pennies on beautiful scents.

“All done,” said Clarkson, taking a step back to admire his and Lucius’s joint handiwork. “And may I say, regardless of whether you wish to impress the lady, sir –”

“You may *not* say it, Clarkson,” said Lucius. Irritation – not with his fanciful valet, but with his own miserable circumstances – sharpened his tongue more than the man deserved. “In fact, from this point onwards you may refrain from making any remarks of the kind.” He strode past the valet, ignoring Clarkson’s reddening cheeks, and went for his bedroom door. “I can assure you that there is no woman on earth whose notice I wish to escape more than – *Lady Isobel!*”

The angry force of his arm swung the door fully open, leaving no doubt whatsoever as to the identity of the person standing in the corridor.

The person dressed in a fetching shade of deep rose, the like of which he’d never seen on the slender form of Lady Isobel Balfour before. The person whose ruffled hair of the morning had been coiffed into shimmering perfection, two mirrored curls trailing down to graze her collarbone. The person whose eyes met his, sharp and knowing and totally at odds with the exclamation of surprise that fell from her lips.

“Do excuse me, Mr Whitby!” Lady Isobel took a step back and curtsied. “It has been so long since I visited the house. I must have got turned about on my way down to dinner.” She pressed a hand to her chest, her feigned horror not even slightly convincing. “Would you be kind enough to escort me down?”

She was the picture of innocence. A picture with every detail sketched by an expert hand – sapphire eyes wide, cheeks flushed the same delicate pink as her dress, thick lashes lowering modestly in the heat of his glare – and all a complete fabrication. Isobel Balfour had visited Whitby Manor often enough to know the way from the guest wing to the dining room. She also, clearly, knew where to find Lucius’s bedroom.

Before he could muster a response, she’d laid a hand on his arm. A repeat of the intimate, possessive gesture she’d used that morning in front of the entire blasted household.

Lucius didn't dare glance back at Clarkson's expression. He didn't have to, anyway. He knew his valet well enough to picture the gleeful wink.

Besides, what could he do? Cast her off and leave her to wander the corridors alone? Plead a pressing need to top up his cologne before he made his entrance downstairs?

"Escorting you would be my pleasure," he said, his clipped tone making it perfectly clear that he meant the exact opposite. Lady Isobel simply smiled.

"That will be all, Clarkson," Lucius growled. The door closed behind him with a slow, reluctant creak. The valet would have to conjure up the details of the unexpected tête-à-tête in his own imagination.

And that was for the best. Whatever fantastical ideas Lucius's parents had put into the poor girl's head, it was now time to end them.

"My lady," he said, marching her down the corridor at a pace rapid enough to dispel any notion that he wanted to extend their time together, "I don't know what nonsense my mother has told you, but I cannot allow this imprudence any longer."

"Imprudence?" Isobel slowed her walk, her hand nearly drifting from his arm, and Lucius instinctively slowed, too, to let her keep it in place, before he realised what he was doing.

He glared pointedly at the white glove perched on his sleeve. Isobel's eyes followed his, and she smiled. "My goodness. Do you think I am such an innocent that I need a chaperone's permission to take a gentleman's arm?" She let him go, raising both hands in surrender, and stepped back, putting some distance between them. Lucius breathed a little easier, though he suspected it was a mistake to drop his guard. The effect of Isobel's pink-clad frame was only enhanced now that he could take her full form in at a glance.

An aura of elegance, indeed. Perhaps Clarkson felt the same way about waistcoats as Lucius felt about rose silk and knowing smiles.

He busied himself straightening out his cuffs, which were already, thanks to the valet's guidance, pristine. "There are several layers of distinction between *innocent* and *coquette*, my lady. You have always been closer to the wallflower end of the spectrum than the one which involves waiting uninvited outside a man's bedroom." He glanced up to find Isobel's lips pressed together, hiding something – perhaps a tremor of embarrassment, perhaps a smirk. Her head was tilted sideways, and she had given up the bashful lash flutter in favour of a steady, searching gaze. It sent a warning flicker through his belly, the way a flash of feline eyes in the darkness might warn of danger to primordial man. "I am not blind," he continued. "You have never behaved this way towards me before. And I am not vain enough to think it was brought on by my personal charms. You've never noticed them before. The only explanation is that my mother – heaven help us all – has given you some encouragement to pursue me. And I must save you from further embarrassment by telling you that such pursuit is futile."

"Is your mother in the habit of sending young women to your bedroom door?" That smile, quick and secret and satirical, flickered across Isobel's lips. So it *was* a smirk she had been suppressing, not embarrassment – and his warning hadn't landed at all. Lucius groaned.

"Lady Isobel," he said, mustering all his experience of delivering brotherly rebukes, "As a friend – or, rather, as the elder brother of your friends – I must advise you to stop whatever game you are playing. You are not as subtle as you think. Even the servants noticed the way you took my hand this afternoon. You may be enjoying yourself now, but you will not enjoy being the subject of gossip."

Intrigue sparked in those dangerous eyes. "The servants noticed? Why, that's perfect."

"Are you listening to a word I say?"

"I listen to everything, Mr Whitby. It's a talent of mine." She shrugged, flexing the fingers of the hand that had lately been resting on his arm, then pressing them to her lips – where, to his chagrin, laughter was threatening to bubble over.

“And I can only apologise for the misunderstanding. I suppose I should have warned you in advance.”

“Warned me?”

Now she let the laugh escape, hearty and musical and infuriating. “I thought it would be perfectly clear that I was not really flirting with you. Why on earth would I do that?”

Lucius’s mouth opened, worked around a series of possible answers, and closed again.

“We have known each other a long time,” Isobel continued, “and, as you helpfully reminded me, we have never fallen prey to each other’s charms, such as they are. After all, I am only little Isobel Balfour, the quiet one, the girl who sits in corners listening to music and spends her days at the piano and the harp. You, on the other hand –”

Lucius was several steps behind her. Something about that derisive laugh had brought his thoughts to a halt. “My charms... such as they are?”

“Well, precisely.” Isobel finally bit her amusement down into something that looked horribly like sympathy. “You’re a fashionable gentleman, Mr Whitby. You frequent St James’s Street and the races. You dance through the night at parties. You’ve spent the last few years gallivanting round the Continent.” She forestalled his noise of protest with an airy wave of her hand. “Please don’t think I disapprove of you, for that’s not the case at all. You are everything an eligible eldest son should be. And I am not at all the sort of person who would suit an eligible eldest son. But it’s precisely those unsuitable qualities which made you the perfect choice for...” She glanced from side to side, though they were utterly alone, and lowered her voice to a whisper. “My vengeance.”

Lucius waited a moment, letting her dissection of his character and its potential uses percolate through his astonished ears. Perhaps after a moment’s consideration it would all make sense.

It did not.

“Your... vengeance?”

The light in Isobel's eyes was no longer the sparkle of amusement. It deepened to a crystalline indigo, like sunlight filtering through the depths of the ocean.

"I was wronged some years ago," she said. "The man who wronged me is here at Whitby Manor. And I will not let him escape unscathed. Not this time."

"Lord Randall?"

He'd caught her off guard at last. She deserved it, after the way she'd been speaking to him. But he regretted it a little when her lips parted in distress and she clutched her arms around her chest, fingers digging into her slender shoulders, arms crossed over her heart.

She swallowed heavily before responding. "So he has told you everything?" Her head ducked down before he could respond. "Yes, I suppose that makes sense. I was only ever a figure of fun to him. And where's the fun in humiliating a lady if nobody ever hears about it?"

"I've heard nothing from Lord Randall," said Lucius. "I merely noticed the way he looked at you this morning – and the way you did *not* look at him." Isobel's shoulders stayed high and tense. "Really, I hardly know the man. And I hope you know I wouldn't allow him to mock a lady in my presence." He placed a hand on her shoulder and gave it a brief squeeze – an instinctual action, something he would do to comfort any of his sisters. He had probably touched her that way before, once or twice, when they were all younger and a childhood game had wounded her spirits.

He should have known it would feel different now. They were past the age of casual childhood play. She was right about him – the eligible heir – and she was no longer the little girl she'd been when he left England. A friendly touch like that meant something between adults. Something better not to think about, when a broken-hearted woman was using his name and face to wage her own personal romantic warfare.

So he let her shoulder go immediately, shaking out the brief jolt of heat that had run through his fingers. Isobel's wide eyes raised slowly to his again.

“You want to make him jealous?” Lucius asked.

“I want to make him suffer.”

He almost laughed, but she was deadly serious.

“Does it make me wicked, wanting that?” She whispered the question, but her face was full of determination. He could see there was no point trying to dissuade her.

“I’ve heard far wickeder things from far less worthy people.” He folded his arms across his chest, leaning back against the wall. Better to make clear he would not be touching her again. “Will it make him suffer to see you bat your eyelashes at me? Or does your little game involve my participation, as well?”

“I had hoped I wouldn’t have to persuade you,” she said. “I’ve never seen you shy away from flirtation before.”

Ha. She certainly had a point there. He wondered whether he would have reacted differently to that passionate clutch at his arm in the driveway if his head had not been full of his father’s misdeeds. If he had not been wishing Isobel far, far away from Whitby Manor.

He rubbed a hand across his forehead. She was right to suppose he’d take it all in stride. The Lucius of the recent past, heir to a fortune, had no difficulty accepting women’s admiration. There’d have been no harm in flirting with his sisters’ pretty friend. After all, he had plenty to offer her if things went too far.

Now, he had nothing. And even if her heart was not in the courtship, it was a dangerous game to play.

“I want Lord Randall to regret the loss of me,” Isobel explained, her fingers digging further into her upper arms. If she were not careful, there would be ten red marks left in the skin between the end of her sleeves and the start of her long white gloves. “And, in order for that to happen, he must see me as a person of value. Admired. Desired.”

“Surely you have no difficulty in persuading men to desire you?”

She shrugged up a shoulder and kept it awkwardly raised, defensive. “Well, I – I have never tried.”

He drummed his fingers pensively against the weight of the pocket watch at his breast. That watch ought to fetch twenty pounds, when the time came to sell up.

Unless his father managed to sell Evie, first.

Lucius’s fingers stilled.

Perhaps it was not his father’s scheming that had brought Isobel here with her half-formed schemes of vengeance, but providence itself.

Isobel’s brows drew together. “Is something the matter?”

“Suppose I agreed to it,” he said, as much to himself as to her. “Suppose I took leave of my senses and agreed to court you – publicly. To feign increasingly desperate love. Desire, if you will. Would there really be any harm in it?”

Isobel shook her head slowly, keeping her eyes on him. Her lips pressed into a frown. “No harm that I can see. I can assure you that I am quite immune to true romance.” She gave a little sniff. “Lord Randall has seen to that.” Her eyes narrowed. “What I don’t understand is why you would agree to it now, when only two minutes ago you were lecturing me about the dangers of inciting gossip.”

Because every moment that my father believes I am about to land an heiress is another moment that Evie is free of an unwanted marriage. He cleared his throat. “You haven’t told me the details of Lord Randall’s offence towards you. I’m sure you’ll permit me to keep my own secrets in return.”

“That’s fair.” Some of her sparkle returned, albeit dimmer and more hesitant than the siren’s shimmer she’d been feigning before. “I’ll try to contain my suspicions about which of the local ladies you wish to make jealous.”

He forced himself to grin in exactly the sort of slow, rakish way that she’d expect from Mr Lucius Whitby, fashionable gentleman and heir to a fortune. “Much obliged. Now, it will be noticed that we are late down for dinner, but that’s all to the good. How passionately should I pretend to adore you this

evening? Leaping straight to lovestruck blindness may attract suspicion.”

He extended his arm to her, and she took it without a trace of her previous ardour. She barely looked at him as they descended the staircase at the end of the corridor. Her gaze had focused inward, as though she had come up against a difficult problem in a textbook.

“We must go about this logically. It does not make sense for us to go from acquaintances to lovers in one day. We should proceed firmly, but with caution. A steady *andante*.”

“Are we to court one another in Italian?”

She cut her eyes to him. He suspected she was only just restraining herself from rolling them in pity. “Only insofar as Italian is the language of music, Mr Whitby. We must approach this courtship as we would a sonata. A slow build, each note leading naturally to the next, with the crescendo only at the appropriate moment.” Her lips curved into a smile. “If we were musical notation, this evening would be a chord with a dominant seventh. A transitional chord. Nothing too outrageous, but the additional note to attract attention.”

“I see. I suppose a simple scale of one to ten is too much to ask for?”

She let out a despairing sigh. “One to ten?”

“Yes. We’ll say that *one* equals disinterested friendship, and *ten* will be me taking a bullet for love of you. I’m sure you can work out the in-betweens yourself. That seems much simpler than trying to teach me musical theory.”

She pursed her lips. “If by simpler you mean inelegant and uninteresting, then yes. It is, indeed, simpler.”

“Good. We’re already playing with fire, messing around with romance this way. I don’t think an additional layer of intrigue is wise.”

They had reached the foot of the stairway. Laughter and conversation drifted towards them through the part-open doors of the drawing room. He caught sight of Evie, face pale as it

had been since her rupture with Lord Henry, making a brave effort at chatting to one of the guests.

There were secrets aplenty at Whitby Manor already. What harm could come from adding one more?

Isobel shrugged back her shoulders and raised her chin. It shouldn't have been at all possible for such a delicate slip of a thing to remind him of a boxer preparing for a bout, but somehow, she did.

“C dominant seventh,” she said, imperious as a queen holding court, “corresponds to two point five on your *unromantic* scale of affection. It will not be necessary to take a bullet for me this evening. But I may require you to kiss my hand and talk to me a little too often.”

He laughed. The sound drew Evie's attention from within the drawing room, and she shot him an inquisitive frown through the crack in the door. As much as to say, *So that's where you've been? What on earth are you playing at?*

The sight of her bolstered his courage. He raised an eyebrow at Isobel. “Your ideas of courtship are a little modest, don't you think?”

To his astonishment, Isobel actually flushed red. She avoided his eyes. “I have never had much chance to practice it. You will correct me if I go wrong, won't you?”

Lucius pressed her arm. “No, no. It is not possible to be courted incorrectly. A kiss to the hand – a little lively conversation – all quite suitable. And we are only playing a C dominant seventh, after all.”

“A two point five.”

“Precisely.” Her hand trembled on his arm, a sure sign her nerve was failing her. Lucius swept her into the room before she had time to reconsider.

CHAPTER 4



It took precisely three minutes for Isobel to discover that attending a Whitby Manor dinner party as Lady Isobel Balfour was quite a different prospect to her previous ventures as a mere Honourable Miss.

She'd expected her entrance on Lucius's arm to attract the usual polite murmurs of greeting before she withdrew to sit in her preferred position at Aunt Ursula's side. In fact, she was already moving towards her aunt when Mr Whitby's stentorian welcome rang out loud enough to quiet every other voice in the room.

"Lady Isobel! What a vision of loveliness you are tonight! Come here, dear girl, and let me introduce you around. Everybody is longing to be acquainted with you."

Isobel froze, clutching the stiff wool of Lucius's sleeve. He covered her hand with his, the warmth of his fingers reminding hers to relax.

Heavens above, there was not an eye in the room not fixed on her. Mr Whitby was bustling forwards from the group of gentlemen he'd been entertaining. A brandied glow was already warming his cheeks.

Isobel heard Lucius suck in a sharp breath, but his face remained in that easy smile he'd assumed before entering the room.

"You must not blame Lady Isobel for her tardiness, Father," he said, taking Isobel's hand and passing it to Mr Whitby's with a degree of ceremony. "We met each other on

the stairwell, and I was so enthralled by our conversation that I lost all sense of time.”

So the game had already begun. Isobel should not have been surprised that Lucius glided into this role so effortlessly. She’d chosen him for precisely that reason, hadn’t she? His feather-light flattery – his easy charm – his lack of any moral objection to meaningless flirtation.

But the fantasy of the compliment still caught on some secret part of her, hidden deep inside, that remembered that nobody had ever cared to flatter her before. A half-forgotten, bruised piece of her heart ached with disappointment that it was only pretend.

Mr Whitby, tipsy, convivial, and enamoured with gossip, was the perfect audience for their performance. “I can hardly blame you, my boy!” he said, his eyes darting merrily from Isobel’s face to Lucius’s. He bent to plant a smacking kiss on her hand. “Lady Isobel could charm the birds from the trees, could you not, my lady?”

Isobel opened her mouth without the faintest idea of what she was supposed to say – she’d never been quick with words, like her sister Anthea, or self-possessed, like Selina – but Mr Whitby was already tugging her along to meet his friends, and Lucius merely bowed a farewell, quickly tapping two fingers against his chest as he did, where only she could see them.

Two out of ten on the scale of love. The game was on.



BY THE TIME they were called in to dinner, Isobel’s jaw ached from the effort of smiling. Chief among the benefits of life as a wallflower was the freedom from looking amused at every boring anecdote. She was enormously relieved when they went in to dinner, and she had only the gentlemen immediately beside her to contend with, and the charms of Georgiana nearby to distract both of them.

Georgiana’s first devotee that evening was Lord Bell, a tall fellow with a pronounced chin who sat at Isobel’s left and

laughed uproariously at everything Georgiana said, whether it was amusing or not. To Isobel's right was Sir Ivor Chamberlain, Bell's short, chinless friend whom Georgiana kept calling "Sir Chamberpot" – and if Bell was Georgiana's new lapdog, Chamberpot was Bell's kicked spaniel. He attended on their conversation with the permanent frown of a man who understood only half of what he was hearing, and every time he ventured to make a remark, Bell made sure to speak over him.

For her own part, Georgiana seemed to hear nothing of what either Bell or Chamberpot were saying. She had turned her attention almost wholly to the gentleman sitting at her own side.

Randall.

Georgiana's pretty rosebud lips were curled into an enticing smile. The fingers of one hand curled through the bobbing curls that fell artfully to her shoulder as she turned in her seat, eyes fixed on Randall, listening intently enough that anyone who did not know her would have thought she was fascinated by his explanation of the intricacies of Gentleman Jackson's boxing method.

"Does boxing interest you, Lady Isobel?" asked Sir Ivor, giving up hope of stealing Georgiana's attention. Isobel was recalled to herself with a start and realised that she had been clutching her knife so tightly that her fingers ached.

"Not at all, sir. I confess I cannot see the art in it."

"Nor I," sighed Sir Ivor, burying himself in his roast pork. "Nor I."

Isobel set down her cutlery and stretched out her fingers.

Georgiana possessed the rare ability to make every person she deemed worthy feel as though they were the most important person in the world. The total focus of her attention, seldom bestowed, warmed its recipients like a beam of sunlight.

It was a power Isobel had never managed to wield for herself. And, though her friend would have been mortified to

know she was causing Isobel pain, the sight of Randall's rapt attention as Georgiana twirled her hair and smiled was a particular sort of misery from which Isobel could not persuade herself to escape.

Until a loud clatter from further down the table tore her eyes away, and she saw Lucius's clear grey eyes fixed on her even as he dabbed perfunctorily at the wine stain spreading on the tablecloth beneath his toppled glass.

"Pardon me," he said to nobody in particular and gave Isobel a tiny nod.

The feverish prickle of jealousy fell away, soothed by the cool rain of that storm cloud gaze.

She followed Chamberpot's example and turned her attention to her food.

When the ladies withdrew to the drawing room, Isobel postponed her longed-for escape to the safety of the piano to sit beside Georgiana.

"Is something the matter, Iso?" her friend asked, turning that sunny smile to her. "You seem out of sorts."

"There *is* something," said Isobel. "Georgiana, I must confess..."

She paused, the rest of the words she'd planned to say suddenly ringing false. Was it her place to warn Georgiana away from Randall? What warning could she give – *beware! Here is a man who does not propose to wallflowers?*

Would she truly be speaking out of friendship, or bitterness?

"I must confess I am exhausted after the long journey," she said. "I was not expecting your father's idea of a quiet family dinner to be quite so lively!"

"Oh, I'm as surprised as you! Mama seems to have invited every gentleman in the county to join us this summer." Georgiana glanced across at the corner where Evelina sat, lost in a book, while Cassandra perched on the arm of her chair, whittling away at a stick with a pen knife and looking as

though she would gladly stab it into the heart of anyone who disturbed her sister. Georgiana turned back to Isobel and spoke in a murmur. “I think Mama is trying to lift Evie’s spirits by providing plenty of company. The disappointment of Lord Henry has been very hard to bear.”

Isobel stole a glance in Evelina’s direction. “If she truly loved him, she is not likely to be cheered by the prospect of another. Not so soon after the heartbreak.”

Georgiana gave a wicked smile. “Why do you think I have been working so hard to keep all the gentlemen’s attention to myself?”

Their suppressed laughter drew the attention of Mrs Whitby.

“Georgie! Please do not make those silly faces! It is not ladylike!” Without waiting for a response, Mrs Whitby patted the seat beside her at the card table. “Lady Isobel, do come and join me. I have just been asking your aunt for her advice on which is the best jeweller in London, but she is so mysterious! I cannot persuade her to give me an answer.”

Isobel hastened to join them, before the unmistakable furrow in Aunt Ursula’s brow spilled out into real irritation.

“I do not mean to be mysterious at all!” Ursula was protesting. “I have not bought a new piece of jewellery in forty years! This necklace you are admiring was a gift – and not the sort of gift a woman receives in her eighties, at that.” She gave a broad wink which Isobel pretended not to see.

Mrs Whitby smiled and waggled a finger. “Ah, you may pretend to be frugal, my lady, but I know you always get your niece the best of everything. Isobel, you may confess the truth to me, for I always find out everybody’s secrets in the end. *You* are quite comfortable, are you not? And all thanks to your aunt’s generosity!”

Isobel frowned. “I... Yes, I suppose I am.” She smiled, if only to hide the fact that she did not at all understand Mrs Whitby’s line of questioning. “Aunt Ursula has a truly generous heart.”

She would have liked to seek an explanation of Mrs Whitby's odd remarks, but at that moment the gentlemen came in. Mrs Whitby sprang up to take the pen knife from Cassandra's hands and steer her towards a more *ladylike* activity.

"What a peculiar question that was," said Isobel, keeping her attention firmly on Aunt Ursula and certainly *not* on turning about to see whether any gentlemen were coming her way.

Ursula gave an unladylike snort. "Peculiar? No, I think not. Unsubtle, yes. But neither peculiar nor unexpected. You've never been much of a flirt, my girl, but if you make a habit of cavorting about with Mr Lucius Whitby, you may certainly expect to be priced up like a slab of meat at the butcher's."

"Auntie! That's a shocking thing to say."

"Ha! You don't deny cavorting, then?"

Isobel stood up, doing her best to appear prim. "Excuse me, Auntie. I must go and speak to Georgiana about... something important." She winced, but since Cassandra had just been persuaded to sit down and play a duet with one of the unsuspecting gentlemen, she hoped her discomfort could be excused by the noises emanating from the piano.

Georgiana was holding court, perfectly at ease with Lord Bell and Sir Ivor the Chamberpot hanging from her every word. Isobel was almost at her side when she realised that Randall had started across the room at the same time, with the same destination in mind.

She froze. Was he coming to speak to Georgiana? Or had he noticed Isobel, just as she'd noticed him? Could he be coming to speak to *her*?

She cast about for Lucius, but in her sudden panic, did not see him.

"Iso!" called Georgiana. "Come and sit with us! You'll never believe the rot Lord Bell is trying to tell me."

She patted the seat beside her just as Randall reached their group and bowed, and Isobel knew she would have to retreat. Make an excuse, feign a headache. Anything to escape.

She'd thought she was ready, but she'd never felt so powerless as she did when Randall took Georgiana's hand and pressed it to his lips.

But before she could speak, the pianoforte sent out a chord so jarring it made her teeth ache.

"Blast you!" came Cassandra's strident cry from behind the instrument. She slammed the fallboard closed with a loud *smack* and a discordant tremble of keys. The elegant gentleman who had been playing the other half of the duet only just managed to jerk back his hands in time to save his fingers.

Cassie rewarded him with a poisonous glare. "You know full well I cannot play at that speed, Kendrick, and you kept increasing the pace to force me into an error. I know your tricks."

Lord Kendrick was unperturbed by her outburst, though everyone in the room was looking at them in astonishment. He answered her with a complacent grin. "You flatter me, Miss Cassandra. I am not talented enough to alter my tempo out of spite."

"Tchah!" was Cassandra's only response. She rose from the piano and stormed across the room, holding her skirts up in an ungainly handful, the better to stamp her feet.

Isobel burned inwardly for her friend. Cassie only played in public when forced, and Mrs Whitby's guilty face showed all too clearly just how severely she had been forced that evening.

Lord Kendrick raised his hands and offered Cassie's retreating back a round of applause. His expression was perfectly polite, but Isobel could not help but feel there was mockery in the gesture. The clapping was taken up sporadically by the other guests, with half an eye on Cassandra to check that she was not about to vent her wrath on them.

“Poor Cassie,” Isobel murmured to Georgiana, as the humiliated girl reached the refuge of Lady Ursula’s card table, where she was promptly handed a set of cards and a glass of something fortifying.

“Poor Kendrick, rather!” Georgiana responded. “I am sure he meant to get under her skin, and now he has the embarrassment of being publicly caught!”

“Ah haha,” laughed Lord Bell dutifully.

“Is Lord Kendrick –” began Chamberpot.

“Lord Kendrick is your neighbour, is he not?” asked Bell, stepping in front of him. Chamberpot sighed and turned his eyes to the ground. “Well, he ought to be well-acquainted with Miss Cassandra’s temper! But what a fortunate man he is to have such charming company so close by. I declare, if I were Kendrick, not a day would pass without my calling upon you.”

“I cannot think Lord Kendrick’s embarrassment is anything compared to Cassandra’s,” said Isobel, giving Bell the most disapproving look she dared. “Georgiana, can we not think up some distraction? Something to take everybody’s minds off Cassie?”

“An excellent idea!” cried Mr Whitby, overhearing her suggestion. To Isobel’s dismay, he took her arm again to propel her forcibly towards the piano. “Lady Isobel,” he announced to the room at large, “has agreed to finish the piece on my daughter’s behalf!”

Isobel froze. “Please, sir, that is not at all what I meant...” She sent Cassandra a look of deepest apology, though Cassie did not look up from her cards to see it. The last thing Isobel had intended was to add to her humiliation.

But Mr Whitby was bowing and gesturing towards the piano, and Isobel did not know what else to do but sit. She was no Cassandra, after all, and could not storm off.

She ran her eyes over the piece on the stand, and though the music was unfamiliar, its melody tingled in her fingertips at once. It would be easy enough to play on sight. Mr Whitby beamed at her, happily oblivious to the slight he was inflicting

upon his own daughter. Lord Kendrick waited politely, his hands poised to play, one eyebrow half-raised as though he too were in dire need of a way to escape Mr Whitby's effusions. Whether or not he had really intended to embarrass Cassandra, he evidently regretted the depth of the humiliation.

Isobel sighed, shook her head, and closed the music book. "I am sorry to disappoint you, sir, but I simply cannot play this without studying it first. The most I can offer at such short notice is a simple jig."

"Oh, a jig would be magnificent!" cried Lord Kendrick, jumping up with tangible relief. "Miss Georgiana, I know *you* will oblige me by dancing!"

Bell and Chamberpot launched an immediate protest, but Isobel unleashed a lively jig with such gusto that nobody could make out what they were saying. It was a cheerful little tune with an oom-pa beat. Not at all showy. Nothing that would outshine Cassandra's reluctant attempts.

Across the room, past the energetic whirlwind of jigging feet that was Georgiana and the Viscount Kendrick, Isobel saw Lucius approach the card table, put his arm around Cassie's shoulder and steer her towards the dancing. Cassie made a great show of resisting, but Lucius took her by both hands and tugged her along regardless. Isobel added a little flourish on the keys as Cassie shrugged her shoulders and began to dance.

That, at least, was one feminine accomplishment in which Cassandra Whitby had no rival. The broad grin on her face showed that her embarrassment was forgotten, and her energy was so infectious that soon Lord Bell stood up with Evie, and Mrs Whitby with a red-cheeked Chamberpot.

And there, just past Evie –

Isobel's hands faltered. She recovered from the error so smoothly that the dancers did not miss a step. But the fault was there: an E flat tossed into a cheerful C major, modulating everything, turning the candlelight dim. It resonated in her head as she played on, and as Lord Randall Graves made his way across the room – Good lord, was he actually coming towards her?

Lucius let go of his sister at the height of a spin so swift that she whirled directly into Lord Randall. Cassie was slender to a fault, but wiry with it, and her form carried surprising heft. Randall staggered backwards, barely managing to catch hold of Cassandra's arm. It was unclear whether he was steadying her or using her as a post to keep himself from falling.

"Careful there, Whitby!" shouted Lord Kendrick, still spinning Georgiana at a rate of knots. "Miss Cassandra is not a weapon one should wield lightly!"

Cassandra bared her teeth at him in lieu of a smile and cast about for Lucius again. He caught her hand and pressed it into Randall's.

"No trouble at all, old boy," he said, as though Randall had asked to cut in. "Be my guest."

Before anyone realised what was happening, Lucius spun on his heels and came to stand at Isobel's side.

She stole a glance up at him, catching the mischievous grin playing on his lips, and returned her attention primly to the piano. Cassandra had already shrugged off her stumble, seizing Lord Randall's hands with little regard for what the gentleman's feelings on the matter might be. He was safely entrapped by a ring of dancers, and Lucius was standing guard at Isobel's side.

"That was smoothly done, Mr Whitby," said Isobel. "Anyone would think you were an old hand at this sort of game. Should I be shocked?"

He bent down to bring his mouth closer to her ear. Too close. Closer than a gentleman's face had ever been, discounting certain memories that Isobel would rather forget.

"I don't know what you mean, my lady," he murmured, keeping his eyes up and scanning the room to check that they could not be overheard. "Anyone can see that I was too tired to keep up with my sister. I simply released her to a fresh partner."

Isobel played a little faster. If only to make Randall sweat. "You are too modest, sir. It seems to me that you are as much

an expert in securing a lady's company as I am at playing the piano."

She dared not meet his eyes with his lips so close to her ear, but she heard the widening grin in his voice. "I am rarely accused of modesty, my lady." He straightened up. She was not sure if she was relieved. "Ah, you've changed the key."

She restrained herself from tutting. "Not quite. Guess again, Mr Whitby."

He rested a hand lightly on the piano, his attention withdrawn from the dancers and turning completely to her. As he watched her play, his quick grey eyes taking in every flicker of her fingers, something about it felt just as intimate as his breath on her ear. "Of course," he said. "You're adding the dominant seventh. There's something restless about it, isn't there."

"Restless?"

"No need to look so surprised. I'm not completely tone deaf." Here, with his back to the gathering and his face visible only to her, there was an unexpected solemnity to him. His eyes were darker somehow – more storm cloud than steely gleam. "It's a chord that begins something. That demands a progression. I understand now why you chose it."

She nodded. "We speak of *resolving* dominant sevenths."

He glanced over his shoulder, and Isobel followed his gaze. Randall was still safely occupied with Cassandra. Mrs Whitby was trying to ignore the way Chamberpot kept treading on her feet. Georgiana was winking at Bell every time the dance brought them together.

"I wonder how this one will resolve," Lucius murmured. Isobel had the impression he was talking more to himself than to her. He was dwelling on something he did not wish to share.

But his smile returned easily enough, and he gave her a deep bow. "That ought to add on the extra half a point," he said, and returned to the party.

Isobel resolved the dominant seventh to the tonic without too much trouble, and without any inkling of what deeper

meaning the transition might possess.

She wasn't entirely sure their scale was accurate. Or perhaps Lucius's idea of *two point five* was quite different to hers. She still felt his breath tingling against her ear, still heard the dance of mischief in his voice. And just then, before he withdrew, there had been something that stirred her still more deeply. His gaze was wintry – and yet left her warmer.

Lucius's idea of a *ten*, she realised, would be far more than she had bargained for.

CHAPTER 5



The orangery at Whitby Manor had always been Lucius's refuge. Its lofty white walls and arching glass-paned ceiling offered sanctuary from the wildest of the moods of English weather – and Whitby women besides. The manicured lawns and tempestuous relatives of the world beyond dissolved to mere reflections in the elegant glass. The sharp citrus scent of the fruit trees eased the stresses from his breath and breathed calm back into his lungs. Calm, sweetness, and a promise of distant lands, far-off discoveries, adventure. If it were not for the orangery, perhaps he'd never have wanted to travel.

And would never have spent a fortune on such fripperies as *adventure*.

Lucius paced the aisles of neatly planted trees, letting their glossy leaves brush his sleeves, trying not to calculate how much they'd fetch at auction. Would it be more lucrative to juice the fruit, perhaps, and sell it as a tonic – add a series of lurid claims to the label and travel the country markets as a snake-oil salesman?

Possibly he should be asking one of the gardeners to take him on as an apprentice. The next summer might find him a happy pauper with dirt beneath his fingernails, cultivating exotic fruit and flowers in a luckier, wealthier man's house.

A pale shimmer amid the reflection of vibrant hothouse colours in the window alerted him to Isobel's approach. She'd exchanged yesterday's siren pink for an ingenue's sprigged

muslin. He was glad. It suited her better – and it suited *him* not to be distracted by the thought of rose silk on bare skin.

Lucius muscled down the nauseating thoughts of finances and the future and turned to greet her with a smile. “There you are. I was beginning to think I’d overstepped by inviting you out here. Was your aunt horrified to see a note arrive from a gentleman?”

“On the contrary, she’d be delighted – if she knew anything about it.” Isobel took a seat on an elegant wrought-iron bench. That one would sell for a decent sum – a lick of paint and it’d be good as new. “Aunt Ursula chaperones me in the manner which she preferred when she was young herself – that is, from a distance, and without spectacles.” She paused, taking a deep breath of the perfumed air. “I must say I have always admired your orangery here at the manor. Is this where you bring all your conquests?”

“I’ve no idea what you mean.” It wasn’t, in fact. Not only because Lucius had always been far too shrewd to introduce the object of a passing *tendre* to his family. Simply because the orangery was for him, not his sisters or his raucous friends from Eton or any prospective romances. It would not have been much of a sanctuary if he made a habit of opening up its peace to all and sundry.

“You should,” said Isobel, gazing about her with quiet contentment. “It is beautiful here. And it’s easier to fall in love in beautiful places, isn’t it?”

Lucius took out his pocketknife and nipped a ripe tangerine from a bending branch. “The only conquest I am concerned with at present is you, my lady. Paying attention to another at this juncture would only injure you – and be quite averse to our aim of bringing Randall to heel.” He shucked off the dimpled skin and selected a juicy segment for Isobel’s consideration. “Here. Try this. It should be a little sweeter than usual.”

Isobel hesitated for a moment, then pulled the glove from her right hand and accepted his offering.

“Speaking of Randall,” Lucius began – and then Isobel popped the slice of tangerine past her lips, and he didn’t want to speak of Lord Randall any more. Just for a moment, he didn’t want anything more than to watch her eyes fall closed and her concentration narrow to the burst of sweet-sharp juice against her tongue.

It was every bit as arresting as the pink silk.

He cleared his throat. “Randall. The scheme. We ought to discuss our next moves.”

Isobel’s eyes opened again, and she smiled. “It *is* sweeter than I thought. Why is that?”

“I sent a few plants home from Spain for our gardeners to experiment with,” said Lucius. He took a bite of tangerine himself. The warmth of a Spanish sun on terracotta tiles unfurled in his memory.

He wondered whether those happy times would be forever tainted, now that he knew he should never have had them. That every swallow of Spanish wine was a crumb stolen from his family’s future table.

“Too sweet, I think,” he said, half to himself. “I shall make a note – I ought to try a hybrid with *citrus aurantium*. Adjust the humidity, too...”

Isobel held out her hand for another piece. “I’ll finish it. I don’t mind a little extra sweetness.”

Lucius tried to pretend that he was only handing her the fruit because she’d asked for it, and not because he’d be able to watch her tongue flicker over her lips to catch every last hint of juice.

She was too innocent by far – so innocent that it was almost an assault. It was something close to cruelty to engage in this scheme with her. She didn’t know the stakes of the game she was playing.

“We ought to set some ground rules before we go any further,” he said. “This meeting, for example – it’s useful to know that Lady Ursula won’t object to this sort of thing, but I’ll need to know exactly what would cause her to intervene. I

don't want to compromise you. Or risk making an enemy of your aunt."

Isobel grinned. "Does my aunt frighten you more than my brother? Alex is all your father can talk of. His *Grace* the *Duke of Loxwell*." She winced. "I'll need to know how to behave around your family, too. Things have changed since our dear old cousin died and Alex inherited the dukedom. I hardly know what to do with such, ah, *generous* hospitality."

"Generous is not the word," said Lucius drily. *Avaricious is more like it*. "But you are quite right. My family will be watching you just as closely as Lord Randall does, and we must take care not to leave the wrong impression or make any lasting impact on your reputation. To that end, I suggest a strict limit on any physical affection. You may take my arm, for example, but not clutch at it the way you did on your arrival. Gazing across the room is acceptable, but gazing into one another's eyes is not. As for – I'm sorry, is something amusing?"

"Not at all," said Isobel, though the hand at her mouth was covering what he knew was a smile. How many of her wallflower years had been spent concealing that teasing grin behind a prim white glove? "Do go on. Your expertise is fascinating."

"As for dancing," said Lucius doggedly, "I will be your partner at every given opportunity – unless there is waltzing, in which case you will stand up with one of my sisters."

"That won't be necessary," said Isobel. "I am quite accustomed to being without a partner. Happier that way, in fact. And at intimate gatherings I'm invariably asked to play for the dancers, not join them."

"That won't do at all. How am I to convince anyone I'm mad for you if you spend all your time trapped behind an instrument?"

She frowned. "I'd have thought you could come up with *something*. Musicians are not universally condemned to celibacy, after all. Else how would new little musicians be made?" She caught his expression and rolled her eyes. "Yes,

yes, I know. I am not a musician – I am a *lady*. And ladies, apparently, fall in love while dancing. Whatever happened to music being the food of love?”

“For an internal, hidden, heartfelt sort of love, I expect music is all very well,” said Lucius. “But we need something quite different to ensnare Lord Randall.” Not to mention Horace Whitby. Lucius’s beloved father was not known for responding to subtlety. “The entire scheme will collapse if you spend all your time hidden away behind a sheaf of music. We must dance together. Often.” For Randall’s benefit. And Evie’s salvation. Not because any part of Lucius wanted to feel Isobel’s slender form moving in tandem with his own.

“Gracious,” said Isobel, cold enough to chill the hothouse air. “Well, in that case, I shall resign myself to becoming a flibbertigibbet. Georgiana will be thrilled. She’s always pestering me to have more of what she calls *fun*.” She set aside the remaining half of the tangerine and produced a pencil and a small notebook from her reticule. Lucius watched in amazement as she tucked an overhanging lock of hair behind her ear and began to make a neat series of notes, using the music staves on her paper as lines for her writing.

“Is this really so confounding that you need to write it down?”

Isobel glanced up, and he was afraid he’d hurt her. A light glow suffused her cheeks. “I never do anything without serious study, Mr Whitby. I nearly made a fool of myself trying to improvise yesterday. Flirtation is not like music. There’s no rhythm to this that I can follow, no melody to sing along with. You suggested that we should lay out our rules of romance, and I intend to learn them.” She dotted the *i* in *dancing* – her handwriting was as clear and precise as her piano-playing – and raised her eyes to him, waiting for more. Lucius hadn’t realised how much his bafflement showed on his face until she frowned and asked, “Have I offended you?”

“Not only me, my lady. Every poet in existence.” He gestured vaguely at the citrus-scented air, trying to encompass the entirety of human emotion in one movement, and failing miserably. “Love is not something that can be learned by rote!

You must know that, surely. There cannot have been anything mathematical in what you once felt for Lord Randall.”

She stiffened. But at least she set her pencil down. “I would prefer to leave actual feelings of love out of our arrangement, Mr Whitby. I don’t need a confidant. I need a conspirator.” She narrowed her eyes. “You have not informed me what it is *you* need from our arrangement, and you will notice that I am yet to ask. I hardly think either of our true feelings are relevant.”

The rebuke was timely. The last thing Lucius wanted was to give Isobel any hint of his family’s predicament.

“Make your notes, then,” he said, though it irked him deeply to watch her pick up her pencil, and he couldn’t say why. “Dancing aside, we ought to spend as much time as possible in one another’s company. Not alone, like this – not unless there is something vitally important to discuss. We must be *seen* together. It should be obvious to everyone that you are my first choice of companion for every activity, and that I am yours.”

“*First choice of companion,*” Isobel murmured as she wrote it down. “Yes, that seems wise.” A flicker of apprehension crossed her brow. “What sort of activities usually occupy you in the country?”

“Oh, the usual,” said Lucius, trying not to grin. “Riding, hunting, fishing. Long, muddy walks. Racing about in my curricule. The horses need the exercise, you see.”

He would not have thought it possible, but Isobel’s indoorsy pallor grew a shade paler still. “And you want me to join in with all of that?”

“Chin up,” he said brightly. “A little fresh air will do you the world of good. And it’ll be interesting, won’t it, to let Lord Randall see a different side to you.”

“Even though that side doesn’t exist?”

Lucius shrugged. “None of this exists, really, does it? I am not falling in love with you. I am not really Randall’s rival. But I promise you that the loss of a sparky, active, exciting

sort of girl will cause him much more regret than the loss of a homebody wallflower.”

Isobel’s eyes drilled a hole into him. “The loss of *me*, you mean.”

“That’s...” Drat. That was *exactly* what he’d meant, wasn’t it? “Just trust me,” he said. “I’ve fallen prey to the green-eyed monster once or twice in my time. I know how to make a fellow jealous.”

Isobel looked down at her notes, sighed, and closed the book neatly before slipping it back into her reticule. “You’re right. He’s already lost the real me once without a trace of regret.”

And there was no helping it. He simply couldn’t bear that calm resignation. Her simple, sad acceptance, without a shred of self-pity.

Randall wasn’t there to have some sense pummelled into him, so Lucius would have to do the next best thing. “Come here. I want to show you something.”

He led her past the citrus trees, through the blooming sprays of oleander and bright hibiscus, to the far end of the orangery.

It wasn’t much to look at. He was quite certain, in fact, that the rows of glass boxes were supremely uninteresting to the untrained eye. A tilt of glass here, a furnace-box there – the subtle adjustments that increased heat or humidity – it would mean as much to Isobel as the concept of a dominant seventh meant to him.

“My personal collection,” he said.

Isobel looked, with nothing more than politeness, he thought – until she said, “They’re all different, aren’t they? This one here has a pointed roof – and that one more ventilation. You’re testing different glasshouse designs.”

“Exactly.” He couldn’t suppress a smile, though it was rueful. The latest experiment would be his final one. Glass was too costly to waste on a mere pastime. “It’s *this* one I

particularly want you to see. Call it... My own private wallflower.”

She frowned, as though trying to decide whether or not he was joking. “It isn’t flowering,” she pointed out.

“It has never flowered. Nor has any other orchid of its kind – not outside its native country. It’s not the sort of plant that adapts to fluctuating temperatures or variations in humidity. The conditions must be kept constant – perfect.” He gave the tilted pane of the glass box roof a fond tap. “But when I get it right – or, more likely, when someone far more talented than I eventually manages it – the flower will be magnificent.” He drew her attention to the sketch pinned above the struggling plant: a tiny, delicate orchid with petals like hearts, the whisper of their true colour daubed in with watercolour red.

Isobel winced. “Yes, I see. And I’m sure I am just like the orchid. A frail, delicate thing that requires coddling and coaxing and a great deal of effort before anyone can admire it.”

“No, no.” Drat, again. It was all so clear to him that he hadn’t stopped to remember that not everybody spent hours studying glass manufacture and temperature charts all for the sake of one elusive, exotic flower. “What I mean is... This orchid is *already* spectacular. It doesn’t bloom for just anyone. It doesn’t conform to every environment. But that’s the fault of the gardener, not the plant. This orchid contains beauty that men would pay a fortune to possess. You may not see it, but it is there nonetheless.”

She gave him a wry smile. “So, some wallflowers are rare orchids. If you are clever enough to spot them.”

He grinned wickedly. “And I’ve never considered Lord Randall a particularly observant man.”

A loud crash shattered the peace – and their brief moment of connection. Isobel stumbled backwards, as though the glass boxes were something too intimate to be caught admiring. As though she hadn’t deliberately chosen to meet Lucius there, where they might be seen, and compromised.

“*Mama!*” came Cassandra’s strident cry. “What on *earth* are you doing hidden away there? You gave me the shock of my life!”

“Oh, hush, child, hush!” Mrs Whitby sounded unusually flustered. “I am not hidden, Cassandra. I don’t know why you would say such a thing!”

Isobel relaxed at the sound of Mrs Whitby’s excuses. She caught Lucius’s eye with a mischievous sparkle that filled his mouth with tangerine sweetness.

Cassandra’s tall, thin form strode into view at the end of the aisle of neatly pruned orange trees. She stopped abruptly when she saw Isobel and Lucius. She planted her hands on her hips and fixed them with an accusatory glare.

“If you were *not hiding* on the lookout for my brother, Mama, he is here,” she said. “He seems to be giving Lady Isobel a lecture on horticulture.” She seized up a broom that was leaning against the windowpane, shook it in Lucius’s direction as though she would happily use it to beat the life out of him, and carried it off to sweep up the pieces of whatever it was she had knocked over.

“Lady Isobel, how lovely to see you!” cried Mrs Whitby, hurrying towards them with cheeks pink as strawberries. “I had just popped in to – well, I was on my way past and – goodness me, Cassandra has left me all in a flutter!” She pressed a hand to her chest and looked eagerly from Isobel to Lucius. “I do hope I am not interrupting?”

“Not at all, Mama,” said Lucius. “I was just apologising to Lady Isobel for disturbing her contemplation. I certainly did not mean to intrude upon her. It is all quite a coincidence.” He gave Isobel a bow and made off towards Cassandra, hoping against hope that it was not one of his fresh seedling trays she had smashed.

He glanced back over his shoulder, just once, to see Isobel talking quite calmly to his mother. There was not a trace of embarrassment on her face. Just as though the girl had been caught alone in perfumed orangeries with gentlemen every day of her life.

Her eyes briefly met his, as though she sensed him watching her, and he saw the briefest flash of triumph.

It looked as though their plan was already bearing fruit.

CHAPTER 6



Alone of all the guests at Whitby Manor, Isobel was dismayed when the following day brought bright sun and a cloudless sky.

“You promised me a country walk, Lady Isobel,” Lucius reminded her over the breakfast table, loud enough for everyone to hear. “And the skies have rewarded our hopes with the perfect day. Fate must be on our side.”

Isobel made a sour grimace in response before she remembered that she had agreed to the scheme in the first place.

Of course. She was to have *fun*. Or a gentleman’s idea of fun, at any rate. Get some fresh air. Put some colour in her cheeks. And turn Lord Randall green, with any luck.

“I will come with you,” said Cassie, eyeing Lucius suspiciously as she buttered a roll. She had clearly not forgotten the intrigue in the orangery the previous day.

“And I!” cried Georgiana at once. She caught Lord Bell’s eye across the table. “What do you say, Lord B? Shall we take a picnic and make a day of it?”

Naturally, the moment Georgiana suggested anything, every gentleman in the room fell in line. Isobel risked a glance at Lord Randall, who had been sitting opposite her and yet had managed not to meet her gaze once during the course of the breakfast. He was the only one who had not expressed enthusiasm.

Lucius had his number, alright. Randall was continually charging about the countryside on one adventure or another. There'd been a time when Isobel had entertained happy fantasies of welcoming him back home at the end of each busy day. A bright hearth and a pleasant song from the harp to ease that busy soul back into the heart of his family.

How foolish. How *embarrassing*.

But Isobel's agonised reminiscence was interrupted as Lord Randall's cool green eyes cut into hers, not in the past, but right there and then across the breakfast table.

"A country walk, Lady Isobel?" His fine lips lifted a little, and Isobel's heart thudded.

Their scheme was too obvious. He'd seen through it in an instant. She'd be his figure of fun once again...

"It took some convincing," she said airily. "But Mr Whitby is most persuasive."

Randall's half smile faded away. "I am glad," he said, not sounding glad at all. "I can think of nothing more pleasant on a day like today."

"Then it's settled!" cried Georgiana, clapping her hands. "We shall all spend the day out! Mama, do ring for the cook. We must have fresh bread, cherry jam, boiled eggs..."

Evie stood up and pushed her chair into the table. "I will not come," she said. "I have a sore head."

Lucius half-rose from his seat, but Evie shook her head and left the room before he could stop her.

"A tisane for Evie," Georgiana added smoothly, counting off the list on her fingers. "A pot of cream, a fruit cake..."

Lucius sat down, his face tight with worry. Isobel could feel the tension in his jaw from across the room.

But he smoothed it into a smile before anyone else noticed.

"See, Lady Isobel," he said, inclining his head to her. "You have inspired us all."



ISOBEL WAS glad of the crowd. Such a large group could not help but move slowly, and the muddy path through the wooded hills around Whitby Manor was not at all to her liking. She clung to Lucius's arm out of necessity as much as to continue their deception.

Go out and get some mud on your dress, Aunt Ursula had told her with approval. Though Ursula herself was still sitting in bed sipping tea and reading the gossip pages. *She* did not have to contend with mud, stones, and small buzzing insects. Nor with Lord Randall.

Not that he offered much to contend with. He had said nothing to Isobel since breakfast and was ambling along slowly at the rear carrying one of Georgiana's laden picnic baskets. Isobel felt his presence as a continuous uncomfortable prickle, as though he were a woollen shirt she could not take off. Georgiana, blessedly oblivious to everything, was attempting to engage him in a little flirtation.

"My, but you must be so much stronger than I, my lord! I'm sure I could never carry that basket half so easily."

"I'm sure you could do anything you set your mind to, Miss Georgiana." There was a smile in his voice, and Isobel did not need to turn and look at him to know his expression. She shivered.

"Careful, now," murmured Lucius. He caught her arm and guided her aside just before she stepped in a puddle. When Isobel made to draw her arm back, Lucius held it tight and tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. "I insist on keeping you at my side, my lady. It's the only way to protect you from the dangers of the great outdoors."

Isobel gave him a rueful smile. He was just as accomplished a flirt as his sister. "A puddle doesn't strike me as particularly dangerous, Mr Whitby. Do wild beasts roam the land around Whitby Manor? Or are we at risk of an avalanche?"

“All Whitby creatures are wild, my lady,” he answered, with such a twinkle in his eye that Isobel laughed in spite of herself. He gave her hand an encouraging squeeze.

Perhaps country walks were not quite so bad as Isobel had always thought.

Cassandra Whitby was taking the lead, her long legs easily outpacing Lord Bell and Sir Chamberpot. As their party rounded a corner, the sight of an enormous fallen tree blocking the path sent Bell scurrying to reach her.

“Allow me to assist you, Miss Cassandra!”

Cassie glanced over her shoulder, her expression closer to a sneer than a smile, and quickened her pace. She placed a hand on the tree trunk, hitched up her skirts with the other, and planted her foot in the crook of one of the tree’s branches. She was standing on top of the fallen trunk before Bell could reach her.

“Can I offer you a hand up, Lord B?” she asked, one hand on her hip and the other mockingly outstretched. Bell stopped in his tracks, whipping his head around to fire a glare at Sir Ivor, who was shamelessly sniggering.

“I don’t see *you* clambering up there after her, Chamberpot.”

“No, no,” said Sir Ivor evenly. “But do hurry up and let her hoist you over, Bell, so that she may assist the rest of us.”

Isobel caught Lucius’s eye and they both immediately looked away again for fear of breaking out into laughter.

Bell made Cassie an extravagant bow. “I beg your forgiveness, Miss Cassandra. I will not make the mistake of offering you help again.”

He spoke lightly, as though making a joke, but Isobel detected an undercurrent of bitterness in his voice. Gentlemen did not usually appreciate Cassandra’s brand of independence.

Which was fortunate, since Cassandra did not usually appreciate the presence of gentlemen.

Cassandra returned him a bow as elaborate as that of any dandy, pretending to doff her hat the way a man would, and caught hold of another protruding branch to make the jump down to the other side.

Just as she had launched her first foot into the air, the branch gave a rending creak and snapped in half. Cassandra went down on the other side with an audible thump.

“Serves her right!” Lucius chuckled. “Ho there, Cassie, are you hurt?”

His answer came in the form of an anguished scream.

Lucius dropped Isobel’s hand immediately, but she was already springing into action beside him. She had never heard such a sound issue from the mouth of her hardy friend. Lucius ran ahead, vaulting the trunk in a single leap, and Isobel pushed her way through the thicket of brambles and nettles at the side of the path, holding onto the tree’s displaced roots to help herself get past.

Mud on her dress aplenty. Aunt Ursula would be thrilled.

She forced her way around the tree to see Lucius with his arms crossed and his face contorted somewhere between severity and mirth. Cassandra was sitting splat in the middle of a large, deep, filthy puddle, the seat of her dress thoroughly soaked.

And leaning against a tree a little way down the path, helpless with laughter, was the Viscount Kendrick.

“Don’t you *dare*,” Cassandra growled, sending mud splattering about as she threatened Lucius away with a muddy finger. “Don’t say a *word*.”

Kendrick leaned forwards, gasping for breath, his hands resting on his knees to support himself.

“Go and hang yourself, Kendrick!” Cassandra rose to her feet, angrily batting at the stains on her dress as though there was anything she could possibly do to remove them.

“With pleasure,” Lord Kendrick answered, taking out a handkerchief and dabbing at his eyes. “Now that I have seen

this, Miss Whitby, I shall die happy.”

“Easy, Cassie.” Lucius took his sister by the arm and kept her from advancing on the still-chortling Kendrick. “Are you hurt?”

“I am perfectly well,” she said, through gritted teeth, still glaring murderously at Lord Kendrick. “I have never been better.”

Isobel took out her own handkerchief, for all the good it would do, and went to wipe some of the dirt from Cassie’s face. Kendrick got there first.

“What’s that saying about pride, Miss Cassandra?” he asked, handing her the kerchief with a masterful attempt at containing his laughter. “Here you are.”

She accepted it with bad grace. “You were standing close enough to catch me, I think,” she said. “Or is that old hunting wound still slowing you down?”

“Well, only yesterday you made me promise never to help you again,” said Kendrick evenly. “All the same, I’d have caught you if I could. Let me see that arm, now. You came down hard on your elbow, I think.”

Cassie wrenched it beyond his reach. “I’m not afraid of a little bruise. As you ought to know by now.” She stormed off, leaving Kendrick to direct his concern to the empty air. The viscount thrust his hands into his pockets, giving a shrug, but Isobel could see he was chagrined.

“It was her own fault,” said Lucius, patting Kendrick on the shoulder. “If either of us were to try catching Cassie every time she flings herself into danger, we’d never get anything done. Though it was Bell who baited her into it.”

“Oh?” Kendrick glanced over the offending tree trunk at Lord Bell, who was awkwardly attempting to help Georgiana climb it.

“He tried flirting with her.”

Kendrick let out a low whistle. “Braver man than I.”

Isobel freed her skirts from the tangle of briars and followed Cassandra down the path. She would not have caught her had Cassie not stopped every few paces to dab at her ruined skirts with Kendrick's handkerchief.

"Don't fret about the dress," said Isobel, brushing a mud-splatted lock of hair back from Cassie's forehead. "Is your arm really hurt?"

Cassie held out her arm and gave it an exploratory shake. "Not much. Kendrick's a cautious old woman at heart. I didn't land hard enough to do much damage." Her arm fell loose at her side as she let Isobel wipe the dirt from her brow. "I *will* fret about the gown, Iso. It's Italian sarsenet. One of the very few walking dresses I've managed to keep looking fine."

Isobel paused her wiping, taking the opportunity to study her friend's face more closely. She had never once heard Cassandra wax lyrical about fine clothes. "Are you worried your mother will be angry?"

"It's the waste," said Cassie, ducking away from Isobel's hand. "The expense of a dress like this – the idiocy of my mother to insist on my wearing it – ah! It's too much."

Lucius had left Kendrick to assist the others in navigating the tree trunk. He reached Cassandra and Isobel just in time to hear Cassie's lamentation, and he responded with a wide, beaming smile that struck Isobel as somehow false.

"Really, Cassie, there's nothing to worry about! Mother will leap at the chance to take you on a trip to Paris and have ten or twenty such dresses made."

Cassie's mouth twisted into a grimace. "I can think of nothing worse. Lucius, you must promise me that you won't let her take me. Let her do *anything* but that."

The two Whitby siblings met each other's eyes, and the quiet, earth-scented air of the forest was suddenly sharp with a tension Isobel did not understand.

"If you are truly distressed at the thought of losing the dress, I'm sure it can be saved," she said. "I've seen my maid work wonders with a long soak in cold water and mild soap."

And if that does not get all the stains out, it can be dyed. A deep blue or green would cover the damage entirely, and I think it would suit you very well, Cassie. Primrose yellow is for homebodies like me who spend their time indoors. You lead an active life.” She saw the tension ease out of Cassie’s shoulders and drew closer with a conspiratorial whisper. “Your poor mother has endured far worse from you than a spoiled dress, after all.”

Cassie’s face turned pale. “Lord! How can I be such a clot, complaining about my own mother hen when yours is long gone?”

“Hush. I have a whole family of mothers – my sisters and I all mothered each other. And Aunt Ursula did her part, too.” Isobel waggled her eyebrows, making Cassie laugh. “Thank your lucky stars you don’t have to contend with *her* as a matriarch. That would create a very different kind of trouble!”

Cassie let out an unladylike snort of laughter. She had recovered her spirits enough to keep smiling through Georgiana’s squeals of horror as she caught them up and saw the state of the dress.

Isobel stood aside and let Georgiana do her sisterly duty of fussing and tutting and enquiring how on earth Cassie had survived the fall.

A warm, masculine presence moved behind her. Lucius’s voice dipped close to her ear. “Thank you.”

She looked back at him, puzzled. “Whatever for?”

He answered her with a searching smile. “Why should a duke’s sister bother to learn how to get stains out of a dress?”

She shook her head, hiding a grin. “If you knew my brother better, you wouldn’t set so much stock by the idea that dukes are somehow above everybody else. He’s as much at risk from unexpected puddles as anyone. And I was brought up to be practical, and not to take anything for granted. Alex’s inheritance is his, after all, not mine.”

“True, but I know how it feels to possess a crowd of beloved sisters. Your brother will always have your welfare

close to his heart. And he could replace a hundred sarsenet dresses without his fortune suffering a jot.”

“How horrifying! I don’t think any of my family are so extravagant that we’d rather buy anew what could easily be cleaned.”

Lucius placed a hand over his heart, his smile taking on a self-mocking slant. “You are accustomed to making use of the battered and broken.”

He was talking about himself. But it was towards her own heart that Isobel’s thoughts turned. Her own battered, broken, ill-used heart. One that still bore the stains of the fall it had taken three years ago. Despite all her attempts to cleanse it, despite all her sisters’ entreaties to find love anew.

“Lady Isobel? You have torn your dress.”

Ah, yes. Of course. Here came Randall.

Lucius took a step towards her – to rescue her, presumably – but Isobel stopped him with a flare of her eyes and turned to Randall with a sweet smile.

“I hadn’t noticed.” She had, of course. She’d inwardly cringed the moment she felt the fabric catch and tear on a stubborn thorn. She’d tackle the mending herself if she could, rather than make extra work for her maid.

“Please. Allow me.” Randall dropped to his knees. Isobel took a step back, alarmed.

He pulled the pearl-topped pin from his cravat and smoothly pushed it through the two torn edges of the muslin, holding the hem together again. At least for now.

“That should keep it from further damage until we are back at the manor,” he said, rising to his feet. He was not avoiding her gaze, exactly, but Isobel noticed that his eyes were fixed on the trees beyond her, rather than on her face.

“It was – it was foolish of me. I know it was.” Ah, there she was again – the silly, babbling fool. The girl who couldn’t keep her thoughts straight around a gentleman. The girl

Randall had once pitied enough to woo. “Chasing after Cassie like that. So silly. She’s so much tougher than I am, and –”

“No,” Lucius protested, standing close beside her. Isobel could practically see his hackles rising, his protective instincts extending hidden claws. Randall noted it and stood a little straighter, setting his shoulders, poised for action.

Isobel felt like a piece of meat poised between two competing lions, and she was not sure she liked it.

“It wasn’t foolish at all,” said Lucius. “Never say that again.” He took her hand, pressed it warmly to his lips, and tucked it into the crook of his arm. The motion pulled her closer to him. Her hip nearly brushed against his thigh. His chest might have touched her shoulder with only a breath.

Isobel held herself as still as she could manage. She didn’t know whether she wanted that touch, or if she wanted to avoid it. She wasn’t sure if she could conceal the way his proximity set every nerve in her body on high alert.

“I agree,” said Randall, his tone sheer enmity. He broke off the warning glare at Lucius and inclined his head to Isobel. Neither friendly nor possessive – as Lucius was – but respectful.

Respect from Randall was new.

“It was admirable to rush to your friend’s aid,” he continued. “I’d think less of you if you stopped to fuss over a dress in such circumstances.”

Lucius settled beside Isobel, no longer threatening battle. She felt the protective rage ease from him. “Careful there, Randall. My sister Georgiana didn’t risk her dress to offer help.”

“And I didn’t risk my buckskins.” Randall shrugged out the tension from his shoulders, taking Lucius’s cue to back down. “Lady Isobel has bested me for heroism.” He cut his eyes to her. A flash of jade, reflecting inner flames. “But you’ve always had the knack of showing me how I could better myself, haven’t you, my lady? I remember it well, from our time in Brighton.”

There it was. Randall was merely feigning peace – sheathing his weapon only to draw out a hidden knife. Somehow, Lucius had turned intimacy with Isobel into a precious commodity. And Randall wished to show that he was the old money to Lucius’s *nouveau riche*.

Isobel found her tongue at last. “A pity you never listened to me, then.”

Lucius let out a burst of laughter that couldn’t possibly be mistaken as convivial. Not with that clear ring of triumph.

Randall’s jaw tightened. He bowed – an impeccably deep bow that offered no insult – and moved quickly away to join the others.

“Well, well,” said Lucius, looking after him with the keen-eyed enjoyment of a hunter sighting his prey. “It seems our efforts have been noted.”

“That was a completely unnecessary display of – of *masculinity!*” snapped Isobel. Lucius’s eyes sparkled in answer, so full of mischief that she had to turn her face away before he made her smile.

“Really? I found it very necessary.”

It took all her energy to maintain her stern demeanour. “We are only supposed to have reached a three on your uninspiring numerical scale. *That* was not a three, Mr Whitby.”

“Really?” She had roused his interest more than she’d intended. He looked extremely pleased with himself. “Where would you rank it, then?”

Isobel’s chest was full of flutters – the painful combination of nerves and pleasure she felt whenever Randall was nearby. The thrum of violin strings under tension.

But it was not Randall filling her with whispered vibrato now.

And *that* was not good at all.

She fixed Lucius with an appraising glare. “Do you remember when your younger siblings discovered music for

the first time? The moment they first realised a good tutor could help them draw sweet melodies from the keys of a piano?"

"Of course." His smile grew wider.

"Do you remember the sound it made when they started practising?"

"Oh."

"You are supposed to be *flirting* with me. Not treating me as if I am your betrothed and you need to defend me from all other suitors."

The smile left him. He glanced back at Randall, brows drawing together. His eyes were the grey of glowering rainclouds. "Yes. Quite. We mustn't scare him off, after all."

It was Isobel's turn to be piqued. "I beg your pardon?"

"Because that's what all this is about, really, isn't it?" Lucius's voice was soft and low. Isobel was sure that no one could hear him. And yet she felt horribly exposed. "You don't want him to suffer. Not really. You want him to love you."

At least it was Lucius accusing her, and not Randall. Randall struck her dumb. With Lucius, the wheels of her mind kept spinning as they should. Faster, even.

She gave a careless shrug. "Love is a kind of suffering, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know." He thrust his hands into his pockets, the stiff set of his jaw the only thing that gave the lie to his pose as careless country gentleman.

He strode off towards his sisters. "Stop fussing, Georgiana! Better to mourn over Cassie's dress than a broken neck. Let's turn back to the house. We can picnic on the lawn while Cassie gets cleaned up."

Isobel ran her hands briefly over her bodice and skirt, trying to shake off the feeling that Lucius had torn off a piece of her clothing and left some inner secret exposed to sight.

On the way home, she took Cassie's arm – never mind the mud. It was the best way to avoid all conversation with gentlemen.

She'd had *quite* enough of that for one day.

CHAPTER 7



Everything was going exactly as Lucius had hoped. Really. He had nothing to complain about. Truly. The scheme could not be progressing in a more satisfactory fashion.

His mother greeted him after the walk with a wink and a knowing smile, so gratified by his excursion with Lady Isobel that she even forgot to wail over Cassie's dress.

The following morning, he overheard Georgiana pestering Isobel with a series of ill-disguised enquiries about *just how well do you know my brother?*

His father had a spring in his step which even the cane and the wound could not subdue. The wretched hunger in his eyes had subsided. He had not even voiced a single objection to giving Lucius free rein to go over the family accounts.

And, most important of all, no one had spoken the name *Lord Henry* to Evie in a week. She was even beginning to regain some of the old colour in her cheeks. More than once, he'd seen her smile.

There was very little Lucius would not do to bring that smile back to his sister's face, and apparently that included watching Isobel reel Lord Randall in like a fat trout on the end of her line. While Lucius stood beside her, laughing and instructing her on the finer points of gamesmanship.

Yes. It was all going perfectly according to plan. And even if Lucius was exhausted, disappointed, and fearful for the

future as he'd never been before, at least he had one small pleasure to spur him on.

His mornings began before dawn, poring by candlelight over his father's accounts, desperately searching for a solution and finding only more debt. The long hours of playing the charming host, chatting and joking with Bell and Sir Ivor and Randall, sapped his energy still further. And that left only the late evenings, the quiet midnight hours after the guests had at last retired and every other candle in the house had been snuffed out, for him to study his horticultural texts and compile the data from his stolen moments in the orangery. That blasted orchid had still not flowered. What more did it require? An adjustment in the angle of the glasshouse roof – a drop in humidity – a better-draining substrate – if he only had the space to think, he would solve it.

But each night, just before the revelation came, Clarkson was shaking him awake at his desk with fresh coffee and a candle in the pre-dawn darkness, and it was time to begin all over again.

In the face of all that, escaping to Isobel's side was not the chore he had feared it would be.

In fact, it was all the one remaining guiltless pleasure he had.

“Whitby?” Bell's sharp elbow in his ribs jerked Lucius back to the present moment. “We're waiting on you, old boy.”

Lucius glanced down at the cards in his hands, the sound of Isobel's laughter more vivid in his ears from across the room than the gentlemanly chatter around the card table.

“I fold,” he said, setting them down. Bell frowned.

“But we're playing whist –”

Lucius had already risen to go and investigate the cause of that laughter. His arrival was forestalled by a loud whisper from Georgiana.

“Enough, enough! Here comes my brother.”

Georgiana, Isobel and Evie all turned to greet Lucius with expressions that were rather too innocent. He raised an eyebrow, assuming a stern expression for his sisters' benefit, and pretending he had not seen the slip of paper adorned with painted forget-me-nots that Georgiana was hiding beneath her needlework.

"I cannot imagine you have any secrets from me, Georgie."

She raised a hand to cover her mouth and stifled a mischievous giggle. Evie rolled her eyes and settled back in her armchair, gathering up the embroidery she had set aside to listen to Georgiana's whispers. "She will never have any secrets, Lucius – she doesn't have the knack for keeping them."

Georgiana composed her features into a sweet smile. "Evie makes that sound like a fault, but I know it is one of my finest qualities. There is no need for secrets in our family, is there, dear brother?"

Lucius bent to let her kiss his cheek. "No need for secrets at all." He was surprised at how easily the lie came. Only a week ago his innards had twisted into knots over the knowledge he was keeping hidden from his sisters. Now, the guilt was no more than a gentle pang.

He was not sure he approved of the man he was becoming.

Isobel had bent her head over the writing desk, taking the opportunity to scribble a few more words – No, now that he looked closer, he saw they were not words. She was writing music.

The absorption in her face was so absolute that he was loath to disturb her.

"Miss Georgiana!" called Lord Bell, as uproarious laughter sounded from the card table. "I am lacking a partner!"

"Lordy, Bell, you know I have no head for whist!" Georgiana responded gaily, but she trotted off to join him regardless.

Evie glanced up, caught Lucius's eye with an expression that was far too knowing, and rearranged herself so that she was curled up in the armchair with her back to him and Isobel, and her face to the window.

He took a seat in the chair Georgiana had just vacated. Isobel's eyes flicked up to him, brief and warm, before returning to her work.

And he would have been content merely to watch her, with her hair pinned up in a sensible bun, and her lower lip half pulled between her teeth to aid her concentration, and the rise and fall of inner music playing across her face, had Randall's eyes not landed on them from the fireplace where he stood talking quietly with Lucius's father.

"Give me your hand," said Lucius urgently. Isobel was in the middle of a section that required her full concentration. She indicated she had heard him by extending her left hand with her eyes still on the page, a faint wrinkle forming between her eyebrows.

Lucius caught it, forced himself not to stare Randall down, and pressed Isobel's bare fingers to his lips. Not the way he'd done in the woods – possessive and full of arrogant posturing. No, this time he kissed her hand the way he really wanted to. Softly and reverently, offering those clever fingers the tribute they deserved.

He could practically see the shock of heat travel down her arm, chasing her blood from her fingertips to her beating heart. Her eyes widened. The bitten lower lip was relinquished, plumper and redder from the pressure.

It was immensely gratifying.

Isobel tore her attention from her music with a look of alarm, and Lucius let his head incline the slightest bit towards Randall.

"That wasn't for my benefit," he said. Though that, he supposed, was another little deviation from the truth.

Isobel didn't bother turning to see the effect on Randall. She snapped her hand back from his, her movements tight and

irritated. "I am busy, Mr Whitby. You must seek amusement elsewhere."

He leaned an elbow on the desk and settled in to watch her. "May I stay if I'm quiet?"

She rolled her eyes without raising them from her music. "I can hardly force you to vacate your own drawing room."

"What is it you're writing? An exercise?"

"A composition." Her hand moved across the page as she spoke, etching out the shape of the music with dizzying speed.

"You compose?"

The shoulder nearest him lifted, as though she were defending herself from an incoming blow. "I know. Isobel 'Bluestocking' Balfour. Try to contain your despair."

"May I hear it?"

"This one?" She looked up, only then realising how closely he was watching her, and pulled a blank sheet of paper to cover her work. As though he had any hope of understanding the music simply by reading it on the page. "No," she said. "This one isn't ready yet."

"Another, then," he suggested, leaning closer. "I should very much like to hear your music."

Isobel gave him a sceptical look. "You didn't list musical appreciation as one of your preferred pastimes, Mr. Whitby."

Lucius couldn't argue with that. It wasn't the music he was interested in. Not really. It was the insight it might offer into Isobel Balfour's inner workings.

"I attended a few concerts here and there on the Continent," he said, painfully aware of how pathetic he was in his lack of expertise.

Isobel perked up. "Really? I never pictured you as a concert-goer."

"He is not," interjected Evie. Lucius gave a guilty start, feeling as though he had been caught discussing something too intimate.

Isobel gave Evie a knowing smile. “You are always quick to uncover everybody’s hidden motives,” she said. “Pray tell me, why does your brother attend concerts, if not for the music?”

Evie fixed Lucius with a look designed to put fear into his heart, but which only gladdened him, for he saw her old sparkle returning. “For the same reason he does everything else,” she said. “Because, at one time or another, it must have seemed to him an amusing way to pass the time. My brother Lucius is the epitome of a modern gentleman. That is to say, he is an expert in pleasing himself.”

Isobel was watching Lucius try to maintain his composure and, apparently, taking great pleasure in his struggle. “Well, Mr. Whitby,” she said, resting her chin keenly on her hand. “Did the concerts please you?”

Lucius fought back urge to throttle his grinning sister.

“I’m sure the *company* pleased him,” said Evie, enjoying his discomfort all the more. “Test him, Isobel. See if he can tell you the first thing about the music he heard. We will soon find him out. I’m sure he remembers every detail of who cadged a ride in his carriage and who flirted with whom in the interval. And which fine fellow invited him back for a snifter of brandy once the dreary business of listening to the music was done. Our Lucius is a pragmatic fellow, you see. Art for art’s sake is not his philosophy. He will have found a way to make the music work for him.”

Lucius rose to his feet. Isobel’s laughter was as enchanting as it had been when he sat at the card table, but now that it was directed at him, he found it had lost its allure. “You have the measure of me all right, Evie,” he said, making her a stiff bow. “Lady Isobel.”

Isobel held up a hand to stop him leaving. “Peace, Mr. Whitby! I have faith in your artistic soul where Evie does not. I will play something for you if you truly care to hear it.”

Lucius folded his arms, glancing from Isobel to Evie, unsure if he was still being teased. “I have no artistic soul,” he admitted. “But I’d be honoured to hear you play, all the same.”

Isobel led him to the piano. Lucius made a point of ignoring Evie's waggling eyebrows as he followed her, hands thrust into his pockets, his usual careless demeanour now growing mysteriously difficult to maintain.

Isobel's fingers hovered above the ivory keys, poised and graceful, ten tiny birds about to take flight. That was her sole concession to showmanship; there was nothing in her of pride or need for attention. She did not fuss and complain and strike wrong notes on purpose to spoil the tune, like Cassie, and neither did she simper and gaze about the room to see who was listening, as Georgiana did. She simply gazed ahead, her face lit with an inner glow, as though the music that flowed from her fingers took physical form before her.

And as that music began... As those ten skilful fingers began to caress the keys...

Lucius closed his eyes and let the sweet melody move through him. Isobel's piece began soft and gentle, delicate tinkling notes that descended slowly from the highest reaches of the piano, underpinned with mournful minor chords from her left hand that hinted at a sadness beneath all that sweetness. For the first time in his life, Lucius wished he'd bothered studying music. Oh, he knew how to plunk out Rondo alla Turca, certainly, and he could just about tell his Bach from his Schubert, but he was utterly ignorant of the meaning behind it all, the patterns and methods that underlay the melody.

Isobel's tempo quickened, her left hand now bouncing merrily from one bass note to the next. She'd somehow transformed that tinkling right-hand tune into a rich celebration of the sounds and scents of summer. It was birdsong. It was green leaves rustling in the wind. It was the pressure of her hand on his arm as they sauntered through the heat of a summer's day.

And still, beneath it all, that elusive minor melody. A sadness that even the sunlight could not chase away.

Lucius opened his eyes. To his amazement, Isobel was smiling at him, bright and cheerful, as she played. As though

creating that music were nothing more complicated than fastening a bonnet or picking a flower.

“I wrote this just the other day,” she said. “When we were —”

“When we were walking through the forest,” Lucius finished for her. “Did you really?”

Isobel narrowed her eyes. “How did you know that?”

He opened his mouth, but realised he had no answer to give. He only knew that it had seemed obvious. All he could offer Isobel was a shrug and an embarrassed half smile.

The piece drew to a close. Lucius was surprised to feel a distinct pang of loss as Isobel lifted her hands from the keys.

“Is that all?” he asked. “There’s nothing more?”

Isobel rubbed a hand diffidently over the back of her neck. “I thought I’d stop before Cassie fell from the tree,” she said. “That would not really be in keeping with the rest of the piece. I know it’s very simple —”

“No, no,” said Lucius. “I only meant that – well, it was wonderful. I was sorry when it ended. I’d love to hear more.”

“It’s a frivolous little tune,” said Isobel. “I doubt I could sustain it any longer. But I thought you might like to hear it, since you were there when I wrote it.”

“You were really composing that in your head all the while walking through the woods?” Lucius asked, amazed. “With no instrument at hand?”

“Oh!” Isobel shrugged, feigning carelessness, but Lucius saw a hidden pleasure turn the tips of her ears pink. “That’s nothing. I hear the music in my head. That’s all I need.”

“That’s marvellous,” said Lucius. “*You* are marvellous.”

She gave him a shy smile. “It’s kind of you to say so. But I can claim no real credit for it. It’s a talent I was born with; not the result of any special study or diligence.”

“Let me compliment you,” said Lucius, smiling. “There’s no harm in a little flattery, whether it’s deserved or not.

Besides, I've a feeling you'd rather hear me praise your genius than your beauty or your sweet disposition."

"I make no claims for either genius or beauty," said Isobel. "As for my disposition, I shall have to accept your judgement." She closed the piano.

"No, no," called an imperious voice from behind Lucius. He saw the flush rise in Isobel's cheeks and knew before he turned that Lord Randall was standing behind him.

"Play a little more," said Randall. There was a glittering in his eyes as he watched Isobel that Lucius didn't quite like. "Your compositions are always so delightful."

Lucius cast his mind about for any excuse to call Isobel from the piano. It wasn't that he didn't wish to hear more of her music – on the contrary, he'd have happily listened for hours, regardless of the motives Evie ascribed to him.

It was the meek obedience with which Isobel returned to the piano that appalled him. When Randall was near, all her fire was dimmed. She'd sooner argue with a gorgon than with him. And Randall had done so little to earn Isobel's obedience that Lucius could hardly stand to see it.

But when she began to play, he was instantly mollified. Lucius recognised the tune at once. He couldn't recall quite where he'd heard it, but it was one of those popular pieces of music that works its way into the brain via the ears and stays there, repeating long into the midnight hours.

Randall had demanded one of Isobel's compositions, and without saying anything about it she was declining to share one with him. It was foolish, perhaps, but Lucius could not resist crowing over it.

"I know this one!" he cried. "It was all the rage in Prague last year."

Randall gave him an infuriatingly pitying smile. "Whitby, you are no musician. You cannot have heard this in Prague. I was present when Lady Isobel composed it in Brighton three years ago. It is her own piece. I am quite sure of it."

Lucius was amazed. Was Randall really so jealous of his sometime connection with Isobel that he would tell an outright lie?

“I do recognise it,” he insisted. He began to hum along with the tune, tapping out the rhythm on the back of the piano for emphasis.

Isobel stopped playing abruptly. “How embarrassing,” she said. “I am no original when it comes to music. This *is* my own piece – or at least, I thought it was. It seems I inadvertently mimicked an existing composition when I wrote it.” She stood, inclined her head politely to Lucius and Randall, and abruptly turned on her heel to return to Evie.

Lucius met Randall’s gaze coolly. “You have a rather good memory for music,” he said. “I’m not sure I could pick out the tune I had only heard once or twice, three years ago, in Brighton. Not unless the memory held a special significance for me.”

“I am quite familiar with Lady Isobel’s musical style,” said Randall, with a smile Lucius wanted to punch. “I could not mistake it anywhere. And I assure you, you did not hear that music in Prague.”

Lucius bowed, smiling outwardly, seething inwardly.

He should, of course, have been delighted. Here was clear evidence that Randall’s memories of Isobel in Brighton were uppermost in his mind. Here was certain proof that Randall had noticed Lucius and Isobel’s flirtation and wished to interrupt it.

And wasn’t that what Lucius wanted, after all? To help Isobel secure Randall’s affection – this time, for good.

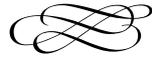
The only trouble was that it was all moving too quickly. Evie was not yet out of danger. Lucius’s study of his father’s accounts had confirmed his worst fears. He had not yet found a way to avert financial catastrophe. If Randall fell for Isobel too soon, the game would be up, and Mr Whitby would embark on his reckless scheme of selling Evie to Lord Henry.

He had no desire to stay in Randall's company any longer. "Excuse me. That is my father calling." He left Randall at the piano, well aware that the other gentleman had not heard Lucius's father say anything at all.

It was becoming ever more obvious that Lucius had underestimated Isobel's powers of attraction. If they continued at this pace, Randall would be in love with her again by the end of the week, and down on one knee in a fortnight.

And Lucius had to stop him. Not for ever. Only until Evie was safe – only until he had patched the holes leaking money from his family life raft. Once he had done that, Randall would be Isobel's to do with as she wished. And if she wished to marry him, that was none of Lucius's concern. *Really.*

CHAPTER 8



“Stupid, stupid, stupid.” Isobel clenched her fists so hard her fingernails pinched her palm through her gloves. Thank goodness for Evie and her innate sense of when to talk and when to be silent. Isobel was sure that Evie could hear her whispered self-castigation, but of all the denizens of Whitby Manor, she at least could be relied upon not to pry. And Isobel could curse herself in peace.

Why had she chosen to play that piece? To spite Randall, surely? Remind him of Brighton, and thereby give a vicious twist to the dagger that she hoped her flirtation with Lucius was driving into his chest.

No, that was not the reason. She'd had a baser motive even than that. It was pride – worse, arrogance. That composition was one of her greatest successes. She'd wanted Randall to remember it, true – but more than that, she'd wanted Lucius to hear it. She'd let his appreciation of her music go to her head like wine, even though she knew it was all for show. Just another move in their secret game.

Even now, the memory of his closed eyes and part-open mouth as he listened sent an unworldly thrill through her. He'd been rapt. It was intoxicating.

No, she reminded herself sternly. He'd *feigned* rapture. And he did it well. Randall, for one, certainly believed the show.

As for Isobel, she'd drunk so deeply of Lucius's heady admiration that she'd forgotten how recently he'd been

travelling through Europe. Even the sort of philistine Evie painted him as could not fail to recognise the music that Isobel very well knew had been the sensation of the summer throughout Austria the year before. The first great success of one *Isidore Babbage*, a mysterious composer who issued new music via an understanding publisher, received his cheques care of one Lady Ursula Balfour, and who had never shown his face to the public.

“Stupid,” she murmured to herself again, but this time, it was with a smile. She was only human, after all. Pride was a human failing. And, heaven help her, she was proud of what she’d achieved.

Which made it all the more important not to slip up again. There was too much music at stake to risk on such inconsequential things as gentlemen.

Evie was watching her with a politely raised eyebrow.

“I’ve forgotten what comes next in my new composition,” Isobel explained, with a wry smile. “I should not have let Mr Whitby distract me.”

Evie returned her attention to her needlework. “I must admit, I am surprised,” she said. “I have seen you sit in a corner throughout an entire ball without a care for any partner, thinking only of the music. Now, without anybody having any idea of how, it seems Lucius has supplanted every other passion.”

Isobel flushed. It wasn’t only that she was lying to her friends – she’d grown quite accustomed to deception over the last few years. A gently bred young lady could not possibly pursue a career as a composer without keeping herself concealed. No, Evie’s words only brought to light certain fears that Isobel had been trying, unsuccessfully, to hide from herself.

She had begun to lose sight of the true reason why she had embarked on this – whatever on earth *this* was – with Lucius.

He had made it too exciting. She’d been having fun. And fun made her lose her focus.

So why did she let it continue? Randall's attention was caught – that alone was more than she had dared hope. She did not yet have his love, true, but since she had never truly had that in the first place, it seemed foolish to hold out for it now. With a little imagination, she could surely find a way to humiliate him – and then be done with it. With Randall, and with Lucius, too.

It was past time. By her calculations, they had now reached about five on Lucius's ten-point scale. Any further could do her reputation real damage.

"You're imagining things, Evie," she said, forcing herself to speak lightly. "Your brother and I are simply good friends."

"Interesting," said Evie. She took up her embroidery scissors and snipped through a scarlet thread. "Very interesting, considering Georgiana and I never saw you exchange more than a polite greeting with Lucius before you arrived here this summer."

"I am not the sort to hold a kindred spirit at arm's length simply because we are but little acquainted," said Isobel. "I find myself enjoying Mr Whitby's company, and I see no reason why I should not continue to enjoy it."

Evie's sharp, bright eyes flicked up from her needlework. Isobel had the uncomfortable sensation that her deception was being unpicked as carefully as the snarl in that embroidery.

"It makes me worry for you," Evie said. "You have an open heart, Isobel, and I can see that Lucius's attentions flatter you. I only hope that you have your wits about you. You see, Lucius is..." She set down her needlework, sighed, and folded her hands atop her work. "Don't misunderstand me. I love my brother dearly. But he is not like you, Isobel. He has never been the sort to feel things deeply. I'm afraid that, for him, this flirtation is no more than an amusing diversion."

"I would hardly call it a flirtation," said Isobel, knowing that her protest would fool no one.

She would have done better not to deny it. Evie's eyes filled with concern.

“Please, Isobel, tell me that you are not entertaining serious hopes of my brother?”

Isobel laughed. She was surprised to hear that her merriment had a brittle, false quality, as though she were trying to play a symphony on a toy glockenspiel. “Oh, Evie, is it too much to believe that I, too, am simply enjoying a little summer’s fun?”

Evie sat back, letting out a sigh of relief. “I am so glad to hear it. Anyone who does not know Lucius as I do might easily believe that his feelings were more than they truly are. Part of the trouble with Lucius is that he has never really understood how attractive a prospect he is to the right sort of woman.” She let out a fond chuckle. “He has very little idea of his own charm or good looks. You’ll not believe me, but I think if he didn’t have Clarkson to pull him into shape, he’d arrive at the dinner table in stained buckskins and a workman’s shirt, covered in mud from the gardens.”

“How lucky he is unaware of his own charms,” said Isobel dryly. “I dread to think how proud he might be otherwise!”

Evie laughed and returned to her embroidery. Isobel took up her pencil again but was disturbed to find that when she set it to the paper, she could no longer remember the shape of the melody she had been writing.

She ran her eyes over the last few bars of music. The notes sounded in her head, clear as day, but the moment she reached the end of what was already written, her imagined melody came to an abrupt stop.

Only a few moments ago she had been chiding herself over one sort of pride. Now, it seemed yet another had reared its ugly head. Her pride – her vanity – was hurt to hear that Evie thought it impossible that Lucius could truly have feelings for her. And it had ruined every hope of finishing her composition that day.

Isobel shook her head, mentally taking herself by the shoulders and shaking some sense into herself. She set down her pencil.

“I have dallied here too long,” she said, rising to her feet. “I must go upstairs and check that my aunt has everything she needs. I will never hear the end of it if her afternoon tea was overbrewed, or her slice of cake not substantial enough!”

As she went to the drawing-room door, Lord Randall rose from the card table and began walking towards her. His attitude was casual, but his pace deceptively fast. He reached the door just as she did and nodded her through, following swiftly after.

Isobel had intended to leave him standing in the hallway, to hurry upstairs to Aunt Ursula without a backward glance.

It was inexplicable, then, that she found herself waiting, patient, meek, and mute, while Randall ran those imperious green eyes over her and began to speak.

“I was rather glad to hear you play that old tune again,” he said. “It always amazes me how a certain sight or sound can transport one back in time.”

“Indeed,” said Isobel, hoping she sounded aloof rather than insipid.

“I have been recalling more and more of our summer together in Brighton,” said Randall. He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, his eyes fixed on Isobel with a glitter in their emerald depths.

“Really? I can barely recall it at all,” said Isobel. Or rather, that is what she meant to say. What actually emerged from her lips was only the first word, in an embarrassing, high-pitched squeak. “*Really?*”

Randall rewarded her inarticulate noises with the sort of smile that would once have made her knees tremble. “Do give my regards to your aunt.” He bowed and returned to the drawing room, leaving Isobel trying to steady her legs enough to manage the stairs.

It seemed that a mere five out of ten was not enough. Randall was very far from humble.

She did not go upstairs to Aunt Ursula, afternoon tea be hanged. Instead, she hastened to the orangery.

It was time to modulate the key of her latest little deception.

CHAPTER 9



“*A*bsolutely not,” said Lucius, sending a shower of leaves cascading to the ground as he snipped his shears through the branches of an overgrown box hedge. “Are you insane?”

His father eyed up the growing pile of leaves with apprehension. “You are too harsh with me, Lucius, too harsh by half!” He rubbed his sweating forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a smear of pomade over his glove. The great outdoors, even the primped and pampered version of it to be found in the gardens of Whitby Manor, was not Horace Whitby’s natural habitat. “I happen to think it is a very good idea. Everybody knows there’s no place for romance quite like a ball.”

“Indeed,” said Lucius, decapitating another errant branch with his shears. The under-gardeners who had maintained the topiary’s crisp, even geometry had all been dismissed the week before. With excellent references, and in spite of loud protests from his parents. “Nothing has ever made my heart beat faster than the list of expenditures for the ball we threw in London. Three hundred pounds on fireworks, two hundred and fifty on candles, fresh hothouse flowers at ten shillings a vase!” The latest had particularly stung considering the quality of the flowers provided. Given a suitably large hothouse, Lucius could have provided better for half the price.

“Gracious, but you have such a head for figures, Lucius! You would do better to fill your brain with hunting and fishing, my boy, and leave no space for all this mathematics.”

Lucius's temperature was rising a good deal faster than the mercury in the thermometer on the garden wall. He set aside his shears before he did the topiary irreparable damage. "Georgiana's birthday ball was funded with money we did not possess. And the number of wealthy matches it attracted for my sisters was precisely zero. I cannot allow you to take out yet another loan and waste it on this fool's errand again."

"But you have not heard the best part of the plan!" his father complained. "It was your mother who thought of it, of course. She is so much cleverer than I. She always knows how to arrange these things."

Lucius eyed up the shears and wondered if anyone would really blame him if his father's foolish head was snipped off by mistake. "I am familiar with mother's way of arranging things," he said. "I cannot see that it will help us out of our financial predicament."

"Ah!" cried Mr Whitby. "That is where you are wrong. Women have a way of seeing to the heart of these things, have they not? Your dear mother, you recall, is a frequent attendee of the ladies' seminars hosted by Lord Henry's mother, the Duchess of Richmond –"

No jury would ever convict me, Lucius told himself. *Any reasonable man would be driven to murder in these circumstances*. "Out of the question," he snapped, so stern that even his oblivious father stopped mid-sentence, blinking with confusion. "I will not tolerate any further mention of Lord Henry or his cursed family money. I warn you, Father, if the Duchess of Richmond is invited to our house, I shall pack Evie into a carriage and take her so far away that you will never see her again. She has decided against Lord Henry. We must respect that."

"Are you determined to see our family ruined?" Mr Whitby demanded. "Our time is running out! Or have you overlooked, in all your *mathematical calculations*, that if our girls are not married by the end of the summer, they may very well never marry at all?"

Lucius gritted his teeth to prevent himself from saying something he knew he would regret. “Nothing will sully our family more than forcing Evelina into an unwanted marriage. What good is it to escape financial ruin if in the process we lose ourselves? In any case, Father, what you suggest is impossible. We have no money for a ball. We do not even have the money to see out the summer. I will speak to my mother if you cannot. I have already drawn up a list of measures she can take to improve our household finances.”

“You will do no such thing.” It took a great deal to stir Horace Whitby to anger, but this threat to his wife’s comfort did the job. “Your mother is a delicate creature! You cannot expect her to live the life of a pauper. She will be very upset if you interfere with her household management.”

“If it was your aim to avoid upsetting her, you would have done better to take care of your money when you had it,” snapped Lucius. His father visibly wilted.

Lucius groaned. He had much preferred the anger. It was easier to argue with an unrepentant father than to comfort a guilt-stricken one.

“My poor son,” Mr Whitby moaned, taking out a lace-trimmed handkerchief and dabbing it across his face. “I have failed you...”

“Please, father. It does none of us any good to wail and blame ourselves.”

But Mr Whitby was not listening. “After you have done so much for us. The Balfour girl is not to your taste, I know, but you are performing your role admirably. If only I possessed your capacity for selflessness. Tell me, Lucius, how close are you to closing the deal? I admit that the Midsummer Ball will be much easier on the pocketbook if Lady Isobel is part of the family.”

All of Lucius’s anger turned to ice. “What did you say?”

Mr Whitby smiled, utterly failing to interpret his son’s tone. He gave Lucius a loving clap on the back. “She is half in love with you already – a blind man could see it! When I

invited her here, I did not dare to dream of such an outcome. You have always been so headstrong. But now I see that I misjudged you. I really could not admire you more, Lucius.”

Nausea roiled in Lucius’s stomach. “There is nothing to admire, father. Lady Isobel and I...”

He stopped. What was he doing? Wasn’t this exactly the outcome he had hoped for? He had set out deliberately to deceive his father. The more fervently Mr Whitby believed that Lucius was about to land an heiress, the more time Evie had to distance herself from Lord Henry. The more time he had to scrape together the first payment of his father’s debts.

She is half in love with you already. The words were sharp and painful in Lucius’s ears. His father was prone to exaggeration, true, but also utterly oblivious to the nuances of human emotion. If Mr Whitby truly believed that Isobel was falling in love with Lucius, it either meant that she was every bit the excellent actress Lucius had hoped for... or that he had been blind not to see that her feelings were real.

“You are mistaken, father,” he said, and bit his tongue before he ruined the scheme entirely.

Mr Whitby looked alarmed. “Have I said something wrong? Dear boy, the way she looks at you leaves little room for doubt. She is yours for the taking, I know it. Tell me you do not intend to let this chance slip away.”

Lucius swallowed. “No, no. I only meant that... You are mistaken to believe that Lady Isobel is not to my taste.” He breathed out a little of the tension. It was easier to stick to the truth, and only tell part of it. “I enjoy her company very much.”

“Truly?”

Lucius cringed inwardly at the astonishment in his father’s voice.

“Well,” said Mr Whitby, for once lost for words. “That is... That is unexpected.”

“Why should it be?” Lucius trailed his fingers fondly over the newly even shape of the box hedge. He had cut back

enough to reveal the healthiest new growth; leaves with a deep green gloss that surpassed any emerald. “Lady Isobel is one of the most accomplished women I have the pleasure to know. Not to mention her kindness, the loving attention she shows her aunt, her utter lack of pride or vanity...” Something tightened deep in his chest, as though a fist had squeezed inside his ribcage. He looked up from his work to find Mr Whitby frowning at him. “My point, Father, is that she is not an investment at the bank. She is a person of passion and feeling. I will not tempt her into marriage under false pretences. She deserves more.”

“It is easier to be sanctimonious about a lady’s finer feelings when one has a fat pocket book,” said Mr Whitby. Lucius stopped himself, with effort, from rolling his eyes at the hypocrisy. “Well, I will not press you about the Midsummer Ball. Don’t worry about your mother – I will put her off the idea. But I must counsel you not to be choosy over Lady Isobel. We are running out of time, and if you do not find another way to replenish our coffers, I shall have nothing to offer my debtors at the end of the month but the prospect of the Duke of Richmond’s generosity.”

Lucius felt physically ill. The early mornings shut up in the study had given him a finer grasp of their situation than his father possessed. And, unlike his father, he could not delude himself that blackmailing a duke could do anything more than add to their troubles. What good would it do to make an enemy of Richmond by twisting Henry’s arm into marriage, then begging him to cover their debts?

Besides, Lucius no longer had any faith that his parents could be trusted to manage their finances in the future. Without a steady source of income, they’d soon find themselves in the same situation – and Richmond’s generosity would not be extended a second time.

But he knew it was pointless to say any more. Mr Whitby had proven time and again that he was immune to reason on the subject. So Lucius was not entirely sure why he called out as his father turned to leave –

“Do you truly mean it?”

Mr Whitby planted his cane on the gravel path and turned back with a quizzical expression. “Mean what, my boy?”

“What you said about Isobel.” That fist in Lucius’s chest tightened even more. It required some effort to keep his breathing even. “Do you genuinely think she feels something for me?”

Mr Whitby’s jowly face broke into an indulgent smile. “Is it so hard to believe, Lucius? What girl in her right mind would not, eh?” The clacking of his cane beat time with his chuckling as he left Lucius alone.

Lucius thumped a fist against his sternum, trying to rid himself of the sensation that his heart was a piece of clockwork that had been wound a turn too many.

He knew exactly why he’d let himself get carried away with Isobel. He was only human, after all! There was no distraction from his troubles more agreeable than a smile from her, bold and suggestive and designed to arouse other men’s jealousy.

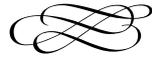
It was all too pleasant, too flattering. And what with the late nights and early mornings, the stress of all his secrets and the depressing mess of the accounts, he was more susceptible to flattery than ever before.

He remembered, with a delicious shiver, the way her eyes widened when he kissed her hand at the writing desk. That hadn’t been for Randall, for Evie, or for his foolish father. Lucius had done it to please himself. And he had selfishly forgotten what he risked awakening in Isobel as he did.

He could not risk Isobel forming a real attachment to him. Even if it meant sacrificing Evie – even if it meant his family’s disgrace coming to light.

It was time to bring the game to an end.

CHAPTER 10



“Isobel! Isobel, please! I need you!”

Georgiana’s eyes were wild as she caught Isobel’s arm and tugged her into the shelter of the topiary maze. It took a moment for Isobel to understand what was going on. She’d been so intent on making her way to the orangery – to Lucius – that she had not even seen Georgiana coming to intercept her.

Georgiana paced up and down, rubbing her hands over her arms as though the warm day had turned icy. Her eyes roved desperately from one end of the leafy corridor to the other, searching out for some secret beyond the maze’s usual mystery. She looked sick to death.

“It’s not here!” she moaned, covering her face with her hands. “Oh, Iso, what will I do now?”

“Sit down, for a start, and breathe steadily.” Isobel steered her to a little stone bench. “Come, now, what have you lost? I’m sure it can be replaced.”

Georgiana lowered her hands just enough to reveal her wide, frightened eyes, and gave her head a little shake, sending her curls bobbing. “Some things can’t be bought in a shop, Iso. Reputations, for example.”

Isobel’s head was still full of her own intrigues, and her thoughts turned immediately to Lucius.

Had she compromised her reputation with him? Already? When he’d kissed her hand – when his lips sent flickers of flame from her fingertips straight to her core, a different sort

of fire entirely from the familiar burn for vengeance – had all she felt been written so plainly on her face?

“The *puzzle purse*,” Georgiana wailed, and Isobel remembered that she herself was not the only impressionable young woman at Whitby Manor.

“That little plaything?” she asked. Georgiana had been showing off the fruits of her labours to Evie and Isobel just as Lucius came to interrupt them. A square of paper folded into an intricate design, each layer inscribed with a line of poetry and daubed with a delicate spray of flowers in Georgiana’s skilful hand – forget-me-nots for devotion, violets for fidelity, red carnations for an aching heart. “I’m sorry you’ve lost it. It was so lovely. But you can make another, can’t you?”

“I could,” said Georgiana, whispering through her fingers. “I could, certainly. But I’m not sure if I ought to, Iso. Because, you see, the problem is...”

Isobel groaned. “Georgiana. What did you write inside it?”

She’d seen the outer layers. Painted paper that folded outwards like the petals of a flower, lines of self-composed poetry inscribed in looping calligraphy. *Heart* rhyming with *part*, *hand* with *wedding band*. By Georgiana’s standards, it was surprisingly modest.

But Lucius had interrupted them before Georgiana had revealed the final layer of the puzzle.

Georgiana moved her hands upwards to cover her eyes, revealing a bitten lip beneath. “Poetry.”

“Saucy poetry?” Isobel raised an eyebrow and waited. Georgiana had never been able to withstand simple patience.

“The last time my brother Sebastian came home on leave, he left behind a book of verse. And... well, some parts of it were very enlightening.” Georgiana twisted her fingers together, writhing in the agony of Isobel’s patient attention. “Did you know, for example, that John Donne did not only write religious poetry?”

Isobel said nothing. Georgiana writhed, whimpered, grinned in spite of herself, covered her eyes again and began

to recite. “*Licence my roving hands, and let them go*

“*Before, behind, between, above, below –*”

“My word! Enough!” Isobel caught Georgiana by the wrists and prised her hands away from her face, to reveal an unrepentant smile and a pair of eyes bright with terror. “What sort of poem was that?”

“It’s called *To His Mistress Going to Bed.*”

“Georgiana!”

“Well, it’s hardly my fault. Sebastian bought the book. I only happened to stumble across it.”

“And read it. And memorise it.”

“It was really *very* interesting, Iso.”

“I can imagine,” said Isobel, who really couldn’t. Certainly not. Though, if she *could* imagine the interesting parts of that sort of poetry, she would definitely not be imagining it read by a gentlemen with a wicked smile and storm-cloud eyes.

“You’d have read it too,” said Georgiana. “Don’t deny it. You’re blushing!”

Isobel clapped a hand to her hot cheek. “Yes, I might have read it – but I would stop short of copying saucy quotes down into a puzzle purse for my sweetheart. Georgiana! What were you thinking?”

Georgiana cast her eyes down. At times like this, it was clearer than ever why so many gentlemen were captivated by her. Even in the throes of despair, Georgiana was a work of art from every angle. Her eyes were brightened by tears, rather than red and streaming. Her cheeks pleasantly flushed, her lips bitten red, her hand pressed delicately to her bosom.

“I thought it might make him... *notice* me.”

Isobel was silent again. This time, because she was lost for words.

She recognised the expression on Georgiana’s face. The hopelessness, the confusion. She’d seen it in the mirror, three years ago in Brighton, and too many times to count since.

“Georgiana. Not –” Isobel sat beside her, putting an arm about Georgiana’s shoulders, though she felt she was in as much need of support as her friend. “Not Lord Randall?”

Georgiana let out a squeak of dismay. “Is it so obvious?”

“Only to me.” Isobel gave her a comforting squeeze. “My dear friend. Listen to me. If a gentleman is not clever enough to notice you of his own accord, he does not deserve a single piece of your heart. Do you understand?”

Georgiana shrugged and gave a little half smile. “I wouldn’t say it’s my heart, exactly. It’s just – oh, it’s so strange! I was sure that he liked me. And I like him a great deal more than those silly fellows, Bell and Chamberpot.”

“Sir Ivor,” Isobel corrected her. Georgiana twisted her fingers again.

“Yes, Sir Ivor. But you see how I am, Iso! I am too easily tempted into doing the wrong thing. Teasing poor Sir Ivor is only one of my sins. And when I noticed that Randall had started to take less notice of me, I admit I was piqued enough to forget my good judgement once again.”

Lord Randall had stopped taking notice of Georgiana. There was no reason for Isobel to doubt it – her friend was an expert in the art of flirtation, and she knew well enough how to see if a gentleman was taken by her.

Isobel searched her own heart for any trace of unjust triumph, or even the thrill of impending victory. If Randall’s attention had been withdrawn from Georgiana, despite all her efforts, it surely meant his thoughts had turned to someone else.

To *her*.

Isobel’s heart responded with nothing. No swell of strings, no *accelerando* of its steady beat.

What did she feel, on learning Randall had left off his thoughts of Georgiana?

Nothing.

How odd.

“I invited Lord Randall to take a turn about the gardens with me,” said Georgiana. “But rather than wait for him here, I meant to leave the puzzle purse on the bench so that he would find it. I thought it might... intrigue him.”

“Intrigue,” Isobel repeated. *Licence my roving hands...* “Intrigue is not quite the word, is it?”

Georgiana grinned. “Well, Randall did *not* come out to the gardens. I saw him just now walking towards the stables. So I ran back to collect my little puzzle purse, and when I got here... it was gone!”

Isobel looked at the tall square walls of box hedge, as though they could bear witness to the interloper who had discovered Georgiana’s ill-advised puzzle. “Did you see anybody on your way back? A gardener, perhaps?”

“Nobody. Nobody at all.”

So it could have been found by anyone in the house. A servant, a parent, a sister, a friend...

Or any of the gentlemen staying at Whitby Manor.

“Did you sign the puzzle?” Isobel asked. Georgiana shook her head.

“After what I wrote inside? No, I’d never dare!”

“And you wrote in calligraphy, not your usual hand.” Isobel thought it over a moment, testing all the ways the situation could go awry. “You’ve only shown it to me and Evie, haven’t you? So we are the only ones who would know for certain that it was yours.”

Georgiana’s eyes widened. “But who else in this house would ever make such a thing? Evie is so heartbroken, no one would ever believe it of her. And Cassie hates painting, and poetry, and all that sort of thing.”

Isobel laughed. “That leaves me... and Aunt Ursula! Don’t worry, Georgiana. If it does come back to haunt you – which is not at all likely, I think – my good aunt will no doubt be delighted to take the blame for you.”

Georgiana spluttered into laughter. “Oh, poor Lady Ursula! As if anybody would believe it.” She dabbed at her eyes, removing the last traces of her frantic tears. “Thank you, Iso. It was silly of me, I know, but I was really beside myself. Thank goodness for sensible friends like you! Now I am quite at ease. Will you come back inside with me?”

“Not yet.” Isobel could not help but feel that Georgiana had recovered a little too easily. She was prone to this sort of scrape – and so far, immune to its consequences. But that did not mean she would always be. A true friend would find the words to remind her of the seriousness of her mistake.

But Isobel could not seem to do it. Not with her own murky schemes unfolding and commingling with Georgiana’s own.

“Will you do me a favour?” she asked. “Check in on my aunt and see that she has everything she needs? I...” She found her eyes sliding away from Georgiana’s. “I would like to stay out a little longer. On my own.”

Another lie. A small one. Inconsequential, compared to others Isobel had told.

But each feather-light lie, no matter how small, only added to the weight of the pile on her shoulders.

CHAPTER 11



*H*idden away at the back of the orangery was a raised bed in which neat rows of seedlings were beginning to send out hopeful leaves. Lucius took up his trowel and laid out ten terracotta pots. The seedlings needed planting out if they were to thrive.

This work was a far cry from the intricate horticultural science he'd been reading by candlelight, and yet all the more essential for it. Something about the scent of freshly turned earth and the slow progress of new, green life soothed his soul.

Here, among the tender, tiny growing things, he was at peace.

And there was a satisfaction unlike any other in knowing that it was he alone who had brought this small miracle of flora about. He who had crossbred the sharp tangerines with the sweeter clementines sent home from Spain, carefully collecting the pollen from one flower and daubing it inside another, taking note of which plant succumbed to disease and which thrived in his hothouse's pale imitation of Mediterranean heat. These strong green rows of plants were thriving because Lucius had cared for them. If he had only the security of another full year at Whitby Manor, he would create something truly special here.

And perhaps, if he could find a way to tend his family as carefully as he tended his orange trees, the Whitbys would someday thrive again too.

“I knew I’d find you in here.” Isobel approached with a smile and sat on the wrought-iron chair beside the raised bed, looking with interest at his seedlings. “These had barely begun to sprout on our first meeting here,” she said, delighted. “Now look how fine they are! What will you do with them next?”

Lucius thrust his trowel into the soil, forgetting to roll up his sleeves. He cursed under his breath as the soil marred the white shirt cuff which Clarkson had starched to perfection. The under-gardeners had been easy enough to part with; his valet remained indispensable while he wanted to maintain the pretence of being a member of polite society. “When I can manage it without covering myself in dirt,” he said, pulling off a leather glove and rolling up his left shirt sleeve, “I will plant each seedling out into these pots. With any luck, we’ll have ten new orange trees ready to fruit next year. *Completely* new, at that. They are hybrids of my own creation.”

“What is it that you’re hoping for?” asked Isobel. “Better yields? Resistance to disease? Here, let me help you.”

Before Lucius could object, she’d brushed the dirt from his right shirt sleeve and removed the cufflink to roll it up his arm.

“Stop that.”

She gave him a look that plainly said he was being silly. “It’s easier if I help you. Hold still.”

Lucius jerked his arm out of her reach before the touch of her fingers could send any more agreeable tingles down his spine. “I can do it perfectly well myself,” he said, demonstrating the depth of his hubris by fumbling with the sleeve as he rolled it up the rest of the way. “I thought we had an agreement about this sort of thing. Physical contact is out of the question. In fact, so are clandestine meetings. You should not be here.” Though, heaven help him, he was glad that she was. The cool, damp relief of the soil, the warmth of the glass-filtered sunlight, the knowing smile in Isobel’s voice: they were all part of the same soothing lullaby. She calmed and revived him every bit as much as the citrus scent filling the air.

Another of the little luxuries he now had to give up. Paupers didn’t woo dukes’ sisters.

Isobel leaned in closer, a conspiratorial sparkle lighting her eyes. “We agreed that we would not meet in private unless we had something urgent to discuss,” she reminded him. “And as it happens, I have an important suggestion to make.”

Lucius’s body responded to her glow of mischief in ways he struggled to ignore. He turned his eyes back to his work. “Unless you are suggesting that we put an end to this entire silly business, I do not wish to hear it.”

He did not look up to see what she made of that. He did not want to know whether she would be hurt or relieved.

“Tell me about the oranges,” said Isobel.

She’d caught him. He met her eyes, finding no guile in that blue gaze.

She must know what she was doing – didn’t she? Slipping into the orangery, touching his arm, all softness and sweetness and questions about horticulture. Was he really so transparent that a little slip of a wallflower knew exactly the way to bait him?

“I am trying to propagate a particular species that I encountered in Spain,” he said. “But, my lady, that has little to do with our arrangement –”

Isobel leaned her chin on her hand, head cocked to one side as though nothing in all the world interested her more at that moment than what he had to say about Spanish citruses. Feeling the full force of her attention was a little like being caught in an open field on a cloudless night with a full moon. She was luminous, and Lucius felt at once illuminated and cast into shadow.

No wonder she played the wallflower. Imagine the devastation she’d wreak on society if she inflicted that full-moon beam on every unsuspecting dandy who asked for a spot on her dance card. It would be carnage.

“Can a Spanish tree really thrive in an English orangery?” she asked.

“That’s the problem,” he said, giving in. He eased his fingers in into the soil, not bothering to replace his gloves, and

felt for the ball of roots of the first young seedling. He lifted it from the earth, chalky soil cascading through his fingers. “I sent home three plants, and not one of them has survived. I was lucky that the head gardener managed to coax one of them into flowering before it withered away. He bred it with a hardier plant which was already here, and when I returned home, I began refining the strain.”

“There must have been something particularly special about those Spanish oranges.”

How could Lucius possibly explain? His mind traced back to two years ago, to a warm night filled with silver moonlight, to the nearby sound of waves and the scent of the orange trees lining the square. To the cool, sweet taste of fruit and the haunting melody plucked on a harp by someone in one of the villas nearby.

“Honestly?” He lowered the uprooted seedling gently into its pot and began scooping soil in around it, packing it tight. “There are a hundred practical reasons why the fruit grown in Spain is superior to that grown in England. Sharper flavour, sweeter juice, larger fruit... But I’m not really looking for any of that.”

He flexed his fingers, noting with a degree of satisfaction that the earth had ingrained itself into every crease of his knuckles. His fingernails would send his mother into convulsions if she saw them before he scrubbed them clean.

Here and now, in this moment, these were not the hands of a spoiled, useless country gentleman. These were hands that had cultivated life. Hands that might be put to good use.

“There was a particular night in Spain,” he said, “when I felt true contentment. I don’t know whether it had anything to do with the weather, the heat, the people... But what I’m trying to do is replicate for myself some small piece of that Spanish beauty. To bring a little ray of south European sunlight into these dreary English days.”

Isobel was still watching him intently. Lucius had spoken too long; his mouth felt dry. “You must think I’m half mad,”

he muttered. "It's sentimental balderdash, I know. But I find the hobby diverting."

"I would be quite the hypocrite if I laughed at someone else's passion," said Isobel. "I like your idea very much. There are days when I'd give anything to be transported somewhere else." She gave a shy half shrug, lowering her eyes. Releasing him from the moonbeams at last. "But you must have noticed that already. Everyone knows I'd far rather dissolve myself in music than pay any attention to the here and now."

He wished he'd studied music. He wanted to tell her about the Spanish harp, how the melody had been sweet and achingly sad all at the same time, how it mingled in his memory with the taste of the clementines, but he lacked the words to explain it. "These will need watering in," he said instead, gesturing at the seedlings.

There was a battered tin watering can beside Isobel's bench. She lifted it and gave it a shake, finding it empty. "Where is the pump?"

Lucius nodded towards it. By rights, he ought to be sending her off on her way. One un-chaperoned meeting in an orangery could be explained away; two such private rendezvous would be less easily brushed aside.

It was a mystery, then, why he found himself pushing up and down on the pump handle as Isobel held the watering can.

"I won't get my hands dirty," she said. "At least until I've seen you at work long enough that I think I could handle one of those little plants without breaking them. But I can certainly give them a good soaking."

She looked so pleased to have found a way to help him that Lucius laughed aloud. "There's no magic to it," he said. "It's not exactly playing a sonata."

"But I like to watch you do it," said Isobel. Her eyes widened again, just the way they had when he kissed her hand. "I so rarely see a gentleman do anything actually useful with his time. Oh, my brother spends hours and hours writing letters and practising speeches and riding about the place to

oversee this or deal with that. And I suppose it's very unfair of me not to consider that truly useful." She bit down on her lip, raising her eyebrows in alarm. "Of course, I know that *you* make yourself extremely useful in that way too. I've noticed all the hours you spend in your father's study. I only meant that there is something *real* about what you're doing here. Something nourishing, something good." She lifted the watering can, its new weight sending her slightly off-balance. "So I'd like to keep watching you, and I'd like to help."

Lucius could not argue with that. He took the trowel and cut down into the soil around the next seedling. "No eligible dukes in your future, then."

Isobel sent a shower of sparkling water droplets into the soil around the seedling he just planted out. "I hate to disappoint you, Mr Whitby, but if you imagine that I'm continually plagued by a steady stream of dukes and lords begging for my hand, you are mistaken. If I were that sort of person, I should probably have forgotten Lord Randall the moment I left Brighton." She rested the watering can on the raised bed and sighed. "And I would probably be a better person for it."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Lucius. "There's something to be said for the avenging angels of the world, after all. Where would we be if cads like Randall were allowed to break hearts from here to Land's End with no consequences?" He held her gaze for a moment. "He was a fool, you know. A fool not to know what he had. A fool not to fight to keep you."

This is no more than friendly affection, Lucius tried to tell himself. The protective instinct that raged in his gut whenever he heard Isobel stutter in Randall's presence. The way his hands itched to strike the man a violent blow every time he thought of Isobel being hurt.

But Lucius had friends aplenty, and there was nothing at all in common with his affection for them and the lance of white-hot intensity that struck him through when Isobel met his eyes.

“On that subject,” she said slowly. “I came in here to tell you something.”

Lord Randall has made me an offer. Lord Randall has seen the error of his ways, and it's time to end our pretence.

If he had any sense at all, he'd be praying for her to utter those words. But that fist clenched tight in his chest, and it was suddenly hard to remember all his good, sensible reasons for bidding Isobel goodbye.

“If it's not too much to ask,” she said, “I would like to jump ahead a few points on your numerical scale.”

“No.”

“Hear me out. Randall is beginning to show some signs of interest, but without any remorse.”

“No.”

“Let me finish! Randall is still suffering under the delusion that he could have me, if he chose. We have succeeded in showing him that I have value. But he will not *truly* suffer until he values me and knows he has lost me.”

“No.” There was only one way to persuade Randall that Isobel was out of his reach for ever. They had already pushed the stifling rules of courtship too far, too fast. To go any further would be madness.

And no matter how tempting that madness might be, Lucius could not do it.

“I am not going to ask you to marry me, Isobel.”

“Goodness, how melodramatic.” Was he imagining it, or was there something brittle about the way she laughed? “There is no question, of course, of us really getting married.”

“I should think not, since it's becoming ever more clear that you wish to end this fanciful scheme by marrying Randall.” Oof. Perhaps he would have done better to pay less attention to the hurt in Isobel's voice and more to keeping it out of his own. He sounded bitter as a Seville orange (*thrives in well-drained soil topped with manure, prone to disease in high humidity*).

“I would not marry him if he were the last man on earth,” she snapped. “And neither have I any intention of marrying *you*, so there is no need to be so – so masculine about it! Surely there is no real difference between a make-believe betrothal and what we have already been doing?”

“There is an enormous difference.” Lucius drove his trowel into the soil again, the better to marshal the thoughts which exploded and scattered away like sparks from a firework every time he faced the unbending defiance in Isobel’s eyes. “There is your brother, for a start. I have absolutely no desire to drag the Duke of Loxwell into this mess by writing to him to ask for your hand.”

“I don’t believe for a minute that you are afraid of Alex,” she said. “But in any case, I can manage him. There is no danger of his charging after you with a pistol once our deception is completed.”

“Is that supposed to be comforting?” Lucius raised a muddy hand. “No, don’t answer. I have given you my answer, Isobel. It’s *no*. I am sorry that our efforts so far have not produced the result you wanted, but I’ve done as much as I honourably can. What you are suggesting is utter madness. It could ruin you.”

“I’d dearly love to know why you value your own reputation so little that you imagine a public connection between us would ruin me.” For a moment, Lucius was afraid Isobel was going to argue further. But instead she gave a weary sigh and sank back onto the garden bench, letting water spill from the watering can and dampen her skirts. “No. You don’t have to explain, Mr Whitby. I am sorry for pushing you. I already know why my suggestion is so unpalatable.”

A thrum of tension ran down Lucius’s spine, though he knew that she could not really know what he was thinking.

If he and Isobel announced an engagement, there would be no way to apply the brakes to his father’s runaway spending. The wedding would be arranged before the day was out... Only to come crashing down the moment his family’s dire situation was dragged into the light by Loxwell’s lawyers. And

while he was sure that neither Isobel nor her family would ever seek to humiliate him, he could not risk his sisters' future on the hope that not a single lawyer or clerk would spread whispers of the Whitby shame. And that was only the best-case scenario. At worst...

At worst, Isobel would be his wife by the end of the summer, and her entire inheritance would be thrown into the bottomless pit of his father's debts.

"What do you know?" he asked, fearing the answer.

Isobel gave another of the little shrugs she used to feign carelessness when tears were brightening her eyes. "Why, that I'd embarrass you, of course." The tremble in her voice tore at his heart. "The dashing Mr Lucius Whitby, engaged to that strange girl who spends all her time at the piano? Isobel 'Bluestocking' Balfour?" She raised her hands to her lips, a semi-hysterical laugh spilling between her fingers. "I rather think it isn't *my* reputation which would be ruined."

"Are you serious?" Lucius took a step towards her, knowing full well that it was the wrong thing to do. "You cannot be serious."

It ought to be no concern of his what she thought of herself. It was not in his power to comfort her. And he knew exactly what would happen if he gave in to the desperate need to stop those tears before they fell from her eyes.

But already, it felt inevitable.

"You think you'd embarrass me?" He dropped to his knees before the bench, so that he could look up into her downcast eyes. Isobel avoided his gaze, her mouth twisting bitterly.

"I embarrassed *him*."

"Is that what he told you?" Now there was anger, too, mingling with the sensations within Lucius that were already burning with a volcanic heat. "And you believed him?"

"He didn't *say* it. He didn't *have* to say it. But he made it perfectly clear all the same." At last, she let him look into her eyes. Large and blue and bright with tears. And that was the end of all Lucius's better instincts.

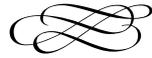
“I told you once before that you did not understand how dangerous this deception was,” he said. “If you think I was concerned for myself, you are hopelessly mistaken. You are not an embarrassment. You are as far from an embarrassment as it is possible to be. If you refuse to accept responsibility for the power you wield over men, I must find a way to make it clear to you.”

And there were a thousand better ways he could have done that, weren't there?

There were a thousand chances, in the instant before his lips met hers, for Lucius to make the right choice and back away.

But instead, he let that tight-clenched fist in his chest unfurl, and the relief of giving in was so great that just before he kissed her, he smiled.

CHAPTER 12



This was nothing like music.

The constant melody that sang in the background of Isobel's every waking hour stopped the instant Lucius's lips touched hers. Suddenly, for the first time she could remember, she knew... Silence.

And in the wake of sound, the sense of touch that she had so often neglected expanded to fill her entire awareness. Simply by pressing his mouth to hers, Lucius sent sensation through every nerve of her body.

So *many* new sensations. Warmth. Urgency. The strong, sweet scent and taste of him. And more than that, stronger and sweeter yet, the understanding of him. *He wanted to kiss her.* It wasn't wise, it wasn't planned, it wasn't necessarily honourable, but he wanted it – wanted *her* – so much he didn't care.

Nothing like music. *Better.*

And then it was over, just as she realised what it meant and how much she wanted it to continue. She fell back to earth with a thump, still frozen in the same pose she had been in moments before, and Lucius was jerking back from her with an expression of sheer horror.

"I should not have done that," he said.

"Don't..."

"I am sorry. I must be out of my mind. But hang it all, Isobel... *Isobel.*" He ran his hand through his hair,

inadvertently brushing tiny particles of fresh soil through the dark mop of curls. “Do you understand now? I don’t know how to explain it to you any better. *This* is the nature of the game you are playing. *This* is the sort of danger you are in.”

“Don’t....” She did not intend to smile, but an inner demon had taken control of her mouth.

And even her smile felt new. It was the complete opposite of the polite, obliging expression she was always so careful to wear in public. It was nothing like the seductive pout she’d attempted on her first day at the manor. It was truly... *wicked*. When Lucius saw it, he let out a strangled noise something between a groan and a sigh.

“Don’t you want to do it again?” she asked. Lucius’s horror only made that new, wicked smile grow wider.

“I did it to frighten some sense into you. I see now that I should not have bothered. Perhaps you are past help.” He flung up his arms in exasperation and began to pace back and forth across the tiled floor. “Perhaps we both are.”

“Do you mean you *don’t* want to do it again?”

Lucius fired her a scalding look. Isobel supposed that, if she had been one of his younger siblings, she would be quaking in her slippers.

But she was not one of the errant young Whitbys. And there was something delicious about seeing Lucius so overwhelmed. Especially about knowing she was the one who had sent him into this state of consternation.

“There are several very good reasons why I should not do it again,” he said gruffly.

“That isn’t the same thing as saying you do not want to.”

Lucius thrust his hands into his pockets. There was something much more real and intimate about him now, a little ruffled, a little dirty and dishevelled, than Isobel had ever seen in any drawing room or dinner party. “What is it you want from me?” he demanded. “Some reassurance that when Randall comes crawling to you on his knees he will not be put off by the touch of your lips? Well, you may rest assured on

that count. That was..." He raised his eyes to the glass-paned ceiling, as though an appeal to divinity could erase what had just happened between them. But no divine intervention was forthcoming, and he let out a defeated little laugh. "That was an *exquisite* kiss." He brought his eyes back to hers, the storm-tossed grey full of a dreadful warning. "And no. I do not wish to do it again."

Isobel supposed she should have felt rejected. She was no stranger to cold humiliation. To the awful conviction that she was not – would never be – desirable enough for anything more than a single hasty kiss, stolen in secret and never admitted to again.

But she did not feel any sense of rejection now. Rather, as Lucius warned her off with wary, unsmiling eyes, she was filled with the exhilarating sense of her own power.

"Don't worry, Mr Whitby," she said. "I have no intention of kissing somebody who does not want it. No matter how *exquisite* it might be."

With the intoxication of the kiss fading, the music crept back in. Lucius's discomfort was a mournful solo played on the lowest strings of a cello. He grimaced and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, proffering it to her with his head turned away, as though he feared what would happen if he looked at her at such close quarters.

"There's a smear of dirt on your cheek," he said.

Isobel took the handkerchief and folded it over her fingers, dabbing at the place just beneath her cheekbone which his hand had caressed. She did not need a looking glass to know where he'd left his mark. His touch still tingled in her skin. "Now that you have failed to frighten me off, what do you say to my proposal?"

The warm air in the orangery turned several degrees cooler. Lucius's jaw tightened. If Isobel did not know better, she might have thought he was angry. But she'd spent enough time at his side over the past weeks to recognise when he was in pain.

He folded his arms across his chest. “I say that you are a lonely young woman whose siblings have all recently married and who is desperately trying to stir up some romantic intrigue of her own.”

That knocked the breath out of her. “Oh. Well. Ouch.”

But Lucius wasn’t finished. “I’ve been willing to go along with it this far, but I’m growing bored of the whole affair. How far off do you suppose Randall is from declaring his love? I’d hate to waste my entire summer on this childish game.”

Isobel blinked. More than half of Lucius’s scorn was put on, and the rest was directed at himself rather than her. She wasn’t hurt by his words as much as by his need to say them. He was hiding something from her – something important, something painful – and he was pushing her away to throw her off the scent. And making an utter hash of it. A child could have seen through his display.

But she had made it a point of pride that she would not ask about his personal reasons for going along with her scheme, and she could hardly use his moment of weakness as an opportunity to break her word. He wanted to pretend this was about Randall? Fine. She’d play along.

“I cannot say whether or not Lord Randall has remembered his old feelings,” she answered coolly. “He is interested, yes, but not enough to suffer. And that, as I told you, is my aim.”

“Somehow, I find that hard to believe,” said Lucius, with a grim, mirthless smile. “But whether his feelings run deep or not, I know the way to hasten things along to their natural end. And it doesn’t involve anything so foolish as an *engagement*.” He unfolded his arms, set his hands on his hips, then folded them again, his jaw working as though there were words trying to escape from him which he had to fight to keep back. “Will you promise me something?”

“Of course,” she said, without stopping to think whether it was wise.

“You must trust me and follow along exactly as I lead you. I will deliver you Randall. But there must be no more

suggestions from you – no more seeking me out in the hothouse – no more surprises. Simply do as I tell you, and pretend you feel what I instruct you to feel. Can I rely on you to do that?”

“You want to continue the deception?” asked Isobel, unable to resist needling him. “This same deception which has grown so boring and distasteful to you that you were forced to kiss me in order to maintain your interest in it?”

Lucius grimaced. “I am not pretending that I have behaved well. On the contrary, I think I shall spend some sleepless nights wishing I had handled things differently. I wish that I could release you from our agreement now and send you off to Randall with open arms. And I will. I will cheer and throw rice on your wedding day, or I will wave a handkerchief from Plymouth harbour as Randall sets off to the Americas to forget the way you jilted him. Whichever outcome suits you best. But in return I must ask you to do exactly as I say – and *nothing more*. Is that acceptable to you?”

Isobel hesitated. There was a dreadful finality in Lucius’s tone. He’d pulled back the curtain on his easy charm, and there was grim darkness beyond. She’d thought – perhaps naïvely – that her own motive was sinister enough, but she realised now that the force driving Lucius was something of an entirely different nature.

He looked as though his soul were in torment, and she was not vain enough to imagine that it was all the effect of one simple kiss. No matter how exquisite.

“Yes,” she said softly. She’d hoped it would soothe him, but he flinched from her acquiescence as though her trust caused him physical pain. “Yes, I will do as you ask. I will do everything you ask. You have promised me Randall’s scalp – in a manner of speaking.” Lucius did not smile – she wondered whether he even realised she was speaking in jest. “That prize is worth a little obedience.”

He mustered a hint of his usual sparkle and gave her a wry grin. “Obedience does not come naturally to you. I think that’s

the true reason you've been a wallflower. Nothing has ever compelled you to please others over yourself.”

He gave her a brisk nod and left her sitting alone in the orangery, with only the smear of rich soil on a handkerchief remaining to prove that he had been there at all.

CHAPTER 13



*B*y the end of the following week, Isobel was certain that she had uncovered Lucius's hidden motive.

He intended to drive her insane.

His instructions arrived each morning in the form of a handwritten note – unsigned, naturally – which was pushed underneath her bedroom door. It was not that his directions were difficult to follow. Quite the opposite, in fact. Many of them were unspeakably dreary.

Tonight at dinner, for example, I will make a joke. You must pretend that you find it very amusing but are trying not to show it.

This morning, I will invite you and Cassandra out riding. Cassie will very likely agree, but you must decline.

Spend an hour reading after luncheon this afternoon. If Randall should ask about the book, mention that I recommended it to you.

Isobel had no idea of the purpose behind many of these rules. They kept her at a distance, certainly. They fostered the illusion of an intimate acquaintance without incurring the trouble of actually spending any time in each other's company. All the better for Lucius to lock himself in the study, and nurture his plants, and brood over his secrets in peace.

By the third day she had developed a nagging suspicion that at least some of his commands were invented simply to test her. He'd made it clear what he thought of her, after all. *Nothing has ever compelled you to please others over yourself.*

And Isobel was as surprised as anyone to discover that Lucius was absolutely right. When the seventh of his morning notes arrived, she was so infuriated by the whole ridiculous process that she very nearly threw it on the fire without even reading it.

She regretted restraining herself the moment she saw the first line.

You will put away the dress you wore to Mrs Jackson's card party yesterday. You will not wear it again for the duration of your time at Whitby Manor.

“The cheek of that man!” Isobel gritted her teeth to stop herself from saying something even worse. Her maid, busy putting away a freshly washed set of undergarments, glanced up in alarm. “Oh, go along and report back to Aunt Ursula,” said Isobel, sinking back onto her bed and scrunching the offending note in her fist. “I’m sure she will be delighted to hear that I have received a note from a gentleman.”

“My lady,” stammered the maid, “I would never –”

“There’s no need to deny it,” said Isobel. “I happen to know that she offers such generous bribes that any servant would be a fool to turn them down. You have my permission to negotiate an even higher price for betraying my confidence, if your conscience still gives you trouble.”

The maid’s cheeks turned scarlet. She bobbed a hasty curtsy and left the room in a rush. To nobody’s surprise at all, Aunt Ursula’s familiar *rap-tap-tap* sounded at the door a few minutes later.

“Come in,” said Isobel, with a sigh. “I suppose you want me to apologise to Peggy. I didn’t mean to upset her. I will give her the rest of the day off to recover from the shock of being caught spying, if you think that will help.”

Aunt Ursula merely raised an eyebrow and held out her hand. Isobel tried to shift the crumpled note underneath one of her pillows without being noticed. She failed.

“I give you the benefit of freedom over your own correspondence because I trust you not to get yourself into

trouble,” said Ursula, hand still outstretched. Isobel tried her best to take it seriously, but she could not stop a small laugh from escaping. Ursula sighed. “Very well, very well! I trust you to get only into the *right* sort of trouble. And that, I do not need to tell you, is the kind which does not involve gentlemen.”

“Is Lord Randall no longer considered a gentleman in your eyes?” asked Isobel innocently. “I thought you encouraged me to come here with the express intention of getting myself into trouble with him.”

“Tush! I have apologised for that a thousand times!” Ursula perched on the edge of the bed, giving the note in Isobel’s hand a beady eye, but allowing her to keep it for now. “I really did think it was for the best. And, do you know, I think I was right! It may not have fallen out as I predicted, but all the same, you have triumphed. You have given that man the impression of complete indifference. Which, since he has still not proposed to you, is exactly what he deserves.” Ursula narrowed her eyes. “Unless it is *he* who is slipping notes under your bedroom door?”

“Oh, you mean this note?” Isobel glanced down at it in feigned surprise, smoothed out the paper, and handed it to Ursula. “I’m afraid I have no idea who wrote this to me. It does not bear my name, as you can see, nor that of the sender. But the handwriting has a gentlemanly air to it, I think, and only a gentleman would be so abominably rude.”

Ursula scanned the note, her wrinkled brow furrowing. “A gentleman – or a jealous lady,” she said. “You looked extremely well at Mrs Jackson’s card party. The blue bobbin net set your figure off beautifully. Perhaps one of the young girls here considers you a rival?”

“Oh, no,” said Isobel. She had not intended to cast suspicion on any of her friends. “Who on earth could that rival possibly be? Georgiana has so many admirers she does not know what to do with them. It is dreadful the way Lord Bell and his friends are continually buzzing around her – as though she were a pot of honey, and they were hungry wasps! She would likely be glad if I took an admirer or two off her hands.

And Cassie gives barely a moment's thought to her own clothes, let alone anybody else's."

Aunt Ursula nodded gravely. "That leaves poor Miss Whitby, doesn't it? But I cannot imagine that Evelina is in any state to be jealous of another woman's beauty. She has been so quiet and withdrawn, and all over that dreadful boy, Lord Henry! I wish she were one of my relations. I have several very good pieces of advice to offer her, but I fear it is not my place."

Isobel shuffled forwards across the bed to lay her head on her aunt's shoulder. "*You* have never allowed a gentleman to destroy your peace of mind, Auntie. You are a fine example to every young woman, not only to your nieces."

"Well, well," said Ursula, shooing away the compliment. "Perhaps you are right that the letter is not from any of the Whitby ladies. They are all such good-hearted girls. But there were other women at Mrs Jackson's last night, and one never knows how a jealous creature may connive to get her way and persuade a servant to slip a nasty letter in where it is not wanted. In fact – ha! Now that I think on it again, I am sure that the lady who sent you this note must have designs upon Mr Lucius Whitby."

Isobel jerked upright as though somebody had given her a nasty jab in the spine. She began to stammer out a denial, but one look at her aunt's toothy grin told her it was useless.

"I am not blind, Isobel. And nor am I ignorant of the way a gentleman's mind works – even one as well-heeled and worldly as young Whitby. I know precisely what was going through his mind when he looked at you yesterday evening. The poor fellow was so distracted that he lost every hand he played. He's in serious danger, my girl, mark my words."

To Isobel's surprise, she felt a deep pang of guilt. It was one thing to gloss over the truth a little, but she found she could not allow her aunt to believe that Lucius's feelings for her were serious. "I am glad to hear you say so, Auntie," she said, wondering how on earth she could explain it all. "But you must not think there is any real sentiment behind Mr

Whitby's attentions to me. The truth is... Well, you see... In actual fact, I asked him..."

"Ha! There it is!" Ursula slapped her knee in delight. "The truth comes out at last! Did you really think you could deceive me, my girl? I know perfectly well why you have been batting your eyes at Lucius Whitby. I only wish you had come to me for advice, for, as you know, I have a great deal of experience with intrigue. That said, although your methods were clumsy at first, they have produced the desired effect. Lord Randall is completely taken in. Last night, all the while Whitby was looking at *you*, Randall was glaring at Whitby." Ursula put her arm about Isobel's shoulders and gave her a jubilant squeeze. "And he had good reason to glare. The fact is that not even the finest actor ever to grace the stage could have feigned the expression on young Whitby's face when you walked in wearing that gown. And that means that whoever wrote you this note saw it too – and that they have some interest in making sure his feelings for you do not develop any further."

Isobel opened her mouth to tell Aunt Ursula that her suggestion could not possibly be true.

Aunt Ursula's eyes met hers with a knowing twinkle. Isobel closed her mouth again and looked back down at the note.

Then, without giving herself any time to lose her nerve, she gave the bell pull a vigorous tug.

"Peggy," she said, when the maid appeared, still looking frightened, "I am sorry that I was harsh with you just now. It is quite natural and right that you listen to Lady Ursula when it comes to my safety. I hope you can forgive me. For the moment, would you please bring out the dress that I wore yesterday evening? I know you have not had time to wash it, but I hardly think the card party was enough to cause it serious damage."

Peggy's eyes darted nervously from Isobel to Ursula. "My lady, it is still the morning. I fear that dress is not suitable –"

"Don't worry about all that," said Aunt Ursula. "I am the only one who need worry about what sort of attire is and is not

suitable for my niece. We are quite aware that it is not a day dress. Nevertheless, please bring it upstairs. Lady Isobel knows what she is doing.”

As Peggy hurried to obey, Aunt Ursula gripped Isobel’s shoulder and used it to push herself upright. For such an elderly woman, her grip was exceedingly strong. “That is,” she added, for Isobel’s ears only, “I certainly *hope* you know what you are doing. The note is rude. But you are responding with a clear provocation. Remember that you are not invulnerable. It may not be wise to create an enemy.” She took hold of Isobel’s chin, forcing Isobel to look her in the eyes. “It would not do if anyone should go digging around and uncover information about Mr Babbage.”

CHAPTER 14



Lucius realised his mistake the moment Isobel sauntered into the breakfast room clad in heart-stopping white satin overlaid with that translucent sea-blue gauze.

And he realised in the same instant that it was a mistake he should never have made at all. He knew Isobel well enough by now to understand that her meek obedience was only for show. Did he really think she would allow him to dictate what she could and could not wear?

He'd pushed her to her limit, and here was his reward. A breakfast in full view of the most distracting gown he'd ever seen in his life, and a ravenous hunger deep inside him that all the toast and kippers in the world would do nothing to satisfy.

Beside him, Lord Randall dropped his fork onto his plate with a loud clatter. Lucius pretended not to notice, though he felt a sudden urge to turn around and give the man a smack.

"Good morning, my lady!" said Mr Whitby, barely glancing up from his bacon and eggs. He was the only one in the room not staring at Isobel in open-mouthed astonishment. "I trust you slept well?"

"I trust she slept *at all*," murmured Lord Bell. "I don't believe she's changed her clothes since last night – *Ow!*"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," said Evie, setting down the pot of scalding coffee which she had poured all over Lord Bell's arm rather than into her cup. "I am so clumsy in the mornings. Hall, will you fetch his lordship a cold compress?"

Lord Bell rolled up his sleeve, revealing a length of painful-looking pink skin. “Not to worry, not to worry,” he said, through gritted teeth. “I am quite all right.” But he accepted the damp towel the footman offered him, and his smile had grown exceedingly strained.

“Please forgive my unusual appearance,” said Isobel, sliding into her seat with an innocent smile that was aimed directly at Lucius, and struck him like an arrow in the chest. “I’m afraid my maid had a little trouble this morning.”

With Lord Bell thoroughly silenced by Evie’s sleight of hand, nobody in the room was ill-bred enough to question her any further. Lucius was no expert on women’s clothing, but it was perfectly obvious to him no possible scenario existed in which a maid could fall ill enough to make every dress in an heiress’s wardrobe unwearable but one.

That one. The one whose shimmering aquamarine perfectly matched the sparkle in her eyes. The one with the swooping neckline that left her shoulders almost bare.

Sweet heaven, the pale smooth skin of those shoulders. Lucius tugged at his collar and forced himself to look deeply into the depths of his scrambled eggs.

Mr Whitby let out a hearty laugh. “My word, you ladies and your little troubles! Not to worry, my lady. I’m sure you look very well indeed.” He gazed fondly down the table at his daughters. “Now, what diversions do you all have planned for the morning? Lord Kendrick invited me and all the gentleman to go shooting today, so you girls will have the house to yourselves.”

“I beg your pardon, Mr Whitby,” said Lord Randall. “I will not be able to join you at the shooting party. I’m afraid I turned my ankle getting out of the carriage yesterday night, and I must rest it.”

Mrs Whitby let out a cry of alarm. Lucius concealed a rather petty smirk. Randall had not accounted for his mother’s tendency to hysteria. “Oh, you poor man! I cannot believe you did not mention it! We will send for a doctor immediately.”

“No, no,” said Randall. A deep red flush was rising up his neck. Lucius did not know whether to attribute it to embarrassment or to Isobel’s blue gauze. “It is nothing really. An old injury. I know from experience that it requires nothing more than rest.”

“Old wounds can be most troublesome,” said Isobel sweetly. “I do hope you will not be too bored spending the day at home with us, my lord.”

Randall was looking at her with a deep intensity that Lucius could not bear to leave uninterrupted. “Don’t worry, old chap,” he said, aware that his voice was far too bright. “I’ve shot more than enough of Kendrick’s birds over the years. I’ll stay behind with you.”

Randall broke from Isobel’s gaze, turning to Lucius with a smile that was positively vicious. “There’s no need for that, Whitby. I hope you don’t think I’m such a clot that I can’t amuse myself for one afternoon.”

“Not another word,” said Lucius, with his own smile-that-was-not-a-smile. “I insist. You are our guest, after all. It would be churlish of me to abandon you. Kendrick can bear the disappointment.”

Randall inclined his head by way of acceptance, his jaw clenched tight. Isobel, either blithely unaware or excellent at feigning blithe unawareness, started on her toast and coffee and began chatting to Georgiana about something to do with ribbons and a new bonnet.

Lucius forced himself to take another bite of his breakfast, though he had never in his life had less appetite for food.

All this time, he’d been operating under the assumption that Isobel was an innocent he had to protect. Now, it seemed that the ingenue had some not-so-innocent ideas of her own. The idea of Randall spending the entire afternoon with her while she wore that flimsy dress and played him sweet music was simply intolerable.

The instructions delivered by letter were not working. Lucius would have to think up some new way to keep her

from harm.

And judging by Isobel's expression as she met his eyes across the breakfast table and very deliberately drew her lower lip between her teeth, he had his work cut out for him.



IF THERE HAD REALLY BEEN anything wrong with Lord Randall's ankle, Lucius reflected bitterly, Isobel had certainly found the way to cure it. Her music was sweet enough to be a panacea for all ills. In vain, he had suggested any number of activities which would have excluded Randall from their company. A turn around the gardens? Out of the question. Isobel was not dressed for the weather. Her maid's mysterious malady had not cleared up by the afternoon. The blue bobbin net, as everybody agreed, was far too lightweight to wear outdoors.

A game of sardines, then? Lucius allowed himself a moment to imagine the forbidden pleasure of finding himself alone in a tight space with Isobel – before he remembered that he would, of course, have to spend that forbidden private moment telling her *exactly* what he thought of her response to his instructions that morning.

No, no, such frivolous party games were out of the question! Mrs Whitby did not allow her daughters to run mad through the house as though they were at Vauxhall pleasure gardens. If her eldest son wished to indulge himself in that sort of game, he was very welcome to return to London and acquaint himself with his dissolute friends there.

Isobel, of course, was far too well-mannered to actually laugh at Mrs Whitby's dressing down. But Lucius saw the mirth in her eyes clearly enough.

No, it seemed the only possible way for Isobel to pass the day was to sit behind the piano, there in the drawing room surrounded by all Lucius's sisters, and serenade poor dear ailing Randall with her favourite pieces.

“Let me turn the pages for you, my lady,” said Lucius, endeavouring to throw the offer out, casual and offhand.

Isobel met his eyes coolly. “There’s no need to trouble yourself, Mr Whitby. I am playing from memory.”

Lucius smiled through gritted teeth. It could not be more obvious that Isobel anticipated exactly what he was minded to say to her and was doing her best to avoid having to hear it. Lord Randall was reclining on the chaise, his arms crossed behind his head, his catlike smile widening each time the lady foiled Lucius’s attempts to draw her away.

Lucius couldn’t stand it. Couldn’t she see that it debased her to cater to Randall’s whims? Once again, she was playing the saucy temptress without any real understanding of the game in which she was embroiled. Randall was mocking her just as much as he mocked Lucius.

But Lucius would save her. He would not allow Randall to keep smiling at her in that self-satisfied manner, a cat batting an unusually musical mouse between its paws.

“I am sorry to see you so laid up, Randall,” he said, making a show of walking up and down the room as he spoke. “That ankle must really be hurting you. Are you sure we should not send for a doctor?”

“A little rest is all I require,” said Randall, unperturbed. “Are you quite well yourself, Whitby? You look as though something is troubling you.”

Lucius cocked his head, returning Randall’s cool stare. “Troubling me? Far from it. It is only that I find this piece of music excessively moving. Lady Isobel, is this another one of your charming compositions?” Before she could answer, he glanced over his shoulder towards her and added, “I only ask because I am almost certain that I heard something like it once before. It must have been in some salon or another as I visited Paris. Tell me, where might I have heard this lovely piece?”

Randall let out a bark of laughter. “Whitby, you old philistine! This is *Mozart*. I’d wager you could hear this

played in every drawing room in Europe. Though, not, of course, as well as Lady Isobel plays it now.”

He offered Isobel that eminently punchable smile again and shrugged his shoulders deeper into the chaise cushions.

But Lucius had calculated correctly. Isobel stopped playing and rose to her feet with a frown. “You are too kind, my lord,” she said, not even glancing towards Randall. “Do you know, Mr Whitby, I believe you are right. I would greatly benefit from a little fresh air. I will ring for Peggy. I should think she has had enough time to recover from her...”

“Her unhappy accident with the laundry,” Lucius supplied, smiling as blandly as his amusement would allow.

Isobel did not return the smile. She closed the piano’s fallboard with an uncharacteristic snap.

“You must borrow my shawl, Isobel,” said Evie, her attention drawn from her book by the noise. “There is no need to wait for your maid.”

As Isobel left the room, Lucius laid a heavy hand on Randall’s shoulder to prevent him from following her. “Please, Randall, don’t stir from this couch! I’m sure my mother will not be easy unless she sees that you are resting properly. Pray tell me what you are after, and I shall fetch it for you.”

“Nothing at all, dear fellow,” said Randall, sinking back against the cushions, defeated. “Thank you for reminding me of my disability. It is exceedingly hard to sit and be idle – I very nearly forgot myself just now and put some weight on it!”

“Poor Lord Randall!” cried Georgiana, setting aside her embroidery so enthusiastically that she did not notice when it slid to the floor. “Shall we sit and read together? Or will you allow me to sing for you? I’m sure there is nothing I would not do to help you bear the pain.”

Lucius winced. His sister’s love of flirtation was awkward enough when there were plenty of gentlemen to dilute it; in this intimate setting, it was downright uncomfortable.

Thankfully, Randall did not react to Georgiana’s provocation. He accepted the offer of a song without any

indication that she had overstepped and reclined back on the sofa with his eyes closed – the better, presumably, to appreciate Georgiana’s sweet but unpractised voice.

“I must get back to my bookkeeping,” Lucius announced, to nobody in particular. Evie’s eyes followed him suspiciously as he left the room, but she did not stir from her quiet reading corner.

He did not, of course, go anywhere near his father’s study and that accursed pile of mismanaged accounts. He marched straight into the garden, where a few minutes’ searching revealed Isobel strolling past the herbaceous borders. They had grown a little ragged in the absence of the under-gardeners, but Lucius did not mind the wildness.

As he drew closer, he began to see that Isobel was not strolling, in fact, so much as pacing. Marching. Stomping – if that indelicate word could ever properly describe her and her too-lovely blue gauze. And when he reached her –

“I suppose you think you have a very good explanation for this!”

Lucius closed his mouth, utterly bemused. He could have sworn he had come into the garden to remonstrate with Isobel about her inappropriate choice of dress. Why, then, was he not the one doing the remonstrating?

And, judging by the furious flush in Isobel’s cheeks, would he be lucky enough to escape the garden with all his limbs still attached?

“I – I beg your pardon?” He rallied. Sometimes attack was the best form of defence. “That is, *I* am not the one who needs to explain myself. You agreed to follow my instructions to the letter. Were we transplanted to the Antipodes overnight? Am I to understand that when I give you an instruction you will now do the opposite? Or is it simply that you have lost your mind?”

Isobel’s fists were clenched at her sides. “If you intend to punish me over the dress –”

“It is not my place to punish you. I gave you my word that I would guide you, and I intend to keep that promise whether

you like it or not. A silly stunt like this will not help your cause.” He took a step towards her, and she did not back down. There was a violent fire burning in her blue eyes. She radiated so much heat that Lucius was struggling to keep a cool head. He put his hands behind his back and clenched his fists until his knuckles cracked, as an acceptable alternative to grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking some sense into her. Or kissing her senseless. He really didn’t know any longer which he was more likely to do. “Do you really not understand the impression you give when you cavort about the place dressed in that – that *thing*?”

“I understand perfectly that you find it unacceptable,” said Isobel, lowering the temperature all the way from blazing hot to icy as the frozen pole. “But that is your problem, Mr Whitby, not mine. If you cannot bear the sight of me in this dress, you must simply learn to control your masculine urges.”

Lucius was sure he’d had several more very sensible things to say, but his tongue skidded to a halt. “My – my what?”

“It is hardly my duty to control the thoughts that an excitable gentleman might have about my perfectly ordinary choice of attire,” Isobel continued, cheeks still flushed, tone still cold, clenched fists perched on her hips – a stern little schoolmistress in a coquette’s flimsy gown. “I am sorry to learn that it upsets you to admire my figure, but I must ask you to deal with the consequences of that admiration on your own, without involving me. I am not about to put away all my nice things simply to indulge your lack of self-restraint.”

“Oh, is it *I* who lacks self-restraint?”

She glared up at him defiantly. “Well, you are the one who kissed me.”

Lucius gave a guilty start and looked about to check that none of the remaining gardeners were within earshot. “Have you utterly lost your senses?” he demanded, taking Isobel by the arm and steering her forcefully into a nearby arbour. It was not exactly private, but at least from here they could not be seen from the house. “What if someone had heard that?”

Isobel wrenched her arm from his grasp and sat down primly on the edge of the love seat beneath the climbing clematis which, like the herbaceous borders, had started running wild. “What if somebody had walked into the orangery and seen you kiss me? Or is it only *my* transgressions that require correction?”

Lucius bit down the response that first came to mind. The situation demanded delicate handling. He needed a moment to collect himself.

But then she looked up at him with a flash of that wicked smile breaking through her indignation, and he said it anyway. “I won’t apologise for the kiss.”

“Good. It was quite delightful. It would be a pity if you spoiled it by rueing the day and begging my pardon.” She forced the grin from her lips, re-assuming her mien of outrage. “However, I would certainly appreciate it if you begged my pardon for all your hinting and needling regarding the music. And I should very much like to know how you found out about Mr Babbage in the first place.”

“Mr Babbage?” Lucius frowned. “I don’t know the fellow. Who is he, the next would-be victim of your vengeance?”

This utterly failed to raise a smile from Isobel. “Don’t be coy, Mr Whitby, it doesn’t suit you. You went out of your way to remark that you find my music extraordinarily reminiscent of music you have heard elsewhere.”

“I’ve offended you?” He thumped a hand against his forehead. “Ah! I’m afraid Randall is right in this regard – I’ve always been something of a philistine. It’s hardly your fault that I can’t tell the difference between your compositions and Mozart. Would you consider it a compliment?” But that was not true, he realised as he spoke. He had noticed her adorable frown of annoyance the first time he’d confused her music for the piece he’d heard in Prague. He’d brought the notion up again because he knew it would rattle her. Not only to get her out into the garden, where he could address the issue of the blue gauze. There was a wicked satisfaction in teasing her.

He'd been as clumsy as a schoolboy pulling at his sweetheart's braids.

Isobel narrowed her eyes. "I can't tell whether you are toying with me, and this subject is too serious to be toyed with. Are you quite certain that the name Babbage means nothing to you?"

"If I knew anything of serious consequence to you, I do not like to think that I should keep it a secret." Lucius spread his hands wide. "Come now, there are no secrets between us."

"Apart from your secret motivation for wishing to show the world that you are besotted with me," she countered, unimpressed. "Our entire acquaintance is built upon secrets, Mr Whitby. You can hardly expect me to have much faith in your word now."

That stung. A great deal more than it should have done, and a great deal more than was fair to her. "If that's the case, it raises some serious questions about your judgement," he said, his jaw aching under the weight of all the other words he was holding inside. "You have placed a great deal of trust in me, and I assure you that I am well aware of the honour. I will not ask you to explain any further about Mr Babbage. I can see that it upsets you. And no, I am not telling you every concern that flits through my mind. But I hope that does not make me unworthy of your trust. If it does, perhaps it would be better if we left well alone. I hate to think of you becoming uneasy on my account."

Isobel took a long while to answer. The unseen clockwork wound tighter in his chest.

Why on earth should it matter to him, after all, whether Isobel Balfour thought he was trustworthy? He could hardly pretend that he had shown her the best side to his character. Nor could he truthfully say that he had any right to her confidence. She was clearly not telling him everything – which was perfectly acceptable, since he was keeping several very significant things from her.

But in that pause, while Isobel pondered Lucius's character with a light frown and parted lips, Lucius's personal inner

ratchet nearly reached breaking point.

“I am not uneasy,” said Isobel. “Though by all rights I should be. Very well. I accept that it is a mere coincidence that you have been teasing me about – about certain things the importance of which I cannot share with you. I feel safe with you, Mr Whitby. Is that foolish?”

The winding ratchet suddenly dissolved from cold iron into soft yellow butter. “No,” said Lucius quietly. “No, on my honour and on my family’s name – if I am not worthy of your trust, I shall at least always strive to be.”

Isobel dropped her gaze, a little of that old wallflower demeanour returning. “That’s very sweet. I hope that you also feel safe with me.”

He answered her with a warm smile, though beneath it he felt as though he had just been pushed over the brink of a precipice. An unpleasant falling sensation churned through his stomach.

It wasn’t the dress, and it wasn’t the heat of the summer or distress of his financial position. When Lucius was with Isobel, he was in significant danger.

But she had requested quite clearly that he should restrain what she termed his *masculine impulses*. And, even if she had invited him to continue, it would do neither of them any good at all.

So, forcing those impulses down, he took up her hand and pressed a swift kiss to it. “It would be unwise of me to stay out here,” he said. “We had agreed, hadn’t we, on restricting our private meetings to only those that are absolutely necessary.”

And he had certainly shown her why such restrictions were necessary, hadn’t he? His behaviour in the orangery was beyond the pale.

And yet here he was, with her hand still in his, her eyes still gazing up at him, and the moment impressing itself into his memory like a blue cornflower pressed between the pages of a book, to be taken out and admired in the depths of winter.

Another trinket of his past wealth to warm the long, cold winters of his future poverty.

A murmur of voices outside the arbour recalled him to his senses with a jolt. He dropped Isobel's hand – or tried to. As he let go, she held tighter, and pulled him close. Her eyes were wide. Before Lucius could ask what was wrong, she had pressed a finger to his lips.

“You will understand when you read it, my dear Mrs Whitby, that I was duty-bound to show it to you.”

Was that Bell? Why wasn't he out shooting with the others? Lucius cocked his head, asking Isobel a question without daring move his lips, but she shook her head frantically and motioned with the other hand for him to listen.

“My goodness! Oh! Lord Bell, I am simply horrified!”

“I knew you would be,” came Bell's smooth reply. “But, if I may, while Miss Georgiana has expressed her feelings in an... unconventional manner, I am not a cold-hearted man. It is clear that I must ask for her hand before she takes any more drastic action. I have no intention of letting her indiscretion put me off –”

They were rounding the corner and would soon come upon Isobel and Lucius in the arbour, and he would have stepped away in plenty of time if Isobel had not turned the finger on his lips to a confident and inescapable grip on his chin, and pressed her lips to his.

At school, Lucius had learned that certain secret societies in Ancient Greece initiated their members by forcing them to spend the night lying on an ice-cold stone slab next to a blazing fire. Those torturous extremes of heat and cold could not have compared to what he felt at that moment.

On one side – Isobel, the softness of her mouth, her sweet clean scent of fresh cotton and lavender, her fingers tightening in his hair, pressing him closer to her, as though his kiss were the only thing she wanted in all the world, the roar of blood in his ears and the blooming of sweet heat in his chest – even with only seconds to spare, his body responded with its own

craving, and his traitorous arms caught her up, and his mouth made its own reply to hers.

On the other hand, *his mother*.

“Oh, my dears, my dears!”

Lucius came to his senses and pushed Isobel away. But it was too late.

Mrs Whitby was rushing towards them, hampered only by the fact that her hand was still on Lord Bell’s arm, and he was far less keen on running than she was.

In fact, he was dawdling along with what seemed to Lucius a rather unhappy expression. In his hand was a folded piece of paper, decorated with delicate forget-me-nots and red hearts that called to mind Lucius’s prize orchid.

“I was so certain that there was something between you two!” Mrs Whitby drew out a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. “You could not hide it from me, you know!”

Isobel put a hand to her mouth, covering the place Lucius’s lips had just vacated. He had the sudden mad thought that if she lowered it, the imprint of that kiss would glow like the sun.

“Isobel,” he said. It was a reproach, but an unjust one, because he had kissed her back, deeper and longer than she could have intended.

“And has she accepted you, Lucius?” asked Mrs Whitby, pressing a hand to her heart. “Oh, Isobel, to think that after all these years you will at last be part of our family! It’s simply too much!”

“Mother,” said Lucius urgently, “you are running away with yourself. Lady Isobel and I –”

“Lucius.”

He’d never heard his own name spoken that way before. Soft, urgent, intimate.

Isobel laid a hand on his shoulder and spoke again. “Lucius, there’s no reason to hide it any longer. I am quite sure

my brother will not object. Let's not keep the happy news from your parents." She turned a sunlit smile on Mrs Whitby and Lord Bell. "And at least, now that you know we are engaged, Mrs Whitby, you may be perfectly at ease regarding the contents of that puzzle purse. I beg you not to read any more of it. I would be so embarrassed if my private sentiments were known. Lord Bell, I cannot thank you enough for finding it for me. When I realised I had lost it in the maze, I was quite mortified!"

Mrs Whitby gave a little start. "Are they really *your* sentiments, my dear?"

"This cannot be yours," said Bell, his tone staying just on the right side of polite. "These flowers were painted by Miss Georgiana. I have seen her paint many such, just like these!"

"I'm sure you have," said Isobel, smiling as she extended her hand for the folded paper puzzle Bell still clutched. "It is a watercolour technique we developed together." She waited, hand out, until Bell reluctantly surrendered his plunder. "I am sorry to shock you, Mrs Whitby. The lines are from a poem by Mr Donne. And I should never have dared write them if I were not absolutely certain that my beloved Lucius did not return my affection." She turned her face to him and very nearly broke his heart on the spot.

That happiness, that innocent joy, the sparkle of mischief in those eyes – she made it all so very real. So wonderful. So tempting.

Lucius touched a hand to her cheek, his eyes scanning her face, desperately seeking some hint of what she was truly thinking. But all he saw was a delight he could not return, a trust he did not deserve, and a half-finished kiss that he still – despite himself, despite every better instinct – longed to resume.

Lucius's imagination conjured up, sharp and clear, the jaws of a trap springing closed.

But he was not the one caught in its teeth. The innocent victim, though she did not know it, was Isobel.

CHAPTER 15



Isobel was not often accused of being too proud. So it was always a surprise when something hurt the little vestige of pride that she did have.

And oh, it did truly hurt to see the panic in Lucius's eyes when he realised that there was no way to escape.

She preferred not to dwell on unpleasant things, particularly when they could not be helped. But it did cross her mind, just for an instant, that there must be something truly dreadful about the prospect of being entangled with her. Randall was one sort of man, a careless, insubstantial sort whose cruelty – though painful – lacked any poison in its barb.

Lucius was different. She valued his opinion. She'd told him not moments earlier – like a little fool – that she felt safe with him.

But clearly even one or two exquisite kisses could not save her from the curse of being eternally undesirable.

Now, sipping impromptu champagne amid the joyous celebrations of the Whitby family, all Isobel wanted was to return to that moment alone with Lucius – to have a minute's quiet and privacy in which to discuss what had passed between them and set forth a plan.

But Lucius had not met her eyes since she had forced his hand by announcing that they were engaged. She'd gone too far, that was plain enough. She'd known it even as she pressed her mouth to his and lost herself for one brief shining moment in his kiss.

Perhaps he'd never forgive her, even when he understood she'd only done it to protect Georgiana. All she could do was catch him alone, explain herself, and hope.

"Father, please recall that I have not yet spoken to the duke," Lucius was saying. The deep strain in his voice made Isobel cringe. "I do not think that we can call our... arrangement... official until I have Loxwell's blessing. It would be extremely premature to put out a notice in the papers. In fact, I am sure he would think it insulting."

"Gracious, my dear Mr W!" interjected Mrs Whitby, clutching at her husband's arm in fright. "The young duke is such a stern, serious fellow, I dread to think what would happen if you upset him!"

"I will write to Loxwell myself," said Mr Whitby. "I will be able to explain everything to him, man to man. There will be no objection, my dear boy." He turned his benevolent smile on Isobel, who endeavoured to reflect back a faint shadow of joy. "It is plain to see that our Lady Isobel is head over heels for you. Her brother would not be so cruel as to keep you apart."

"*You will do no such thing!*" Lucius's voice lashed out, a whip cracking over the heads of the whole party. A hush followed, everybody turning to him with wide eyes and open mouths.

No newly betrothed lover had ever used such a tone. There was nothing of love in it, or the anticipation of future joy.

Isobel's composure was growing ever harder to maintain.

Lucius cleared his throat, loud in the silence. He extended a hand towards Isobel, his eyes commanding her to take it. What could she do but obey?

"My sweet Isobel has explained to me a little of her brother's character," he said, a false lightness ringing harsh in his voice. "Loxwell will expect me to ask for Isobel's hand in person, and I cannot risk offending him. I must ask you all to keep the happy news between ourselves. So you see, Father, your kind offer is unnecessary. Isobel knows the way to

manage her brother.” He planted a smacking kiss on her white glove. A false kiss, showy and brash. The very opposite of the intimacy they had shared before. “And I will not allow anyone to cross me when it comes to Isobel’s wishes.”

“Gracious,” said Cassie, and let out an enormous yawn. “I had no idea you had it in you to be such a *romantic*.”

A ripple of nervous laughter followed her pronouncement. Lucius hung his head, feigning embarrassment, but made a great show of not letting Isobel take back her hand. For the first time, the warmth of his touch gave her no pleasure. She wished he would let her go.

Cassie met Isobel’s eyes with a distinctly unimpressed expression and flounced off to seek out better entertainment. There was a warning in her gaze, and an invitation for Isobel to follow, if she wished.

But before Isobel could think up an excuse to go after her, she was cornered by the one person she least wished to see in the world. For once, that honour had been wrested from Randall by the conniving brigand, Lord Bell.

“I am sorry to see you look so unhappy, my lady,” he said, leaning towards her with a nasty leer and solicitousness dripping from his voice like honey. “It was so unfortunate that Mrs Whitby and I stumbled on your private moment. I trust there is nothing else amiss?”

She knew perfectly well that he was fervently hoping for something to go wrong. She’d fooled Mrs Whitby by claiming the puzzle purse, but Bell was harder to deceive. He still posed a danger to Georgiana.

“I admit that I was caught off guard,” she said, with her blandest smile. “I have a retiring character, Lord Bell. I had hoped to enjoy the news in private, just for a little while.” She lowered her voice as though imparting a great confidence. “And, speaking of privacy, there is a certain item that I would be much obliged if you could erase from your memory.”

Lord Bell’s smile turned sour. Isobel drew the puzzle purse out from her reticule.

“I am so glad that *you* were the one to find my silly puzzle,” she said. “A less honourable man might have used it to his own advantage.”

Bell was no longer smiling so much as baring his teeth. “I thought it was my duty to keep hold of it. This sort of thing could cause a great deal of damage to a young lady if it fell into the wrong hands.”

“I quite understand.” Isobel held the puzzle purse by one corner and touched it delicately against the nearest candle. Once the flame had taken hold, she dropped it into the fireplace, where it turned to ashes. “And since Lucius and I are now engaged, I hope you can forgive my little indiscretion. I will make sure he understands precisely how noble you have been. I’m sure he will wish to thank you himself, when he knows the whole truth.”

Bell went pale. Until that moment, Isobel had harboured a few faint doubts as to whether he truly believed Georgiana’s saucy poem was intended for him. Now, she saw that he was perfectly aware it was not.

She shuddered to think that of the pain his scheming could have caused Georgiana. What would be the worse choice – marrying Bell to keep him quiet, or risking her absolute ruin if he made that puzzle purse public?

Bell bowed and moved away without another word. He set aside his champagne and left the room at once without so much as a nod to his hosts. Isobel rather suspected she would not be seeing him again. He was wise enough to know how Lucius would react when he understood what Bell had tried to do.

But there was no hope of speaking to Lucius privately now, either for her own sake or Georgiana’s. She and Lucius were the centre of everybody’s attention. As soon as Bell was disposed of there was Sir Ivor, offering congratulations as limp as his handshake, and then she was overtaken by the twin explosions of delight that were Mrs Whitby and Georgiana. They seemed to be competing with each other to suggest the most outrageously extravagant decorations for the wedding.

Isobel did not fail to notice that Lucius's jaw ticked tighter with every fresh garland of roses and firework display that adorned his mother's imagination.

It was a relief when a footman approached her to pass on a note from Aunt Ursula, who had declined to join them for the celebration. Isobel was wanted upstairs, and at once. Ursula had underlined the last two words of her note in thick dark pencil. *Don't dawdle.*

To Isobel's surprise, she found Ursula quite calm. The old lady was sipping at a glass of sherry and leafing through some of the large pile of correspondence beside her bed.

"Ah, there you are! Sit down, my dear. And do help yourself to a little tot of sherry."

Isobel usually drank nothing stronger than tea unless it was a particularly special occasion. But in this instance, she thought it could only help.

She was engaged, after all. To all intents and appearances. It might not call for a celebration but, as occasions went, it was certainly special.

"I hear I am to wish you joy," said Aunt Ursula, just as Isobel took the first sip. She choked on it.

"Auntie –"

"I thought it best not to come downstairs," said Aunt Ursula, adjusting her spectacles as she peered down at her next letter. "I was considered quite the actress in my day, but I am afraid my best performances are long behind me. I don't have the patience to play make-believe any more. So tell me, Isobel, when was it that you first knew you would marry Mr Lucius Whitby?"

Isobel set aside her glass, straightening her spine. She refused to be embarrassed. "When Lord Bell tried to use a salacious note from Georgiana to blackmail her into marriage, and I saw no other option but to claim I had written it myself."

"Ah." Aunt Ursula's eyebrows raised a fraction. "Well, that won't go down as one of the great love affairs of history, but as reasons for matrimony go, I've heard worse."

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, Auntie. I am not married yet. Nor do I intend to be.”

“Is that so?” Aunt Ursula fixed Isobel with a steely gaze over the top of her spectacles. “You had no business getting yourself engaged, then. But we shall set that aside for a moment. What I really wish to know is what you foresee happening at the end of all this. I know well enough that I started all this confusion by neglecting to mention that you would find Lord Randall here at Whitby Manor. But you have done such a marvellous job of entangling yourself that I can no longer make out where the play-acting ends and reality begins. Oh, preach all you like about your intentions to remain single and live as my companion. I know you too well for that, Isobel! You have a good heart, and it deserves someone who appreciates it. Now, it seems, there are two gentlemen presenting themselves as candidates. I would like to know which of them is a serious prospect. Randall or Whitby?”

“I really wish you would not speak as though I am choosing between two offers, when the reality is that neither of these gentlemen has asked for my hand at all.” Isobel tried to sound careless, as though the subject meant nothing to her, but Ursula’s knowing smile soon let her know she had failed.

“Come now, my girl. One of these fellows has wounded you. Not that old wound you had in Brighton, the poison of which I trust has now been excised by your mischief. Something new is troubling your heart. Is it once again Randall? Or has he been supplanted by young Whitby? There is no use denying it. I am determined to get it out of you.”

Isobel sighed – a long, mournful sigh the strength of which surprised her. “I do like Lucius,” she said quietly. “I admit that over the past weeks I have grown to like him very much. But I cannot allow myself to do more than that, for I am very nearly certain that he feels nothing more than friendship for me. Outside a few minor indiscretions, all his admiration is nothing more than pretence.”

Ursula was looking at her so sceptically that Isobel was forced to re-examine what she had just said.

It was not quite true, after all. He'd objected to her wearing the blue bobbin net and given no excuse when she accused him of doing it to subdue his own desires. Sometimes she caught him looking at her with such depth of emotion – emotion to which she could not put a name, but which encompassed fondness and surprise and admiration all at once. When he looked at her that way, it was all too easy to believe that they were no longer really pretending.

And he'd kissed her. *How* he'd kissed her! Held her face in his hands and told her she wielded power and, more than that, made her really believe it too. Just for the brief moment when his lips were on hers.

But if he did feel something, why was he always so careful with her? So precise about what was and was not part of their arrangement. Quick to remind her that it was all merely an act. And out in the garden, when they'd been caught, there was nothing but horror in his eyes. No hint of any secret pleasure, no hidden feelings set free.

That horror was not feigned. Something about the prospect of marrying her filled him with dread.

“If he does feel more,” she said slowly, “it is not as simple as falling or not falling in love. I cannot quite work him out. There is something complicated at play – something which he does not wish to tell me.” She brought a hand to her temple, not feeling a headache as much as a dissonance. A note was out of place in the melody of her thoughts. “And while there are so many layers of secrets and pretences and complications, I do not know how I can possibly begin to solve the mystery of him.”

“May I make a suggestion?” Aunt Ursula laughed at her own question. “Nay, I *will* make a suggestion whether you wish to hear it or not. It seems to me that you and Mr Whitby have got entirely too tangled up in this idea of your marvellous deception. And in the end, the only people you have managed to deceive are yourselves. You need to unpick this tangle one thread at a time. Start by imparting a confidence to him. I mean something much more significant than your old heartbreak over that fool Randall. Offer him something of

value about yourself. See if he reciprocates. You cannot ask him to open his heart without opening yours.”

“You don’t mean... Tell him about Mr Babbage?” Isobel glanced over her shoulder, half in jest, half really checking to be certain that nobody was there. “Auntie, I cannot think of a surer way to ensure he would find me completely unmarriageable.”

“Hm! If that’s so, he is certainly not the fellow for you. But you are right. That one is a confidence best saved for the man you are actually going to marry – not any of the men you are merely tormenting.” Aunt Ursula took an unladylike swig of sherry and let out a cackling laugh. “No, I had something else in mind. It seems that Mr and Mrs Whitby have got the idea that I am sitting on an enormous stash of money – and I dare say that a great deal of their attentions towards us have been inspired by the dream of that fortune. I rather wonder what young Whitby’s reaction would be if you broach the subject with him. You are indeed an heiress – of the Balfour name, and the usual Balfour dowry. See what he has to say about that. That will give you a better idea of his intentions.”

Isobel frowned. It was uncomfortable to think that her friends’ affection might be motivated by money. The Whitbys lived an extremely comfortable life – an extravagant one, even. In their position, Isobel would not have cared whether anybody might be an heiress or not. But she had to admit that she often found herself thinking quite differently to the way most people did. And Aunt Ursula was right that Mr Whitby had very nearly suffocated her with his attempt to be the perfect host.

But Lucius was not like that. Lucius was generous and honourable and passionate about citrus fruit and glass houses... In addition to being exactly the sort of insubstantial rake who kissed women in hothouses and had salacious thoughts about perfectly ordinary dresses.

Drat. She really could not make sense of her own feelings any longer. And, at times like that, there was only one thing left to do.

Isobel kissed Aunt Ursula, made sure the old lady had everything she needed, and slipped away, taking the servants' staircase to avoid bumping into anybody who might offer her their congratulations again.

Words might fail her. Gentlemen certainly would. But one thing she could always rely upon was the inimitable Mr Babbage.

CHAPTER 16



“*O*ut with it, then,” said Lucius, folding his arms across his chest to hide the way his fists were clenched tight with pent up anxiety. “What do you know?”

Sunlight filtered down through the cracks in the roof of the barn, glinting off tiny floating specks of hay in the air. Cassie glared back at him through the golden flecks, arms crossed just as his were, her eyes interrogating him. He was almost sure – *almost* – that she knew the secrets that had been rotting away in Lucius’s heart. He’d suspected it ever since she panicked over the cost of her ruined dress in the woods.

But he was not nearly certain enough to risk speaking the truth unless she did first.

Cassie let out a noisy exhalation and dropped down into a pile of straw, legs crossed in gentleman fashion. “I know that you and Isobel have been cooking up some foolish scheme between you. I know that I have never seen any newly betrothed man look so miserable as you do today. And I know that you had better not marry her, Lucius. Mark my words.”

“Why not?” Because of the money? Or because Cassie wanted to protect her friend?

It was unnatural to speak with his sister this way, making feints at the truth, avoiding the things he really wished to say. The strain of it ached in Lucius’s jaw and brow. But even Cassie, with her wild ways and her carelessness – perhaps *especially* Cassie, with her lack of feminine wiles to lure in a suitor – would suffer so greatly to hear of their father’s

wrongdoing that Lucius could not bear to mention until he was certain beyond all doubt that she already knew.

“Because I do not know if you love her,” said Cassie, speaking simply, softly, and devastating him in ways he could not explain. “And if you do not love her, you do not deserve her. Isobel is not one of the silly frippery types of girl you like to play around with.”

“You know very little about the sort of girl I like to *play around with*, as you term it,” said Lucius stiffly. “You were only eighteen when I left for Europe. Do you imagine that I was irresponsible enough to allow my eighteen-year-old sister, only just out, to hear all the details of my youthful misadventures?”

Cassie was not deterred. “The very fact that you had misadventures at all is simply another example of why Isobel Balfour is so far above you, my dear brother, that you barely deserve a space on her dance card – let alone her hand in marriage. Isobel is good and sweet and kind and clever. I will not let you abuse her.”

That was too much to bear. Lucius paced from one end of the barn to the other, swinging the anger out through his arms. The barn was as warm and cosy a hideout as it had ever been when they were children. He was sorely tempted to stay in there for ever and never come out again into the cruel world of money and fathers and sisters.

But he would have to set Cassie straight before enlisting her help in building a hay fort to call his home. “I am sorry to hear that you have such a low opinion of me, Cass,” he said, surprising himself with the wrench of hurt in his voice. “I have been trying all this time to protect Isobel.”

“You would have done better to protect her from your own bad influence,” said Cassie, but her accusatory tone had softened. As his restless pacing brought him past her, she caught his coat sleeve and gave his arm a little shake. “I am sorry. I’ve upset you – that wasn’t what I meant to do. It’s only that I’m... surprised. I knew that there was something strange going on between you and Isobel, and all your silly simpering

and arm-taking and eyelash-fluttering may be enough for our parents, but it never looked to *me* as though you were serious. Until now. You cannot convince me that an actual engagement is a silly summer's prank. Lucius, please tell me you have a reasonable explanation."

"I only wish I did," Lucius groaned. He flung himself backwards into Cassie's pile of hay, folding his arms behind his head and filling his ears with the crackle of sweet-smelling plant matter. "I met Isobel alone today, in the garden, and that was foolish enough. I made it worse by kissing her. I've no excuse, Cassie. When we were alone together – the things she said – no, the way she said them – ah! How can I explain?"

He couldn't look his sister in the eye. There was one very simple explanation for the way he'd behaved that afternoon, and it wasn't the sort of thing one discussed with family.

She'd been so gentle, even in her anger. She'd forgiven him. *Trusted* him. And yes, she was lovely to look at, and yes, heat flashed through his body at the mere memory of her touch, but all that was only physical. It could be withstood.

The gentleness had unravelled him.

"I did not expect her to tell Mother that we were engaged." His voice was a hoarse croak.

Cassie frowned, hands thrust into the pockets of the old greatcoat she was wearing – a hand-me-down of their father's. "You're telling me that you and Isobel have been meeting in secret and kissing and scheming and yet never discussed a betrothal?"

"Oh, we've discussed it!" Lucius closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, hoping that the pastoral goodness of the stable would revive him. "It's complicated, Cass. That's all I can tell you."

"You've been a fool." Hay stalks prickled through his shirt as Cassie squatted on her haunches to get a closer look at him. "But so have I, apparently. You *do* love her."

Lucius considered denying it, but the relief of admitting a small piece of truth at long last was too great. He let the

tension release, as though his heart were the River Isobel and Cassie's words had broken through the dam. "I admire her," he admitted. "I'm... captivated by her. I'm sick with yearning. But I'm trying not to be, because I know that no good will come of it."

Cassie sounded half exasperated and half amused. "I could see that you were playing pretend, but I didn't realise you were pretending to yourself as well. Have you not told her?"

"No, I –" Lucius stopped himself. That last kiss... In one blinding instant, it had brought all his inmost desires to the surface. Could Isobel really have kissed him like that without knowing what it meant? "I think she has some idea of my feelings," he amended. "She doesn't know that they are serious."

He risked a sideways glance to find Cassie openly smirking. "Only serious enough to lead to an engagement," she said.

"I have to speak to her. I need to find out what she was thinking. I made it clear to her that this was out of the question –"

Again, that shuttered suspicion fell over Cassie's eyes. She hugged her knees close to her chest. "And why should it be?" she asked pointedly. "We all adore Isobel. Do you know of any reason why you two should not marry, if that is what both of you truly want?"

Lucius pushed himself up on his elbows. "What do you know?"

Cassie jerked up a little straighter. "Why – what do you know?"

But before he could answer her, something miraculous happened to Lucius.

While his physical body remained there in the hay, his soul was transported back to one perfect Spanish evening. To the sweet contentment that came at the end of a warm day in good company, to the embers of a fine bottle of wine glowing in his belly, to the sharp-sweet taste of the tangerine he'd been trying

ever since to recreate, and to the sound of a harp playing so mournfully yet so sweetly that he wanted to cry.

It took him a moment to understand what was happening. But when he did, he leapt to his feet.

“That music,” he said hoarsely. Cassie was staring at him with her mouth half-open, and no wonder. He knew he was acting like a madman. “Where is it coming from? How – how did she know?”

It was there. It was really there, filling the air with its invisible beauty, whispering to him in a language he barely realised he understood.

It hadn’t been the oranges, or the wine, or the Spanish village, or the company... It was the music of the harp which had filled that distant evening with magic.

The same music that Isobel was playing now.

Of course it was her. He *knew* it was her. Even if his sisters possessed a trace of her talent at the harp, he would have known that *this* music was Isobel’s.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it,” said Cassie, eyeing him uncertainly. “The harp is in the yellow sitting room, where it has always been. Lucius, what –”

He didn’t hear the rest of what she had to say. He was already running back to the house.



ISOBEL WAS LOST in a different world. A world in which love flowed freely and jealousy did not exist. A world of which she was the mistress, immune to humiliation, immune to disappointment.

A world in which her heart could roam where it pleased. No need for the walls she had built around it.

This piece for the harp was one of her favourite compositions. She’d written it during one of the darkest times of her life – the cold, dark loneliness of the months after her

parents had died. At first, she kept it inside her head, the music too personal to play aloud.

But as the years went by and her grief eased to loving remembrance, she'd found the strength to bring the music out into the world – first by playing it to herself, then by recording it on paper. And at last, she knew that she had truly recovered from her loss the day she sent the music out across Europe, published under the name *Mr Isidore Babbage*.

The melody was a familiar friend. Mournful, yes, but hopeful, too. She liked to think of it bringing comfort to other lonely girls in other lonely rooms. They would never know the truth that inspired it, but that did not matter. What mattered was that her music was played, heard, appreciated. What mattered was that she was able to do what she loved. And what was her parents' legacy, if not a life filled with love?

Oh, and the charming letters of appreciation sent to Mr Babbage were quite pleasant, too.

Gentlemen might well be a mystery to Isobel forever, but music – music, she understood.

So when Lucius burst in upon her solitude, slamming open the door of the little sitting room, the storm on his face so dark that it dimmed the cheerful yellow wallpaper, she felt more than a little exposed. Her hands hovered beside the harp strings, unwilling to continue.

“Please go on,” said Lucius hoarsely. “Please. Keep playing.”

“Is something wrong?” Isobel could not imagine what he meant by making such an entrance if it was not supposed to interrupt her.

Lucius did not answer. He staggered to the chair opposite the harp, his breathing heavy and his face flushed with exertion. He slumped into it, his head dropping into his hands and his eyes falling closed.

Isobel did not know what was troubling him, but she had one sure way to ease his pain.

She resumed her playing. And Lucius listened with such intensity that she felt he was drawing the music out of her. His eyes did not open. He barely moved at all. But she felt the yearning from him all the same, an empty space which her music could fill.

She played to the end.

Lucius's eyes slowly opened. His gaze roved the ceiling, unfocused, still lost in the echoes of the harp strings.

“That was one of yours, wasn't it.”

“You've heard it before.”

Neither of them was asking a question. Lucius's eyes at last met hers, dark with impending rain.

“What chord does this correspond to, Isobel?”

She could hear the music within her before he asked. It would be a minor fifth – D minor, the key of her song on the harp. A sad chord, but hopeful. A chord that prayed for better days to come.

“You don't look to be in the mood for musical theory.”

He hung his head, brushing his fingers up through his dark curls. “I have always been a poor student of anything that is not purely scientific. And I cannot have been paying attention now, for I do not know why you told my mother that we were engaged.”

“I was sorry to do it without consulting you.” He looked broken, and she did not know why, so she ploughed on with an explanation that sounded more and more foolish as she spoke. “It was for Georgiana's sake. She – she made a puzzle purse – a silly little thing really, but you know how she can run away with an idea. Some of the sentiments it contained were... not the sort of thing young ladies are necessarily supposed to think about. And then, naturally, it went astray.” Isobel stopped, waited for him to respond, but he said nothing. She plucked a few strings to fill the silence. C, then G sharp – the devil's interval. “So when I realised Lord Bell had it, I thought it better to let him think it was mine. And I must say that if

Georgiana even considers entertaining his suit after this sly trick, I shall – I shall –”

Lucius offered her a grim smile. “Bash him over the head with your harp? That seems to be the sort of thing the blighter deserves.”

“I shall give Georgiana my honest opinion of him,” said Isobel. “Believe me, he may well find that just as painful.”

Lucius did not laugh. His lips twisted as though he might, but his eyes were bitter. “I wish you had given me a little warning. I might have reacted differently.”

“I know it was terribly wrong of me.” The words rushed out of Isobel’s mouth almost faster than she could form them. “I know you are offended – anybody would be in your position – and I must assure you that I had no intention...” She shrugged helplessly. “It does not mean anything, Lucius. I do not intend to hold you to any sort of promise. After all, you have not made one.”

To her amazement, he laughed then. His shoulders convulsed and he let out a bitter, sharp lemon squeeze of mirth. The sound of it was frightening.

“I wish you had warned me,” he said, snapping back into severity, “because I am certain that you did not intend to put yourself at risk by protecting Georgiana. Georgiana, in fact, has always been a mischievous minx, and is a touch too pretty for her own good. It’s a bad combination, but she has such a sweet nature that I know it will all come right for her in the end. No, I am not overly concerned for Georgiana. It is you – your inheritance, I should say – which is vulnerable now.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake!” Isobel sagged with relief, putting a hand on the harp to steady herself. “Aunt Ursula will really be unbearable when she hears that she was right. Let me set you straight on the subject of my inheritance. There is nothing there out of the usual way. The money that comes with the dukedom is all Alex’s, of course. My sisters’ dowries have been talked about enough this past year that you must have some idea of what they are worth. And there’s a little left to us from my mother, and that is all.”

Lucius was staring at her. He spoke very slowly. “Do you mean to tell me that your aunt does not intend to leave her money to you?”

“I’m sure she would if she had any. There is a rather wealthy old admirer of hers in India who sends her extravagant presents every now and again – fine jewels and the like. And she quite enjoys cultivating a little mystique. That’s the truth. No great fortune at all.”

She had been expecting him to laugh. It certainly seemed ridiculous to her. But Lucius’s eyes were wild.

“There’s no money?”

She stiffened. “There is more than adequate money for the sort of life I wish to lead, and plenty to give to the less fortunate besides.”

He pushed up from the chair as though propelled by one of the fireworks his mother wanted to set off in celebration of their upcoming marriage. “We must keep this between ourselves, Isobel. It would not do anybody any good to spread it about.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Isobel left the harp, moving in front of him as he began to pace across the room. She wanted a better look at his face, but he would not stand still long enough for her to have it. “Why should it matter one bit whether I have a vast inheritance or not? Particularly since you have now made it *extremely* clear that I was wrong to give anybody the impression that you – that you would ever –” She heard her own voice trail away until it was a shameful whisper. Tremulous, wounded, heartbroken. But she had started saying it, and she refused to let herself back out, even as the tears quivered in her voice. “That you would ever want to marry me.”

Yes, she’d been a fool once again – and deceiving herself besides. It hurt – it *ached* – to remember that nothing real had passed between them at all. And now, Lucius knew that she was hurt. So hurt that she could scarcely bear to speak of it.

She turned away to the window for fear of the pity she was sure she would see in his eyes. “Well, there it is.” She directed her words to the daisies bobbing in the lawn beyond the windowpane. “I don’t know what you expected. You broke our rules before I did. What did you think it would do to a silly girl like me, all those secret glances, those lingering touches? The way you looked at me in the garden this afternoon. The way you *kissed* me. You know by now that I have a rather romantic soul. You were not careful with me, Lucius. You have told me often enough that I did not understand the game I was playing. But if you understood it so well, then why –”

He laid his hand on her shoulder. He was so close behind her that the heat of his body crossed the space between them. She felt it in her arms, in the small of her back, down the sensitive skin of her neck. She felt without seeing it that his gaze was following hers out the window.

If she only turned her head and tilted up her chin, her lips would be within half a breath of his.

“I do not think it is silly at all,” said Lucius. His bare hand tightened on her shoulder, the warmth of it pressing through the thin fabric of her dress. “I am sorry I ever told you that you were not capable of understanding your own actions. You seem to understand these things much better than me, in fact. And you have been honest with me from the start.” He let her go. “Now I must be honest with you. As honest as I can be. I will not marry you, Isobel. There was never any question of that. I appreciate that you tried to protect my sister. In some ways I believe it was the right thing to do. Now, if you can bear it, I must ask you to carry on the pretence a little longer. It would not do to invite gossip by ending our supposed engagement on the day that it began. But we must be extremely careful to avoid any discussion of money. You must not mention anything about an inheritance – or lack of an inheritance – to anybody. Take your aunt’s example. Be coy, be mysterious, invite speculation. Only do not let anybody know the truth. Will you do that? For me?”

“You want me to tell your parents that Aunt Ursula’s fortune is real?”

He hesitated just long enough for her to start believing she had been mistaken. Then...

“Yes.”

If she concentrated, she could make out the reflection of his face faintly in the glass, superimposed over the vibrant summer green of the garden. He did not realise that she could see him, she was sure, for if he had known he would surely have hidden the torture on his face.

The way he looked down at her, his eyes tracing the curve of her collarbone and the shape of her ear and the white flash of her neck beneath her pinned-up hair. It was as though he were committing her to memory. As though the sight of her was precious, and he did not know when he would be able to enjoy it again.

“Lucius, there is something you are not telling me.”

His left hand lifted where he thought she could not see, his fist unclenching so that his fingers almost – *almost* – caressed her. Almost took hold of her and gently turned her around. Almost brought her face close enough to kiss. Isobel dared not move, though her whole body burned with the agony of holding still.

He moved away. He thrust his hands into his pockets and strolled over to the harp. If she hadn't seen his face in the window, she might have thought his insouciance was real.

“There is plenty that you are not telling me, either,” he said, setting his hand on the instrument. “I could ask you why it is that one of your drawing room compositions came to be played in southern Spain two years ago. And you, in return, could ask why it suits me to pretend I have landed an heiress.” He gave one of the strings a sharp pluck, sending ripples of honey through the tension in the air. “The truth of the matter is, if I must play along with this charade of an engagement, I had better wring as much value from it as I can. It's all well and good to land a duke's sister, but to break off an engagement with the heiress of a great fortune?” He summoned up a grin that would have better suited the face of a devil like Lord Bell. “That will really raise my credit! When

word gets around that I relinquished the impossible wealth of Lady Isobel Balfour, without a trace of regret or a word of complaint, I'll be the talk of London next Season. And better yet, if I do find a likely heiress – a *real* one –she'll never suspect that I'm thinking of her money at all." He plucked another harp string, and another, striking a cheerful major tonic, then thrust his hands back in his pockets and turned to Isobel with that false, wicked smile. "There. I've told you my secrets. Are you going to confess yours to me?"

"Not a single one of them, for every word you have just spoken is utter nonsense," she said. "You are not the sort of man you are pretending to be, Lucius."

"No need to use my first name in here. We are alone, after all. Must we continue the act even when there is no audience?"

His words sent heat blooming through Isobel's chest, but this time it was the simmering of frustration. Or was it? She couldn't tell the difference any longer between desire for him and the sheer irritation of the game he was playing. "Lucius," she said, returning his counterfeit grin with one of her own. "Lucius, Lucius, Lucius." She took a step towards him each time she uttered his name. By the end, they were almost nose to nose. She rose up on tiptoe to look him in the eye. "Only one of us is play-acting at present. And the other one..." The wickedness overtook her now, as though by pretending she had willed it into being. "The other one is an *exquisite* kisser. I have it on very good authority."

There. He couldn't sustain that cool, roguish aloofness. Not with her looking him in the eye. Not with her standing so close that they could both feel their breath rise and fall in unison.

"Careful." His eyes lingered on her lips, tension ticking tight in his throat. "I may not have the romantic soul that you do, but I'm only human. There's only so far you can tempt me before I do something we'll both regret."

Isobel kissed him. Just once, lips closed, fleeting. She bounced back down onto her heels to see how he would respond.

Now *that* was oddly pleasing. She'd stunned him. If anyone happened in on them at that moment, they'd think she had just punched Lucius in the face.

The wicked, frustrated yearning brought her blood to a rolling boil. Isobel rose on her tiptoes again and gave him another kiss. And another. She kissed him as though she were coaxing something out of him, unpicking his tight grip on that powerful force which had swept over both of them in the orangery, in the garden. He was a lion that had taken fright, just for a moment, at a mouse – and she, the mouse, wanted to be devoured.

The fourth kiss drew a groan from somewhere deep in his throat. She did not have the opportunity for a fifth. He had swept in ahead of her.

His hand clenched in her hair, the other seizing her waist, drawing her in tight against him. And she realised she'd been wrong to imagine that he hungered for her.

No. He was *ravenous*.

He kissed her as though he were starving to death and her touch was the only thing that could sustain him.

Isobel closed her eyes, revelling in each new burst of pleasure as his mouth travelled from her burning lips to her earlobe, to her cheek, her forehead, her neck. Then he lifted her chin to bring her mouth to his again, and at last found it in himself to pause. She opened her eyes.

“Isobel,” he breathed, brushing her lips with the sound of her own name. “I warned you. We will both regret this.”

The door to the yellow sitting room swung open. It moved slowly enough, but Isobel and Lucius were so entangled that there was still not enough time to leap apart. Lucius's eyes flared wide, that inner agony flashing over his face as he relinquished her.

“My apologies.” Only then, when that smooth murmur cut through her confusion, did Isobel realise that it was Randall who had happened upon them.

She whirled around, one hand pressed to her half-fallen hair, the other to her mouth, as though she could hide the aching imprint of Lucius's kiss.

Randall's eyes flickered from her to Lucius. Back to her again. His back was a little too straight, his smile too wooden. "I heard the harp music," he said, by way of explanation. "But I see someone else heard it, too. And he got here first." He gave Lucius a stiff bow. "Congratulations, Whitby. I wish you joy." Though his words were directed towards Lucius, he was looking only at Isobel. "And I think you'll have it," he added softly. "No – I know you'll have it."

"No need to get carried away, Randall," said Lucius. He spoke so briskly, so tight and careless and offhand, that it was as though he had suddenly become someone quite different to the man who had been clutching at Isobel only moments before. She glanced back, alarmed to find his features set into a granite wall.

No way to scale it. No way to see what lay behind.

"Nothing has been decided yet." Lucius looked at Isobel and gave a little shrug – the sort of shrug a man might give if he often went about kissing women and announcing engagements without ever worrying that it might mean anything at all. "Do excuse me, Randall, Lady Isobel. I must go and have a word with Lord Bell."

Randall raised an eyebrow. "It doesn't sound as though Bell will enjoy the experience."

Lucius answered him with a mirthless grin and left without so much as a backward glance. She watched him go, still catching her breath from the kiss, half-tempted to run after him and kiss him, shake him, take his face in her hands and force him to look at her – whatever it would take to knock down that stone wall he'd constructed about his heart.

"Isobel –" began Randall, moving towards her with a strange light in his eyes.

"I have never in my life met anybody as maddening as that man," said Isobel, more to herself than to Randall. "Oh, not

now, my lord. I simply can't support another overwrought encounter." She brushed past him, the sound of her name following her as she left him in the sitting room.

"Isobel!"

The absolute cheek of it, presuming they might still be on first-name terms.

But that was nothing to the *audacity* of Lucius pretending that kissing her had not shattered his world in two. Pretending to be careless. Pretending to be concerned with his reputation as a rogue and a romancer. And asking her to pretend with him, and, worse than that, imagining that he could pretend it all well enough to fool her.

Isobel was thoroughly sick of pretence. It was time to bring the charade to an end.

CHAPTER 17



“Please don’t do it, Mr Whitby. Please. I beg of you.”

Lucius was astonished to hear a sob in his valet’s voice. He forced himself not to say the words he really would have liked to say – all of which were far too rude for Clarkson’s delicate ears – and turned back towards the mirror. “What is it now, Clarkson? I really don’t have time to starch my collar or straighten my shirt or whatever – Oh, don’t look at me like that! I’m not doing it to upset you, man. I simply have too much on my mind to bother with looking my best.”

“An elegant appearance is the hallmark of a true gentleman, Mr Whitby,” said Clarkson. “It would be a stain upon your reputation – not to mention my own – if I let you go down to dinner with a duke without the right tailcoat. Please sit down.”

“I am a fully grown man, Clarkson, and more than capable of dressing myself. And I am not going to dinner. I am going to punch Lord Bell in the face.”

“In that case, sir, you will need your riding gloves. White kid is too delicate.” Clarkson steered Lucius back to the chair in front of the dressing table and, with surprising strength for such slender arms, forced him to sit. “Now, if you insist on dressing yourself, you must at least accept my instructions on how to do it *correctly*. This misaligned collar will not do at all. A little tug to the left, a tweak to the right – like so! You see how it sets off your shoulders. Now, a touch of powder will take the flush out of your complexion. It is much more refined

to look cool-headed as you break a man's nose. Shall I pour you a glass of brandy to fortify yourself?"

Lucius glowered into the mirror, hating the rich furnishings crowding the room behind him, hating the heat Isobel had brought to his face, hating that Clarkson was absolutely right about the way to adjust his collar.

Lucius, she'd said, and he'd only ever been called that by his family. He'd never known his first name could sound so sweet, so intimate, so daring. *Lucius, Lucius, Lucius*.

Clarkson set the glass of brandy before him. Lucius drained it in a single swallow.

"Now, I must admit even *I* am not entirely certain of how to dress you for the evening, sir," said Clarkson, whipping out a pomade brush and making some sense out of the hair Lucius had all but pulled out in his rage – his passion – in whatever the emotion was that rolled through him like a summer storm when he remembered kissing Isobel.

"I understand that tonight is to be a special celebration," Clarkson chattered on. If he had picked up any sign of Lucius's inner agony, he was far too professional to show it. "And with His Grace attending, I think full dress is called for. But your appointment with Lord Bell presents a difficulty. Is his lordship at all likely to fight back, do you suppose? Your best tailcoat is fiendishly difficult to repair, but more to the point, you will have more ease of movement in a frock coat."

And how good it had felt to kiss her back. What a dangerous, delicious relief to abandon all the restraints he'd tightened round his heart and his longing and his innermost fears. She'd made him forget it all.

And that was something he could not afford. In any sense of the word.

"On the other hand," Clarkson continued, happily oblivious, "since the duke is a relative of your lady, perhaps the evening is not such a formal affair, in which case the linen tailcoat strikes a happy medium between sturdiness for physical violence and elegance for a celebratory dinner."

Only then did a few of Clarkson's words penetrate Lucius's fog of misery. And those words were unwelcome indeed. "Clarkson?"

"Sir?"

"Tell me you did not just mention a duke."

Clarkson's brows drew into a polite frown. "Of course I did, sir. Haven't you heard?"

Lucius hadn't heard anything all afternoon but the sound of his name on Isobel's lips and the pounding of blood in his ears as he stormed through the manor searching for Bell.

"Your mother is quite overwhelmed," said Clarkson. "I hear she very nearly inhaled her smelling salts."

Lucius clenched a fist and thumped it into his forehead, wondering whether he might feel better after punching himself in the face, since Bell was not at hand. "How did Loxwell hear so quickly?" he demanded. "Who told him? Is the entire world conspiring against me?"

Clarkson, ever the professional, merely set down the pomade brush and took up a comb. "I couldn't say, sir. But it is not Lady Isobel's brother who has arrived. It is the Duke of Caversham, who I believe recently married the lady's sister."

"Caversham?"

"Caversham."

Lucius took a breath to calm his racing pulse. Caversham was not as bad as Loxwell. They'd been at Eton together. If anyone understood the necessity for discretion in a sticky situation, it was Caversham.

On the other hand, the gossip about the Caversham-Balfour union suggested that the man formerly known as His Gorgeous Grace, devilish flirt and ruthless politician, had cast off all his old associates and become a reformed man for love of Lady Selina. Lucius didn't believe the half of it – there were certain types of leopard who'd never wash out all their spots – but even so, the situation required careful handling. Caversham could be vicious when crossed. If he took it into

his head that Lucius had insulted a member of his new family, Loxwell's lawyers would be the least of Lucius's troubles.

"Forget the fistfight," he said, rising to his feet. "Bell will have to wait. Where has my mother stashed Caversham? Has he spoken to Isobel?"

"I understand from the footmen that His Grace is being entertained by your sisters in the drawing room," said Clarkson, smoothly intercepting Lucius as he made for the door and redirecting him to the wardrobe. "Regarding the lady, I'm afraid I have no idea. The fine wool tailcoat will do nicely, sir, if you are quite certain you have dispensed with the idea of fisticuffs. Should Lord Bell require correction after all, I must respectfully ask you to remove it before punching him, and preferably hang it over a chair."

"There are more important things in life than one's appearance, Clarkson," Lucius grumbled, but he allowed the man to primp him a little. It wouldn't do any harm to meet Caversham looking the part.

For all he knew, the next time he saw his old friend, it might be with his hat in his hand to catch the duke's spare change.

"There we are," said Clarkson, brushing a barely visible speck of dust from Lucius's shoulders. "*Now* you are ready to celebrate your engagement."

Lucius turned this way and that, making a little show of admiring himself. But when he met Clarkson's eyes in the mirror, they were grave.

"I notice you haven't offered me your congratulations, Clarkson," he said.

"Forgive me, Mr Whitby. You did not look as though you wanted them."

Lucius glanced down, fiddling with his cuffs to avoid that too-knowing gaze. "I thought you were all for the idea of Lady Isobel."

Clarkson hesitated before replying, selecting each word with care. "I am all for the idea of your happiness, sir."

Lucius squared his shoulders, meeting his own eyes in his reflection with a broad smile. “As you can see, Clarkson, I am extremely happy.”

He was going to miss the fussy little man in more ways than one. At least he’d be able to provide Clarkson with the very best of references.

The dinner bell chimed downstairs. Lucius gave his well-groomed reflection a nod and went to meet his fate.



MAINTAINING his smile throughout that evening was one of the most painful experiences of Lucius’s life. Bell did not show his face to offer the relief of a confrontation. The elder Mr Whitby, though, came perilously close to being the target of physical violence as he expounded at great length on the immensely expensive parties with which he intended to celebrate the upcoming wedding. Malcolm Locke, the Duke of Caversham, sat in the place of honour and treated everyone to the same implacable, unreadable smile. It reminded Lucius of a crocodile he’d once seen in the menagerie at the Tower of London.

Randall, on the other hand, sat and pushed food around his plate with what Lucius felt was an unnecessary amount of dolour. Every so often he would raise his eyes to Isobel, his face full of tortured yearning.

Ridiculous. Randall was hardly being tortured at all. He had only his own mistakes to lament over, only his imagination to torment him. *He* did not have to suffer the intoxicating proximity of happiness, all the while knowing it was forever out of his reach.

Whereas Lucius, who was forced to smile and chatter and feign gladness, had tasted the intoxicating reality. Had held Isobel in his arms. Had heard her pour out her innermost fears. Had soothed her pain with kisses, had brought a light to her eyes that surpassed even the glow that suffused her when she played the harp...

“Lucius!”

A sharp heel dug into his ankle, making him jump. Beside him, Evie carried on eating as though she had not just kicked him as viciously as an angry horse.

“Lucius,” his mother repeated, her voice oddly high pitched, “did you not hear the duke speaking to you?”

Caversham turned that suspiciously bland smile to Lucius, his eyes glittering. “No need to fret, Mrs Whitby. Your son has been stricken down by a terrible affliction. We can all make allowances for those suffering from ‘love match fever’.”

Isobel glanced up from her food. “Don’t tease him, Malcolm. I’ll make you sorry if you do.”

The duke turned to her with a spark of genuine amusement in his eyes. “Dear little sister, I’d like to see you try.”

She gave a careless shrug. “I’ll tell Selina you came here to check on me. I know perfectly well that she thinks you are still in London.”

Caversham let out a dry chuckle that almost – almost – masked the alarm in his eyes. “Now there’s a threat.”

“Your Grace,” said Mr Whitby, “I have a little conundrum on my hands that you are best placed to answer. My son tells me that we must not make any mention of our happy news until he has spoken to Lady Isobel’s brother – spoken *in person*. Is that not a trifle overzealous? When there is no possibility of Loxwell withholding his blessing, it seems a shame to keep it all under wraps!”

“It is not my request, Father. It is Isobel’s,” said Lucius tightly. Caversham’s eyes cut to him, taking in a great deal too much.

“Yes, Malcolm,” said Isobel, ignoring the little squeak of shock that escaped Mrs Whitby each time she used the duke’s first name. “You must not breathe a word of this to Alex – or Selina.”

“What will you threaten me with this time, dear child?”

Isobel set down her cutlery and pinned him with a look. “It would upset me very much.”

The duke pressed his hand to his heart. “Another dire threat. I did not imagine the countryside would turn you so wild, Isobel. But, as it happens, I think you have the right of it. Loxwell will appreciate a discussion man-to-man before anything is made public. In fact...” He paused a moment, glancing at Isobel, who inclined her head in a barely perceptible nod. “In fact I advise that you must under no circumstances allow news of the engagement to go beyond this room.”

“Dear me,” said Mr Whitby. “I had no idea Loxwell was so difficult to please!”

“My brother likes things done properly,” said Isobel.

“Quite so,” said Malcolm, with a self-deprecating smile. “And just as allowances are made for lovers, a little consideration must be given to the tender feelings of men who are accustomed to getting their own way.” Without allowing a moment for anyone to respond, he smoothly turned the subject to a recent horse race. And, in a perfect demonstration of the point he had just made, the conversation around the table followed his lead. There was a certain momentum in the whims of a duke that took considerably more willpower to resist than Lucius’s parents possessed.

Lucius rubbed his left foot against the ankle Evie had savaged. There’d be quite a bruise there in the morning.

“What is the matter with you?” Evie asked him, speaking in a low whisper from the side of her mouth. She nodded at something her father had said and covered her mouth with a hand, feigning laughter. “Anyone would think you were planning a funeral rather than a wedding.” She shot him a brief look, dagger-sharp. “I know there’s more to this business with Isobel than meets the eye, but if you wish to avoid Caversham’s suspicion, you’d better sharpen up.”

Lucius answered with a pointed glance at the food Evie had been cutting up and pushing about her plate while barely

taking a bite. “May I serve you another slice of beef, Evie? Or perhaps a little more swede?”

She gave him a smile that could turn milk sour. “Thank you, dear brother, I could not eat another bite.”

“Neither could I,” announced Mrs Whitby, rising to her feet. “Ladies, shall we withdraw?”

To Lucius’s surprise, Caversham got up as well. “If you’ll excuse me, Mr Whitby, I’d like to stop in on Lady Ursula before the hour grows any later. I am rather concerned to find her too unwell to join us for dinner, especially on such a happy occasion.” His eyes flickered to Isobel, who returned him a bland smile.

“Really, Malcolm, there’s no need to fret. Aunt Ursula never stirs when she’d rather be in bed – even for you.”

He bowed. “Indulge me. You know how I dote on the old battle-axe.” He gave a wink so roguish that Georgiana had to stifle a shriek of a giggle. “There we are. Some more ammunition for the next time you need to threaten me into good behaviour. And since the young lovers have been so reticent on the details of their sudden engagement, I am all agog for the sort of salacious detail that only Lady Ursula can provide.”

He meant to get the truth from Ursula: that was plain as day. Lucius did not know how much Isobel had confided in her aunt. But Caversham was no fool, and he was far fonder of Isobel than Lucius had bargained for. If he wanted to get to the bottom of things, he would do it in short order.

Isobel either had not noticed Caversham’s suspicions or simply did not care to acknowledge them. She caught Lucius’s eye across the table with a look that was mischief and fire – harp strings and oranges – clandestine embraces and secrets exposed.

“Be careful what you wish for. Salacious isn’t the word.” She crooked an eyebrow, gave that wicked smile, and sent heat rushing to every extremity of Lucius’s body.

He'd never in his life imagined he could be so uncomfortable at a family dinner.

Lord Randall rose abruptly to his feet. "Please excuse me, too. I am not feeling well."

"Lady Ursula's indisposition must be catching!" cried Mrs Whitby. "Oh, Lady Isobel, I *wish* you had let me send for a doctor! Only imagine if she should die in our house – and poor Randall too!"

Randall stared at Isobel with a face full of agony, but she did not notice. "I assure you, Mrs Whitby," she said, "there's no need for a doctor. My aunt is elderly and is easily tired. That's all."

"Why, Randall, you look positively frightful!" exclaimed Georgiana. "I wonder, was that chicken cooked through?"

"The chicken was perfection," said Caversham, soothing Mrs Whitby's cry of dismay. Behind him, unnoticed by the object of his adoration, Randall slunk from the room.

"All the same, I must now insist on calling a doctor for poor Lady Ursula," Mrs Whitby declared. "Tell me, my lady, has she a private physician?"

"Gracious, what a thought," said Isobel. "She could never afford such an extravagance."

Her eyes were still fixed on Lucius, and all the mischief had dropped away. Her gaze now was pure, crackling flame.

There was silence. Lucius didn't dare glance at his father. He caught Cassie's expression, stone-faced and directed down at her plate. Caversham was looking askance at Isobel – as well he might, since the indelicacy of the remark was utterly unlike her.

Georgiana let out a titter of laughter, which sputtered out into silence as she realised that nobody was making a joke.

Mr Whitby leaned forwards, the edge of one sleeve trailing unnoticed in the remains of his dessert. "What on earth do you mean, my lady?"

“Why, that my aunt is but a poor spinster. Of course my brother provides her little indulgences here and there, but a personal physician! No, she’d never accept such charity.”

“Isobel!” Caversham’s tone carried a reproach which she blithely ignored.

“There’s no shame in it, Malcolm. I am sure Aunt Ursula will not mind me speaking the truth.”

“My lady,” interrupted Mrs Whitby, her face as white as the cream in the bone china jug, “surely you don’t mean to tell us that your aunt is in financial difficulties?”

“Far from it. Happily, she has more than enough family to support her.” Isobel at last dropped her defiant stare into Lucius’s eyes and turned to Mrs Whitby with a smile. “She may not be blessed with money, but she is replete with familial love. And that’s much more important, don’t you think?”

She must have learned that bland, charming, vicious smile from Caversham. It cut deep into Lucius’s heart from all the way across the table.

“Lucius,” Mr Whitby began, but his wife stopped him with a sharp hiss of warning.

“Is something the matter?” asked Isobel, still smiling.

“*Lucius...*”

“Nothing is the matter, my dear Isobel!” cried Mrs Whitby. “Nothing at all! Why should it be! Why on earth!”

“Mama, there is something stuck in your throat,” said Georgiana. “You sound terribly hoarse.”

Cassie was still staring resolutely at her plate. Sir Ivor was slurping posset from his spoon with no indication that he had heard a word of the conversation. Evie was trying to catch Lucius’s attention, but he couldn’t meet her gaze.

Couldn’t tear himself from Isobel.

Had he thought that was fire in her eyes? He’d been mistaken. She was cold as winter.

“Why don’t you accompany me upstairs, Isobel?” said Caversham, in a tone that made it perfectly clear he was not asking, but giving an order. He took her hand and pulled her from her seat. “I really *must* see your dear aunt. This minute.”

She resisted him long enough to say something for Lucius’s ears alone. Something nobody else in the room would understand.

“E Minor. Diminished seventh.” Again, that flare of defiance. That terrible, cold flame. “In case you were wondering.”

Before Lucius could answer – long before he could begin to sound out the notes of the chord in his mind – Malcolm had whisked her away.

And left Lucius to face the music of an entirely different sort.

“Ladies, Sir Ivor, I’m afraid you must excuse us at once,” said Horace Whitby, in a voice flat with rage. “Lucius and I have an urgent matter to discuss.”

CHAPTER 18



“*T*his way.” Malcolm pulled Isobel sharply left when she tried to lead him ahead to Aunt Ursula’s rooms. He kicked open the door of one of the lesser-used upper receiving rooms, surprising frightened squeaks from the two maids dusting off the shelves. “A moment, please, ladies.”

Malcolm’s winning smile had melted most of the female population of London into rapturous puddles at one time or another, and two young country servants did not stand the slightest chance against it. They hurried out, giggling, and Malcolm extinguished his smile the moment the door closed behind them.

“Out with it,” he said, arms folded. “And thank your lucky stars that it’s *me* paying you a visit, and not Loxwell or Streatham or, heaven forbid, my sweet and gentle wife. Selina will put you under house arrest till your thirtieth birthday if she hears of this. That’s if you survive her initial tongue-lashing.”

Isobel saw at once there was no need to keep up her pretence. In any case, she had something far more important on her mind. “He *lied* to me!”

“Good lord, Iso, are you utterly bent on causing havoc?” Malcolm ran a weary hand through the blonde mane Isobel’s friends all used to sigh over before he unforgivably betrayed them all by getting married. “Who has lied to you? No, wait – you are trying to distract me! Look, I give you my word I’ll run through anybody who requires it, but first I need you to

tell me the truth. Starting from the beginning. In plain English, if you please.”

“He told me he only wanted me to play the heiress to polish up his reputation for the marriage mart,” said Isobel, her hands clenching into fists. “But that doesn’t seem to be the case at all, does it?”

A dangerous light played in Malcolm’s eyes. “Do you mean to tell me that Lucius Whitby has put you up to this? All for a bit of polish on his aura of mystique? Why, that conniving little rat, I’ll see him hanged –”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort!” For the first time in her life, Isobel felt like punching something. *Someone*. She wasn’t sure who, and though she was sure she couldn’t hurt Malcolm if she tried, it seemed a little unfair to choose him. She moved away instead, her fingernails biting into her palms, and tried to let out all the wrath boiling inside her with a long sigh of anguish instead. “Lucius didn’t put me up to anything. The only person who did any putting up of anybody else was me.”

“All right. All right.” To her surprise, Malcolm’s voice had gentled. His large hand landed on her shoulder and steered her into a chair. “Take a few deep breaths, old girl, and then – if you can possibly manage it – try making a little sense, won’t you? Shall I ring for some tea, or brandy? A pistol? Whatever you need.”

“I don’t need brandy,” she said, trying to steady her breath. “I need Lucius.”

Malcolm raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“I need him to explain why he lied to me.” Isobel replayed that awful dining room conversation in her memory. The triumph she’d felt – *as if I’d do as you tell me!* – and then the betrayal in his eyes. The hurt. “Oh, Malcolm, it’s all so mixed up! I don’t know what to do.”

“I see.” Malcolm took a deep breath, sat opposite her, and took her hands in his. “Come, now. I am an expert at sorting out messes. I have had years of practice. Now, I am going to

ask you some questions, and you only need answer yes or no. Do you understand?”

Isobel nodded. Malcolm gave her hands a fond squeeze and released them.

“Are you really engaged to Lucius Whitby?”

“No.”

“Do his parents believe that you are?”

“Yes.” Her voice dimmed to a shameful squeak, but Malcolm made no sign of censure.

“And it was your own idea to do this thing?”

“Yes.” She winced. “Sort of. It was not supposed to go this far, but –”

“Steady, steady. Stick to yes and no for now.” Malcolm rubbed his jaw. “Does Lady Ursula know?”

“Yes.”

He grinned. “Does she approve?”

“I...” Isobel sighed. “No.”

“I remember Miss Georgiana’s birthday ball. You asked me to dance with you. You hadn’t had many partners, and you wanted to make somebody jealous. Was that person Lucius?”

It took Isobel a moment to remember. That ball – London – the Season – it all seemed a lifetime ago compared to the past short weeks of summer. “No.”

“Didn’t think so.” Malcolm gave her what looked very much like a grin of approval. “Poor Lord Randall is absolutely *sick* this evening. I really think he might die.”

“You shouldn’t look so pleased about it,” said Isobel. “You are my brother now. You ought to be telling me the error of my ways.”

“I apologise. I’m new to this business of having a family. I’ll try and do better next time.” His eyes twinkled, but Isobel could barely muster half a smile in response. “Very well, my

accidental siren enchantress, here's the crux of the matter: do you love him?"

"Randall? Not a bit."

Malcolm held up a finger. "That's not who I was asking about. As you know very well."

Isobel dropped her gaze to her floor. Somewhere, down there beneath the Persian rug and the oaken floorboards, her heart had fallen, too. "I don't think there's any question of love between me and Lucius." He'd *lied* to her.

And she'd hurt him. Perhaps... perhaps she'd even *wanted* to hurt him. At the very least, she'd wanted to show him that she wasn't prepared to follow along with that silly primping of his masculine pride.

She didn't dare look back at Malcolm. He might be new to the family, but he already understood her far more than she liked. Which was a rare talent, because at that moment, she barely understood herself.

"It doesn't seem such a terrible mess to me, Iso," said Malcolm gently. At last, Isobel found the ghost of a smile. She thought how mortified the fearsome Duke of Caversham would be if anyone overheard him coaxing his sister-by-marriage from the brink of despair as gently as he'd nurse an injured kitten. "I've known Whitby some years now. He's a thoroughly decent fellow. In fact, a little less decency might have steered him better in this regard. Heaven knows how you managed to persuade him into this mad scheme. But here you both are, and the fact of the matter is it's no bad thing to find yourself betrothed to someone you —" He caught her expression. "To someone you are very fond of. And who, by the looks of things, is head over heels in *fondness* for you."

"He lied." And so had she. And had she really expected anything better? Everything between them was founded on deceit.

"Yes, about that." Malcolm drummed his fingers on his knee, frowning. "I wouldn't describe your little announcement

downstairs as *delicate*, but the elder Whitbys certainly seemed upset by more than your manners.”

“Why should it matter to them whether Aunt Ursula is rich?”

“Why, indeed.” Lucius was standing in the doorway, face drawn, eyes weary. Leaning against the doorpost at a nonchalant angle as though there were the slightest hope she’d believe he was not miserable.

Isobel wanted to leap to her feet. To run to him. To slam the door in his face. To kiss him. To ask how long he’d been there. To pray that he hadn’t heard anything, and to hope against hope that he had.

“Give me a moment to collect myself, and I’ll tell you,” said Lucius. “I’ll tell you all of it, if that’s what you want.”

He took a step into the room and glanced pointedly at Malcolm.

The duke laughed. Not a merry laugh. A warning. “No. I think I’ll stay right here.”

“Malcolm,” Isobel pleaded. He settled back in the armchair, arms folded, crossing an ankle lazily over the opposite knee as though he intended to stay a good long while.

“Don’t ask me to give you a moment alone, Iso, because I won’t. I can’t. Heaven knows I’m nobody’s idea of a chaperone, but here I am, and I’m not moving.”

“She is my betrothed, Caversham,” said Lucius. “What harm could come of it?”

“Plenty.” Malcolm shrugged his shoulders back into the chair, almost as though he were relaxing, but there was no doubting the hint that he was squaring up for a fight. “Don’t push your luck, Whitby.”

Isobel leaned forward, fixing Malcolm with a glare. “I’ll tell Selina you’re not in London.” He didn’t blink. “I’ll tell my brother what happened at the inn in Twynham the day of the election.”

Malcolm’s eyes widened. “How do you know –”

Isobel sat back with a satisfied smile. “I was only guessing, until just now. Give us five minutes, Malcolm.”

“No.” He stood. “It’s getting late, Isobel. Whatever’s cooking between the pair of you can keep until morning. I’m not going to be responsible for leaving you alone, upstairs, late in the evening, with a man whose behaviour towards you has been questionable *at best*.” The last words lashed back at Lucius, sharp and biting. Lucius took it, still leaning on the doorframe, unflinching, face set.

Malcolm held out a hand to Isobel. “I’m going to escort you to Lady Ursula’s chambers. Don’t insult me by trying to change my mind.”

Isobel was accustomed to dukes, to their tempers, their orders, and their particular habits of always getting their own way. She recognised that tone and knew there was no use arguing with it.

But she also knew how to get her own way, regardless. The secret, quiet way that looked like acceptance but was anything but.

The wallflower way.

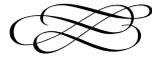
“It’s a lovely evening,” she said to Lucius, as Malcolm led her swiftly past. “It’s just as I imagine that night in Spain.”

His eyes locked on hers. And she knew, without a word passing between them, that he understood. “Goodnight, Isobel.”

“Goodnight.” She turned away, let Malcolm steer her to Ursula, let him berate her at great length about *suitable company* and *chaperones* and *we both know you know better*.

Let him think her smile was only for show.

CHAPTER 19



*T*he orangery, again. But this time in moonlight.

The neat rows of trees, such familiar friends by day, had transformed into ethereal statues in the darkness, their outlines picked out by moonlight. Their green leaves now were deep black, their heavy fruits a silvery mystery. The tiled paths between them glowed with reflected moonbeams. It was a glorious night, stars thronging in the heavens, their dainty patterns visible, though distorted, through the glass roof.

Lucius leaned against one of the narrow greenhouse pillars, its ironwork chilling through his jacket, the scent of earth and growing green things lulling his mind with the promise of good things to come.

Promise that would never be fulfilled.

When Isobel appeared at the far end of the hothouse, clad in a white nightdress, he thought for a moment he had dreamed her. But she stepped forward across the moonlit tiles, arms wrapped around herself as though something chilled her despite the warm air, and called his name.

“Lucius?”

He let his eyes fall closed and let himself pretend, for just a moment, that it would all come good. Told himself that he wasn't about to hear the sound of his name on her lips for the last time.

“Lucius? You are here, aren't you?” Her voice moved towards him. He opened his eyes and stepped out from the shadow of the pillar to join her in the moonlight.

“I’m here.”

She jumped at the sound of his voice, but the sight of him relaxed her. As a cloud passed across the moon and shadows fell across the orangery, he thought he could feel rather than see the tension leaving her shoulders, the smile blessing her face like sunlight.

“Oh!” He heard her stumble into something, and he smiled. *That* hadn’t occurred to his fevered imagination. “Now I can’t see!”

He moved towards her, not needing the moon to guide him across the well-trodden aisles of fruiting trees. “You didn’t bring a candle?” Or a coat. Or even a dressing gown. He was fairly certain he’d seen lace at the neck of that nightgown. The thought made him burn.

“I didn’t want to be caught – oh!” This time the exclamation was a glad one, as his outstretched hand found hers. He held her tightly, his fingers surprised by the warmth and strength in hers.

But of course she had strong hands. The sort of music Isobel played didn’t come easily.

He might have pretended he was clutching her bare hand so tightly merely to steady her, if Isobel had not responded by pulling herself towards him, drawing herself closer. Tantalisingly close, in the dark.

“I’m sorry about Malcolm,” she said. “He’s a fine one to preach about propriety!”

“He cares about you.” And wasn’t that just an extra sprinkle of salt over the bleeding wound of it all? Of *course* Isobel was a favourite relation of Caversham, whom Lucius counted among his oldest friends. How could she not be? It was becoming more obvious by the hour that everything that would be perfect for Lucius, Isobel already was.

Except an heiress, of course. Except that.

“Fond of me – terrified of my sister – one or the other.” Her voice warmed with the sound of that playful smile she

usually kept hidden. She'd freed it now, in the darkness. With him.

"I thought they were a love match?"

"Very much so." She hesitated, her fingers loosening their hold on his. "I think... I think there is always a little terror, when love runs very deep."

"Isobel..."

The clouds shifted, and moonlight crept slowly in through the orangery once more, and her face shone with an inner glow that was more than moonlight, and – heaven help him – she was only inches away.

Her eyes held his for a moment, then dropped as she spoke. "You said you'd give me an explanation. But first, I owe you an apology. I gave my word, after all, that I'd follow your lead. And then I deliberately set out to frustrate you. I've no excuse. I did it because –" Her eyes rose back to his, and there was such a spark in them that, despite everything, he wanted to laugh. "Because you made me so *angry* with your silly posturing! Your ridiculous put-on of the silly, vain, fortune-hungry rake. And you thought I'd believe it, Lucius! How could you?" She shook her head, biting her lip to quell everything that was fighting to spill out. "Wait. I am supposed to be apologising. I *am* sorry. My only excuse is that I had no idea the consequence would be as grave as it evidently is."

"And why should you have known?" He did let himself laugh then, but it was bitter. "I kept it all from you."

Isobel dropped his hand, wrapping her arms about herself again, though she could not possibly have been cold. "Why does your father need so desperately for you to marry an heiress?"

Now, when the moment finally came to unburden himself, he found it harder to do than he'd imagined. All this while he'd felt the truth building up like water behind a dam, and he'd been certain that at any moment his silence would crack, and it would all come gushing out in a torrent. But he couldn't find the words. "Can't you guess?"

There was no reproach in her eyes, no judgement. Only concern. “What happened to the money?”

“Misspent. Badly invested. Gambled, drunk, frittered away on a thousand little luxuries. There’s no great sin at the heart of it, Isobel. Only my father’s lack of judgement.”

She touched a hand to her lips, concern turning to contemplation. As though a few moments’ thought might turn up a solution where Lucius’s long hours of labour had failed. “I’m sorry. Is there nothing to be done?”

“My father was relying upon Evie to catch Lord Henry Claremont last Season.” He grimaced. “It seems one of us must be sold to save the others – or at least buy us more time. A love match would have been a happy by-product, but...”

He stopped. Looked at her – really *looked* at her, as though by studying each moonlit detail of her face, he’d imprint her in his memory forever. And leave a part of himself behind, standing here at midnight in the Spanish-scented orangery, gazing into the eyes of a woman who’d walked straight out of a dream.

“A love match would have been heaven.” There. That was as close as he dared come to the heart of it. His voice hoarsened around the words. But Isobel nodded, and he knew she understood. “I didn’t intend to entangle you so deeply.” It was urgently important that she knew that. Knew he wouldn’t have used her – even if there had been a fortune – even if he’d had the chance. “I only wanted to buy myself some time to think. To search for another way out.”

Perhaps it had worked, after all. Perhaps there was now sufficient distance between Evie and Lord Henry that his father would give up his desperate idea of blackmail.

Or perhaps, cruellest of ironies, that cocksure lie he’d told her would come to pass. Lucius Whitby, gentleman-about-town, freshly returned from Europe and breaking off his engagement to Isobel Balfour without so much as sigh for her fabulous wealth. It would certainly give him a dreadful kind of allure. To a particular sort of wealthy woman, he’d be appealing. The thought made him sick.

“You may yet find something.” Hope glimmered in her eyes along with the starlight. And something worse still – trust. “Have a little faith in yourself. And... have a little faith in *me*.”

She trusted him. Despite everything.

Lucius managed half a smile. “Do I have the pleasure of meeting the famous composer, Mr Babbage?”

She took a step back and made an ironic little bow. “Isidore Babbage, at your service.” She straightened up and wrinkled her nose. “I wouldn’t call him famous. But he has built up a comfortable income.” She took his hands again, those strong fingers sure and steady. “I wouldn’t cost you anything as a wife, Lucius. I would even be able to help a little.”

He lifted her hands to his face. Let her fingers trace along his jaw, her cool palm press against his cheek. He closed his eyes to savour it.

So sweet. So tender. A luxury beyond claret and cologne and hothouse flowers.

He couldn’t bear to end it. He felt as though the effort would rend him in two. But, somehow, he found the strength to fold his hands over hers, and gently push them away. “Could Mr Babbage help me out to the tune of fifty thousand pounds?”

He heard her sharp intake of breath and opened his eyes to find her staring at him, frozen. She’d left her hands in his. He gave them a last, longing squeeze, and let them go. “Isobel, if it were only my future at stake...”

He’d choose her in a heartbeat. He’d be on his knees before her at that moment. He wouldn’t let another second pass before swearing himself to her forever.

She wrapped her arms around herself again. Perhaps she felt the aching absence of his body, just as he ached to hold her. “I know,” she said. “I know.”

“My sisters deserve better.” He shook his head, searching within himself for that resolve which had seemed so iron-clad

only days before. “They’ve no idea of the danger we’re in. Even now, they think I’ve broken off the engagement over some simple misunderstanding. My father managed to keep his real objections contained until we were out of the room. And I don’t intend for them ever to find out the truth.”

“I won’t breathe a word of it,” said Isobel.

Lucius smiled. “I know. I have faith in you, too.”

A moment stretched between them. A shimmering, moonlit moment in which all that mattered was the warmth of the alliance between them, their shared admiration, their shared secrets. Then her smile grew brittle.

“So I must release you from our arrangement. To find a real heiress.” She spoke with false brightness. And no wonder she’d made such a perfect partner in deception – if Lucius wasn’t very nearly certain of the truth, he’d have been wholly taken in by that ersatz cheer. “Have you anyone in mind? Some wealthy widow, perhaps? I’m sure my aunt has some friends who might do.”

“*Don’t.*”

“No. You’re right. I won’t tease.” Her eyes glittered with more than moonlight. “Well, I’m glad if our little misadventure was any help to you. Even if it was only a little space to catch your breath.”

“It’s meant a great deal to me.” A great deal more than it should have done. But that couldn’t be helped now. “And you? Did you get what you wanted?”

She laughed, soft and low. Not at him – at herself. “No. Or rather – I did, but not in the way I imagined. Do you remember, when I first dragged you into this mess, that I asked you whether I was wicked, to thirst for revenge the way I did?” She lifted a shoulder, a little half shrug. “I hardly recognise the girl I was that day. The girl I’d been for years before. It seems that thirst has been quenched.” She looked at him, arch and knowing. “Perhaps you cleansed my soul, Mr Whitby.”

“You give me too much credit.” He traced a finger down her cheek, brushing the teasing smile from her lips. “And you are incapable of taking anything seriously.” He cupped her face with his hands. “But if I helped you, I am glad of it.” A cloud covered the moon once more, plunging them into darkness. And under the secrecy of that dark veil, Lucius laid one last reverent kiss on her lips.

“You were wrong about one thing,” she whispered, her breath hot and fierce on his mouth. “I don’t regret this. I don’t regret it at all.”

And she was gone.

Lucius let himself sink down to the tiled floor, careless of the spilled soil staining his clothes. He took a breath of the air, still and sun-warmed despite the darkness, and watched as moonlight and cloud chased each other in fragile glimmers across the row of glasshouses.

A single clear moonbeam picked out a tiny flower, newly blooming, red petals unfurling like little bleeding hearts.

CHAPTER 20



The next morning brought silence to Whitby Manor.

Unwelcome silence. Unbreakable, unwanted, deafening silence.

Isobel struck a single key on the piano. A tinny, uninspiring middle C responded.

She glared at her blank sheet of stave paper. Lifted her pencil. Set it down again.

Her left hand formed a C minor, picked out the notes one by one. And then her fingers hovered in midair, uncertain. Where to go next?

Where was the music?

For the first time in her life, she was glad to be interrupted mid-composition. Even when the interruption came in the form of the brother-in-law she had still not forgiven for his unexpected arrival in the middle of her schemes.

“We have a serious problem,” said Malcolm, striding across the empty drawing room. Isobel slammed her hand into the keys, the discordant clamour resonating painfully in her ears.

“We have an *emergency*.”

Malcolm stopped, hands on his hips, puzzlement marring his stern expression. “I’m talking about the news we received over the breakfast table about Mrs Whitby. *You* can’t be talking about the same thing, because you were not at

breakfast. Which I noticed, by the way.” He held out a honey cake. “Eat.”

“I can’t,” said Isobel. Malcolm dragged a chair across the floor, sat astride it, and waved the cake at her, threatening to spill crumbs and sugar crystals over the piano keys.

“Eat, I said. Don’t make me force it down your throat. You’re pale as a ghost. You need food.”

She took the cake, if only to rescue the piano from a sticky demise, and picked off a crumbling corner. She’d never been less hungry in her life, but Malcolm was watching her, so she tried a bite. To her disappointment, the honey did not turn to ashes in her mouth. Quite the opposite, in fact. It was all she could do not to stuff the whole thing down in one gulp.

It would have been far more poetic to wither away with grief, but if Isobel had learned anything from the past weeks at Whitby Manor, it was that life was rarely as satisfying as poetry. She finished the cake and licked the honey from her fingers.

“I can’t hear the music,” she said, when Malcolm’s concerned gaze did not abate.

He frowned. “Do you have an earache?”

“No, knucklehead, I mean the music *inside*.” She threw up her hands as though she could catch the notes that she had always heard on the wind, as though they were floating through the air just beyond her hearing. “I can’t hear the next part of the melody. I had it all in my head so clearly, and now...”

She ran her finger down the keys, a frustrated glissando, ending in a gloomy chaos of bass notes.

Malcolm glanced at the blank sheet of paper, and at its crumpled, torn brethren filling the wastepaper basket beside it.

“I take it your clandestine rendezvous with Whitby didn’t go as you hoped.”

Isobel felt the blush ripen in her cheeks, but she made an attempt at hiding it anyway. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He gave her a knowing look. “Of course you don’t. Well, he was not present at the breakfast table this morning, either. Nor was Lord Bell, to Miss Georgiana’s apparent dismay. And our hostess, Whitby’s esteemed mother, seems to have taken to her bed, in the full expectation that she will never get up again. Though from what I know of the dear lady, news of a fresh suitor or two for her daughters will likely restore her from death’s door. In short, Isobel, you seem to have made all the trouble you can here. Time to move on and overturn another family’s summer.”

A shrill tin whistle played vibrato in her stomach. “I can’t possibly leave –”

“Dear child, you can and you must. It’s quite clear to me that Lady Ursula, much as I adore her, has no hope at all of keeping you out of trouble. And while I don’t know the ins and outs of whatever tragedy has befallen the Whitbys, I can see that the last thing they want is a mischievous houseguest stirring the pot. Your things are being packed as we speak. Lady Ursula is taking care of that much, at least.”

“Malcolm, you don’t understand! I can’t. Not without...”

Not without fixing things with Lucius. Unpicking the mess she’d made.

But matters with Lucius were already settled, weren’t they? He’d said his goodbye. He’d kissed her one last time. He’d made things perfectly clear.

But he was *wrong*. Isobel knew it in her bones. Her heartbeat had pounded the truth through her chest all night, keeping her from sleep: *He’s wrong. He’s wrong. This is all wrong.*

She knew she could find a way through it all. Some stroke of inspiration that could reconcile his family’s needs with his own desires. His own love.

And he might not have told her he loved her – not quite – but the words didn’t matter in the end. Isobel knew that, too, more than bone deep. The truth of it sang in her heart. So loudly that she was deaf to everything else.

Malcolm's eyes were so full of sympathy that she had to fight off the urge to scream.

"Where will you take me?" she asked. "Not to Alex – please. He'll never understand."

"Don't be silly. I'm bringing you and Lady Ursula home with me. I haven't the faintest clue what to do with you – which is a pretty good indication that you need Selina."

He spoke Selina's name with such reverence, such simple adoration, that Isobel was tempted by the thought, just for a moment.

Selina had always meant *home* to her, too. The safe, comfortable home of childhood dreams and childish sorrows. And in some ways, she craved a return to it. To leave Whitby Manor behind – to forget scheming lords and ruined gentlemen – to cry into her sister's embrace and have her forehead stroked and be nursed back to happiness. Or at least the semblance of it.

To be the little sister again. The quiet one. The wallflower. After Lucius had made her feel like a roaring lion.

He'd shown her the truth of her own power, and she couldn't give it up now. There would be no quiet convalescence in Malcolm and Selina's country pile. Isobel was not a wallflower anymore; she was a trickster, a composer, a woman in love. She could no more run home to Selina than she could sprout wings and fly off into the summer sky.

But there was no use telling that to Malcolm.

"I'll go and help Aunt Ursula manage the packing," she said, rising from the piano. "Or perhaps I should say, rescue the maids from Aunt Ursula." She gave Malcolm just the sort of bright, mischievous smile that would convince him she'd given up all thought of arguing and took her leave.



"AH, THERE YOU ARE, MY GIRL," said Ursula, and turned back to shake her stick at the hapless Peggy. "*Not like that!* That's

Chantilly lace, you silly creature! Use the tissue paper!”

“Auntie,” said Isobel softly, taking up the packing paper and passing it to the maid, “there is no need for all this fuss.”

“There certainly is, if we want to preserve the lace,” Ursula sniffed.

“It will be safe enough hanging in the wardrobe. I am not leaving Whitby Manor.”

Ursula peered at her for a moment, then grinned wide enough to show her missing tooth. “That’s my girl. What shall we tell our dear boy Caversham? He’s putting on a great show as your stern older brother, but a little nudge here and there and we’ll steer him how we like.”

“Tell him nothing. Not yet.” Isobel hoped it sounded as though she had a mysterious plan for sorting everything out. The reality was that she had no idea what to tell Malcolm, because she had no idea what she could possibly do next, beyond the vague notion that if she could only track Lucius down, inform him that their engagement was *not* off, and let him kiss her until her knees trembled and her body caught alight and her heart chimed like a bell, it would all come right.

But Ursula was no fool. She gave Isobel a hearty laugh. “Come now. It’s not like you to have a head empty of ideas. Let me handle the pretty young duke. I’ve always had a way with his sort. *You* had better get moving if you want to make your rendezvous.”

“My what?”

Ursula tapped a wizened finger against the side of her nose. “Another note came for you this morning.” Behind her, Peggy dropped the nightgown she was folding, blushing scarlet. “And I’m only telling you what was in it because I’m sick and tired of all this play-acting and intrigue. Your mysterious letter-writer wants you to meet him – yes, my dear, I’m now quite aware that it’s a *him* – in the rose garden at noon. You’d better hurry if you want to get there in time. And while the two of you are straightening everything out, do make

sure you mention Mr Babbage. That isn't the sort of thing a gentleman likes to be surprised with on his wedding night."

Isobel gave a guilty start. Aunt Ursula had always been her co-conspirator. Happy enough to encourage her endeavours – pleased enough to celebrate her income – but always clear as crystal that Isobel should never, under any circumstances, reveal Babbage's true identity. She would never imagine that Isobel had been so foolish as to offer her secret up to Lucius without the security of an engagement.

And for good reason. A duke's sister, publishing music? Trying to make her name as a composer? It simply wasn't done. At best, Isobel would be ridiculed. At worst, she and her family would lose a great deal of social standing. What need did the Duke of Loxwell's sister have to gather pennies from publishing music? People would talk. And in the *ton*, certain kinds of talk were near-fatal. Society loved a scandal – as long as it was kept at a safe distance.

Isobel froze.

Society *did* love a scandal. Society scoured the gossip columns, bought prints of saucy caricatures, passed forbidden novels from one gloved hand to another.

Society loved a scandal and paid for it as handsomely as for every other pleasure.

The idea sang like a struck harp string in her mind. "You think the danger of being found out is no longer so great?" She was speaking as much to herself as to Ursula. "My sisters are married. My brother is well-established among his peers... My own little scandal wouldn't harm them, would it?"

Ursula laughed heartily. "You don't need to worry about that, my dear! Not when a fellow is as hopelessly in love with you as young Whitby. Even if it doesn't end with a ring on your finger, he'll never expose you. Now *hurry*, Isobel! It's very nearly a quarter to one. Even the most lovelorn fellow won't wait forever."

All of a sudden, Isobel felt like a bottle of champagne that had been shaken until it was liable to explode. She was filled

with bubbling, fizzing excitement. It had as much in common with nausea as with joy.

She blew her aunt a kiss and tried – failed – to keep her feet from running as she sped through Whitby Manor towards the rose garden.

Lucius would never expose her. She had never doubted that.

She'd have to do it herself.



HE WAS STILL THERE. Standing with an arm tucked behind his back, gazing out at the idyllic pastoral vista before him. In his other hand – the one pressed anxiously to his heart – he held a small box which contained a ring.

Lucius knew all this thanks to the breathless report of his youngest sister. All the disappointment of Lord Bell's disappearance was quite forgotten as Georgiana stood at the window, hands clasped together, gazing down in rapture at Lord Randall, who was waiting in the rose garden for Isobel.

It was more than Lucius could do to pretend that he was not in agonies of suspense himself.

He paced up and down the room like an angry bear, responding to each of Georgiana's updates with a grunt that gave no indication as to his true feelings, but did at least serve to let off some of the steam building within him. Thereby reducing the chances of his pent-up rage exploding out in a volcanic eruption.

"The ring is an heirloom, I believe," said Georgiana, flattening her nose against the glass in her eagerness to watch. "It was left him by his grandmother."

Lucius grunted. The fist around his heart squeezed so tight that he could not have spoken comprehensible words if he tried.

“I did have hopes of Randall myself,” Georgiana admitted, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, “but I see now that we are quite ill-suited. It seems everything is working out for the best. Oh! Here comes Isobel into the garden now.”

“Georgiana, if I desired a blow-by-blow account of somebody else’s business, I would read the scandal sheets,” said Evie tartly, glancing up from her horizontal position on the chaise. “I’m sure that Lucius does not wish to hear another word.”

“Well, since Lucius does not wish to marry her, I do not see why Randall may not take his chance.” Georgiana turned back to shoot Lucius a sympathetic glance, the tip of her nose bright pink from where it had rubbed against the windowpane. “Poor dear. Do you regret breaking it off?”

Lucius grunted, found it failed to convey the depth of his feelings, and managed to follow it up with a growl. Georgiana gave a little jump of surprise but was swiftly diverted again by the goings-on in the rose garden.

“He is doing it! He is really asking her. He is down on one knee – Lucius, did you get down on one knee when *you* proposed to Isobel? I have always thought of that as the correct way to do it. Perhaps, if you did not bother, it is all for the best that you called things off. Though I admit I would have dearly loved to call Isobel my sister. Oh! Look! You will never guess what – he’s taking her hand – kissing it –”

“Georgiana, that is quite enough.” Evie leapt up and dragged the curtain across the window so violently that it threatened to rip from its hangings.

“But I had not finished watching! I’m sure they were just reaching the most interesting point!”

“A proposal is a private matter, and both Isobel and Randall would be absolutely mortified if they knew their business was being shouted about the house as though you were a town crier and they an attraction at a travelling fair. Go and find yourself something useful to do. You will hear every detail which Isobel wishes to share from her own mouth when everything is concluded.”

“It is not at all fair!” cried Georgiana. “I have never once received a proposal, and this is Isobel’s second in as many days.” She gave Lucius a meaningful glare. “Even if the first was not made in the proper fashion.” Her protests continued as Evie bundled her out of the door. “I know I am right! If he had proposed properly, he would not have taken it back the very same evening!”

Evie closed the door on Georgiana’s defiant glare and turned back to face Lucius. “Georgie does have a point,” she said, fixing Lucius with a suspicious look. “But I will not press you on it. I am hardly one to talk about what does and does not constitute a valid proposal of marriage.”

Grunting and groaning would no longer suffice. Lucius took a step towards the curtains, knowing that if he swept them aside to see Isobel doing anything other than pushing Lord Randall into the fishpond, the volcano within him would erupt and Randall’s all-too-handsome face would be the first casualty.

If only it were as simple as punching a rival into submission! Physical violence, though it had never been Lucius’s preferred method of dealing with problems, was at least quick and effective. He’d have given anything to simply knock Randall to the ground and carry Isobel away in his arms.

But, since he could not, there was nothing to say that he had to remain at Whitby Manor and watch Isobel announce her engagement to the man she’d really wanted all along.

Lucius forced himself away from the window and took up a pen, scribbling a quick note and scattering blotting sand so hastily that a great deal was wasted by falling to the floor. A loss of roughly a farthing, he calculated. It might well be the last such frivolous expenditure he made in a while.

The ink dry, he folded the paper in half and handed it to Evie. “Give this to her, if she asks,” he said.

Evie took the note, frowning. “Whatever it is, would it not be better to tell her yourself?”

Lucius risked a glance back at the curtains, their heavy fabric forming long dark shadows against the bright sunlight outdoors.

He imagined the scene that lay just beyond them. No false proposal, this. Isobel deserved exactly what Georgiana dreamed for her. An honest gentleman down on one knee, hiding no dark secrets, an heirloom ring in his hand, a fortune at his disposal.

Lucius could not offer her that. So, again, Georgiana was right. It was better to let her go.

“If anyone asks for me, I have gone out riding. And I intend to make it a very long ride.”

Evie held his gaze for a long moment. Then she gave a nod. “I’ll cover for you. For as long as I can.”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “Evie, do you still feel the same way about Lord Henry? There are no circumstances under which you might marry him?”

She dropped her gaze, surprised into revealing a hurt he knew she’d been at pains to conceal. She tried to back away, but he held her tightly.

“No,” she said, reluctantly meeting his eyes again. “No! It’s out of the question.”

“Even if the alternative was terrible? Even if it meant certain ruin?”

“What sort of question is that?” She scanned his face, alarmed. “Who have you been talking to?”

He said nothing. He knew that, if he waited long enough, she would answer.

Evie sighed. “There’s a difference between being ruined and being unhappy. No. I’ll never marry him.”

“Then burn his letters.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Burn them. Don’t be sentimental. Do it today.”

“Lucius...” She didn’t bother asking which letters he meant or pretending there was nothing worth burning. She

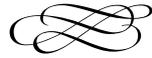
caught at his sleeve, clinging to him like the little girl he still had to remind himself she no longer was.

The baby sister he'd tried so hard to protect.

“Are you coming back?” Evie asked. She did not need to be told that wherever Lucius was going, he had no desire to be followed or found. “When will I see you again?”

“On the other side of ruin.” He gave her a grim smile, pulled his sleeve from her grasp, and left without a backward glance.

CHAPTER 21



Isobel's feet overtook her the moment she saw the silhouette of a gentleman outlined against the sky at the end of the rose garden. She ran the last few steps to him, her heart pounding far faster than that brief burst of exercise warranted, her hand already outstretched to tap him on the shoulder. The happy surprise on Lucius's face was so clear in her imagination that for a moment she did not understand she had not seen it in reality.

"You came," Randall breathed, and seized her hand, and dropped down on one knee.

Isobel blinked, the image of Lucius still uppermost in her mind. "Lord Randall? I'm sorry – I was not expecting – that is, I did not mean –"

"Hush, my darling girl, my sweet Isobel!" To her alarm, he clutched her hand violently to his chest, pressing it against his heart. "I, too, am sorry. A great deal sorrier than you, because I have more to apologise for. But that is all behind us. Let us think only of the future now."

Isobel tried to tug her hand away, but Randall misinterpreted the gesture and responded by pressing it fervently to his lips. Isobel wished she had waited long enough to put on her gloves again after the morning's failed efforts at composition. It was safe to say that Randall's kiss was not at all how she had once imagined it.

Her imagination, for example, had included rather less spittle and heavy breathing.

“Dearest, kindest, sweetest lady,” Randall began, his eyes glazed over with either ardour or – Isobel suspected – a fortifying shot or three of brandy.

Oh dear. It seemed he had rehearsed a speech.

“My lord, please,” said Isobel, yanking her hand away with a great deal more force than she would have liked to use. “Get up from there. I’m afraid there has been a misunderstanding –”

Randall smiled beatifically. “Ah, Isobel. You have always had such a generous heart! But please, do not spare my feelings. It was no misunderstanding – it was my own cursed pride! When I think of the time that I wasted by failing to notice you in Brighton –”

Isobel had been about to give him the gentlest but firmest brush-off she could manage under the circumstances. But this could not be allowed to pass unnoticed. “Excuse me. Would you mind repeating that?”

“Pride! Yes, undeserving pride which the past few days has happily taught me to forget. I know that a sweet and innocent soul such as yours can have no conception –”

“Not that part. What did you mean about our time in Brighton?”

Randall let out a violent groan and flung a hand to his forehead in despair. “I was a fool in Brighton, Isobel! I had eyes only for the bright, spirited, exciting sorts of girl who flit by twice or thrice a day like so many summer butterflies. If only I had raised my eyes to the wallflower behind those fleeting attractions...! How I regret it all now! I was a shallow creature. But the moment that I saw you at Whitby’s side on that glorious walk through the woodland, I felt as though I saw you for the very first time.”

“But it was not the first time,” Isobel interrupted. Randall responded with a frown. The conversation was clearly not going the way he had planned. “The first time we saw each other was on Brighton Pier. You must recall it. I was wearing my green sprigged muslin and walking with my sisters Edith

and Selina. It was a miserable day for a walk – it had begun to rain, in fact, and you were kind enough to lend us your carriage to take us back to our accommodation.”

“Was I, indeed?” Randall shook his head, smiling. “What a marvellous memory you have! I had no idea. But I shall simply add it to my ever-increasing list of your admirable qualities.”

Isobel folded her arms and stared down at the rather pathetic smile on Randall’s upturned face. A horrible suspicion was dawning on her. “What about our second meeting?” she demanded. “The day we both happened to call in on Lady Elspeth at the same time. Surely you remember that?”

Randall’s mouth worked around a few soundless words before he managed to decide on a response. “I’m afraid not, my darling. But if the date is significant to you, I shall endeavour to recall it...”

“And the day you heard me play at Mrs Smith’s? The day you told me that even an angel could not have produced a more glorious sound?”

“And I’m sure I was right to say so, sweeting, but the exact occasion of which you speak...”

“The picnic on the beach? The walk along the cliff tops, when you gave me a bracelet you had made from a daisy chain?”

“Yes!” He exclaimed. “Yes – how could I forget that day? You went running on ahead, slipped on a stone, and came up wailing. But when we reached you, the damage that caused you such distress was only a great green grass stain over your favourite parasol. My word, how we all laughed!” He let out a chuckle of merriment. Isobel did not.

“That was Edith,” she said coldly. “Edith was the one who ruined her parasol. I was walking with you at the time, holding your arm.”

“Edith?”

“My sister. Really, my lord, I have just mentioned her.”

“Forgive me, dear sweet Isobel. I confess I am a little nervous...”

“My word, what a fool I’ve been,” Isobel murmured. Then, suddenly, she could not contain herself any longer. Her shoulders began to shake. Her breath quickened. She pressed her fingers to her lips, but there was no help for it.

She burst out into peals of laughter.

Randall got halfway to his feet, hesitated, and dropped back onto his knee again. “Should I... Should I continue?”

“I’m terribly sorry, my lord,” said Isobel, through helpless bursts of merriment. “It’s just that it’s all so ridiculous.” She dabbed at her eyes. “Please get up. I can’t bear to see you kneeling there. It only makes the whole thing more dreadfully amusing. Oh, heavens! Do you know, I even kept the daisy chain! I pressed it between the pages of my copy of Beethoven’s Fifth and then I slept with it beneath my pillow. For months.”

“That is terribly touching,” said Randall, eyeing her up as though she were a powder keg into which he had inadvertently stumbled while smoking a cigar. “Do you have it still?”

“I tore it up,” said Isobel, trying but failing to control a flurry of giggles at the memory. “I tore it up and scattered it ritually in the vegetable plot at my brother’s country house. By the light of a crescent moon. Because it was a crescent moon the night we first danced together. Not that you’ll recall that, either.”

Randall reached for her hand. “But it means more to me than you could possibly know, my angel –” She moved her hand out of his reach. Blinking, he grasped for her again. “Dear one – sweet lady – Isobel, please! How am I to place a ring upon your finger if you will not let me take your hand?”

“You are not to place a ring on my finger at all,” said Isobel, placing both hands firmly behind her back. “Lord Randall, I am terribly sorry, and all this is terribly flattering, and as you have probably guessed, there was a time when this very moment was all that I dreamed of, but –”

“It is a very nice ring,” said Randall petulantly. “You haven’t even seen it!” He held out the box he had been clutching. “It belonged to my grandmother.”

Isobel placed her hand gently on the box and pushed it back toward him, unopened. “I am sure that it is lovely. And you must keep it for somebody else. I am not worthy of it, my lord. And, without meaning any offence, you are not worthy of me. Despite great strength of feeling and an enormous expenditure of emotion, it seems that you and I have failed to understand each other at every step. Do you know, I was so infatuated with you in Brighton that I truly thought you were going to propose?”

“My poor Isobel!” Randall’s eyes shone with sympathy. “If only I had known! If only I had noticed you.”

“But you didn’t,” said Isobel. “In fact, it was not until I attracted the attention of another gentleman that you realised I existed at all. And that simply won’t do. You must not go about proposing to women whose existence you did not even notice by yourself.”

“I had a great deal to say on that very subject,” said Randall, looking rather put out. “The second part of the speech I have prepared for you addresses that very failing in my character – ”

“Your character is perfectly fine the way it is,” said Isobel. “With the proviso that you could stand to be a little less flirtatious, so as not to arouse false hope in any other silly girls. And *I* am perfectly fine the way I am. I should never have imagined I needed to change myself or play a part in order to secure somebody’s love. Don’t you see, we have both been going about this entirely the wrong way?”

“What does it matter how it all began?” Randall demanded, that feverish glow returning to his cheeks. “It is our feelings *now* which count! Isobel, my Isobel, I understand now why you wish to make me suffer a little, but I cannot bear it any longer. Why on earth did you break things off with Whitby if not because you were in love with me?”

Isobel knew it would be unkind to say what she was really thinking. So she took a deep breath to persuade herself not to point out to Randall that there were, in fact, a great number of reasons why somebody might end an engagement, and none of them had anything to do with *him*. He was not the sun about which her world revolved.

What she actually said was this:

“You have been misinformed, my lord. I have every intention of marrying Lucius. There are just a few small details I have to iron out first.”

“Details?” The feverish red spread from Randall’s cheeks to his ears, his nose, and from there to the rest of his face. This was not the flush of a man in the throes of a violent love. Isobel guessed it was rather something in between embarrassment and anger. “Details such as the fact that your engagement ended the very day on which it began? *Details* such as the fact that Mr Horace Whitby was heard announcing this morning that if his eldest son was fool enough to do the honourable thing and marry you, he’d march down to the church himself to put a stop to it?”

“That, and a few other little matters.” Such as revealing her identity as the true composer behind the reasonably well-esteemed name of Isidore Babbage. Such as wallowing in the ensuing scandal and raking in the money that came with it. Society would pay handsomely to hear her music. She’d make sure of it, by charging a premium for ringside seats to the demise of her good name.

It might well not be enough to cover all the Whitby family’s debts. But it was the only means of making an income which Isobel had. And she had to try.

She gave Randall a friendly pat on the shoulder. “I hope you’ll take this in the spirit it’s intended, my lord. But when you fall in love with someone – truly in love – you’ll see that all these little obstacles no longer mean anything.” He looked disappointed, but not, she thought, *too* disappointed. He’d recover in time. After all, the girl with whom he thought he’d been in love did not exist.

“Is that it?” Randall looked down at the unopened ring box in his hand. “You really still mean to marry him? You will not even consider me?”

“It would be a disservice to us both. But I do want to thank you, Lord Randall. You will always mean a great deal to me. It was my silly infatuation with you in Brighton which ultimately led me to Lucius. And I know that you will understand my decision one day, when you finally win the heart of somebody you notice for the right reasons.”

Randall shoved the ring box into his pocket. “To the devil with both of you,” he said sourly. “I wish you both all the happiness you deserve. And not one bit more!”

He turned on his heel and stormed off, kicking at a rosebush on his way and sending a flurry of petals to the ground.

Isobel must truly have undergone a great transformation of character, for she did not feel at all smug or satisfied as she watched him stomp away.

Not one bit. Really.

Well... Perhaps just the faintest smidgen of satisfaction. She was only human, after all.

Back in the manor house, Isobel was swiftly accosted by the three Misses Whitby. Georgiana wished to know every last detail of Randall’s proposal – though she seemed aware of a great many details already. Cassandra desired to understand what on earth kind of tomfoolery Isobel had put Lucius up to now, and would she please accompany Cassie to wherever he might be hiding so that Cassie might knock both their heads together until they came to their senses.

Evie, thankfully, wanted nothing from Isobel at all. Instead, she handed her a note written on a folded piece of paper.

“I told him I’d only give it to you if you asked for an explanation,” she said quietly. “But, on reflection, I think you had better have it now.”

The note seemed to burn cold in Isobel's fingers before she had even opened it. A dreadful premonition of what lay within.

Isobel,

Forgive my writing. After all that has transpired between us, it is the greatest impertinence, I know.

I do not know whether you will accept Randall or not. But, since either option would only cause me unutterable pain, I see no point in staying to find out.

I have a duty to perform. One that can no longer be put off. I will not return until it is done.

I know that I can rely on your discretion when it comes to the matter we discussed last night. Regarding everything else which passed between us, please do not feel under any obligation towards me. We have made each other no promises. For whatever freedom is worth, we are each of us free.

I shall always remember this summer – the taste of Spanish oranges – the sound of harp music.

He had left it unsigned.

Isobel pressed the letter to her heart, flattening the words against her breast. Her eyes met Evie's. "Have you read this?"

"I thought I'd better not," said Evie. "Though I can guess well enough what it says."

Isobel closed her eyes. Took in a long, deep breath. Thought of Lucius.

He was the deep, rich, mournful tones of the clarinet. The gentle sweep of strings. A piano's keys sprinkling above, like summer sunlight reflecting from water, like the fragrant mist of oil that rose from fresh orange peel. And a lone cello, rich and reassuring, clever and agile, climbing from resonant bass to a tender tenor in unison with the soaring emotion in Isobel's heart.

The music was back. All she had to do was think of Lucius, and it was there.

She let out the breath. Opened her eyes. “Evie, would you please send my regrets to your mother? I know she is unwell, but I must leave at once.” She folded up the note again and tucked it into her bodice. “There is a great deal of work to do. And I have very little time.”

CHAPTER 22



In all his travels, Lucius had never encountered a more miserable place than London outside the Season. When it came to absolute misery, even the rather uncomfortable comfort stop in the middle of the Flemish countryside or the particularly arduous coach journey across the Bavarian Alps could not hold a candle to it.

The heat which had been welcome in the countryside had stewed into a thick, smoky miasma in the city; a Turkish steam bath flavoured with fish markets and rotting refuse. There was no company to speak of. Everyone of quality – and everyone who liked to pretend to be of quality – had long fled to the peaceful comforts of their summer homes.

In a peculiar way, it was exactly what Lucius needed. Even if he'd had the inclination to seek out company, the state of his pocketbook could not support it. His father's beholden fifty thousand pounds were not so much burning a hole in it as unleashing a wildfire. Lucius had spent days traversing the length of London to sweet-talk their creditors, and now, slumped in an armchair before the unlit fireplace in his once-comfortable townhouse, he was faced with the fact that all his efforts could only suppress the flames for a few more weeks. Doom was still coming for the Whitbys, and there wasn't a soul in London or out of it that he could trust with the truth.

No, that was not quite true, was it? Such a soul did exist. Had already been entrusted with his deepest fears. And had been promptly abandoned in Whitby Manor, either to mourn

him or marry another – or both. Lucius had no power to change the course of her history either way.

Isobel deserved so much more than he could give her.

He'd managed to forgive his father for all the rest – barely – but the loss of Isobel was a wholly new kind of agony. And Lucius suspected it would have something in common with a punch to the face. The initial pain was really more of a numbness – a shock to the system.

The true hurt would only reveal itself with time.

Lucius peeled off a glove with his teeth and began for the thousandth time to sift through the sheaf of papers on the desk beside him. Some were ancient, some brand new. Many were yellowed and stained by their voyage from one end of Europe to the other. But the work itself was sound. The diagrams were clear, the record of specimen-gathering exact.

And as for the fruit of his labours...

Three round oranges, plucked from the hothouse at Whitby Manor, sat plump and ripe and full of juicy promise atop an empty drinks tray. Lucius's mouth watered at the sight of them.

Not because his stomach was empty – though it was.

These oranges – and the small, square, velvet-lined box beside them – represented something far more important than a full belly.

He picked up the ring box and cupped it reverently in his hand, tempted to crack it open. Just to make sure. Just once more.

He set it aside. No time for sentiment now. He had one final call to pay. The one upon which all the rest depended.

Lucius stood and surveyed his appearance in the mirror above the cold fireplace. A scruffy, unhappy, ill-shaven fellow looked back at him, every bit as pathetic on the outside as Lucius felt within. His clothes, dusty and bedraggled from a long day traipsing the London streets, let off an unsavoury aroma every time he moved.

He tugged off his cravat, forcing his leaden limbs to move through the fog of exhaustion. On the mantelpiece, before the unlit fire, he had carefully hung a suit. It was a little creased from the journey, but at least it was fresh and clean.

Every one of the servants had been dismissed the moment he arrived, sent off with thanks and pay till the end of the month. The house, so full of happy, raucous memories from that winter and every winter before, was utterly empty, furniture covered in dust sheets, every room dark and cold. The first prospective tenants were expected on the morrow. If any of the Whitby ladies required a further London Season to make a match, they would have to rely on the hospitality of their friends... should any friends still remain.

Lucius shrugged off his frock coat, leaving it crumpled on the floor, and went to the wash basin. At least the summer heat penetrated the townhouse. The water was tepid, unrefreshing, a far cry from the steaming bath Clarkson would have had waiting for him at home. But it was clean, and Lucius was not. He unbuttoned his shirt.

Somebody knocked at the front door.

Lucius hesitated a moment, glanced again at his unsavoury appearance in the mirror, and resumed undressing. He was in no fit state for company. And there was not a single person on earth to whom he wished to speak.

The knocking persisted as Lucius dipped his hands into the water and splashed the dirt of the day from his face. His efforts succeeded in making matters significantly worse. Little muddy rivulets tracked down his chest.

How much water would it take to wash away all the muck he'd accumulated over the course of his life? To scrub out the stain of extravagant living on borrowed money? To rinse away the last traces of his former life?

And he knew that no matter how hard he tried, there was one mark on his innermost soul that would never be removed. He did not even wish to try it.

His heart had been dyed the colour of Isobel. Deep, rich, lasting ink that would remain no matter what tawdry browns or dreary pauper's greys were layered on top of it.

The knocking intensified. Whoever was at the door had no respect at all for Lucius's miserable solitude.

Damn their eyes. Couldn't a man nurse his wounds in peace?

Just as Lucius was making up his mind to march, shirtless and dripping, to the front door and give the insistent caller a piece of his mind, the knocking stopped.

It was replaced by the sound of shattering glass.

Lucius's blood went cold. His eyes went immediately to his three plump oranges.

"Devil take it," he whispered. He could ill afford to let anything in the house be stolen. Not when he'd spent the antisocial hours of the previous morning writing up an inventory and pricing out each item of furniture.

And the oranges must be protected at all costs.

He thrust the ring box into his pocket, seized a poker from the fireplace and crept past the shut-up rooms and sheet-covered furniture to the hall.

The bright stained-glass window at the side of the front door had been broken. Carefully, exactly broken, in one particular panel. The rest was untouched.

Two eyes peered through the resulting gap. Two *familiar* eyes. At the sight of Lucius, half undressed and clutching the poker in the dusky darkness of the hallway, they grew wide with terror.

"Mr Whitby!"

Lucius froze, not sure whether to believe the evidence of his eyes and ears. His hand moved of its own accord, lifting the poker into a defensive position.

"Oh, Mr Whitby," tutted his valet. "This will never do. I did warn you that your whiskers grow at an alarming rate. And

I *wish* you had taken my advice on the best clothes to choose for a long journey.”

“Clarkson?” Lucius’s voice was a hoarse whisper. He stopped, collected himself, coughed, and tried again. “Clarkson! What the devil are you doing here?”

“I apologise most sincerely, Mr Whitby. I did try to let myself in at the servant’s entrance, but I found everything locked and barred. Then, when my knocking went unanswered, I’m afraid I had to resort to vandalism. I will make no objection at all to the window’s repair coming out of my wages. Would you be so gracious as to let me in?”

Lucius unbolted the door and flung it open. Clarkson pushed his spectacles up his nose and beamed up at him. Despite the arduous journey from Whitby Manor to London, he looked as crisp and fresh as always. A rather large suitcase was sitting beside him.

“I didn’t mean, what are you doing here at the front door,” said Lucius, still struggling to make sense of the sight before him. “I meant to ask, what on earth you are doing in London? I had absolutely no intention of your following me. Did you not receive my letter of dismissal?”

“I certainly did, sir, and while I am extremely grateful for your offer of a reference and your advice to seek new employment at once, I could not consider my duties discharged until I had assisted you in choosing an adequate replacement.” Clarkson looked Lucius up and down and wrinkled his nose. “I’m afraid that whichever gentleman has been assisting you of late is clearly not at all up to the task.”

“I’ve been managing perfectly well on my own, Clarkson.” Lucius crossed his arms, blocking Clarkson’s way inside. “Your services are no longer required.”

Clarkson sighed. “It’s exactly as I feared, then. Mr Whitby, I entreat you to permit me entrance and allow me to perform my usual duties. The consequences of your refusal, I am afraid, will be rather significant.”

“Don’t you understand, man? You been dismissed. It’s not a question of professional pride – or indeed, professional anything. I’ve no money to pay you with.”

Clarkson nodded. “I surmised as much, sir, when I heard from my cousin who was a footman here that every last servant had been sent away. I shall not distress you at this juncture with a report of your father’s reaction. I must ask you one last time, however, to please let me inside. You are in no fit state to receive company at present.”

“Clarkson, what on earth gives you the impression that I’m expecting company?”

Clarkson winced. “Once again, Mr Whitby, I must beg your forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness for what?”

By way of answer, the little valet stepped aside. Lucius registered for the first time that there was a carriage standing at the townhouse gate.

A carriage bearing the crest of the Duke of Loxwell.

A lady’s white-gloved hand pushed open the carriage window. “We are quite sick and tired of waiting, Mr Whitby! For heaven’s sake, put on a shirt so that we can come inside without averting our eyes.”

Lucius locked eyes with Clarkson, who, despite his numerous requests for forgiveness, did not in fact look at all sorry.

“You can forget that reference,” he snapped, slamming the door shut in Clarkson’s face.

“Quite understandable, sir.” Clarkson had stuck his cane through the door at last minute, wedging it open. After a moment’s wrestling, his hand emerged through the gap bearing a soft, white, rose-scented towel. “Do make haste, Mr Whitby. The ladies are now approaching the front steps.”

Lucius growled in frustration but took the towel anyway and stalked off down the corridor, trying not to appreciate the freshly laundered softness as he scrubbed it over his face. He

seized the clean shirt from the mantelpiece and dragged it over his head.

Out in the hallway, he heard Clarkson apologising to the guests – it sounded like quite a number of them – for the darkness of the entrance and the unprepared state of the house, asking if they would please allow him to take their coats and hats, and assuring them he would soon be able to rustle up some refreshment.

Lucius threw the towel over the back of the chair and made his way to the bookshelf on the other side of the room, stepping over the jacket crumpled on the floor as he did so. He scanned the bookshelves until he saw a weathered, leather-bound copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. He gave it a tug, and a hidden panel on the wall beside the bookshelf slid open.

“If you would please follow me into the library,” Clarkson was saying. “I shall get the candles lit in a matter of moments, and then we can see about uncovering the furniture.”

Lucius glanced back at the jacket on the floor. Cursing himself, he darted back to pick it up, brush it off, and hang it over the back of a chair. That done, he slipped into the hidden passageway and shut the door behind him.

In the cool, secret darkness, he took a moment to breathe and steady his pulse.

He knew exactly what Isobel’s brother wanted to do to him. It presumably bore no small resemblance to the violent retribution Lucius wished to wreak on Lord Bell. With some additional bruising necessary, no doubt, for the indignity of subjecting Isobel to an engagement and a broken betrothal on the same day.

He let his head knock forwards against the stone wall. Loxwell would be absolutely within his rights to beat Lucius to a pulp. And part of Lucius would even welcome it. No fist or steel-toed boot would ever match the degree of pain he’d already inflicted upon himself.

But until he had made his final call that evening, he could not risk a black eye and a burst lip. So the Balfour family’s

vengeance would have to wait.

As the sound of voices entered the room from which Lucius had just escaped, he crept down the hidden passageway. A left turn and then a right brought him swiftly to the exit that led into a discreet alcove on the other side of the house.

Lucius swung open the hidden door with a sigh of relief that was abruptly cut short when Malcolm Locke, Duke of Caversham, laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Hello, Whitby,” he said, with a smile that promised dreadful things. “Good to see you again.”

He turned Lucius around and marched him forcibly back down the hidden passageway. They were joined partway by George Bonneville, the Earl of Streatham, coming from the direction of the library with his hands in his pockets and an infuriating grin just visible in the dim light filtering through the cracks in the passageway walls. “Ah, Whitby! I see you’ve bumped into Caversham already. Shall we go ahead and join the others?”

Lucius wrested his shoulder from Caversham’s grip. “What the devil do the lot of you mean by breaking into my house like this?” he demanded. “I ought to call the Bow Street Runners and have you all turfed out onto the street!”

“Drag us off in chains if you like, Whitby, but first, we need a word with you.” Caversham’s eyes were hard and glittering.

“I’ve no intention of discussing my private business with either of you,” protested Lucius, setting his back to the wall as the two men advanced on him. “If Loxwell wishes to black my eyes, fair enough, but ganging up on me like this isn’t fair!”

“Oh, no, I’m afraid it’s much worse than that,” smirked Streatham. He took Lucius by one arm and Caversham took him by the other, and together they marched him firmly back the way he had come. “It’s the Balfour ladies you have to face up to now.”

They had reached the exit to the library. Mustering what little remained of his dignity, Lucius shook off their guiding hands and opened the hidden door himself, trying to look as though he had not just made a failed attempt at running away.

Streatham was right about one thing. While the Duke of Loxwell's grim expression was certainly alarming, it was nothing to the chilling glare of Isobel's sisters.

"Good evening," said Lucius. "Do forgive the state of the place – and the state of myself. As you can see, I was not expecting company."

Selina, Isobel's eldest sister, rose from her chair and prudently closed the passageway door behind him. "There's no need to stand on ceremony, Mr Whitby. I hope we are all friends here."

She really did make the perfect match for Caversham. They both had the knack of imparting the chill of absolute power and dread using nothing but a well-turned phrase and a smile.

Anthea, Streatham's countess, gave a disapproving sniff. "Speak for yourself, Selina. I intend to reserve judgement until I hear what Mr Whitby has to say for himself."

They turned to their brother, the duke. He ran a disturbingly perceptive eye over Lucius, taking in every detail from Lucius's unshaven chin to his half-undone shirt. There was no conceivable way that Lucius looked like the sort of man a duke might consider worthy of his sister.

But Loxwell merely sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I hardly dare ask how you two knew where to find him."

"Oh, this funny little hidey-hole was a great deal of fun when we were lads," said Caversham smoothly. "I'm amazed I remembered where it goes. Haven't been there since our Cambridge days. Have you, Streatham?"

"No," said Streatham, the picture of innocence. "Not at all."

“Really, Alex,” said Selina. “I can’t imagine where you got the idea that two respectable peers of the realm would spend their time engaging in nefarious business inside secret passages.” She took Caversham’s arm, and they shared a glance that suggested Caversham didn’t have a leg to stand on when it came to lecturing Lucius about intrigues with Balfour women.

Loxwell looked infinitely weary. But before he could say anything more, his bright-eyed little duchess took pity on Lucius at last.

“Poor Mr Whitby! I can see that we have caught you quite off guard. Do sit down. I sent your man to the kitchens to see if he can find the makings of a nice hot cup of tea.”

It wasn’t quite the thing for an uninvited guest to instruct the host to sit down in his own house, but when a duchess gave you an instruction, you obeyed it. Particularly when that duchess was related to the woman whose name you had just dragged through the muck of your family’s own private disaster.

Lucius sat. Cleared his throat. “I suppose I owe you an explanation,” he said, and stopped.

He had absolutely no idea what Isobel’s siblings knew about what really happened at Whitby Manor. Truth be told, he had no idea what Isobel now made of it all herself. He didn’t even know whether she’d accepted Randall’s proposal. He had studiously avoided even glancing at a newspaper since he left the manor, for fear of finding out.

Could it be that she was pining away for him, gazing hopelessly out of windows and composing sorrowful melodies on the harp? He hated the thought of it – and hated even more the thought that it might not be true.

Fortunately – or not – he was saved from saying more by Selina, who fixed him with a glare so penetrating that it took him a moment to be sure she had not just run him through with a sword.

“Oh, no, Mr Whitby. *We* have something to explain to *you*. All you need to do is keep your mouth closed and listen.”

“But –”

Caversham’s hand landed on his shoulder again, not half as menacing as the flash of his duchess’s eyes.

Lucius closed his mouth. Selina gave a nod of satisfaction.

“Good. It appears that your wits have not entirely deserted you. Believe me, sir, we realise this is unorthodox. But judging by the report my husband brought us, you are no stranger to unorthodox behaviour. Isobel, as you know, lacks the guidance of our dear late parents. So it falls upon us, as her siblings, to express to you the depth of your recent – how can I put this delicately?”

“It is impossible to put it delicately,” said Anthea, a malicious glitter in her eyes.

“Quite true. It falls upon us to impress upon you the depth of your recent clot-brained idiocy.”

Lucius opened his mouth. Selina raised an eyebrow. He closed it again.

Anthea rose to her feet and produced a sheet of paper with a flourish. “Our youngest sister, Edith, is away in Italy and in too delicate a condition to travel. She has sent her own remarks upon your behaviour by way of this letter, which I shall now read to you.” She made a show of running her eyes over the first few lines. “Edith wishes you to know that only the worst sort of scoundrel, a wretched, drooling imbecile, lacking enough matter within his skull to feed a mangy dog, would imagine that he could treat our beloved Isobel in this manner and get away with it.”

Daisy, the Duchess of Loxwell, shook her head sadly. “Dear Edith has such a temper.”

“Even that preening peacock Randall has managed to muster up a proper proposal,” Anthea continued. “But you, Mr Whitby? We are sorry to see that you are the sort of lily-livered coward who cannot even declare himself to the

kindest, sweetest, most loving girl in the world – even when he is absolutely certain of her feelings for him.”

Lucius could no longer bear to sit still. Mindful of Selina’s admonition to remain silent, he leapt out of his chair and began to pace furiously from one end of the room to the other.

Clarkson – that treacherous rascal – entered bearing a tea tray.

“Wonderful!” said Daisy warmly. “If it’s not too much trouble, Clarkson, I wonder if you could hunt down a glass of something stronger for Mr Whitby? I think he’s going to need it.”

“And not only that,” declared Anthea, warming to the theme, “but you had the temerity to imagine that there was the *slightest possibility* of Isobel actually accepting goat-witted Randall. I can only imagine that you contracted some kind of horrendous parasite during your travels on the Continent, and the fevered worm is now eating into your brain.”

“Or so says Edith,” said Selina delicately. “I’m sure we would not all phrase it in those exact words.”

“She turned Randall down?” Lucius’s voice was a hoarse rasp. He was extremely grateful, despite himself, when Clarkson moseyed up with the tumbler of brandy.

“You’re a damned fool if you thought she’d have him,” said Loxwell quietly.

Lucius took a gulp of the brandy and sank back into the chair. “I’d be a damned fool to think she’d have *me*,” he said. “That’s what none of you understand. You couldn’t possibly understand it – Isobel certainly would not have told you. The truth of it is that I will not be able to support her in anything like the manner she deserves.”

“Perhaps your brain really has been eaten by worms,” said Anthea. “Do you truly think that Isobel desires an enormous fortune more than a man she cares for? Isobel, who is happiest sitting out every dance at a ball so that she can chat to our old aunt and listen to the music? Isobel, who wouldn’t notice

whether she were in a palace or a hovel as long as she had her instruments at hand?"

"It's not a question of the size of my fortune," said Lucius. "It is my utter lack of it. And the hopeless task of clearing my father's debts."

That was enough to shock the assembled Balfours into silence. Lucius couldn't look any of them in the eye. His vision narrowed to the three round oranges sitting on the tray.

"I ask for your discretion, knowing I have done nothing to deserve it. Besides, it will all be public knowledge soon enough. I have a scheme which I believe should bring in enough income to get by. My brother has his career in the Navy, and though he must do without an allowance, he is clever enough to fend for himself. My sisters... Well, I will confess to you that the reason I agreed to that foolish deception with Isobel was for love of them. To protect them. To buy them some time. I can buy them precious little else.

"My intention this very evening is to meet with the gentlemen of the Horticultural Society of London and present to them the fruits – literally – of my experimentation with a new style of hothouse. I hope to ask them for a recommendation that will allow me to find myself a place on the staff of the groundskeepers of some great house or another. Perhaps I could offer my services in consultation over the great glasshouse in development at Kew. Should I manage to secure enough investment, there is certainly a market for the tropical propagation system I have designed. In time, I hope to make a respectable tradesman's living. But I am not now and never will be again the class of man that Lady Isobel could marry."

The silence was broken by a loud, wet snuffle. Lucius glanced up from his misery to find the Balfours dry-eyed.

Clarkson, however, was sobbing into a handkerchief. A spotlessly white one, with lace around the edges.

"Beg pardon," he choked out. "It's only – oh, Mr Whitby, I am so terribly distressed for you!"

“Clarkson,” said Daisy, “would you be so good as to fortify yourself with a tot of that brandy? You are the only person who knows his way about downstairs, and we simply cannot manage if you are overwhelmed by emotion.” She turned her eyes to Lucius. “Do you truly believe that Isobel would refuse you if you made her an offer, knowing your circumstances?”

She would not. Lucius’s heart spoke the answer, as though he had known it all along. Isobel would not refuse him. And that was precisely why he could never ask her.

“She’d be shunned by polite society,” he said. “How many doors that open gladly to Lady Isobel Balfour would remain open to the wife of Mr Whitby, apprentice gardener at Kew? She’d be made the object of gossip and ridicule. Her life would be unalterably changed – diminished.”

The Duke of Loxwell folded his arms and held Lucius’s eyes with a steady, serious gaze. “So you thought it better to take the choice away from her entirely? To run away, without giving her a chance to hear the truth?”

“The truth is a scandal.” There was no trace of shame left in Lucius now. It had all been burned away by his sudden, incandescent rage. “The truth is a nightmare from which I cannot escape. I am not naïve enough to think that all my love, my tears, my labour, would replace the brutal loss of Isobel’s entire world. Do I believe she’d refuse me? Never in a thousand years. But I am in love with her. Don’t you all understand? I will never ask her to sacrifice her place in the world for me. I’d never forgive myself.”

For a long moment, the only sound was Clarkson blowing his nose.

Then Loxwell gave a brief, decisive nod. “Very well. You’ve made your point, Whitby.” He smiled wryly. “I only hope you can find it in yourself to forgive *her*.”

“What?” Lucius had thought that all the hunger and the agony had sharpened his mind to a fine point, but he could not follow Loxwell’s meaning at all. “What do you mean?”

“My sister Isobel has taken it upon herself to abandon the gentle classes of her own accord. She has decided to reveal herself as the true composer behind the name Isidore Babbage, who apparently has quite a following. She has arranged...” Loxwell winced. “...a public music hall in which to unveil herself and perform her first concert.”

Anthea turned the letter around to face Lucius, only to reveal that it was not a letter at all. It was, in fact, a poster announcing a musicale to be performed by

A Noble Lady,
formerly styled (without her family's knowledge)
as the esteemed composer
Mr I. Babbage.

“Edith did not really have time to send a letter all the way from Florence,” said Anthea, half-apologetic, half pleased. “But she would have been terribly sorry not to be included, so I... embellished.”

“Isobel has sold tickets,” said Loxwell, in the tones of a man to whom it had been explained at great length that he must not voice any objections.

“A great number of tickets!” interjected his duchess, beaming. “And we are all quite certain that, once her secret is out, her future concerts will be extremely popular.”

“I had a feeling you'd be hard up for cash,” said Caversham, giving Lucius a friendly elbow. “So I took the liberty of purchasing one for you.”

“And we are going to come with you,” added Selina. “To make sure that you do things right this time. Not that I imagine it will really require all of us, but I'm afraid nobody could bear to miss out on the opportunity of making you suffer. Just a little. We had to be sure that you were really worth it.”

Lucius stared down at the poster. A concert to be given by *the esteemed Mr Babbage*. That very evening.

“No,” he said. “No. She can't. I'm not worth this. I'm not worth all this at all.”

“Isobel will never lack for people who love her,” said Caversham. “This is the path she has chosen. And she has our blessing. As do you.”

“Though my blessing is, in fact, the relevant one,” said Loxwell tersely. Malcolm grinned and made a graceful bow of acknowledgement.

“But this isn’t what she wants,” said Lucius.

Streatham rolled his eyes. “Come now, Whitby, there’s no need to keep up with all this miserable woe-is-me nonsense. Isobel has chosen you, and it’s nobody’s place to disagree with her. Yours least of all.”

“I’m not speaking of myself!” Lucius brandished the poster in the air. “It’s *this*. Do any of you really believe that Isobel wants this? A public concert – a public scandal – a thousand eyes all fixed on her? People tittering behind their hands? Whispers about her wherever she goes? Ceaseless, relentless attention?”

Loxwell folded his arms. “There! I’m glad someone else has said it. No. No, Isobel does not want this at all.”

“Alex!” snapped Selina.

“Oh, I know I can’t stop her. You’ve all made that perfectly clear. But Whitby knows it as well as I do – in fact, if he didn’t know it, I’d feel much less easy about giving this ludicrous business my blessing. The last thing Isobel has ever wanted is to become an object of public interest.”

“But, dearest, she has decided to do it of her own accord,” said Daisy patiently. “I am sure she would do it a thousand times over if it meant she could marry the man she loved.”

Lucius crumpled the poster in his fist. “I’ll be damned if I let her do it.”

Loxwell was triumphant. The rest of his family was dismayed.

“Not so fast, Whitby,” said Caversham, his voice a dangerous low growl. “We have come here with the express purpose of making sure you give our girl the proposal she

deserves. Loxwell here is a noble fellow, and the ladies, of course, would not resort to violence. But I assure you, if you're not down on one knee by the end of the night I will personally make sure that it is because you no longer possess kneecaps. And Streatham here will hold you down while I remove them."

"Yes, yes, Caversham, we all know that you are exceptionally ruthless and menacing." To his own amazement, Lucius managed the shadow of a grin. "And nobody would put any money on a mere gardener when faced with the mighty Duke of Caversham. If you could all take a moment's break from threatening me and insulting my character, I will explain to you exactly what I have in mind. But first – drat!" The clock on the wall had not been wound in days. He took up his frock coat from the chair and fumbled through the pockets for his watch. "What time is the concert?"

"It begins at half past eight," said Anthea. "And she *will* go through with it, Mr Whitby. It may not be what she wanted, but believe me, she is happy with her choice."

"Argue with me later," said Lucius. "I don't have time for it now. Delay the concert by any means necessary. If I hurry through my appointment at the Horticultural Society, I should reach her before nine." He shrugged the topcoat over his shoulders.

"Mr Whitby!" Clarkson rushed forward, looking even more alarmed than he had by the prospect of Lucius becoming a gardener. "I cannot possibly allow you to attend such a critical event dressed like that."

Lucius groaned. "Clarkson, have you heard nothing of what I said? You are no longer my valet. I don't have the money to pay you."

"Very well," said Loxwell. "Clarkson, I've heard you're a decent hand with a needle and thread. I happen to be in need of a new valet. I'll pay you twice what Whitby did. We can hammer out the details later. For the moment, I must ask you to attend upon my friend here." He gave Lucius a rare genuine smile. "He has an important engagement this evening."

CHAPTER 23



Isobel took one last look at herself in the mirror. For once, it was not enough to give her reflection a cursory glance to check that her appearance was, broadly speaking, acceptable.

Tonight, she would not be able to sit in the corner and fade into the background. Tonight, all eyes would be on her.

She touched the spray of hothouse orange blossom which Peggy had woven into her hair. The flowers were not as fine or exotic as the blooms at Whitby Manor, but she knew Lucius would appreciate them nonetheless. Would understand what it meant for her to wear them, at this moment, on this night.

“Don’t fret,” said Aunt Ursula, giving her a gentle prod with her cane. “You look lovely. You always look lovely, even though you manage to arrange things so that nobody notices. But *he* will notice. And he’ll be very pleased, I’m sure.”

Isobel smiled, though it felt strange to do so. Inside, she was a writhing mass of uncertainty and nerves. And something more than that. There was sadness, too.

But that was only natural. She was about to leave her old life behind, and it had been such a comfortable, pleasant life that she could not help but grieve a little.

It did not mean that she was not prepared to set it all aside.

“I am not worried about what Lucius will think,” she said. “I have the impression he’d admire me just as much if I were dressed in a potato sack.” She watched the way her gown shimmered in the candlelight and frowned. “It’s the audience

that concerns me. Though I keep reminding myself that they are only here to listen to the music.”

Aunt Ursula cackled. “They’re here for the gossip, my dear, and don’t fool yourself into thinking otherwise! There are very few people in the world whose love of music is as pure as your own. The crowd out there wants to know which highborn lady has been calling herself Mr Babbage and sinking so low as to sell her compositions. You’ll play like an angel tonight, but it won’t be your talent spoken of on the morrow. You do understand that, don’t you?”

Isobel returned Ursula’s sceptical gaze with all the steel she could muster. “My talent is not enough to settle Mr Whitby’s debts. My notoriety, however...” She stopped, took a breath, closed her eyes and pictured Lucius.

And just like that, her smile lost all its sadness.

“I cannot wait to see him, Auntie. To release him from all he’s had to endure. You see, it’s no longer enough for me to live in comfortable solitude on the sidelines. I refuse to let the man I love suffer another moment. And I refuse to let him slip out of my grasp.”

Aunt Ursula pursed her wrinkled lips. “My girl, I’ve no advice to give you. I’m a selfish old woman, and I was selfish even in my youth. No mere gentleman has ever tempted me to give up my own comfortable solitude. But I have the greatest faith in you. You know best how to secure your own happiness. If you believe the sacrifice is worthwhile, I cannot argue with you.” She gave a wicked grin. “And your poor dear brother will forgive you eventually, I’m sure. Once all the teasing at the House of Lords subsides.”

Outside the door, one of the stagehands rang a bell. “Five minutes, ladies!”

Isobel took a deep breath and smoothed her hands over her dress. “How do I look?”

Aunt Ursula gave her an approving nod. “Like a woman who knows exactly what she wants.”

Isobel's nerves were twisting knots in her stomach, but it was good to know that none of that inner turmoil was visible on her face. Once she reached her harp and began to play, she knew everything would be all right. The moment her fingers touched the strings, every face in the crowd would vanish.

All she would hear was music. All she would see was Lucius.

For a moment, when she opened the door to leave the dressing room, she thought she had pictured him so clearly that she had managed to make herself believe he was really there.

But even her wildest imaginings could not supply the sheer admiration, the pride and – yes – the *love* which glowed in his face, brighter than candles, brighter than the footlights. It could even have surpassed the sun.

For the first time in Lucius's presence, she was lost for words.

His eyes locked on hers. "Good evening, Isobel."

She wondered how anyone had ever thought grey a cold colour. That deep, mysterious, boundless grey of his gaze could have set the ocean aflame.

"You are not supposed to be here," she blurted out. "Not now – not yet!"

He gave a slow, rueful smile. "Considering people call you the quiet Balfour sister, you've always seemed quite outspoken to me."

"Well, that's because it's *you*." She felt her own smile mirror his. "I've nothing to hide when you're around."

"I'm glad to hear it. And now that I'm better acquainted with your sisters, I understand why you thought yourself quiet by comparison." He reached for her hand, but she withheld it.

"Don't try to stop me, Lucius."

"I wouldn't dream of it. But, if I may, I would like to present you with an alternative. Once you have heard it..." He stood aside, leaving her path clear to the stage door. The

murmurs of the audience were suddenly loud in the air. “The decision is yours. If you still wish to reveal yourself, do it. I intend to marry you either way.”

Aunt Ursula gasped. Lucius glanced at her over Isobel’s shoulder and made a bow. “Lady Ursula, with the greatest respect...”

“You don’t have to ask me twice, young Whitby! I know perfectly well when to exercise my discretion.” She hastened to gather her things and shuffled out, closing the dressing room door behind her.

The moment they were alone, Lucius seized Isobel’s hand. “Isobel –”

“Don’t say anything too wicked!” Isobel whispered. “She’ll be listening at the door.”

His eyes widened in amusement, and his gaze raked slowly from the tips of her fingers to her elaborately coiffed hair, and all the way down again to her embroidered satin shoes. Heat flared everywhere his eyes lingered. Then, he lifted her hand to his mouth and, without breaking eye contact, pressed it to his lips. She shivered.

The wickedness was unspoken, but she understood it perfectly well, nonetheless.

“I have it all backwards,” he said, with a rueful shake of his head. “I meant to *end* by declaring my intentions. Build up to it. Ask you properly, the way you deserve. But now that the moment is here, nothing else seems quite as important as letting you know. Isobel, I will spend my life with you whether as a penniless pauper or the husband of the scandalous lady composer, living off his wife’s notoriety. It makes no difference to me – *none* – whether you want to be a wallflower or a famous musician. I want you to understand that before you hear the rest of what I have to say.”

“But Lucius –”

“Let me speak.”

“Not if you’re going to –”

He interrupted her with a rich laugh and drew her to him, enveloping her in his arms, pressing his lips to hers.

Isobel melted. And, better than that, she felt Lucius melting against her, too. Felt the sweet embrace percolate through his body, relaxing every tense muscle, undoing all the strains of the long, lonely time spent trying to save everyone he loved. Knew that he found sanctuary in her kiss.

“There,” he said, voice husky. “*Now* will you listen?”

She laid her hand on his chest, admiring the way her fingers were so dwarfed by the masculine broadness of him, the strength he’d gained from his hours in the garden. “Not if you’re going to talk me out of it. I know what I’m doing, Lucius. And I don’t mind – I promise you, I really don’t mind. There’s nothing society loves more than a good scandal. I already make a comfortable sum posing as Mr Babbage. Imagine how much that sum will increase when my secret is revealed! Your sisters will have their next Season, and your father’s debts –”

“Are my father’s business,” he said forcefully. “Not yours. And I would not entrust him with a penny of your earnings. Neither do I intend to trust him with a penny of my own.”

“Your own?”

Lucius grinned so wickedly that she thought he was about to kiss her again. Instead, he took a tiny square box from his pocket. Inside was –

Not a ring. A flower. A tiny, perfect hothouse flower. A voluptuous star of crimson petals.

It was the drawing in Lucius’s glasshouse brought to life. The prize orchid, flowering in England for the first time.

“You did it,” Isobel breathed.

Lucius twirled the orchid in his fingers, looking down at it fondly. “Impressive, isn’t it? The gentlemen of the Horticultural Society of London were most impressed with it, too. In fact, they were so impressed that they have agreed to introduce me to Mr Poulton, the head gardener at Kew. And on top of that, your attentive brother-in-law Caversham believes

the Duke of Devonshire's head gardener will wish to speak with me quite urgently. But what may yet bring in more income than all that is the manufacture and sale of my curved glasshouse design.”

He was addressing all this not to Isobel's face, but to the flower. She worried for a moment that it was because he was ashamed. That he could not reconcile himself with the prospect of becoming a tradesman.

But she heard the passion in his voice, saw the intensity in his eyes. She heard the pride.

Perhaps the quiet wallflower and the eligible heir had more in common than they had ever imagined. They both had their passions – their unique talents. And neither of them cared a bit for what society said they could and could not do with those hard-won skills.

She wrapped her hands around his, the tiny orchid cradled at the centre. “This will make you happy, won't it?” she said. “Not merely solvent, but happy.”

He lifted his eyes to hers, breathing out a sigh of relief. “I should have known that you would understand it. But I – I couldn't be certain, Isobel. I'm not speaking of your love for me. I'm speaking of the other loves you might compromise for my sake. I knew that you would give up anything I asked you to. And that is precisely why I *couldn't* ask. But now, you mad thing! Were you really prepared to throw away all your social standing – not to mention your quiet life – without even the promise of marriage?”

“I didn't need a promise,” said Isobel. “I knew you cared for me. And I knew exactly why you were trying to convince me that you didn't. So I decided to take matters into my own hands.”

He set the orchid down on the dressing table and laced his fingers through hers, bringing her hands to his lips and kissing each fingertip. “And they are such clever hands. I have no doubt that, if you step out onto that stage, you will cause a sensation. And if a sensation is what you want, I will cheer for every note you play.” He met her eyes. “But you must do it for

your own sake, not mine. You've no need to prove yourself to me, or to injure yourself to rescue me. I will be able to rescue us both."

"And your sisters?"

Lucius sighed. "They have been born with the misfortune of a father who does not understand money. But they are not the first women to endure such misfortune, and each of them has their own talents and the will to wield them. There will be sacrifices. I can't protect them forever. But the day I left the manor, Evie told me something that I am just now coming to understand. *There's a difference between being ruined and being unhappy.*

"Well, we are already ruined, and there's no helping that. But we may all yet be happy. I know none of my sisters would forgive me if they knew you had sacrificed *your* happiness to save them from their own father's mistakes."

Isobel hesitated. "I can't," she said quietly. "I can't simply sit back and do nothing, knowing that I could have helped. Besides, the audience is here already. I've sold tickets! I can't disappoint them."

Lucius's hand cupped her cheek, and Isobel's eyes fell closed for a moment, just to appreciate the warmth of it, the strength and security in his palm, the faint aroma of fresh green life still on his fingers.

"You will not disappoint anyone," he said. "We are not talking about a crowd of high-minded music lovers. I should know – I used to attend concerts for the exact same reasons. They've come for the gossip, not the music. And Mr Babbage's mysterious kidnapping will give them plenty to gossip about."

Her eyes flew open. "Kidnapping?"

Lucius grinned. "Disappearance? Sudden illness? Or perhaps we should have him called away on a secret mission for the Crown?"

"Do you really mean it?"

“Oh, I’ve no compunction about putting Babbage through the wringer. I’m sure he’s a man of fortitude. He’ll manage.”

“No.” She couldn’t help but smile, though she needed to be serious at that moment more than any other in her life. “Do you *truly* mean that you’ll be happy with my little composition money, and your horticulture? You won’t ever look back and regret stopping me tonight?”

He kissed her. So softly and sweetly that little birdsong trills sang in her heart.

This was Lucius’s music, free at last of the mournful cello and dark clarinet. A fresh, outdoors, green and growing sound. It didn’t follow the rules of composition. It didn’t keep in time, and it couldn’t be written down.

But none of that mattered, because his song was the perfect counterpoint to her own.

“I will never regret it for a single moment,” he said.

Isobel let out a deep breath, pressing a hand to her heart. She felt so dizzy that she had to clutch Lucius’s arm to keep her balance. “Oh, I’m so relieved! I haven’t slept a wink since I left Whitby Manor. Not for any romantic reason, you understand. I’ve been *terrified*.” She raised her chin defiantly. “But I would have done it gladly, you know. For you.”

“I know. I know.” He gathered her up in his arms again, and a little sigh escaped her. Her racing pulse at last began to steady.

And then he kissed her again, and it started racing for an entirely different reason.

“You really thought I’d rather be a lady, and alone, than marry you and be a gardener’s wife?” She gave him a gentle push. “Lucius, *really*.”

His eyes glowed, and he was about to make an answer – but a loud cough from outside the dressing room interrupted him.

“Isobel! *Isobel!* Please do not keep us all in suspense! Surely the gentleman has had time to propose by now?”

Isobel kept her arms about Lucius, delighted to see a faint blush rising in his cheeks. “Not yet, Auntie. I think he needs another five minutes. Will that do, Lucius?”

Ursula cracked open the door and fixed them with a beady eye. “More importantly, it is coming up on eight forty-five, and my discretion does not extend to giving up my nightly glass of sherry simply because you wish to dither about.”

Another pair of eyes appeared in the gap in the door above Ursula’s, and above those, a third set, all of them bright and curious, all sharing a family resemblance.

“Girls, *please*,” groaned Alex, from somewhere behind them. “This is extremely undignified.”

“Cheer up, Loxwell,” came Malcolm’s jovial reply. “We’ll pour you out a tot of sherry too, and you’ll soon feel better.”

Isobel seized the bottle Ursula had left on the dressing table and thrust it through the door, very nearly smacking it into Anthea’s nose in her haste. “Auntie, Mr Babbage has been ordered not to reveal his face tonight. Or he’ll be kidnapped. By pirates. Please ask the stage manager to announce it.”

Ursula took the sherry and frowned. “You’ve no talent for deception at all, my girl. *I’ll* take care of the excuses. You take care of your young gentleman.”

She closed the door.

“Open that at once!” Alex demanded. “Ursula! You are supposed to be her chaperone!”

“Oh dear,” said Anthea, jiggling perfunctorily at the handle. “Deary me, it seems to be stuck.”

“Here you are, Loxwell. Take a deep swig straight from the bottle, now.”

Inside the dressing room, the whole world had shrunk to a pair of clear grey eyes and the rhythm of two hearts beating as one. Lucius pressed Isobel’s hand between both of his and dropped to his knee.

“Yes,” she said, before he’d even had a chance to open his mouth. “I know you haven’t asked yet. I do want to hear your

lovely speech. But I want you to know – even though I’m quite sure you already do. It’s yes, Lucius. It’s *yes*.”

CHAPTER 24



On the day of the wedding, Lucius was wide awake before the first cockerel greeted the dawn.

He was not nervous, exactly. What was there to be nervous about? Isobel had but one desire for this day: *No fuss*. And that was something Lucius was certainly able to accommodate.

No fuss. No frills. No special licence, no new carriage, no great banquet. Isobel wanted to throw herself into life as they would live it from this point onwards. All her sisters' protests about lace and flowers and new gowns were cheerfully ignored.

So the banns were read in two churches: the one at Loxton, closest to her brother's country estate, and the one in the town of Appleby where the Whitby family made their weekly devotions. They were to have a small, simple wedding and depart immediately for London, where Isobel's income had secured them a modest house. He would begin his career working under the renowned landscape architect Mr John Nash. And if that fortuitous opportunity had come about thanks to a generous investment by certain dukes into Mr Nash's work on St James's Park, well... Isobel had made it extremely clear that Lucius was not to ask awkward questions.

It was the stuff of daydreams. Fantasies. His wildest imaginings come to life. By the end of the week, Isobel would be his wife, and he'd be a respectable working man. Able to support her – able to support himself – able at last to prove that he was worthy of the undying faith and trust she'd put in him.

Could this really be the life Isobel wanted? Could he truly be the man she loved? It made him dizzy to think even so far ahead as the end of the day. As though it were all truly a dream, and he might wake from it at any moment.

The one difficulty – the pinch in the arm which told him he was *not* dreaming, that Isobel was really his – was his father's rage.

Lucius had not spoken to Horace Whitby since that painful dinner the night Isobel revealed she was not to inherit a fortune.

If you're fool enough to marry her, you can forget about setting foot in this house again, his father had said that night. Lucius had but one duty as far as Horace was concerned, and he had failed to discharge it. The family fortune was not restored; the stately London home had been given over to tenants; the Manor would soon follow. Evie had burned Lord Henry's letters – or, if she could not bear to actually destroy them, had hidden them away so well that Horace had not discovered them. And Lucius was not marrying well enough to pay off fifty thousand pounds worth of debt. Not only that, but Loxwell's lawyers had done their business well. The money Isobel brought to the marriage would remain her own, far out of the grasp of Lucius's profligate father.

So Lucius would be the only Whitby at church that day. It was not the way he'd imagined marrying. No tears from his mother, no winks from his sisters, no proud paternal slap on the back. His brother Sebastian would have defied their father's orders, but he was away at sea. Lucius was entering his new life alone.

Well, not quite alone. Isobel, the undimmable beacon of hope that she was, had insisted on marrying him in his own church. Just in case, she said. Just in case his father should have a change of heart.

So the little cottage about which Lucius was restlessly pacing was a dilapidated old building owned by his neighbour Lord Kendrick, a seldom-used hideaway on the edge of Kendrick's holdings in Appleby town. And when the rising

sun brought with it a raucous hammering on the door, Lucius's thoughts leapt –

To Isobel, naturally, but of course it could not be –

To his family, secondly, vain though the hope was –

But he opened the door to reveal, of course, Kendrick, with a broad grin and a wicker basket under one arm.

“Hullo, Whitby,” he said, thrusting the basket into Lucius's hands and striding past him into the cottage. “I've brought breakfast. And the Duke of Loxwell's valet wanted to tag along, for some reason.” He gave Lucius a broad wink as Clarkson trotted in after him. “Those pastries are hot from the bakery. I'd recommend getting one inside you as quickly as possible.”

“Absolutely not!” Clarkson squawked, snatching the basket from Lucius. “Not without a napkin, sir, I beseech you!”

He set the basket out of Lucius's reach and produced a crisp, white handkerchief which had somehow survived a journey in Clarkson's pocket without gathering a single crease or crinkle. Kendrick made no effort to defend Lucius from the valet's attentions. He took out a plump Bath bun and settled into one of the elderly armchairs, which let out a groan and a shower of dust.

Lucius mustered a grin and spread his arms wide, submitting for the last time to Clarkson's inspection. “Come on, then. Let me have it. Are my lapels misaligned? My shirt the wrong shade of white? My hair not quite untidy enough to be fashionable?”

Clarkson paused, napkin in hand, and made an unnervingly slow study of Lucius's apparel. He opened his mouth, closed it again, raised a finger, and made a slow circuit to study him from every angle.

“My word,” he muttered. “Oh, my.”

Lucius took the opportunity to grab the napkin as Clarkson's circling brought it within his reach. “This is your

final chance to kick up a fuss about my appearance, Clarkson, so you'd better make the most of it."

His former valet withdrew another of his endless supply of freshly pressed handkerchiefs and dabbed it at the corner of his eye. "I have not a single criticism to offer you, Mr Whitby. Your appearance is impeccable in every regard."

Lucius paused with one hand hovering over a steaming pastry. He narrowed his eyes. "I don't believe you."

Clarkson's handkerchief obscured his mouth. If he was smiling, there was no way to tell. By the time it was folded and replaced in pristine order in his top pocket, the little man's expression had returned to its usual pure professionalism. "Really, sir. I assure you. When your dear lady sees you in the church, she will think you absolutely perfect."

"That's not quite the same as meeting *your* standards, Clarkson, but I'll take it." Lucius tucked in his napkin and took a bite of the pastry. Suddenly, despite being certain only moments earlier that he would not be able to manage a bite, he was ravenous. "I've no one but Isobel to impress, after all."

Kendrick leaned closer and frowned, his fingers drumming restlessly against the moth-eaten velvet fuzz of his armchair. "You really mean to go ahead with it, then? Not the marriage – the..."

"The gardening?" Lucius offered him a teasing grin.

"The *business*," said Kendrick delicately. "The trade. Or, more importantly, the rift it has caused with your father."

The pastry suddenly lost all its flavour. "Kendrick, I only wish I could explain it all to you. Believe me, I have not cast off my father lightly." It was not, of course, the choice of trade that had enraged Horace beyond hope of reconciliation, but the choice of bride. Though Lucius would not reveal the truth to Kendrick while his father's impending ruin was still concealed.

Kendrick kept his eyes on Lucius for a long, thoughtful moment while his fingers continued their restless drumming. "I've never told you this, Whitby. It's not the sort of thing one

usually speaks of. But, given the situation, I hope you'll allow me to be sentimental. My own father and I did not always see eye-to-eye, as you know. And yet, if I had the chance, there are several things I should dearly love to say to him. Important things. Ones I shall always regret keeping to myself while he lived."

Lucius recalled one or two particularly fiery interludes in the Kendrick household. He raised an eyebrow. "Good things, Kendrick? Or..."

Kendrick pushed himself to his feet and brushed the crumbs from his hands. "Doesn't matter. The point is, I hope you'll forgive me."

"Forgive you for what –"

The world went dark. Clarkson had darted up behind Lucius and pulled a hood of some rough material – it felt like sackcloth – over his head.

"What the devil's gotten into you?" demanded Lucius, struggling to lift it. Two pairs of strong hands restrained him. "Let me go! Get this thing off me!"

"You'll want to keep that on," came a voice, smooth and calm, from behind him.

Isobel.

Lucius wrested his arm out of Kendrick's grasp and whirled around, hands reaching out for her blindly. "Isobel? What are you doing here? You can't be here, it's –"

"Bad luck," she said softly, and a small, gentle hand settled in his, and his wild heartbeat steadied. A small thrill ran through him at her touch – even there, with Kendrick and Clarkson snickering beside him. A memory of a moonlit night in the orangery. The anticipation of future moonlit nights to come.

"It's bad luck for you to see me before the ceremony," Isobel continued. "So these gentlemen were kind enough to make sure that you would not. And now, they will be kind enough to step outside."

“Wait! Isobel, we are not married yet. I’ve pushed my luck far enough with your brother – not to mention the rest of your terrifying family –”

“Hush.” He could hear the smile in her voice. He could practically feel the mischievous glow of it warming his face. “As far as my brother is concerned, I’m having a very long, lazy breakfast in my room at the inn. And my sisters have made it clear that no gentlemen are to even think of entering the chamber until the bride is ready.” She relinquished his hand, and the pressure of her fingers settled on his shoulder instead, pulling him closer. Her breathing quickened. He caught the scent of her through the rough sackcloth, vivid and bright in the darkness. Lavender and orange blossom and her own indescribable sweetness.

“Don’t worry, Whitby,” called Kendrick from somewhere in the region of the doorway. “You can rely on our discretion. Unless we should happen to want something from you in the future, of course...”

“Get out, Kendrick.”

He kept his eyes closed. It ached to do it, but he managed. While Isobel lifted the hood just an inch – just enough – and those soft, sweet, perfect lips met his.

He would never have another restless night in his life. Her kiss could soothe a man on his way to the gallows. If all the kings on earth could be kissed like this but once, there’d never be another war.

Now his breath was quickening, too, and his hands didn’t need sight to guide them to the curve of her waist, the nape of her neck – the intimate, exquisite places he’d need hours to fully explore.

Isobel broke the kiss and let the hood fall again. A groan of protest escaped Lucius’s lips, and he felt her sigh for him, too, which did nothing to bolster his self-restraint.

“I’m supposed to lift your veil today,” he said, letting his fingers brush their way from her waist up to her cheek. He didn’t need to find the way by feel – the shape of her was

already imprinted indelibly on his memory – but he couldn't pass up the opportunity while it was there. "Not the other way round."

"You had better not kiss me like that in the church," she said. "Aunt Ursula would faint."

"Must we think of your aunt at a time like this?"

She rapped her knuckles lightly against his chest. "No. We must think of your father."

Lucius let out an entirely different sort of groan. "So that's why Kendrick was begging my forgiveness."

"Don't blame him, Lucius. It was my idea."

"Isobel, please don't. Don't force me to disappoint you. Not today. I know you'd hoped I might patch things up with him, but it's simply not possible. And I won't start the happiest day of my life by confronting a man whom I do not respect."

She did not reply for a long moment, holding herself quite still in his arms, and he was not foolish enough to believe he had convinced her.

"Lucius," she said slowly, "it occurs to me that there are some things I must make clear to you before we are married. In fact, it is a very good thing that I have the opportunity to say this now, so that we are sure to begin our life together with no misunderstandings.

"You know already that I am not interested in the sort of marriage that my sisters have. Oh, they are all well settled, and deliriously happy, but I am not them and they are not me. I never wanted a great lord, or enormous wealth, or any of the other things I was supposed to hope for. My idea of marriage is that both husband and wife share equal responsibility to provide for one another. I'm not merely talking of money. I am quite certain that before the year is out your income will have far surpassed mine.

"No, I consider it my primary duty as your wife to provide for your *happiness*. And Lucius, you are the sweetest and most loving man I have ever met. You would sacrifice anything for your family. Do you really expect me to believe you can ever

be truly happy if you are estranged from your father? More to the point, do you really expect *me* to sit by and watch it happen, without doing all I can to help?

“I’m afraid that if that is the sort of wife you were hoping for, it is much too late to find one. You have *me*. But I am giving you fair warning of how things will be between us. I shoulder equal part of the burden. I take equal responsibility for our happiness. And yes, if you take it into your own head to cast off your father, I will take it into *mine* to fix it for you.”

He knew exactly how she would look as she spoke. The defiant upward tilt of her chin, the flames burning in her eyes. A passion that surpassed music, surpassed wealth, surpassed class and status and all that other people prized...

He’d never deserve that passion. Not if he worked for a thousand years. But it was his all the same, and all he could do was accept the gift of it in amazement.

“What did you do?” he asked. “How did you manage it? The things Father wrote in his last letter – no, I won’t repeat them. But his mind was made up. And... Well, I thought mine was too. He won’t give us his blessing, Isobel. As far as I’m concerned, that’s unforgiveable.”

To his astonishment, she laughed. “I went to the manor and begged his pardon for stealing you away, of course. Then I explained to him that he had two choices. He could lose you forever, based on the dream of an heiress who never existed, or he could keep a son and gain a daughter. He’s lost his fortune either way, so I see little good in tossing you along after it. Oh, and I suggested that he should thank you for your good judgement regarding the financial situation. The poor dear man is completely out of his depth. You must have inherited your common sense from –”

“Not my mother,” Lucius winced. “Unfortunately, she has never managed to do anything more than encourage him.”

“Perhaps you had a particularly sensible grandparent? Anyway, that is beside the point. Your father’s carriage is waiting outside. Your wedding present to me is to get into that

carriage, accept his apology, and let him bring you to the church.”

He felt her rise on tiptoes, and he bent his head so that she could press a kiss to his forehead through the sackcloth.

“You’re angry,” she said softly, “and you’re hurt, but you are too good a man to let that pain rule you.”

Lucius caught her head in his hands, held her face there, tantalisingly close to his, and the silly sackcloth hood suddenly seemed as insubstantial as cobwebs. He let his forehead settle against hers. Felt his heart steady, his breath calm.

“You’re wrong,” he said. “I’m not angry. I’m not anything right now but in love with you.”

“You’ll speak to him?”

“I will.”

She let him go. Too soon. But, by the end of the morning, there would be no more letting go. No more goodbyes between them.

He’d have all the time in the world to show her what she meant to him, and he’d start from the moment he took her hand at the altar.

“Wait ten seconds,” she instructed him, her voice a low murmur. “Then take it off.”

He counted. His fingers trembled with the effort of not removing the hood. Was she already in her wedding gown? Or had she slipped out before dressing, wrapped in a cloak, her hair still ruffled with the morning daze?

He’d give anything for a preview of her morning sweetness. But she’d told him to wait, so he did.

He reached ten. And then, just in case he’d rushed it, he counted slowly to ten once more.

He removed the hood, blinking in the sunlight, and stepped through the open door and into his father’s carriage.



IT WAS the first wedding breakfast for the latest generation of Whitbys, and the last of Isobel's batch of Balfours. The celebrations were accordingly lively, raucous, and lasted until late into the evening.

A little too late, in Lucius's opinion, though he could hardly complain. In the grey dawn light, he'd had his sights firmly set on the long, intimate evening he'd share with Isobel. That sort of rare delight didn't let a man dare hope for more.

And yet here he was, watching Isobel's hair shimmer in the soft glow of candlelight, and it turned out there was more indeed. Much more.

His sisters had not stopped laughing since they left the church, and neither had the assembled Balfours. The Appleby inn which Loxwell had commandeered for the celebration shook to the rafters with the endless round of toasts, speeches, and cheers. Georgiana's stories were enough to turn even Caversham's cheeks pink. His mother had forgiven Lady Ursula her lack of riches by the halfway point of her second glass of champagne. His father was giving Loxwell the benefit of his advice for a happy marriage at great length and in very fine detail, though the duke did not look as though he wanted it.

A day like this was one to be treasured. Not only for itself, but for the hope it gave Lucius for the future.

So many in that happy room knew of his family's impending fall from grace. Knew he was taking up a trade. Knew that there was little chance the three Misses Whitby would return to Town the following Season – and everybody would soon hear the reason why. And yet the bonds of family endured – the new bond he and Isobel had forged that very morning just as strong as all the others.

When would he next see Georgiana flirting with a nobleman? When would his mother again enjoy such fine champagne?

And was any of that really important?

“You look thoughtful, Whitby,” said Streatham, approaching him with an unsteady gait and an expression he probably thought was sly. “I hope you’re not dwelling on your father’s advice about the wedding night. I have just heard what he’s saying to poor old Loxwell, and let me tell you –”

“I can hear you, Streatham, you filthy rascal,” said Loxwell, turning in his seat with a glare fit to boil off the liquor in Streatham’s veins.

“Nothing,” Streatham amended smoothly, wagging a finger in Lucius’s direction. “Let me tell you *absolutely nothing*.”

“That’s better.” Loxwell rose from his seat, bowed to Lucius’s father – who looked as though he were about to nod off into his brandy – and came to join them. “Your sisters are charming girls, Whitby. I am glad to get to know them a little better. I believe my wife is already cooking up a scheme to invite them all to Town this winter.” He lowered his voice. “She has not mentioned it to them. We were not sure...”

“No, they don’t know,” said Lucius, though his eyes lingered curiously on Cassie for a moment, wondering what lay beneath her smile. He was sure she suspected something, even if she did not know the stark facts. “My father will break the news in his own time. It is hard to see them so happy, not knowing what’s to come... Harder still to think of destroying that happiness before we must.” He cleared his throat. “But that’s kind of you, Loxwell. I’m sure they will be delighted to accept your hospitality.”

“You never know,” said Streatham. “They may yet sort things out for themselves. Ladies have a way of arranging these things, don’t they? I shouldn’t waste a moment worrying about them, Whitby.”

Loxwell raised an eyebrow. “Streatham has no sisters,” he said. “And it shows.”

“Lucius!” Evie came across the room, her cheeks flushed with laughter and a wicked twinkle in her eyes as she tugged

Isobel along on one arm and Loxwell's duchess, Daisy, on the other. "We are going to help Isobel dress for the journey. I hope you're ready! You mustn't keep her waiting!"

"I must say I am truly glad to see you in such high spirits, Miss Whitby," said Loxwell.

Evie gave an ironic smile and a curtsy that seemed only half-polite. "Thank you, Your Grace. You may report back to Lord Henry Claremont that I have not withered away from grief. In fact, as you see, I am as happy as ever I was before I knew him."

Loxwell did not rise to her provocation. Instead, he took her hand and pressed it between his own, looking at her earnestly. "I never gossip about matters such as these. Please accept my good wishes. For your health – for your happiness." A small smile quirked his lips. "For whatever forgiveness you decide Claremont deserves."

Evie was taken aback but left her hand in his for a moment. She gave him a calm nod before she withdrew it, accepting his frankness with grace, and went to join the other ladies.

"*That* is a difficult business," said Daisy, shaking her head. "At least before long she will know –"

Loxwell gave her a warning look, and Daisy clapped her hands over her mouth, wide-eyed.

"Know what?" asked Lucius. He kept his voice low. It was clear that whatever Daisy had been about to say was not public knowledge. "Please, if there's anything to Evie's benefit, I must know it."

Daisy shook her head. "I should not have spoken. And I'm afraid it will be of no material benefit to your dear sister. But it might – yes, I think it will – provide her with an explanation for Lord Henry's behaviour."

Loxwell gave Lucius an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. Some things cannot be shared before their time – even with family." He fixed his wife with a glare of mock severity. "As I shall do well to remember in future."

“Come along, Isobel,” said Daisy, taking her by the arm. “Before Alex tells Lucius what a dreadful mistake it is for a sensible man to take a wife.” She cast a daring look back over her shoulder, and her husband must have partaken of a little of the celebratory champagne after all, for his response was a wink so roguish it made his duchess blush.

Isobel gave Lucius a helpless wave as she was swept out of the room by a sea of sisters – Balfours and Whitbys alike. Georgiana stopped to shout something to the gentlemen which presumably would have been quite impolite, but Cassie caught her in time and strongarmed her out of the door.

Caversham, free at last from Georgiana’s idea of polite conversation, swiped a bottle from the sideboard and came to join the other gentlemen.

“It’s a jolly good thing I didn’t meet Miss Georgiana in my bachelor days,” he said. “She’d have put some dreadful ideas into my head.”

Lucius gave him a punch on the arm that was on the sharp side of friendly. “You did meet her, Caversham. You danced with her at her birthday ball. Twice. I didn’t hear the end of it for weeks.”

“Did I?” Caversham grinned and raised his eyes to the ceiling, where the ladies’ laughter was filtering through from the chambers above. “Selina was there that evening. My apologies to Miss Georgiana. I’m sure a better sort of man would never let her slip his mind.”

“Poor Caversham,” said Streatham, with a grin. “So many past admirers, such a trial to keep them all straight.”

“I hope Anthea provides you a whole houseful of daughters, Streatham,” said Loxwell wryly. “Hundreds of them. And all of them beautiful and disobedient. It’s exactly what you deserve.”

Streatham’s eyes widened. He tried to hide his confusion behind a sip of champagne, but choked on it.

“Something the matter, Streatham?” asked Caversham, pounding him on the back. Streatham shook his head

frantically, still coughing.

“Congratulations are in order, I take it?” Lucius raised his glass. Streatham pushed it back down again, spilling champagne and spluttering.

“Not a word! Not a word about it! I was not supposed to mention it for weeks!”

“But this is wonderful!” cried Loxwell.

Streatham clapped a hand to his forehead. “She’s going to kill me.”

Loxwell grinned. “That’s Anthea.”

Caversham flung his arm about Streatham’s shoulders, a wicked glint in his eye. “I thought you were supposed to be good at keeping secrets. An almost professional talent, some say.”

“Shut up.”

Lucius raised his glass again as Caversham held Streatham back. “A very *quiet* toast, then,” he said, *sotto voce*. “To Lady Streatham! And the triplet daughters Streatham deserves!”

He clinked glasses with Loxwell while Streatham shook his head in dismay.

Kendrick appeared at Lucius’s side, a second too late to overhear Streatham’s ill-kept secret. The other gentlemen endeavoured to cover up the impression that they had been speaking of anything in confidence. They failed miserably; Kendrick’s sharp eyes narrowed in suspicion. But he decided not to pursue the matter.

“Look who happened to stop by,” he said, beckoning behind him to invite another gentleman into their circle. “I think all you fellows already know Sir Ivor Chamberlain?”

Lucius greeted Sir Ivor with polite surprise and received a watery smile in return.

“I thought I’d drop in to offer my congratulations,” Sir Ivor explained. “A happy day indeed. I do wish you joy.

And... if it were warranted, I thought I might mention the whereabouts of a certain mutual friend.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow. “Not Bell?”

Sir Ivor made a modest bow. “You didn’t think I’d put up with that Chamberpot nonsense forever, did you? I may not have the stomach to deal out the necessary blow myself, but I certainly would not be averse to arranging the opportunity for somebody else.”

Lucius considered it. He flexed his fingers, testing their capacity for forming a fist. It was tempting. Bell had threatened Georgiana’s honour – which was one thing when a lady had fabulous wealth, and quite another when she was poor.

But it was his wedding day, and he was feeling charitable. Besides that, he was wearing his sole remaining pair of white kid gloves, and he had it on the very best authority that they were not suitable for dealing out corporal punishment.

Surely Bell no longer posed a threat. The coward had scurried off in terror at the first sniff of retribution. What more harm could he possibly do?

“Thank you, Sir Ivor, but I must decline.” Lucius made him a regretful bow. “If I ever feel the need to correct Bell’s behaviour, I shall know who to ask.”

Sir Ivor tipped his hat and withdrew. Lucius wondered whether the meek little man would ever be moved to take personal action against his bully of a friend.

That was the last thought Lucius spared for such inconsequential matters as blackmail and brigandry and sisters’ marital prospects, for Isobel had come down the stairs in her going away dress, and nothing else in all the world mattered one bit.

The dress itself was simple enough. A light cream muslin, suitable for travelling on a hot summer’s night. The expression on her face was one of the many he’d already memorised: calm, serene happiness.

No, there was something else about her as she set her eyes on him and left her boisterous sisters behind as she came across the room. It took Lucius a moment to put his finger on it, but as soon as her hand touched his, he knew what it was that had left him breathless.

This woman – this miracle – this mischievous, angelic, genius, saucy, innocent woman – she was *his*. At last. Forever.

As they stepped out into the starlit night, as he took her hand to assist her into the carriage, he had the sensation that a great wind had sprung up around them both, whisking away all the chatter and laughter and shouted scraps of advice from around them. His family's faces dissolved into a blur. All he saw was Isobel. And she smiled at him with such radiance that he knew she saw only him.

Until a louder shout broke through the happy haze just as Isobel had set foot on the step of the carriage.

“It's here!” A breathless footman leaned his hands on his knees, gasping, and proffered a somewhat battered envelope towards Loxwell. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but you did say –”

“Yes, quite right, Samuel. Take a seat now, man.” Loxwell took the envelope and began patting at his pockets for something to slice it open.

“Oh, Alex, for goodness' sake!” cried Daisy, snatching it from him and tearing it messily open herself. “Don't make us wait for it!” She scanned the letter inside and her face broke out into a beaming smile.

Isobel's hand tightened in Lucius's. “Daisy! Is it...?”

Daisy pressed the letter to her chest. “Edith has been delivered of a healthy baby girl. Lady Alessandra Adolphine Townsend.”

An ear-splitting cheer went up, Lucius's sisters joining in as loudly as the Balfours. Only Streatham and Anthea remained silent, exchanging a knowing glance – Streatham's slightly guilty – and taking each other by the hand.

“A toast!” cried Horace Whitby, quite forgetting that all the champagne was Loxwell's to dispense, not his own.

“Another toast! Fetch out a fresh bottle!”

Lucius looked up at Isobel. “Shall we stay a while longer?”

She answered by pulling him into the carriage after her. “I don’t think Edith and Nathaniel will miss us from all the way out in Florence.”

“Isobel!” cried Lady Ursula, hobbling forwards and blocking the carriage door with her cane. For one uncomfortable moment, Lucius wondered whether she intended to clamber in after them. But all Ursula did was blow him a kiss and offer them both a saucy grin. “Remember the advice I gave you earlier, my dear.”

Isobel leaned across Lucius and pressed a kiss to her aunt’s cheek. “I’m afraid to tell you, Auntie, that I have endeavoured to forget every piece of advice you shared with me this morning. You have your great-nieces to instruct now. I hope they will listen better.”

Ursula’s eyes brightened, a mixture of starlight and tears. “My precious Isobel,” she said. “Nobody could ever hope for a better companion.” She nodded to Lucius. “You will find that out, in time.”

“I know it already,” he said, kissing the old lady’s hand and passing it out to a footman. “I truly do.”

And then there was nothing more to do but close the door, wave from the windows, and listen to the cheers fade away into the distance as their horses trotted off out of Appleby and onto the London road.

They were not going far. Only to an inn in the next town along, to reduce their journey to London the following day. But as Lucius met Isobel’s eyes and his hand touched hers, he would happily have stayed in that carriage to the very ends of the earth.

“I hope today was all what you wanted,” he said. “*No fuss*. Or, at least, our best attempt at it.”

Isobel let her head fall onto his shoulder, lacing her fingers with his, and breathed a sigh of long, deep contentment. “Yes,”

she said, simply. “Yes. I have everything that I could ever possibly want.”

EPILOGUE: TWENTY YEARS LATER



THE PALM HOUSE, ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, KEW

“Decimus Whitby, come back here and put your hat on at once,” said Isobel, wafting the humid air about with her fan.

“But Mama, I have *never* in my *life* been so *hot!*” Young Master Decimus attempted to prove his case by tottering dramatically from one leafy palm tree to the next, clutching his hat to his chest.

Isobel bent down, her hoop skirts swaying about her, took the hat and replaced it on the little curly head. A pair of stormcloud eyes frowned up at her, their familiar clear grey turned darker by the greenish light filtering through the arching glasswork above them. “Nevertheless, my darling, a gentleman always wears a hat. You will be much cooler if you stop tearing up and down. Stay at my side now and attend to your father.”

Master Decimus was not appeased by the appeal to his gentlemanly nature. “I do not *wish* to hear about curved glass and cast iron. I *do not wish* to hear about the palm trees of the tropics. I wish to go outside and – and – and swim in the lake!”

Lucius let out a ringing laugh. “Run along, then! Go and find your aunts. They should have the picnic ready and waiting.”

“And may I swim?”

“Ask your Aunt Selina.”

Isobel suppressed a grin until their youngest was out of earshot. Selina would certainly *not* give any of the children permission to swim.

“He’ll come around,” she said, linking her arm through her husband’s and pressing it close. “He’s at that age, you know. Anything Mama and Papa do is sure to be dull.”

Lucius’s eyes sparkled. The crinkles at their corners had not dimmed the mischief she knew lurked behind them. If anything, twenty years of experience had only taught her exactly what sort of delicious mischief he had in mind.

“Decimus must find his own passions,” said Lucius, giving her arm an answering squeeze. “But he will be terribly disappointed the day he realises that Mama and Papa are the most fascinating people in the world.”

“I have several questions, Uncle,” interrupted Lady Erica Balfour, barely glancing up from the notebook in which she was sketching the shape of the glasshouse. She had Daisy’s eyes, Alex’s serious expression, and an investigative mind that was all her own. “I wish you would come and give a lecture at the Institute. I know several of the ladies will be very interested in how you constructed the ironwork.”

“My colleague Mr Burton is better placed to answer questions about that,” said Lucius. “I’m more interested in the greenery than the foundry.”

Erica made another note and glanced up at the leafy fronds above her. “It is magnificent, Uncle. But I’m afraid the Institute will benefit more from Mr Burton’s instruction. I shall get my father to ask him to speak. Nobody says no to my father.”

She lowered her head again, the flowers on her straw bonnet bobbing as she continued to take notes.

“Erica! *Cosa fai? Vieni! Vieni qui!*”

Erica grimaced and passed her notebook to Isobel, who had her reticule open and ready to receive it.

“How long is Cousin Alessandra staying with us, Auntie?” she asked quietly. “And do you suppose we might be able to

persuade her to speak a little English? We all *know* she grew up abroad. This showing off is becoming tiresome.”

Edith’s daughter moved more quickly than most in the heat, and she was at Erica’s side to hear the tail end of the complaints. She gave her cousin a cheerful grin and took her arm. “I’m here until somebody manages to find me a husband, Erica, and I don’t think the gentlemen of the London Mechanics’ Institute are what my Papa has in mind. So if you wish to be rid of me, you must come out and about and show me off at all the best parties. Isn’t that right, Aunt Isobel?”

Isobel couldn’t help but smile. Her two eldest nieces were each perfect mirrors of their parents – Erica every bit as serious and studious as Alexander, and Alessandra so flighty and unmanageable that even Edith had been forced to bring her home to London to learn some common sense.

“I suggest a compromise,” she said, feeling the peculiar sensation that she was once again a young woman negotiating a peace treaty between a flighty younger sister and a stern older brother. “For every party Erica attends, *you*, Alessa, must agree to hear one lecture at the Institute.”

“Auntie!” groaned Erica. Alessandra looked intrigued.

“Perhaps I shall marry a mechanic, after all. Are any of them handsome?”

“They are *educated*,” said Erica flatly. “They are *intelligent*. Before this century is out, women will be educated in equal measure.”

“But *cara mia*, if educated men are not more handsome than silly men, I don’t see any reason...”

Isobel managed to contain her laughter until the two girls had moved away, arguing contentedly.

Lucius let out a low whistle. “Daisy and Edith certainly knew what they were doing, forcing those two to spend their time together. They’re good for each other.”

“Quite. If they manage to reach Christmas without murdering each other, they’ll be best of friends.” Isobel shot him a sly look. “And who knows? Alessa may be very happy

with a handsome mechanic. I've heard that marrying landscape architects, for example, can bring a noblewoman *immense* satisfaction."

For once, Lucius missed her invitation to flirt. He was still watching their nieces as they ambled through the palm trees, arm in arm, discussing the relative merits of good looks versus academics in a mixture of English and Italian. "It's a different world, isn't it," he said, turning back to Isobel with a wistful smile. "Though perhaps not different enough. Perhaps Alessa could marry a tradesman and maintain her position – if he were rich enough. And Erica is right, I'm sure. Women will be attending universities before the end of the decade. But will it help them find good husbands?"

Isobel let her head rest for a moment on his shoulder. They had reached a quiet little arbour in the sun-warmed Palm House, and took a moment to rest there together, breathing in the peace of the trees.

"I think you and I have done our part for the cause of marrying for love," she said. "The young ones will have to find their own way and blaze their own trails." Then, at last, she caught his gaze, and it was only a moment before she had drawn that old sparkle into his grey eyes again. "It was not so terribly hard for us, after all. I remember getting along reasonably well after we wed."

He raised an eyebrow. "Reasonably?"

"Despite all the sacrifices." She grinned, but it turned to a gasp as he caught her around the waist and pressed a kiss to her lips.

When he let her go, she felt as though she were falling gently back to the ground, brushed by tropical flowers and cushioned by green earth.

"Don't you dare imagine," said Lucius, his voice a husky growl, "that I have ever forgotten what a sacrifice it was. Or how much I adored you for making it."

She let her hands linger on his shoulders, gazing up at him, momentarily lost for words. "But *you* have forgotten, my love,

that I never thought it a sacrifice at all. I knew – I always knew – that it would come right for us. I never doubted you’d be a success. I trusted you every step of the way.” She glanced up at the green glass panes, breathed the warm air. Here was her husband’s greatest achievement – *so far* – cradling them at the heart of its magnificent splendour. “And as usual, it seems I was right. It’s all worked out rather well, hasn’t it?”

Lucius allowed himself a small, satisfied grin, though she couldn’t be sure whether he was more pleased with his wonderful glasshouse or with her waist underneath his hands. “Rather well indeed.”

Isobel recovered enough from the kiss to remember to check about them for prying eyes. “Did you design this particular arbour specifically for lovers to hide in?”

“I could never divulge a trade secret.” He pulled her close. “But perhaps it’s best not to mention this little hideaway to any of the impressionable young ones. They might so easily be led astray...” He stopped, cocking his head to one side.

Isobel heard it, too. Somewhere in the murmur of conversation from the myriad pathways leading about the Palm House, somebody was whistling. A cheery, carefree, untutored whistle, but the tune was nevertheless recognisable.

Isobel laughed and pressed her hands to her cheeks, blushing though there was no one but Lucius to see her.

“Concerto in C major?” Lucius hazarded. “Mr Babbage’s fifth.”

She gave him a little push. “G major. Though I believe that gentleman is whistling in F.”

“Oh, then we must go and correct him!” Lucius caught her by the arm and tugged her towards the whistling, while Isobel resisted him, laughing helplessly.

“Don’t you dare! You dreadful tease!”

They emerged back onto the pathway, both struggling to maintain the appearance of decorum. With any luck, her flushed face and breathlessness would be attributed to her

laughter – though what the visitors of Kew Gardens imagined she had found to laugh so hard about, she couldn't say.

“We must go outside and find the others,” she said. “Prevent Erica from strangling Alessa. And rescue Decimus from a spanking by Selina.”

“What do you suppose our boy's done to deserve that?”

“It's been five minutes. He'll have found something.”

They emerged from the dimmer light of the glasshouse into bright sunshine, Kew Gardens unrolling before them in late summer splendor.

In the distance, on the lawn beside the lake, several large blankets were spread out and occupied by laden picnic baskets, bottles of lemonade, and Isobel's three sisters waving fans as they watched the gentlemen at cricket and tried to stop the younger children from spreading strawberry jam over their faces. Alex had pushed up his shirtsleeves and was handily outbowling Malcolm's eldest son, as the others shouted out heckles and encouragement. Decimus had abandoned his hat entirely and was darting between the trees with his younger cousins. Erica, eldest of the new generation, sat in the shade and sketched, while Alessa lounged in the full glare of the sun and waved her fan at the gentlemen walking down the nearby path.

They were not often all together. Time and business and the pressures of busy lives kept the Balfour siblings apart more often than not. But, whenever they were reunited, they were as they had always been.

A family. Happy, troublesome, ever-expanding. Impossible at times, but never less than deeply beloved all the same.

“*Decimus Whitby!*” came Selina's cry. “*You stop that this minute!*”

Isobel met Lucius's gaze, shared his quiet laughter, and took his hand, leading him across the grass to join their family.



*How DID Miss Daisy Morton turn impending disaster into a betrothal to one of London's most powerful men? Read [**A Duke She Can't Refuse**](#) to see a fake engagement become something much sweeter...*

SIGN up to Gemma's mailing list to be the first to know when sparks fly and romance blooms between Cassandra Whitby and the last man on earth she ever thought she'd fall for...

Sword-Crossed Lovers is out in Autumn 2022!

You'll receive two completely **free** Regency novellas to satisfy your cravings for sweet romance while you wait.

[Click here to sign up now](#)

ALSO BY GEMMA BLACKWOOD

The Impossible Balfours

A Duke She Can't Refuse

The Last Earl Standing

A Viscount is a Girl's Best Friend

No Dukes Need Apply

What an Heiress Wants

Scandals of Scarccliffe Hall

The Earl's Secret Passion

The Duke's Hidden Desire

The Lady He Longed For

The Baron's Inconvenient Bride

Redeeming the Rakes

The Duke Suggests a Scandal

Taming the Wild Captain

Let the Lady Decide

Make Me a Marchioness

Standalone Novels

Destiny's Duchess

The Duke's Defiant Debutante