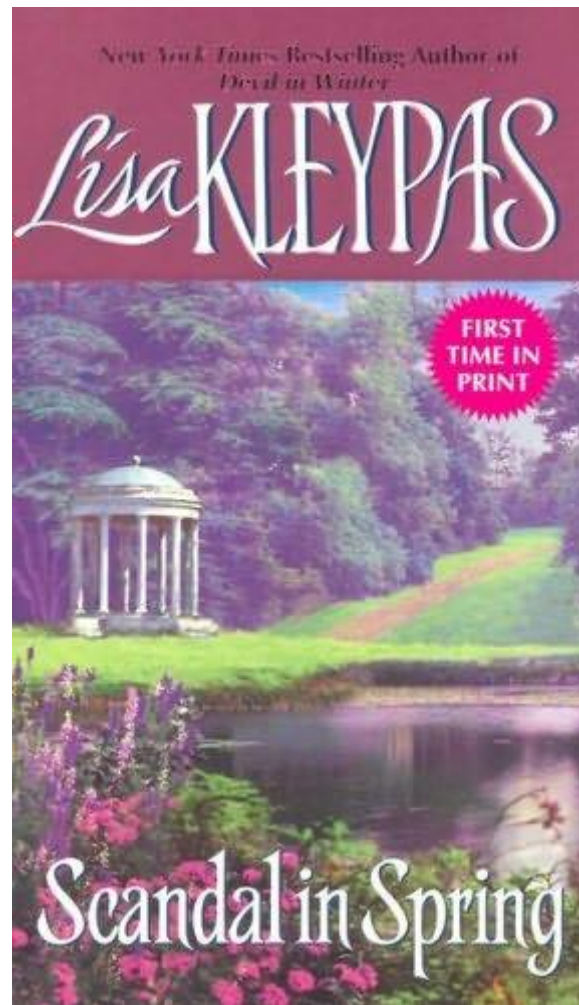


Lisa Kleypas  
Scandal in Spring



## Prologue

“I have made a decision about Daisy’s future,” Thomas Bowman announced to his wife and daughter. “Although Bowmans never like to admit defeat, we cannot ignore reality.”

“What reality is that, Father?” Daisy asked.

“You are not meant for the British peerage.” Frowning, Bowman added, “Or perhaps the peerage isn’t meant for you. I have received a poor rate of return on my investment in your husband-seeking. Do you know what that means, Daisy?”

“I’m an underperforming stock?” she guessed.

One would never guess Daisy was a grown woman of twenty-two at this moment. Small, slim, and dark-haired, she still had the agility and exuberance of a child when other women her age had already become sober young matrons. As she sat with her knees drawn up, she looked like an abandoned china doll in the corner of the settee. It annoyed Bowman to see his daughter holding a book in her lap with a finger stuck between its pages to mark her place. Obviously she could hardly wait for him to finish so she could resume reading.

“Put that down,” he said.

“Yes, Father.” Covertly Daisy opened the book to check the page number and set it aside. The small gesture rankled Bowman. Books, books...the mere sight of one had come to represent his daughter’s embarrassing failure on the marriage market.

Puffing on a massive cigar, Bowman sat in an overstuffed chair in the parlor of the hotel suite they had occupied for more than two years. His wife Mercedes perched on a spindly cane-backed chair nearby. Bowman was a stout, barrel-shaped man, as bullish in his physical dimensions as he was in disposition. Although he was bald on top, he possessed a thick broom of a mustache, as if all the energy required for growing the hair on his head had been diverted to his upper lip.

Mercedes had begun marriage as an uncommonly slender girl and had become even thinner through the years, like a cake of soap that had gradually worn to a sliver. Her slick black hair was always severely restrained, her sleeves tightly fitted to wrists so diminutive that Bowman could have snapped them like birch twigs. Even when she sat perfectly still, as she was doing now, Mercedes gave the impression of nervous energy.

Bowman had never regretted choosing Mercedes as a wife—her steely ambition corresponded perfectly with his own. She was a relentless woman, all sharp angles, always pushing to make a place for the Bowmans in society. It was Mercedes who had insisted that since they could not break into the Knickerbocker set in New York, they would bring the girls to England. “We shall simply go over their heads,” she had said with determination. And by God, they had succeeded with his older daughter Lillian.

Lillian had somehow managed to catch the greatest prize of all, Lord Westcliff, whose pedigree was pure gold. The earl had been a handsome acquisition for the family. But now Bowman was impatient to return to America. If Daisy were going to land a titled husband she would have done so by now. Time to cut their losses.

Reflecting on his five children, Bowman wondered how it was that they should have so little of him in them. He and Mercedes were both driven, and yet they had produced three sons who were so placid, so accepting of things as they were, so certain that everything they wanted would simply drop into their hands like ripe fruit from a tree. Lillian was the only one who seemed to have inherited a little of Bowman's aggressive spirit...but she was a woman and therefore it was a complete waste.

And then there was Daisy. Of all their children, Daisy had always been the one Bowman had understood the least. Even as a child Daisy had never drawn the right conclusions from the stories he told, only asked questions that never seemed relevant to the point he had been trying to make. When he had explained why investors who wanted low risk and moderate returns should put their capital into national debt shares, Daisy had interrupted him by asking, "Father, wouldn't it be wonderful if hummingbirds had tea parties and we were small enough to be invited?"

Throughout the years Bowman's efforts to change Daisy had been met with valiant resistance. She liked herself the way she was and therefore trying to do anything with her was like attempting to herd a swarm of butterflies. Or nailing jelly to a tree.

Since Bowman had been driven half-mad by his daughter's unpredictable nature, he was not at all surprised by the lack of men willing to take her on for a lifetime. What kind of mother would she be, prattling about fairies sliding down rainbows instead of drilling sensible rules into her children's heads.

Mercedes jumped into the conversation, her voice taut with consternation. "Dear Mr. Bowman, the season is far from over. I am of the opinion that Daisy has made excellent progress so far. Lord Westcliff has introduced her to several promising gentlemen, all of whom are exceedingly interested in the prospect of gaining the earl as a brother-in-law."

"I find it telling," Bowman said darkly, "that the lure for these 'promising gentlemen' is to gain Westcliff as a brother-in-law rather than to gain Daisy as a wife." He pinned Daisy with a hard stare. "Are any of these men likely to offer for you?"

"She has no way of knowing—" Mercedes argued.

"Women always know such things. Answer, Daisy—is there a possibility of bringing any of these gentlemen up to scratch?"

His daughter hesitated, a troubled expression appearing in her tip-tilted dark eyes. "No, Father," she finally admitted frankly.

"As I thought." Lacing his thick fingers together over his midriff, Bowman regarded the two quiet women authoritatively. "Your lack of success has become inconvenient, daughter. I mind the unnecessary expense of gowns and fripperies...I

mind the tedium of carting you from unproductive ball to another. More than that, I mind that this venture has kept me in England when I am needed in New York. Therefore I have decided to choose a husband for you.”

Daisy looked at him blankly. “Whom do you have in mind, Father?”

“Matthew Swift.”

She stared at him as if he had gone mad.

Mercedes drew a quick breath. “That makes no sense, Mr. Bowman! No earthly sense! There would be no advantage for us or for Daisy in such a match. Mr. Swift is not an aristocrat, nor is he possessed of significant wealth—”

“He is one of the Boston Swifts,” Bowman countered. “Hardly a family one can turn its nose up at. A good name and good blood to go with it. More importantly, Swift is devoted to me. And he has one of the ablest business minds I’ve ever encountered. I want him as a son-in-law. I want him to inherit my company when the time comes.”

“You have three sons who will inherit the company as their birthright!” Mercedes said in outrage.

“None of them gives a damn about the business. They haven’t the appetite for it.” Thinking of Matthew Swift, who had flourished under his tutelage for almost ten years, Bowman felt a pang of pride. The boy was more a reflection of Bowman than his own offspring. “None of them has the full-blooded ambition and ruthlessness of Swift,” Bowman continued. “I will make him the father of my heirs.”

“You’ve taken leave of your senses!” Mercedes cried hotly.

Daisy spoke in a calm tone that neatly undercut her father’s bluster. “I should point out that my cooperation is necessary in this matter. Especially now that we’ve progressed to the subject of begetting heirs. And I assure you, no power on earth would compel me to bear the children of a man I don’t even like.”

“I should think you’d want to be of some use to someone,” Bowman growled. It had always been his nature to quash rebellion with overwhelming force. “I should think you would want a husband and home of your own rather than continue your parasitic existence.”

Daisy flinched as if he had slapped her. “I’m not a parasite.”

“Oh? Then explain to me how the world has benefitted from your presence in it. What have you ever done for anyone?”

Faced with the task of justifying her existence, Daisy stared at him stonily and remained silent.

“This is my ultimatum,” Bowman said. “Find a suitable husband by the end of May, or I will give you to Swift.”

## Chapter 1

“I shouldn’t tell you about it,” Daisy railed, pacing back and forth in the Marsden parlor later that evening. “In your condition you shouldn’t be distressed. But I can’t keep it to myself or I will explode, which you would probably find infinitely more distressing.”

Her older sister lifted her head from Lord Westcliff’s supportive shoulder. “Tell me,” Lillian said, swallowing against another wave of nausea. “I’m distressed only when people keep things from me.” She was half-reclining on the long settee, settled in the crook of Westcliff’s arm as he spooned some lemon ice into her mouth. She closed her eyes as she swallowed, her dark lashes resting in spiky crescents against her pale cheeks.

“Better?” Westcliff asked gently, swabbing a stray drop near the corner of her lips.

Lillian nodded, her face ghastly white. “Yes, I think it’s helping. Ugh. You had better pray for a boy, Westcliff, because this is your only chance at an heir. I’m never going through this again—”

“Open your mouth,” he said, and fed her more flavored ice.

Ordinarily Daisy would have been touched by the glimpse into the Westcliffs’ private life...it was rare that anyone saw Lillian so vulnerable, or Marcus so gentle and concerned. But Daisy was so distracted by her own problems that she barely noticed their interaction as she blurted out, “Father has given me an ultimatum. Tonight he—”

“Wait,” Westcliff said quietly, adjusting his hold on Lillian. As he eased his wife to her side, she leaned more heavily on him, one slender white hand coming to rest on the curve of her belly. He murmured something indecipherable into her ruffled ebony hair, and she nodded with a sigh.

Anyone who witnessed Westcliff’s tender care of his young wife could not help but take note of the outward changes in the earl, who had always been known as a cold-natured man. He had become far more approachable—he smiled more, laughed more—and his standards for proper behavior had become far less exacting. Which was a good thing if one wished to have Lillian for a wife and Daisy for a sister-in-law.

Westcliff’s eyes, so deep a shade of brown they appeared black, narrowed slightly as he focused on Daisy. Although he didn’t say a word, Daisy read in his gaze the desire to shield Lillian from anyone and anything that might disturb her peace.

Suddenly Daisy felt ashamed for having rushed over here to recount the injustices dealt by her father. She should have kept her problems to herself and instead she had run to her older sister like a tattling child. But then Lillian’s brown eyes opened, and they were warm and smiling, and a thousand childhood memories danced in the air between them like jubilant fireflies. The intimacy of sisters was something not even the most protective husband could disrupt.

“Tell me,” Lillian said, nestling against Westcliff’s shoulder, “what did the ogre say?”

“That if I don’t find someone to marry by the end of May he would choose a husband for me. And guess who that is? Just guess!”

“I can’t imagine,” Lillian said. “Father doesn’t approve of anyone.”

“Oh, yes he does,” Daisy replied ominously. “There is one person in the world Father approves of one hundred percent.”

Now even Westcliff was beginning to look interested. “It is someone with whom I am acquainted?”

“You will be soon,” Daisy said. “Father sent for him. He’ll be arriving at the Hampshire estate next week for the stag-and-hind hunt.”

Westcliff riffled through his memory for the names Thomas Bowman had asked him to include on the guest list for the spring hunt. “The American?” he asked. “Mr. Swift?”

“Yes.”

Lillian stared at Daisy blankly. Then she turned her face into Westcliff’s shoulder with a squeaky gasp. At first Daisy feared she might be crying, but it quickly became apparent that Lillian was giggling helplessly. “No...not really...how absurd...you could never...”

“You wouldn’t find it so amusing if you were supposed to marry him,” Daisy said with a scowl.

Westcliff glanced from one sister to the other. “What is wrong with Mr. Swift? From what your father has indicated he seems a respectable enough fellow.”

“Everything is wrong with him,” Lillian said, giving a last snort of laughter.

“But your father esteems him,” Westcliff said.

“Oh,” Lillian scoffed, “Father’s vanity is flattered by the way Mr. Swift strives to emulate him and hangs onto his every word.”

The earl considered her words while he spooned up more lemon ice and pressed it to Lillian’s lips. She made a sound of pleasure as the frosty liquid trickled down her throat.

“Is your father incorrect in his claim that Mr. Swift is intelligent?” Westcliff asked Daisy.

“He is intelligent,” she admitted. “But one can’t have a conversation with him—he asks thousands of questions, and he absorbs everything one says but gives nothing back.”

“Perhaps Swift is shy,” Westcliff said.

Now Daisy couldn’t help laughing. “I assure you, my lord, Mr. Swift is not shy. He’s—” She paused, finding it difficult to put her thoughts into words.

Matthew Swift’s bred-in-the-bone coldness was accompanied by an insufferable air of superiority. One could never tell him anything—he knew it all. Since Daisy had grown up in a family populated with uncompromising natures, she’d had little use for yet one more rigid and argumentative person in her life.

In her opinion it didn’t speak well for Swift that he blended in so well with the Bowmans.

Perhaps Swift would have been more tolerable had there been anything charming or attractive about him. But he had been blessed with no softening grace of character or form. No sense of humor, no visible displays of kindness. He was awkwardly formed to boot: tall and disproportionate, and so wiry that his arms and legs seemed to have all the substance of stringbeans. She remembered the way his coat had seemed to hang from his wide shoulders as there was nothing inside it.

“Rather than list all the things I don’t like about him,” Daisy said finally, “it’s far easier to say there is no reason why I should like him.”

“He’s not even attractive,” Lillian added. “He’s a bag of bones.” She patted Westcliff’s muscular chest in silent praise of his powerful physique.

Westcliff looked amused. “Does Swift possess any redeeming feature?”

Both sisters considered the question. “He has nice teeth,” Daisy finally said grudgingly.

“How would you know?” Lillian asked. “He never smiles!”

“Your assessment of him is severe,” Westcliff remarked. “But Mr. Swift may have changed since you last saw him.”

“Not so much that I would ever consent to marry him,” Daisy said.

“You won’t have to marry Swift if you don’t wish it,” Lillian said vehemently, stirring in her husband’s grasp. “Isn’t that right, Westcliff?”

“Yes, love,” he murmured, smoothing her hair back from her face.

“And you won’t let Father take Daisy away from me,” Lillian insisted.

“Of course not. Something can always be negotiated.”

Lillian subsided against him, having absolute faith in her husband's abilities. "There," she mumbled to Daisy. "No need to worry...see? Westcliff has everything..." She paused to yawn widely. "...well in hand..."

Seeing the way her sister's eyelids drooped, Daisy smiled sympathetically. She met Westcliff's gaze over Lillian's head, and motioned that she would leave. He responded with a courteous nod, his attention returning compulsively to Lillian's drowsy face. And Daisy couldn't help but wonder if any man would ever stare at her in such a way, as if the weight of her was precious in his arms.

Daisy was certain that Westcliff would try to help her in any way he could, if only for Lillian's sake. But her faith in the earl's influence was tempered by the knowledge of her own father's inflexible will.

Although she would defy him with every means at her disposal, Daisy had a bad feeling the odds were not in her favor.

She paused at the threshold of the room and looked back at the pair on the settee with a troubled frown. Lillian had fallen fast asleep, her head centered heavily on Westcliff's chest. As the earl met Daisy's unhappy gaze, one of his brows raised in silent inquiry.

"My father..." Daisy began, then bit her lip. This man was her father's business partner. It was not appropriate to run to Westcliff with complaints. But the patience in his expression encouraged her to continue. "He called me a parasite," she said, keeping her voice soft to avoid disturbing Lillian. "He asked me to tell him how the world has benefitted from my existence, or what I had ever done for anyone."

"And your reply?" Westcliff asked.

"I...couldn't think of anything to say."

Westcliff's coffee-colored eyes were unfathomable. He made a gesture for her to approach the settee, and she obeyed. To her astonishment, he took her hand in his and gripped it warmly. The usually circumspect earl had never done such a thing before.

"Daisy," Westcliff said gently, "most lives are not distinguished by great achievements. They are measured by an infinite number of small ones. Each time you do a kindness for someone or bring a smile to his face, it gives your life meaning. Never doubt your value, little friend. The world would be a dismal place without Daisy Bowman in it."

Few people would argue that Stony Cross Park was one of the most beautiful places in England. The Hampshire estate sustained an infinite variety of terrain from near-impenetrable forests to brilliantly flowered wet meadows and bogs to the stalwart honey-colored stone manor on a bluff overlooking the Itchen river.

Life flourished everywhere, pale shoots springing from the carpet of decayed leaves at the foot of fissured oaks and cedar, stands of bluebells glowing in a darker part of the forest.

Red grasshoppers vaulted through meadows filled with wild primrose and lady's-smock, while translucent blue damselflies hovered over the intricately cut white petals of bog bean flowers. It smelled like spring, the air saturated with the scent of sweet box hedge and tender green lawn.

After a twelve-hour carriage ride that Lillian described as a journey through hell, the Westcliffs, Bowmans, and assorted guests were gratified to reach Stony Cross Park at last.

The sky was a different color in Hampshire, a softer blue, and the air was filled with blissful quiet. There were no clangs of wheels and hooves on paved streets, or vendors or beggars, or factory whistles, or any of the commotion that constantly assaulted the ears in town. Here there was only the chirping of robins in the hedgerows, the rattle of green woodpeckers among the trees, and the occasional dart of kingfishers from the sheltering river reeds.

Lillian, who had once considered the country deadly dull, was overjoyed to be back at the estate. She thrived in the atmosphere of Stony Cross Park, and after her first night at the manor she looked and felt much better than she had in weeks. Now that Lillian's pregnancy could no longer easily be concealed by high-waisted gowns, she was entering confinement, which meant she could no longer go out in public. On her own estate, however, Lillian would have relative freedom, though she would restrict her interactions with the guests to small groups.

To Daisy's delight she was installed in her favorite bedroom in the manor. The lovely, quaint room had once belonged to Lord Westcliff's sister Lady Aline, who now resided in America with her husband and son. The most charming feature of the bedroom was the tiny attached cabinet room that had been brought over from France and reassembled. It had originally come from a seventeenth-century chateau and had been fitted with a chaise that was perfect for napping or reading.

Curled with one of her books in a corner of the chaise, Daisy felt as if she were hidden from the rest of the world. Oh, if only she could stay here at Stony Cross and live with her sister forever! But even as the thought occurred to her she knew she would never be completely happy that way. She wanted her own life...her own husband, her own children.

For the first time in Daisy's memory she and her mother had become allies. They were united in their desire to prevent a marriage with the odious Matthew Swift.

"That wretched young man," Mercedes had exclaimed. "I've no doubt he put the entire blasted notion in your father's head...I've always suspected he..."

"Suspected what?" Daisy asked, but her mother only clamped her lips together until they formed a bitter hyphen.

As Mercedes pored over the guest list, she informed Daisy that a great number of eligible gentlemen were staying at the manor. "Even if they aren't all directly in line for titles, they are from noble families," Mercedes said. "And one never knows... Sometimes disaster occurs... fatal illness or large accidents. Several members of the family could be wiped out at once and then your husband could become a peer by default!" Looking hopeful at the thought of a calamity befalling Daisy's future in-laws, Mercedes pored more closely over her list.

Daisy was impatient for Evie and St. Vincent to appear later in the week. She missed Evie dreadfully, especially since Annabelle was occupied with her baby and Lillian was too slow-moving to accompany her on the brisk walks she enjoyed.

On the third day after her arrival in Hampshire, Daisy set out by herself for an afternoon tramp. She took a well-worn path she had traversed on many previous visits. Wearing a pale blue muslin dress printed with flowers, and a pair of sturdy walking boots, she swung a straw bonnet by its ribbons.

Striding along a sunken road past wet meadows brilliant with yellow celandine and red sundew, Daisy considered her problem.

Why was it so hard for her to find a man?

It wasn't as if she didn't want to fall in love with someone. In fact, she was so open to the idea that it seemed monstrously unfair not to have found someone by now. She had tried! But there always was something wrong.

If a gentleman was the right age, he was passive or pompous. If he was kind and interesting, he was either old enough to be her grandfather or he had some off-putting problem such as being perpetually malodorous or spitting in her face when he talked.

Daisy knew she was not a great beauty. She was too small and slight, and although she had been praised for her dark eyes and brown-black hair set against her fair complexion, she had also heard the words "elfin" and "impish" applied to herself far too many times. Elfin women did not attract suitors in anything close to the quantities that statuesque beauties or pocket Venuses did.

It had also been remarked that Daisy spent far too much time with her books, which was probably true. Had she been allowed, Daisy would have spent most of every day reading and dreaming. Any sensible peer would doubtless conclude that she would not be a useful wife in the matters of household management, including those duties that hinged on close attention to detail. And the peer would be correct in this assumption.

Daisy couldn't have cared less about the contents of the larder or how much soap to order for laundry day. She was far more interested in novels and poetry and history, all of which inspired long flights of fancy during which she would stare through a window at nothing... while in her imagination she went on exotic adventures, traveled on magic carpets, sailed across foreign oceans, searched for treasure on tropical islands.

And there were thrilling gentlemen in Daisy's dreams, inspired by tales of dashing heroics and noble pursuits. These imaginary men were so much more exciting