

Chapter 3

The Second William's Estate Being of Amber Flickers at Scarlet Whisperings

Surrey, England

Percy paced back and forth, fighting the urge, but it was futile. He picked up his blackberry and called the Compton Estate. There was no answer. He called again, and alas, no change of fate. He felt silly for calling the second time, and at once wished he could rescind the call and wipe it from the annals of history as well as his caller log, but what was done, was done. In hormonal frustration Percy threw the phone into the wall and rubbed his hair. Did she have caller ID? Was he being filtered? He knew he should have just texted, as calling before three days spoke uncouth, while texting was a welcome exception clause from such social stigma. Texting was neutral and innocuous, he knew this, yet had strayed from his better judgement.

He then thought to text anyways, wishing he had done it before instead of calling and placing himself on the chopping block. He retrieved his phone.

Hey Lucy. How r u this plsnt aftn? Was wondering f I may b so bold as to call on u or even come n C U 4 at ur estate? C U soon?

He pushed the send button, sending the text along with good intentions out into the world, hoping the universe would hear his heart. He sat waiting for a moment. And then another. With each passing moment his heart began to winch tighter within his bosom. The agony! Nigh too much bear for such a poor lad of soft heart and mind as he!

Why was she not responding! She must be screening me. I know it!

Knowing that he was the only man alive who had a phone, let alone a cellular phone did

little to ease his fears. He had been a hopeless wreck since the night before when he returned home from the ball. His mind was seared with heartfelt memories of his second cousin, Lucy Compton: the woman who now held the keys to his heart. He desired her. He needed her. But what was he to do?

A despondent Percy then dressed himself with half effort, his kerchief flimsily tied in a square knot and walked down the stairs to where his dutiful servant had been waiting with a breakfast tray. Percy solemnly nibbled on a scone and sipped his tea before he headed for the door. As he passed the greeting room, he noticed from the corner of his eye his mother knitting a quilt through sobbing tears. He wanted to continue on and leave from the house as he knew this was his mother's way of asking attention. Yet, he could not just ignore her as his conscience knew it was his obligation as a dutiful son to pay heed.

“What is troubling you mother?”

“Oh!” she looked up to feign surprise. “Oh, William. I do not know what to do with your sister Mary. I am so worried for her well being. I have had many requests from many of our neighbors who wish to have brunch with the family, and would like to bring their sons with them, albeit they were not so forward, but I know their ways. Such shame upon our family.....”

William raised his hands in befuddlement. “How are we to be worried for Mary's well-being if she has plenty of beneficial suitors calling for her? And just to be clear, which Mary?”

His mother gave him a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, which Mary are we talking about?”

“The only Mary I know of: my daughter. Are you alright, dear Percy? You look pale.”

Mother Williams walked up to her son, despite his physical cues to refrain. “Are you feeling

under the weather my dear boy?"

"No mother. I am fine, thank you," Percy rebuffed. "Mother, you are aware you have a second daughter named Mary, right? The red head?"

Mother shook her head, drawing a complete blank.

"You know?.... The mute?"

Mother gasped as her memory served. "Oh...the mongrel."

"Mother, I hardly think it-"

"Oh, Glenn Beck is on my dear. We shall continue this conversation at another time. You should rest," she said flippantly as she turned her back to him and walked out of the room.

Glad to have an excuse for his conversation with his egocentric mother cut short, yet hurt at the same to be so casually discarded, Percy walked out to the parlor, rationalizing against impulse until at last he relented and committed to step out of his own hearth towards Lucy's. He jogged with a trot over to the stables to retrieve his horse.

Two minutes later, he reached the Compton estate: Tear of a Meadowlark at the Dawn of Remembrance. The Comptons were the most influential plutocrats of Surrey County, finding wealth and influence through their keen ability to devise and patent manufactured names for budding apartment developments. They held the monopoly on the lucrative field. Percy reveled with a deep breath of gratitude, feeling encouraged to see artistic merit at last duly noted and adequately compensated.

He dismounted, handing his hat and gloves to the stable boy, whom Percy could not help but notice wore a ghastly shiner under his otherwise pleasant set of blue eyes. The stable boy felt the attentive eyes of Percy upon him and quickly cowed away, escorting the horse to the stables.

Percy frowned to himself at the odd behavior but then chuckled, "Silly peasants."

He walked up the granite steps and once more like he did two nights last, reveled at the sight of the Compton's glorious revived Tudor estate which was made from a delightful combination of brick, sandstone and granite. He took a breath for courage before pulling the bell. A moment later, the door lightly opened, but it was too dark for Percy to see who answered.

"Yes?"

"Percy Williams the XIX, requesting an audience with the Lady Lucy."

"Did you receive invitation?"

"No. I was told I did not need such."

A pause.

"Just a moment."

The door croaked shut, leaving Percy to stand there sweating in his own anxiety; heart nearly penetrating his throat, sweat forming on his brow. Percy recited in his mind what he was going to say. It was fail-proof. He was sure of it. He coolly wiped the sweat away. He was ready to ask for Lucy's hand in marriage. He was to have her. He was entitled.

The door opened, but the help who opened happened to trap himself in the corner behind the door, so Percy was unable to identify the servant, who then called over it,

"They are waiting for you in the parlor, sir."

The first woman to greet him was not Lucy, but her mother, Lady Compton, a vicious wolverine who scared off even the most aggressive of suitors with her cold, basilisk stare. But she smiled as Percy entered. He was relieved.

"Well, if it isn't my dear nephew Percy, the war hero. I am delighted you have come to

visit me, your dear Auntie. I would have been crushed had you not. Shame it took you so long though, as I was beginning to wonder that maybe you no longer had any time for us home grown, after you have become somewhat of a world traveler, that any woman would desire to have married into their family.”

Percy was thrown a little off-kilter, first with the wave of embarrassment that comes with too much praise, but followed with the suspicion that his Aunt was actually hitting on him. And not for her daughter, but for herself.

But he was proper, “Thank you, Lady Compton. And you thought wrong: how could I ever be above my dear Auntie, and forget the woman who raised me when mother was too busy burning tear-stained roses in the fireplaces every morning?”

“Oh Percy, you always were such a charming young man, and now you are fully grown, and still as charming as ever. Please do come in for some tea.”

Percy obliged, but feigned a chaotic show of hands to make it look like he had only intended on staying for a moment and could not possibly intrude. He walked in to find the sound of duet harps playing at his soul from back in the drawing room.

His heart wept and rejoiced at the same time.

He sat in the family greeting room, accepted his cup of tea from a servant, but then recognized him. *Cyril, the bastard? Had he been the one who first answered the door?* Percy remembered Cyril. He had always been unpleasant as a boy with his sooty demeanor that spelt nothing but contempt for the world.

And Percy had not made it an easy for Cyril, as Percy somewhat regrettably and shamefully recalled the time he had guillotined all of Cyril's dolls, and told him those were not

for boys to play with. Percy wanted to stand up and shake Cyril's hand now, and apologize for his past deeds to a member of the help, but knew that if he were to do so publicly, such a fiasco would carry all the way to London and his family would lose their title and estates, and most importantly their prestige. He would wait for another time.

He instead, opted to simply nod at Cyril, who in turn replied in kind and walked out. Cyril held his poise to show indifference at the presence of the Percy, but inside he was a mess. The emotions inside of him were bursting at his loins; hate, anger, malice, envy and something that might be confused with love, all festered in the cauldron within his bosom. Once Cyril was in the confines of his cubby-hole of a room under the staircase, he calmed his nerves by applying lipstick and mascara.

“It is so good to have your company Percy. We have not seen anyone from your family, since, well, your brother passed.” Madame Compton said.

“Yes, about that-” Percy sat up, hoping to finally receive an answer about his brother's fate, but was interrupted when at last Lucy walked into the room in calculated timing so as to not be too soon, nor too late. Her hands were clasped together properly as she donned a smile in a peach day dress. His heart burst. He fell in love all over again.

“Hello, mother,” Lucy said as she entered the room, not paying Percy one look, torturing him as she had been properly conditioned. Rather than acknowledging Percy with eye contact she asked, “Mother, who are our visitors?”

“Oh Lucy, it is your cousin, Percy, who has just returned home from the war.”

Only then did Lucy turn to face her guest. In a cruel act, she stared at him quizzically, “Oh yes, from the ball the night before last. You were nice enough to ask me to dance, among the

many.”

Percy remained stern, not letting Lucy see her casualness was indeed tearing him up inside. “Yes, we danced, but I must say your sister was much more to my liking.”

Lucy widened her eyes in shock, but regained her composure. “Yes, she is quite the athlete. But, she has the clap...” It was a false statement, but a necessary one.

Percy raised his eyebrows, conceding the fact. “Dear thing. It is too bad penicillin won't be discovered for another 48 years. But, she has many other redeeming qualities, that will no doubt find her a worthy, beneficial suitor: her strong chin, petite nose and big blue eyes are enough to win a man's heart, chlamydia or not. But, in my case, I need one to be of fairer and purer breed.”

“Oh, that is interesting that you should say that Percy, because Lucy here...”

“Mother, please don't embarrass me and our guest as well,” Lucy interjected.

“Oh, nonsense Lucy, Percy is a self-assured man. Why, he has seen men dying in battle and saved them at the risk of his life. Seeing this truth, I trust that Percy will not be abashed by what his dear auntie has to say. Is this right, Percy?”

Percy wanted to say “no” to the assumption, as well to clarify what he actually had done in the war.

In truth, he was no war hero, and had never saved anyone's life. It was actually the other Percy Williams in his regiment that had dragged four men back behind the lines of safety, en route to receiving multiple gunshot wounds and a bayonet stab to his kidney. Risking his life for the lives of four other men, who all died of infection anyway, proving it all for not, the other Percy Williams would pass as well a few weeks later playing Russian roulette.

Our Percy now being the only living Percy Williams in the regiment, without any action on his part, inherited that name and legacy. Percy, the protagonist of whom we are speaking of had actually spent most of the war betting on cockfights.

Percy had tried numerous times, even more so since his return home to clarify the confusion but everyone just assumed he was being modest and humble, which only caused the praises to flow more effusively.

He decided to not even bother try explaining this time, nor did he truly want to as he was going for broke at the moment in matters of Lucy's affection, and would thus take all the help he could get. So he accepted his aunt's ignorant compliments. "You may say whatever you wish to say in your own home, Auntie Compton."

"Ah, and so polite as well. My dear Percy, I think it would be a splendid idea if you took us two out on a walk for a picnic by the pond. It is such a lovely day, and would be a shame to waste it."

"Mother, you do not request favors of guests!"

Lady Compton shushed Lucy up with a hiss.

Percy nodded his consent to the request, "If you wish it so, madam."

An hour after changing out of their home dresses and corsets, Lucy and Madame Compton came down the steps to find Percy holding Cyril in a head lock.

"Ah, they are ready," Percy said energetically and jumped up to begin brushing himself off. He helped Cyril up and patted him on the buttocks for a job well done.

Cyril straightened his bow tie. "Very good, sir" and then left with his head low and pride

still spread on the floor where Percy had insisted on wrestling to spell his boredom.

Picnic and essentials in Percy's arm, and a stupid looking Pomeranian in the arms of Lucy, they walked out, with each woman on either side of Percy. Lady Compton locked her arm with Percy, while Lucy remained at a safe distance. A distance that showed discomfort, but not one of dislike, rather nervousness and fondness, with an uncertainty of what to do. A calculated distance that spoke of too much thought and thus inadvertently spoke of attraction and interest, if not affection.

Such a wonderful feeling Lucy was experiencing: the beginning of something that may well be the start of a possibility which could lead to a potentially life-altering experience, that could plausibly be the initiation of a feasible relationship.

They approached the pond and laid out their blanket, then helped themselves to a delicious serving of tea and crumpets, with honey basted oats and ginger spiced snaps along with crunches of other exquisite delights. "So, Lucy. If I may speak to you directly and not have your mother, bless her spirit, act as mediator for the rest of the day, what are your hobbies? What do you do with your time, what delights you?"

Lucy put down her little Pomeranian puppy, named George, and let him run over to play with the geese, who in turn attacked him.

"Well Percy..."

"Lucy likes to spend her morning playing the piano and harp-"

"Mother!?"

"What, darling?"

"Did you not just hear Percy ask me directly?"

“Oh, yes. I forget. Where are my manners?”

“Well Percy, as I was saying, before mother interrupted me, yes, I do play the piano and harp in the mornings. After my brunch, I like to read and write. After my nap, I like spend my afternoons cruelly teasing Cyril with malicious flirts, leading him on to believe that he actually has a chance to win my love. Then after supper, I like to sneak out of the house and go watch the inner-county stable boy fight competitions.”

“What!?” Lady Compton shrieked.

“Oh, mother, don't be so shocked. Just because you have not seen me there, does not mean that I have not seen you there placing your bettings.”

Percy creased his brow. He had not heard of such a competition and deduced it must have been a recent establishment that began while he was away. That also would explain the earlier incident of why the stable boy had looked rather haggard and worn this morning when Percy arrived at the estate. “Interesting. Who is the best stable-boy in the county?”

Lucy smiled. “Why Percy, you haven't been to one yet, that is right. I keep forgetting you have been go for so long. Well, it should delight you to know that your very own stable man, Lucious is the best in the county.”

“Is that so?” Percy raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, no he is not,” Lady Compton ejected. “While he does have good speed and a nice jab, he does not have the heart. The talent is there, but Lucious at times is a coaster, too easily content and that will never make a stable boy champion. Theo, of the Jackson Estates is by far the most strong willed-”

“Theo is a numskull, mother. He is too dumb to know when to save his energy or when to

go full out. A true master must keep his opponent guessing what will come next, isn't that right Percy?"

Doing his best to keep up, Percy pliantly conceded with a nod of his head.

"And mother, with Theo you know what will happen every time. One just has to wait until he spends all of his energy flying about all crazed and rabid, like he does."

Lady Compton opened her mouth to interject, but sighed and began to fan herself with concession. Irritated, and jealous of her daughter for stealing all of Percy's attention, Lady Compton began to pout. She tried to hide her disappointment by focusing her attention afar on tiny George, the Pomeranian trying to surface its head to water, only to be plunged back in by the bullying swans.

She smiled to herself. She did not know why she loved her dog so, only that she did.

The rest of the hour passed by in courteous nothings, that could not belie the awkwardness of feelings Percy and Lucy had for each other, nor Lady Compton's jealous pouting. As dusk approached, Percy walked the ladies back to the estate home.

He was invited back the next day.

He bowed them goodnight, and when their door closed, skipped back to his horse. Tomorrow would be a beautiful day, which could not come soon enough.