



Prologue

Halfway through the harpist's performance, Sabrina Carlisle slipped through the French doors of the Gilmores' music room, her eyes fixed on the six-foot rose arbor near the back of the garden. It would afford her the privacy she desperately needed. Her breath came in quick gasps, and she put a hand to her heaving chest. This extreme reaction had happened before: a physical attack of such fear and panic that she could not breathe, could not think, and most certainly could not recover herself in that room full of people.

She moved beneath the arbor woven with climbing roses and pressed her back into the thorny branches of the hedgerow that spread out on either side of the archway. The needle-pricks helped ground her in time and place, and the yellow roses of the climbing vine helped remind her of better days. Whatever happened tonight, she needed to keep her wits about her, which meant she had to calm her mind.

Breathe, she commanded herself silently the way Therese, her housekeeper, had coached her on similar occasions. *Think of nothing but your next breath.*

She forced her mind away from any other thought.

Breathe in.

Hold.

Breathe out.

Hold.

She began to breathe the heady scent of the roses in through her nose and out through her mouth in audible release, focusing on the vibrations of the air moving in her chest and throat and mouth. Picturing Hortencia's rose garden in Wimbledon helped her remember the peace she often felt there. Richard never came to the rose garden his mother had designed, and Sabrina was careful not to let on how much she liked it so that he would not somehow take it away from her.

A minute passed.

Then two.

Finally, the grinding sensation in her brain subsided, and her thoughts began to clear. Not clear like a stream racing over rocks, but clear like the still pond located in the center of Hortencia's garden. How she wished she were in that garden now instead of this one that was not her own.

She patted at the sweat on her forehead with the back of her gloved hand, careful not to disrupt the curls around her face, and then moved her hand to her belly, only barely rounded beneath her high-waisted dress.

Richard won't hurt his own child, she told herself. *Which means he won't hurt me.*

The affirmation had proved true for three months now, ever since she'd told him she was finally going to have a child. That he'd not hurt her since that day almost convinced her that he would never raise his hand to her again.

Almost.

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Perhaps that security was why she'd been lulled into foolishly commenting on his poor luck at the racetrack. Why had she said such a thing? And in company too. She knew better than to embarrass him. And she knew the look that had flashed over his face when he'd turned sharply toward her.

When he'd announced to the same company that they would not be staying in London for the weekend as previously planned, the old but not forgotten panic had begun to build. Richard was careful in London, where there were morning callers and daily social events she was expected to attend, but at Rose Haven, the Wimbledon estate some seven miles from the city, no one would call on her. No one would know what happened once the doors had closed them in. She had learned to defend herself over the years even though it infuriated Richard into greater brutality, but the baby . . . She didn't dare do anything that would increase the violence.

How is this my life? What would I give for a second chance to make a different future?

Sabrina pressed on her belly to remind herself it was real. She had reached the halfway point in the pregnancy and had only another four and a half months to go. Therese had impressed upon Richard the delicate nature of Sabrina's condition, and he'd respected that, refraining from exerting his dominance over her.

She'd had a growing hope that this child could change everything. Remedy his rage. Soften his heart. Give them a place to build from so they could have the kind of marriage God intended. She did not expect to be cherished by such a man as Richard, but as the mother of his child, she'd have some security. She could no longer be so easily replaced, and therefore, he would not handle her so roughly.

Right?

Could she still believe that?

She *had* to believe it. She would be a mother, and for the first time since Mama's death, she would have someone to love her. What would that feel like? What would it mean to hold her own child in her arms? A part of her. A part of Mama. A future.

Four and a half more months.

A giggle from the other side of the hedge froze the air in her lungs. A male laugh, low and seductive, closely followed, and Sabrina closed her eyes as though that could hide her. There had been several numbers left in the program when she'd slipped into the garden, and she'd thought she'd have time to compose herself before returning in time for the final performance. How would she explain herself, hiding behind a wall of roses, alone in the dark?

Tears of frustration and anticipated embarrassment pricked the backs of her eyes. She nearly gave into them, except then she would rejoin the party with puffy eyes that would give away her distress.

She looked around for better cover when a man suddenly came into view. He was walking backward through the archway, leading a woman by her gloved hand toward the dark corner where Sabrina had sought her own refuge. He stepped back far enough that he faced Sabrina—her back against the foliage that blocked her from the view of his companion. He stumbled a step before coming to a stop. The man pulled his eyebrows together in confusion.

Please, she prayed, widening her eyes and shaking her head slightly to emphasize how much she needed his help to remain unseen. *Please*.

"I think there must be a better corner," the man said. He held Sabrina's eyes another moment before shifting his gaze to the

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woman he'd kept, literally, at arm's length. He stepped back toward the house, and their laughter moved away with their voices until Sabrina was alone again.

Sabrina took a shaky breath, sending a grateful prayer to the heavens for the stranger having spared her. If only she could orchestrate a means to be spared from Richard.

Perhaps if she were particularly attentive and complimentary for the rest of the evening, his anger would cool by the time they returned home. She could praise his hunting last week—he'd brought home three pheasants in only one morning. Maybe if he drank enough he would forget his anger. The baby's movement had become stronger this week; if *he* could feel it, perhaps both she and their child would become more human to him. More real. Maybe he would see both of them as worthy of his protection.

As confidently as she could, she stepped away from the wall of roses and looked around the empty garden. The notes of a flute carried from the back doors of the music room as she brushed down her dress and straightened her spine. She had taken only a few steps toward the house when a man stepped into her path.

She put a hand to her mouth to keep from screaming, then lowered it as she recognized him as the one whose tryst she'd interrupted. He put his hand on her arm and steered her back behind the roses. Her heart was in her throat. If Richard learned she was in the garden with a man . . .

"Are you all right, madam?"

She blinked at him. "What?"

"Are you all right? When I came upon you a bit ago, you looked . . . Well, you looked terrified."

The man's honest concern brought tears to her eyes, and she tried to swallow the lump in her throat so she could assure him

she was fine. Except she wasn't fine. Her plans to deflect Richard's anger might not work. They might return to Wimbledon this very night.

"May I help you?" he pressed when she did not answer.

Sabrina blinked. "Help me?"

He smiled sheepishly, as though embarrassed for having assumed himself capable of the assistance he offered. "I am hardly the heroic type, madam, but if I can assist you in some way, I will do what I can. My name is Harold Stillman."

She'd never heard his name before, and her wariness increased even as hope fluttered in her chest. "You are new to London," she surmised. She was tapped into the best gossip networks of the *ton*, and she'd have heard of a man like him if he'd been in Town for any length of time.

He was handsome—golden-haired, blue-eyed, tall and lean—and he carried himself with the arrogant confidence of youth and freedom. There was a roughness to him too, however, a sense that he didn't quite belong. It made her wonder where he'd come from.

She had struggled to find her place in the Polite World too. Being the illegitimate daughter of the duke of Anglesey had its privilege; for instance, she had always been called Lady Sabrina, even though she did not technically deserve the address, but the privileges could not overcome the scandal of her birth completely. She'd married Richard because of the security he offered. His grandfather had been an earl, and his family was both wealthy and well-respected. He gave her a legitimacy she'd never had before. However, she'd paid too dear a price for that security. She thought of the child she carried, and she wondered if she were not bringing in someone else to pay too high a price alongside her.

"I *am* new to Town," Mr. Stillman said. He looked past her

toward the light of the house. “And out of place and eager and all those things us young bucks are when we arrive in such a place as this.” He rolled his eyes and waved his free hand in the air. “Lady Gilmore is my friend’s aunt, so I don’t know many of the other guests, but is there someone I can fetch for you? Your husband, perhaps?”

“Not him,” she said quickly, then felt heat in her cheeks when he lifted his eyebrows. Luckily, her anxiety led to a quick solution this time—perhaps the perfect solution. “But there is someone else you could alert for me, if you are sincere in your offer.”

“Of course,” he said with a nod, a glimmer of eagerness in his blue eyes.

“There is a woman inside the music hall,” Sabrina said. “Her name is Lady Townsend. She is wearing a green ostrich feather in her dark hair and an emerald pendant.” Sabrina touched her throat to indicate its placement.

His expression was intent as he focused on her words.

“Could you tell her that I am ill, and direct her this way? I shall move closer to the house once you leave so she will find me easily enough.”

“Certainly. Is that all?”

“Yes,” Sabrina said, her optimism of this newest idea growing.

Lady Gloria Townsend was Sabrina’s dearest friend in London, and had been from their very first introduction during Sabrina’s Season. She had not held Sabrina’s birth against her and championed her in the social circles Sabrina could now take for granted.

Sabrina had not announced the pregnancy because it was not yet obvious, and the *ton* was oddly uncomfortable with pregnant women. Once word was out, invitations would slow, and Sabrina

would be expected to remove to Rose Haven in anticipation of her confinement.

Gloria would understand all of that once Sabrina revealed the secret, and she would insist on a visit tomorrow morning to discuss the particulars. Richard would not be able to take Sabrina from London until the other women of her acquaintance had all come to get their share of the news. Sabrina had been hoping for a child for five long years, and to finally be on the brink of motherhood was reason to celebrate with her friends. As long as she remained in London, she—and the baby—would be safe.

Sabrina being ill from the pregnancy would also explain her leaving the music room in the first place, furthering the protection she needed should Richard have noticed her disappearance.

“Having you pass my message to Lady Townsend would be a great help to me, Mr. Stillman.”

Mr. Stillman looked toward the house, then back at her. “*Are* you ill? Is that why you are here?”

She could tell by his expression that he suspected something else. Something more. Something that better explained the terror he’d noted on her face when he’d first come across her. It was unfair to lie to him when he’d come to her rescue, and yet she could not tell him the truth. “If you could fetch Lady Townsend for me, I would be forever in your debt.”

A smile suddenly lit the young man’s face, so bright in the darkness that she had to blink against it. The face she’d already deemed handsome was suddenly breathtaking. “I am all about having beautiful woman in my debt.”

He winked, and she made a sound that was part gasp and part laughter. Such boldness would do him no favors in such high circles as that of Lord and Lady Gilmore, and yet that same boldness might just save her tonight.

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“I shall fetch Lady Townsend. Who shall I say has asked for her?”

“Sabrina,” she said, then hurried to clarify. “Lady Sabrina.”

Mr. Stillman raised his eyebrows, then nodded. “I shall do as you ask, Lady Sabrina.” He took her hand and raised it to his lips, keeping his eyes on hers. “And I hope that one day we might meet again under better circumstances.”

Sabrina was appropriately offended by his suggestion—she was a married woman, soon to be a mother—and yet she felt a rush of validation. This man thought she was beautiful. This man was kind, even if he was obviously a rake. This man treated her with gentleness. They held each other’s eyes until she remembered to speak.

“Lady Townsend,” she whispered, needing him to leave, needing to begin the process that would take her safely back to the party.

Mr. Stillman lowered her hand and nodded. “Lady Townsend.”



Chapter One

Six Years Later

Harry Stillman swirled the set of dice within the cup and would have prayed if he were that sort of man. Instead, he rubbed the pad of his left thumb against the tip of his ring finger for luck, held his breath, and flung the dice, tracking them with his eyes as they tumbled across the brown velvet of the gaming table.

The dice settled, both showing five dots—a total of ten.

“Chance!” the men positioned around the table yelled.

Harry sighed in relief as the setter gathered the dice and dropped them back in Harry’s cup.

Harry moved his hand in a circle so the dice swirled and tumbled inside. Eight times counterclockwise, then six times clockwise because six was the number he’d called out for this round—the main. On his first roll, he had wanted to roll the main. Now that he was in the chance round, however, a six would lose everything he’d won back tonight, which was almost enough to hold Malcolm off another week.

He finished his sixth clockwise circle, rubbed his thumb against his ring finger again, held his breath, and threw the dice.

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The crowd cheered, Harry could breathe again, and the setter added eighty pounds to the growing pile of winnings—enough for Malcolm’s payment plus nearly enough to catch up rent for Harry’s rooms. His landlord had threatened to lock him out if he did not settle his debt soon.

The thin line of the setter’s mouth added to Harry’s triumph. The unhappier the house, the better things were for Harry.

“Way to show the rest of us up, Stillman,” Ward said as he fell into the seat next to Harry, knocking him with his shoulder.

Harry did not take his eyes off the setter.

Ward placed a glass of warm scotch in front of Harry, who slung it back in one swallow. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt.

Ten hours of going from one gaming hell to another in search of the right luck had left Harry’s once snowy-white shirt stained with ale down the front and soaked with sweat through the collar and under the arms. He had no idea where his cravat was.

There had been a time when he cared about his presentation, but he could not remember how long ago that was. Probably back when he gambled for the thrill instead of to save his skin and drank for the looseness of it instead of to stave off the shakes or the disgust he felt at what he’d made of himself these last years. Life had become a day-to-day existence with the day’s quality defined by the winning or losing he’d done within that twenty-four-hour period.

“You’re not even going to thank me for the drink?” Ward teased, though there was no mirth in his tone.

“Thank you,” Harry said dryly, his eyes fixed on the dice as the setter picked them up again. It was bad luck to take your eyes off the dice. Harry held out his dice cup as his stomach growled. There was no time for something so irrelevant as food.

He won the next round, and the next. Each win drew more people to the table in the dimly lit corner of the club. Harry never looked up, and his pile of winnings grew. Success should have lessened his anxiety, but it didn't. Malcolm expected payment by noon tomorrow—or, rather, noon today. If Harry's luck held and he could pay a double payment, he'd buy himself a full month to sell the western parcel that would pay off the principal of Malcolm's loan.

Another round started as Ward returned with another drink. Harry ignored this one, his stomach burning and his head pounding. The smoke in the room was thick enough to choke on.

"Can we call it a night, Stillman? It's nearly three o'clock in the morning."

"Not yet."

Ward leaned in and lowered his voice. "Every round is a new risk. You're farther ahead than you've been in months."

"Bad luck!" Harry turned to scowl at his friend. One never talked about losing when at the tables. It was almost as bad as having a woman stand on your left side. Thankfully, the light-skirts who ran pretty fingers down a man's arm and laughed at jokes that were not funny thinned out considerably after one o'clock in the morning. However, women had not served as a distraction for him for months now.

Harry ran a hand through his hair, which felt as grimy as his skin, willing his heart to slow. He began to swirl the cup—his main was nine this round, so he needed to swirl the cup eight times counterclockwise—eight was his universally lucky number—and nine times clockwise.

". . . Stillman's got a fortune waiting if he'd just find himself a wife."

"Shut your mouth!" Harry yelled, snapping his head toward

Ward, who sat backward in his chair, elbows propped on the table.

Ward raised his eyebrows. “I was just telling these blokes that I don’t know why you spend so much time here when you’ve a fortune just waiting to be—”

“Stop!” Harry barked as his heart sped up even more. It had been a mistake to tell Ward about Uncle Elliott’s *gracious* offer—an inheritance if Harry married a genteel bride—but Harry had been too drunk to be wise the night it had come out. Harry was too drunk to be wise most nights. He was not too drunk tonight, however, to keep Ward from revealing private information.

“Why should I not tell your *friends*?” Ward challenged, his eyes bleary with drink but also anger. He wanted to leave.

If only Harry could.

“Afraid the rest of us will be jealous of your opportunity?” Ward pressed. He was trying to pick a fight, likely thinking it would force Harry out of the hall, but he did not understand that Harry *needed* to stay. Ward was as much a gambler as Harry was, but he had better income and more understanding parents. Harry’s parents were dead, Uncle Elliott had cut him off more than a year ago, and he’d burned through his quarterly profits—such as they were—within weeks of the last payment.

“I shall ask you to keep my business private, Mr. Ward,” Harry said through his teeth.

Harry tried to focus his attention on the game, but his thoughts had been jumbled by Ward’s reminder of the world outside this club. There was no doubt in Harry’s mind that Uncle Elliott’s “bribe” that he settled upon his nieces and nephews when they made a good marriage had mostly been directed at Harry—Uncle Elliott had never liked Harry very much. Two of Harry’s

cousins—Peter and Timothy—had already saddled themselves with wives, but Harry had no plans to do the same.

Harry had inherited his father's estate, which meant he *could* make his own way. However, Uncle Elliott was no longer paying Harry's debts now that he'd presented an opportunity that he believed would turn Harry into a respectable gentleman.

Harry had seen his uncle only once since his explanation and presentation of the "marriage inheritance" plan almost a year ago. Harry had lost nearly five hundred pounds the night before and had been in the depths of misery, so many of the details had been lost on him.

He'd been able to sell fifty acres of his land soon after meeting with Uncle Elliott, however, which paid off his debts and allowed him to live well through the fall and winter off the remaining profits and improved luck at the tables.

In January, he'd received his profits for the last quarter of the previous year and been surprised at the decreased revenue. The fields had not produced well, his solicitor had explained, and there were concerns about the old steward's ability to manage. Two tenants had moved to a neighboring estate due to unfinished repairs Harry had neglected for three years. The solicitor had suggested Harry spend some time at the estate setting things right and improving profitability, but Harry had been sure that the faster way to make up for the lost profits was at the tables.

Not long after that meeting, however, his good luck had begun to change. Instead of the slow increases between losses, he began leaving the clubs with lighter pockets than he'd entered with. His anxiety about that led to more drinking, which reduced his luck even more. He took greater risks, which led to bigger wins for a while, but bigger losses in the end.

He'd taken his first loan from Malcolm in March, and the

principal had steadily built through the spring until he'd had to sell another forty acres in order to pay Malcolm in full. He had been determined not to borrow again but somehow, he had.

He'd written to Uncle Elliott two weeks ago, desperate, but received a brief response—Uncle Elliott was sorry for the difficulty but had already laid open a course of success for Harry, which was all the assistance he would give.

Having a rich and titled uncle had bought Harry a great deal of latitude with lenders in the past, and if it got out that Lord Howardsford was no longer a resource for securing Harry's debts, he might find doors closed to him.

Ward cleared his throat and coughed twice—a signal the old friends had developed for when one recognized the need to get out of a poor situation. But Harry was on a roll, quite literally.

He'd already begun the process to sell a full hundred acres of his land in order to pay off Malcolm for good. The sale would put his estate in serious jeopardy of being able to support itself, let alone support him living in London, but he'd promised himself that after all was settled, he would spend a year addressing the needs of his estate. Harry was not so far gone that he did not recognize he had a problem with gaming and drink. They ran him like a mill, and he would be crushed if he did not find a way off the wheel.

He just needed one big win—either at the tables or through this newest sale of land—and he could get himself out of debt and out of London.

“Your roll,” the setter said, drawing Harry's attention back to the game.

Harry stared at the cup, which was still but for some tremor in his hand. He couldn't remember where in his count he'd stopped swirling. He swallowed the burst of panic that rose in

his throat. To not execute the precise routine would be bad luck, but he couldn't turn out the dice to start over because the dice touching the table would count as his roll.

"Come on, man," Ward whined. "Can we please bring this night to an end?"

"Your roll, Mr. Stillman," the setter said again, drumming his fingers on the other side of the table.

Harry had bet his entire winnings on the last three rolls and was nearly to fifteen hundred pounds. If he won this round and doubled his winnings, he could pay almost every debt he'd accrued and get out of London by the end of the month. Escape. Redemption. Freedom.

Everyone was watching him, convincing Harry that he must have finished the counterclockwise rolls. He began the clockwise rolls, but his breathing was short and his vision tunneled. This was all wrong. Harry touched his thumb and ring finger together before holding his breath and throwing the dice. All sound disappeared as though he were underwater.

The dice seemed to roll longer than usual, one of them hitting the side of the sunken table before stopping. A five—and a . . . six.

A wave of sound returned, a mix of gasps and groans that roared like a thunderstorm in his ears.

Eleven?

That can't be right, Harry thought. He stared. He recounted. He couldn't breathe.

The setter used his stick to pull the enormous pile of money from Harry's side of the table.

Harry jumped to his feet and reached across the table to pull the stick from the man's hand. "No!"

He threw the stick to the side and lunged for the pile of coin

and paper claims. He needed three hundred pounds to make the week's payment and secure his rooms for the rest of the month. He had to get out with at least that much.

The setter lunged forward, but Harry knelt on the table and elbowed the man in the face, sending him to the floor. Harry desperately grabbed handfuls of coin, intending to stuff them into his boots, if necessary.

Someone grabbed Harry from behind, pulling him from the table. The money scattered from his fingers, the tinkling of coins sounding like discordant chords on a pianoforte as Harry landed hard on the floor.

The setter's booming voice overpowered the din. "All patrons will stand where they are and raise their hands overhead or have your skulls caved in by the protectors of this club!"

The crack of a club against a man's skull reverberated through the room a moment before the man fell unconscious to the floor, his limp hands releasing the coins he'd been fisting. Every other man froze, rose to their feet, and lifted their hands over their heads as commanded.

Except Harry.

Already on the floor, he rolled to his stomach and reached for a scattering of coin an arm's-length away. A man kicked his arm out of the way, and the hall's protectors grabbed him under each arm and dragged him toward the door before he could make another attempt.

Harry fought like a man drowning. "That is my money!" he roared, kicking and twisting in an attempt to escape the restraining hands of men twice his size. He cursed and screamed and threatened until he was thrown head over end into the alley behind the discreetly marked door of the club. The air was knocked

from his lungs, and he groaned in pain and frustration, his face pressed to the wet and dirty cobbles.

“No entry for sixty days, Stillman!”

The door banged shut as Harry rolled onto his side, his entire body throbbing. After catching his breath, he tried to stand, but the arm that the guard had kicked buckled when he put weight on it, and his feet slipped in the oily refuse of the alley. He fell onto his back, unable to muster the energy to make another attempt. He pressed his hands against his aching side as an unexpected wave of emotion gripped him.

What am I going to do? He choked down a sob. If he didn't pay today's interest payment, he would default on his loan to Malcolm, which would require the principal be paid in full, plus a penalty, within two weeks. The western portion of his land could not sell that quickly, or for enough to cover the debt, which would continue to rise by ten pounds every day.

Dear God, he wailed in his mind but could not finish. Why would God hear the desperate pleas of a pathetic man like him?