



THE DUCHESS CONTEST



EVA MORLAND

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Eva Morland

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To everyone who has been told they can't.

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Elena

Elena had never enjoyed weddings. The sense of almost forced happiness and the fact that she would inevitably be stuck trying to converse with someone that her aunt would introduce her to.

Sighing, Elena leant back into the alcove seat she had hidden in. Beautiful hanging vines obscured most of the alcove, and the cushion was large enough for someone to sit cross-legged and be almost invisible to passers-by.

The wedding had taken over the Westbrook Estate, the bride's ancestral home. Even Elena had to admit that the property was nothing short of spectacular. Handcrafted decorations in vibrant colours floated down from the ceiling, and plants crept up the walls inside and outside the old building.

Elena was trying to work out what kind of charm had been used to keep the decorations suspended when a group of footsteps approached her, pulling Elena out of her daydreaming. Assuming her aunt had found her, she started to climb out of the nook and prepared herself for the inevitable lecture. Just as she began to shuffle her legs out from underneath her, she heard the unmistakable sound of raised male voices. She paused, debating whether to reveal herself or wait until they had moved on.

"I am afraid that is very simple. We are no longer able to wait." The man was not attempting to keep his voice low. They had stopped only a few feet from her, and Elena could hear them more clearly now. She paused, cursing herself that she was now stuck eavesdropping. It would be impossible to reveal herself now.

"It was bad enough when your sister was engaged," the same voice continued, "let alone now that she is married before you and you've barely been seen at any public events!" Elena pulled back further, wishing to disappear into the stone wall. "Ambrose, we know that you have reservations, but only

one path is available to you now,” he continued, speaking in a rushed, almost frantic voice.

A pregnant pause lapsed awkwardly. Elena would have thought they had moved on, except for the lack of footsteps on the stone floor.

“It seems I have no choice but to accept the terms set out by law,” said a rather stern second voice. The other man murmured in agreement. Elena could hear the relief in his voice, and the footsteps soon continued as the pair carried on down the corridor.

Elena took a few breaths and waited until the sounds of the men walking away were faint and then wholly silent. Poking her head out of the alcove first, she stepped back into the corridor and began walking briskly the way she had come.



The crowd enjoyed the endless champagne and overflowing tables of luxurious foods in the main hall. Orbs of light and small paper birds had been enchanted to fly over the guests. No expense had been spared in employing the best spell casters in the area. A string quartet had begun to play, and couples were already enjoying the first dance. Elena stood at the back of the hall, searching for her cousins. She spotted them in the centre of a large group dancing raucously with a pair of young men. Making her way over to the twins, Elena smirked at what her aunt would say about her daughters enjoying the celebrations so much. Aunt Marie had reminded all three young women before they attended the wedding feast that the key to being fashionable was to “act as though you are enjoying the festivities without appearing gauche.” The grins that plastered both Ana and Sylvie’s faces were so broad that they had forgotten or chosen not to heed their mother’s advice. Elena found herself smiling with them and even surprised herself when she accepted the hand of a tall gentleman in a bottle green suit and joined the throng of dancers.

After several dances and a few glasses of champagne, Elena leant against the stone wall with her cousins. The three women

laughed merrily, comparing the prowess of their dancing partners, and Elena was shocked to realise how much she was enjoying the evening. After another fast-paced song ended, the musicians began a slower melody. The bride descended the steps from the head table, accompanied by a man who closely resembled her. Both figures were tall with soft brown skin and dark wavy hair. The woman wore her hair down, wrapped in vines and wildflowers. Her brother, for he who could only be that, had cropped hair, but the resemblance was still apparent.

“That’s the new Lord Westbrook,” Silvia whispered to Ana, and the girls giggled quietly.

Elena shot them a questioning look, and Ana elaborated. “Have you not heard? He is the most eligible bachelor now that the Dukedom has been passed to him. The title had been unclaimed for years; he was thought dead.”

Silvie cut across her sister, excited to be able to deliver such fresh gossip. “You see,” she continued, “he was a military man, thought to have died in combat. However, here he is. It turned out that he went missing.”

Ana continued as if she had not been interrupted. “And here he is, dancing the final dance with his sister before her wedding journey. It is customary, you know.” She glanced at Elena.

“I am aware of western customs.” Elena replied, trying her hardest not to snap at her cousin. “I may have grown up in the eastern lands, but I am still from these parts, cousin.”

Ana blushed and directed her attention back to the dancers. “Of course, I only meant...” but her voice faded into awkward silence. They watched as the dance continued in the centre of the hall. The pair moved in perfect harmony with the gentle music.

As the song came to an end, the groom came and greeted his new wife and then escorted her back up to the high table.

Instead of another song, the musicians lay down their instruments, and a loud, jovial voice rang out above the crowd. With the guests’ attention secured, Elena could now see the

speaker as he stood at the side-high side table and addressed the group.

“Dearest friends,” the man began. He must have been in his late fifties and spoke with an authority few could muster. Elena realised that this man must have been the first she overheard in the corridor. He continued, “we are, of course, very thankful to have you all here to celebrate the union of my niece to Sir Kembley of Wimpolst.” A smattering of applause followed this announcement.

Sylvie whispered in Elena’s ear. “That is Sir Carmichael who is speaking; he’s said to be very popular with the King.” Elena nodded absently. As much as her cousin’s gossiping usually was of no interest to her, it was helpful that they usually knew everyone in any given social situation. As a relative living with her aunt, Elena was extended an invitation out of courtesy to all the events her family attended. However, that meant that out of all the weddings she had attended with her cousins and aunt during the summer, Elena had not personally known any couples getting married or very many of the guests.

Sir Carmichael had just finished the part of his speech where he thanked everyone in the hall. “My niece,” he continued, “will excuse me, I am sure, in my lack of tact in making this announcement at her wedding feast.” Titters and murmurings echoed around the hall. “There does not seem to be a better opportunity to speak in front of our closest friends and neighbours.”

Now the crowd had gone silent, wondering what news would be delivered. “It is common knowledge that my nephew, Ambrose, has recently inherited his father’s title. What is not so commonly known,” he paused, clearly enjoying a touch of the dramatics, “is that to fully claim the title Lord Westbrook officially, and the lands accompanying it, he must be wed within six months of laying his claim.”

The crowd broke into conversation, not even attempting to keep their voices hushed. Sir Carmichael chuckled at the crowd’s reaction and paused to let them take in the news.

Elena looked up at the high table and caught sight of Lord Ambrose Westbrook. He was sat at the end of the table wearing an expression that could only be called a scowl.

Elena fought the urge to laugh loudly and lost very quickly as her mirth could not be contained. The guests standing near her looked around in confusion and distaste as a loud laugh erupted from Elena.

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Ambrose

At the high table, Ambrose caught sight of a woman trying and failing to contain her laughter. A pair of blonde women were elbowing her in the side, clearly attempting to shut her up.

At that moment, the woman looked up at the high table, and their eyes locked. The laughter slipped away from her face, and she maintained his gaze when he did not look away.

The crowd no longer gave her any more attention and collectively turned back to Ambrose's uncle. Ambrose drew his focus away from the strange woman and begrudgingly faced his uncle. Sir Carmichael continued his speech, ignoring the momentary interruption. "The King is very pleased that such an old and venerable title is to be preserved. As an honour to our family he suggested that the Queen weigh in on how the new Duchess will be selected."

Ambrose's stomach flipped. He had known about the plan for months but was still uncomfortable with the whole scheme. It was well known that the Queen, although intelligent, was mercurial and fond of games and riddles. Ambrose had been resistant to the idea of marrying, but had thought he would at least be able to choose his bride.

Sir Carmichael was still giving his speech. "We are thankful that the Queen is a generous and thoughtful ruler and has suggested that it is Ambrose who shall select his own Duchess."

Ambrose's heart soared before sinking with Carmichael's next utterance. "She has arranged for the names of all eligible young women in the kingdom to be entered into a draw. Twenty-one shall be selected by the Queen's hand. They shall stay here from the moment their name is selected until they are dismissed or until the Winter Solstice Ball when one of them shall marry Ambrose, and they will both claim their esteemed titles."

The crowd practically shook with excitement, but Ambrose could only sit in his high-backed chair and focus on not screaming. His newly married sister, Rosalind, turned to him. Keeping a smile fixed on her face. From a distance, she must have looked like she was congratulating her brother. “Just think Ambrose, at least this way, you have a modicum of choice.” Her fake smile fell slightly and was replaced with a more concerned expression.

“Do not fret for me, sister; it is your day of celebration. I know I am luckier than some, and I will manage just fine.” Ambrose forced a smile.

“You need not pretend with me, for I know you have been attempting to put this marriage announcement off for months, and now you are to be married in a matter of weeks! We will have only just returned from our wedding tour before you are to wed a stranger!”

Ambrose had to stop himself from glaring at his sister. “There is little any of us can do now. If I had taken after great Aunt Maud with her gift of foresight, perhaps I would have been able to predict the outcome of this process. Sometimes I wish our magical bloodline was stronger. We both know that this must go ahead. I have delayed the inevitable for long enough.” He cleared his throat and attempted a small smile. “Today is your day, so enjoy it. I am sure things won’t work out so badly after all.”

Rosalind smiled tentatively, seeing through his false optimism. She wished him well and returned to her new husband, laughing when he pulled her exuberantly into the throng of dancers.

Ambrose’s smile faded as he watched his sister depart. Mentally shaking himself, he stood and headed towards a servant carrying a tray of champagne flutes. If nothing else, he would not depress his sister with his thoughts of doom and gloom on her wedding day. With a full glass in his hand, Ambrose steered passed a group of women batting their eyelids at him; he ducked behind a thick velvet curtain and entered a blissfully quiet corridor.

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Elena

Although the dancing had been surprisingly enjoyable, it was not long before Elena craved a break from the crowd and went to find a glass of champagne. When she returned from the drinks table, the twins were dancing with new partners, and the song was already in full swing. Smiling and waving at Sylvie, Elena motioned that she would be near the back of the hall. Her cousin waved back in understanding. Looking around the hall, it was now clear that it was busier than earlier and her hope of finding a quiet corner vanished.

The main hallway looked equally full, but she noticed a light coming from behind a thick velvet curtain. On closer inspection, the curtain partly obscured another, blissfully empty, smaller corridor. Elena mentally chastised herself for her desire to leave the main hall; it was, after all, how she ended up accidentally eavesdropping in the first place. She promised herself that she would be more cautious on this occasion. She had not been caught earlier, and the strange conversation revealed only what all the guests now knew. She chuckled, thinking of the surprised expression on the haughty Duke's face. Ana and Sylvie had scolded Elena for her uncontrollable laughter, but she had found the whole exchange so amusing that she had been unable to stop. She pitied the twenty-one women that would end up being courted by the miserable Duke.

Poking her head around a slightly open door, Elena caught her breath. The room wasn't large or even particularly grand as others in the castle, but the small library was breathtaking. A tall window looked out over the gardens. Each wall was covered in bookshelves, and volumes were piled on the round table in the centre of the room. Elena shivered. It was cold as there was no fire in the hearth and the curtains were wide open letting in the chill. She could not bring herself to close off the pretty view of the gardens lit up, so she headed to the fireplace. Such a task would have stumped her cousins, but Elena was thankful that her mother had taught her rudimentary incantations such as starting fires. She sent a few sparks into

the kindling with a common charm and smiled as the fire spread. She gave her thanks to the flames as they warmed her face.

Sitting down with a book from the table, Elena decided to make herself comfortable. She doubted the twins would even notice her absence for the next hour as they were so preoccupied with dancing.

Sylvie was engaged to a lieutenant in the military, and Elena knew that Ana was fond of the local innkeeper. Their mother was, unfortunately, not keen on the idea of her youngest daughter becoming an innkeeper's wife. Both women were good-natured and were enjoying an evening of dancing, even if neither of their first choices of dancing partners were present this evening.

The fire crackled merrily in the hearth, and Elena stretched out on the plush velvet sofa, enjoying the peace. She knew this was not the main library in the castle, but this room was more comfortable and homely than its larger counterpart. Elena greatly preferred it to any of the rooms she had seen in the castle. It felt intimate in a way that large libraries could never be, and the sofa was incredibly comfortable. This was her last thought as her eyes fluttered shut.



The sound of the door slamming caused Elena to sit bold upright, looking around blearily. Damn it, she thought, blinking quickly; the warmth must have lulled her to sleep. The room had become quite cosy and the fire was still crackling in the hearth. Unfortunately, the relaxed atmosphere disappeared when Elena saw a stern figure standing by the door.

Ambrose

It felt like a bad dream. The woman who had been laughing wildly after his upcoming wedding announcement had made herself at home in his private library. Surprisingly, Ambrose realised he felt slightly guilty about slamming the door and waking her up. He brushed the perplexing feeling away and glowered at the woman in front of him. She had unruly curly brown hair and piercing green eyes. The confusion in her expression had gone and was quickly replaced by a look of anger. What had she to be angry about, he wondered. She was the one who had been caught sleeping on his favourite sofa.

“If you are done making a scene,” the woman said haughtily, “I shall leave.” She stood up and made as if to step past him towards the doorway.

“Not so fast,” Ambrose said quickly, stepping in front of her. “I should like an explanation for why you broke into *my* library.”

Her eyes widened with the realisation that it was his personal library that she had made herself so comfortable in, but the expression faded quickly, and she laughed derisively. “I am so sorry that I *broke in*.” She began, smiling as she put particular stress on the words. “I am afraid I left my lock-picking kit at home and had to make do with using the door handle.” Smirking, she started back towards the door. “I should not have been surprised that it is your personal library. Such a cold room could belong to no one else in this household.”

“And what have I done to have made such a bad impression?” Ambrose glowered at her retreating form.

She turned. “Only a cold man could sit through his sister’s wedding feast with such a stony expression.”

“I have my reasons,” he snapped.

“Oh, of course, how could I forget? You are being given a selection of women to choose between to be your Duchess.

Such hardship can hardly be borne,” she mocked, her eyes gleaming with irritation and mirth.

“It is not my choice to be married at all.”

“Ah, yes, but you do have a choice in the matter. You can select which of the women to marry. That is more than can be said for most young ladies.” Fire entered her voice, and for a moment, Ambrose thought she might throw one of the books at him. “Take my cousin, Ana, for example. She is head over heels in love with an innkeeper but unable to ever marry because of their difference in social status. You hold all the cards here, *Your Grace*, do not insult me by acting like you are the one who should be pitied.”

At this announcement, Ambrose paused before deciding to have some fun. “Ah, I see the issue.” He continued as she gave him a perplexed look. “You came here tonight to meet me, to take a shot of seducing me and becoming my Duchess. Now you are cross that, as the women are to be selected at random, you are unlikely to be in the running at all.”

Ambrose grinned as he watched anger ripple through this ferocious woman. “Even if you were the last man alive...” she paused as if trying to come up with a more original insult. “I wouldn’t marry you if the Queen herself commanded it.” With those words, she turned on her heel and swept out of the room, letting the door slam behind her.

Ambrose chuckled and threw himself down on the sofa. It was his favourite room for a reason, and the soft velvet felt reassuring after the tense evening. He realised what a pleasant relief verbally sparring and teasing the mysterious lady had been as he looked up at the ceiling.

Glumly, Ambrose thought about the twenty-one women who would be arriving in a matter of days. He would have to be the perfect gentleman whilst simultaneously attempting to work out which of them would make the best Duchess.

He scowled and crossed the room to his desk. He had already said his goodbyes to his sister, and the rest of the guests would be leaving soon. It was bad manners not to see all the guests off formally, but as he was not *officially* the

Duke, Ambrose felt he could be forgiven. Undoubtedly, Carmichael would disagree, but there was enough work to occupy Ambrose tonight that could not be neglected. Sighing with fatigue, he settled down at his desk and began leafing through reports from his tenant farms.

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Elena

What an infuriating man, Elena cursed to herself as she made her way back to the main hall just in time to see her cousins and aunt all making for the main door. Sylvie waved, and when Elena reached them, Ana passed over her cloak that they had just retrieved with their own. Aunt Marie was so preoccupied with the news about the new Duchess, that she didn't even scold Elena for making them nearly miss their lift home.

They journeyed back to their modest home with their closest neighbours, Lord and Lady Perkins. They were an elderly couple who possessed many wolfhounds and took to walking them about the moors on the full moon. None of Elena's family relished travelling with the couple because the seats of their carriage were always covered in dog fur. However, Aunt Marie could never turn down the offer because they could not afford to keep a carriage as smart as the Perkins'. The family was comfortably off, but their financial situation looked desperate compared to the lavish wealth in the Westbrook Estate.

Elena was the only one who enjoyed the carriage rides with Lord and Lady Perkins. They were an eccentric couple, and on some journeys, they told the most entertaining stories about when they first met and their adventures. On other days they reeled off anecdotes about each of their wolfhounds that became more and more ridiculous as the journey progressed. Privately, Elena thought Lady Perkins was trying to get Aunt Marie to react in some way or another. When she did not quirk her mouth into a smile in response to what was happening in the story, the dog in the tale would become even more outlandish and steal even more food from under the cook's nose. Sometimes the story would focus on how the youngest of their dogs would steal every item of clothing that was blue and take them all out to the pond. Elena usually had to bite back her laughter as one after the other, the stories became more and more ridiculous.

Unfortunately, tonight, there were no stories of the adventures of the unhinged wolfhounds. Lord and Lady Perkins were quite happy engaging Aunt Marie in a discussion about the events of the evening.

“Of course, Sylvie is engaged to be married to a military man.” Aunt Marie began, looking less pleased with the fact than she had been when she announced it to her dinner companions at the start of the evening. “We shall, however, be able to hope that Ana is selected. Just imagine having a Duchess in the family.”

Ana looked crestfallen, and Elena clenched her hand affectionately. She knew Ana was thinking of Robert, the innkeeper that she met in secret, and Elena squeezed her hand.

“There is Elena to remember.” Lady Perkins said archly. “You have another eligible young woman in your household.”

Aunt Marie waved her hand dismissively. “Of course, we are all very fond Elena, but she does not have the disposition of a Duchess. Oh no, it will be Ana, mark my words!”

Lady Perkins looked over at Elena. “I think that Elena has the perfect disposition for a Duchess. Such grace and a kindness that not many possess.”

Aunt Marie grumbled at being dismissed by the older woman but stayed silent.

With a generous smile, Elena replied. “You are very kind with your words, my lady. I am afraid, however, that I have no intention of marrying at all. A prince and a pauper could propose to me tomorrow, and I would not consider either.”

Lord Perkins chuckled at Elena’s words. “You know your mind; I’ll give you that.”

His wife looked less amused. Her face wrinkled with concern. “You are lucky with the money that your parents left you when they died that you are in a position to choose whether you marry. I would suggest, however, not to close yourself off from the possibility completely, my dear. Marriage can be difficult, but the right union can be a blessing.” She looked over at her husband with unashamed adoration.

Elena smiled but did not feel the need to elaborate on her own choice in the matter. Some things were not suited to be discussed in a carriage.

The rest of the journey went by quickly, with animated speculation about the selection process by everyone but Ana and Elena.

Privately, Elena was relieved that Ana was still clearly in love with her innkeeper and had no grand aspirations. After speaking with Ambrose, Elena was sure he would make a most miserable husband for any woman, and she was very fond of her cousins despite their differences.



The following day began as usual, with all the family members sitting around the breakfast table. The chatter was still predominantly about the wedding the night before.

Elena had not felt the need to share her impression of the new Duke with her family, so the discussion was predominantly about the dancing and the announcement that Sir Carmichael had made.

Halfway through the meal, a servant arrived carrying a tray stacked with letters. Aunt Marie leafed through them deftly, sorting them into piles. She stopped on the last note and ripped it open without using the silver letter opener in front of her.

“It has arrived!” She exclaimed in delight. “They have wasted no time at all.”

Elena and her cousins looked around at each other with confusion.

“What has arrived, mother?” Sylvie asked curiously.

“Why, the invitation to attend the drawing of the names at the Westbrook Estate. It is in two days! We must commission new gowns.” She continued chattering and making plans about how quickly the seamstress could be called for and how quickly she would be able to work.

Sylvie and Elena looked at Ana with concern. Aunt Marie had made no secret of the fact that she hoped for Ana to be selected without any regard for how her daughter felt about it. Ana looked slightly pale, and Elena squeezed her hand reassuringly.

Elena weighed the likelihood of Ana being selected and decided that it was so slim that there was no cause for concern. Elena thought that in the unlikely event of her own name being chosen she would be ushered out the door as soon as the Duke recognised her. After the impression she had made upon the new Duke, she was satisfied he would waste no time in ejecting her from the premises as quickly as he could. With this reassuring thought, she sipped her tea and listened merrily to her aunt chatter about fabrics for their new gowns and whether they would be any enchanted silk available at short notice.

Speaking of magic, she had been surprised how many enchantments had been used in the wedding last night and wondered if there had been spell-casters brought in from overseas. Aunt Marie had always been sceptical of the incantations that Elena favoured, but if there was any magical item that would aid her or her daughter's looks, she was quick to obtain it. Elena loved to read the history of the kingdom and the surrounding lands. At one point in time magic had been common but, since the current King and Queen were crowned, it had fallen largely out of fashion. Without the connection to the old Gods, the western part of Odessa had begun to change. More and more people were born without the ability to conduct any magic at all and it was more common for enchanted objects to be traded in the west than created.

Ambrose

The days after Rosalind's wedding passed uncomfortably quickly for Ambrose. The Queen seemed to see no reason to delay setting up the Duchess selection and had sent a staff team to prepare for the name draw. Lists had been made of all the eligible young women. The Queen had declared that all unmarried women from eighteen to twenty-eight would have their names entered. Privately, Ambrose thought that the whole venture was ridiculous, and that the selection of women would likely be hopeless. He tried to keep his concerns at bay by allowing Carmichael to deal with the arrangements whilst Ambrose continued working through his reports.

The unfortunate reality was that it had been several years since his parents had died and only six months ago that Ambrose had arrived back at the Westbrook Estate. When Ambrose had been away, unaware of his parents' death, the estate had been sorely neglected.

Thankfully finances weren't the worst of his problems since his sister's love match had also formed a valuable link to one of the wealthiest families in the kingdom.

Ambrose sighed. He had barely slept, and now the words on the reports were beginning to dance around the page.

Carmichael stuck his head around the library door and smiled at his nephew. "Still stuck in those reports, my boy? Your father would be proud of your dedication to your tenants."

Ambrose smoked uncomfortably and changed the subject before his uncle could say anything. "I suppose the Queen will be arriving to host the name draw in a few days."

"Ah yes, she arrives tomorrow. The names will be drawn in front of a crowd of our dearest friends and neighbours." Carmichael said.

Ambrose knew what that meant; hundreds of people he'd only met a handful of times crammed into the great hall,

gawping at him. “I can’t believe that winter is already upon us,” he muttered whilst rubbing his temples.

Carmichael continued, tactfully ignoring his nephew’s apparent distaste for the scheme. “All twenty-one potential brides will move in within a few days.” He paused, looking Ambrose over. “I know this is not what you had anticipated, but the right wife, the right Duchess, could help you rebuild the estate and make a difference to the people. I know that’s why you’ve been working yourself into the ground.”

Ambrose grimaced. His uncle thought the best of people, and Ambrose could not admit to the guilt that drove him more than anything. He’d left to join the military before his parents died and had only been back for the last few months. His parents died from influenza, and Ambrose hadn’t been there when they passed. Rosalind at least forgave him for his absence, but he still wished he could have been there.

Rubbing more fervently at his temple, Ambrose looked up to find his uncle staring at him with a concerned expression.

Forcing a smile, Ambrose cleared his throat. “I suppose it will be strange having so many more people staying here. Will the staff cope?”

At this remark, Carmichael chuckled. “You’ll be glad to hear that the staff are excited about what they now call *The Duchess Contest*.”

Ambrose groaned while Carmichael grinned. It was going to be a gruelling few weeks.

Elena

For the second time in one week, Elena was sat in between her cousins in the Perkins' carriage travelling towards the Westbrook Estate. Aunt Marie was busy chattering happily about the evening ahead. She wondered aloud about how many of the women whose names were selected would be at the ceremony or if they lived too far away to attend. The Kingdom of Odetta was much smaller than its neighbours, but it was still several days' ride across the Kingdom.

Elena was privately amazed at how quickly the names of eligible young women had been compiled. She suspected that the planning had taken months and had been nearly complete by the time the announcement was made.

The cousins chattered about whether the women would come from families of different social classes. Elena was sure that Ana was hoping that if the new Duchess were a commoner, perhaps her mother would look upon her suitor less harshly. Aunt Marie wanted her daughters to be happy. However, her idea of happiness had more to do with trends and society than true love.

The rest of the journey went by quickly. Elena was occupied by trying to silently reassure Ana of how unlikely it would be for her name to be chosen. Elena had spent several hours in Ana's bedchamber the night before listing ridiculous things that were more likely to happen than their names being selected by the Queen. She hoped that her attempts at cheering up her cousin had been successful.



The turnout was more impressive than even Aunt Marie could have anticipated. The great hall was packed full of guests, and the long table had been moved to allow more standing room. The crowd was already buzzing with excitement when Elena's group arrived through the large double doors. A carpet had been laid down the centre of the

hall that led to a raised platform with an oval table and twenty-one empty chairs. Sylvie scanned the crowd for anyone she knew and waved to a few people she recognised. Aunt Marie nodded to Sylvie to signal that she may join her friends. The crowd around them chattered, and Elena found Ana's hand and held it reassuringly.

"I know my worry may seem irrational," Ana began, "for even if I were selected, my chances of becoming the Duchess would be non-existent." She hushed Elena before she could disagree. "Yet, I have heard from Mama that anyone selected will receive several proposals just because they have been in the running to become Duchess. Mama will never let me marry Robert if there were so many other options. My only hope is to wait until I am so firmly on the shelf that no one would think to marry me and then spring the news on her."

Privately, Elena thought there were quite a few issues with this plan, but she kept silent. Ana was gentle, beautiful and usually unwilling to cause conflict. Elena was secretly proud of her cousin for remaining so steadfast to a suitor that her mother would disapprove of. If not for a broken-down coach last winter, she would never have even had the opportunity to meet him. Ana had been travelling into town when the wheel of the coach had broken, and the young woman had no choice but to walk to a nearby inn to keep warm while it was being repaired. It was there that Ana met Robert and since then they had managed four months of clandestine meetings before Sylvie or Elena found out about it. Since then, it was a secret that the three of them and Ana's maid kept closely guarded.

Elena began to offer reassurance when a loud gong sounded from the back of the room, and the double doors swung back open to reveal the Queen, Lord Westbrook, and Sir Carmichael as they entered the room. The crowd had turned to witness the group's entrance, and faces turned collectively as the Queen ascended the raised platform.

It was Sir Carmichael who addressed the crowd first. "Dear friends," he began, "I am so thankful that you are all here tonight to witness this ceremony. We are greatly honoured by the presence of her Royal Highness. As you all know, my

nephew is unwed.” He paused, and the crowd tittered excitedly. “We are here this evening to begin to rectify the situation and welcome twenty-one women to the castle, one of which will become the new Duchess of Westbrook!” The crowd cheered loudly, and Elena glanced at the third figure on the platform. Lord Westbrook attempted to look neutral but could not keep the scowl from his face. Elena snickered, and Ana elbowed her in the ribs.

“Your presence gratifies me.” The Queen addressed the crowd eloquently. “We are here to choose twenty-one young ladies to compete to become the Duchess of Westbrook. Any women in attendance who are selected will move into the castle tonight. For those who are not here this evening, we shall send word immediately, and they will be here by dawn.” The crowd clapped, enchanted by the spectacle. “And of course,” the Queen continued, “you are all invited to the wedding at the Midwinter Solstice Ball!” Another cheer went up the clapping became even louder.

Hush descended on the room as a servant carrying a large crystal bowl entered and placed it on the table in front of the trio.

“We shall waste no time in getting started with the selection,” the Queen announced. “This bowl holds thousands of tiny rolls of parchment, each with an individual name upon it. All the eligible young women of this kingdom have been entered and the bowl has been protected from interference by the strongest magic in the kingdom. I shall select only twenty-one.” She stepped up to the table and plunged her hand into the bowl with a broad smile. Despite herself, Elena craned her neck forwards to get a glimpse inside the bowl. The rolls were tiny, and the crystal bowl hummed with powerful magic.

“The first woman who could become the new Duchess of Westbrook is...” All of the eyes in the room were on the Queen. “Sara Sinclair!”

A group at the front of the hall erupted with excitement as a young woman with blonde curls was all but pushed up onto the platform. She looked stunned but managed a polite curtsy to the Queen and was then directed to the first seat by Sir

Carmichael. Lord Westbrook looked at her briefly and then fixed his gaze back on the crystal bowl.

“Rosa Fenwick.” The Queen called and another young woman joined the first.

The names were read out slowly, but many of the chairs remained empty, waiting for the women who had been selected but were not in attendance. Elena had stopped listening to the names, instead wondering about all the people who would have their lives thrown into chaos with the arrival of the messengers. Surely not all would be as excited as Lilian Lyle, who all but bounced onto the platform when her name was read aloud and gave such a deep curtsy that she seemed not in the least bit nervous.

A loud cheer just to the right of Elena brought her back to the room. She turned, assuming that one of the candidates was standing nearby. Elena saw people looking towards her and turned, wondering where the young woman was. She turned to Ana but was surprised to see how white her cousin had gone.

“Ana.” Aunt Marie appeared beside her, “My dear girl, go and take your place.” She put her hands on her daughter’s shoulders and gently pushed her towards the platform. Ana staggered forward, her face still a mask of shock.

“Ana Chamberlain, are you here?” The Queen called for what Elena quickly realised was the second time. The crowd parted for Ana, but she slowed as she reached the bottom of the platform. Turning, Ana searched and made eye contact with Elena. Ana’s eyes were panicked, and she teetered on the edge of the bottom step.

“No!” A shout erupted, and Elena was surprised to realise it had come from her own mouth. Faces were now looking at her rather than Ana, and Aunt Marie tried to cover her niece’s outburst by laughing and applauding loudly. Unfortunately for her, no one else joined in, and the sound petered out.

Elena took a moment to gather her thoughts and started walking quickly towards the platform. “I am deeply sorry, Your Highness.”

“Of course, young lady. I can imagine you are disappointed that the last name chosen was not your own. However, that is no excuse for such an outburst!” The Queen looked down sternly at Elena.

“Disappointed?” Elena’s momentary confusion turned to frustration. “No, you mistake me, Your Highness. There has been a tremendous mix-up. My cousin is not eligible to be married.”

The Queen looked shocked and turned to Ana. “Are you already wed?”

Ana hesitated but shook her head.

Elena interjected. “She is not wed, but she is promised to another.”

At this, Ana raised her head and spoke. “That is right; I am so sorry, Your Highness.” Ana’s gentle voice gained strength.

The Queen looked mutinous but waved her hand. “There can be no formal arrangement, or your name would not have been entered. You may take your seat.” She said firmly, looking at Ana. Elena glanced at her cousin, who had not moved an inch. Just as Elena was about to open her mouth to speak again, she was interrupted.

“Perhaps I can be of help.” Lord Westbrook stepped into view and descended the platform towards Ana. Elena glared at him, but Westbrook did not acknowledge her. “Is it true that you are promised to another?” He asked Ana. She looked nervous but nodded firmly. “Then I am afraid, your highness, that there is no way that this young lady can be taken away from her beloved. It would be bad luck, I am sure.”

Elena could not be sure, but she thought she detected a hint of mirth in Lord Westbrook’s expression as he smiled openly at the Queen.

Ana was still holding her breath when the Queen sighed and motioned for the crystal bowl, but before she could speak, Lord Westbrook continued. “However, she has been selected by Her Royal Highness herself.”

Elena all but growled as he spoke. He was enjoying this, she thought. The Queen had been pacified by his words and seemed genuinely interested to hear what Westbrook would say.

“If I may, my Queen.” He said smoothly. “I think it would be only fair to ask for a substitute. Perhaps a family member.”

Elena’s mouth fell open, and she was still gaping when the Queen addressed her. “It is your lucky day, my dear. You are the cousin of Ana Chamberlain, yes?” Elena could only nod. “And you are unmarried?” Again, Elena nodded unhappily. “And you are unattached?” She quirked her eyebrow at Elena. Once again, Elena nodded. “Perfect, then you shall take her place.” The crowd clapped and cheered wildly, and the Queen smiled, realising that this little drama had only added to the spectacle.

Lord Westbrook turned and climbed back up the steps onto the platform as Ana rushed over to Elena’s side.

“Oh, Elena,” she said in a rush, “I am so sorry; how will you ever forgive me for letting you take my place? And after you spoke up so bravely. I was so stunned I could not find my voice until you spoke.” Ana’s eyes were glistening with tears.

“Oh hush, dear cousin.” Elena embraced Ana. “I am thankful you are saved. You may have much explaining to do, though.” She looked over Ana’s shoulder as Aunt Maria barged through the crowd towards them. “Do not worry about me; I will be out of here before you know it and cannot be pressured into accepting any proposals.” She smiled and turned as Sir Carmichael motioned for her to join the other contestants on the platform. She kissed her cousin on the cheek and ascended the steps.

Ambrose

He wondered what on earth had possessed him to insist on that woman being selected as he paced the library. He must have lost his mind. Why would he request that woman stay in her cousin's place? He had no idea. All he knew was that when she had barged through the crowd and been borderline rude to the royalty, he had been pleased. Shaking his head, he sighed. He must be ill; that was the only logical conclusion. The stress of the last few days, or months, must have become too much for him. Ambrose crossed the room and poured himself a large glass of brandy. After drinking it far too quickly, he continued pacing the room until he decided that the only thing for it was a walk around the grounds. It was gone midnight, and he knew that the formal gardens would be blissfully empty at this time.

The whole process of selecting his potential bride had been bizarre in the least, and he was not a fan of the Queen's theatrics. At least choosing Ana's cousin gave him some control over who was staying in his home. Yes, that made much more sense than him actually *wanting* her to stay. Feeling slightly lighter, he pulled on his jacket and pushed it towards the gardens.

Elena

Elena sat down heavily on the luxurious four-poster bed in the room she had been shown to. She had already dismissed the maid that had also been appointed to her and she was now regretting it. Typically, Elena wore dresses that she could put on and take off without assistance, but tonight, her aunt had insisted that she wear a more formal gown laced tightly at the back. After grappling with it for a few minutes, Elena huffed and gave up.

The evening had been a disaster. She had been permitted only a few minutes to say goodbye to her family. While Sylvie and Ana tearfully hugged her, Aunt Marie looked so confused and enraged by the events of the evening that she had barely said a word. She awkwardly embraced Elena before she left and reminded her that she was a member of the Chamberlain family and should remember to act in accordance.

Remembering the exchange did nothing to cheer Elena up, so she gathered her skirts about her and decided to get some fresh air.

Ambrose

The Westbrook estate was beautiful; even Ambrose could not deny it. At the back of the castle there was a stunning formal garden complete with a maze and a walled area dedicated to healing herbs. The whole estate was surrounded by woodland that continued as far as the eye could see.

The name drawing ceremony had ended hours ago, and Ambrose had waited until it was late enough that every sane individual would be fast asleep before he left his room and took a walk. He wandered through the herbaceous borders and leant against the weeping willow. He loved this spot in the garden and was just starting to feel some of the stress of the day slip away. The garden was quiet, and most of the lights at the windows had been extinguished. Only the floating orbs of light hung low over the pathways to illuminate the paths.

From his viewpoint under the tree, Ambrose was suddenly alert as saw the figure of a woman running into the maze. It was light enough to see her figure disappearing behind a hedge but dark enough not to be able to make out her features. Ambrose set off at a run, following her into the maze. He often came into the garden at this time of night but had never seen another soul, let alone a woman running full pelt into the labyrinth.

She may have been quick, but Ambrose had grown up playing in the maze, and it was only a minute or so before he caught up with her. "Stop!" he shouted before grabbing her arm and spinning her around. She turned about quickly, and before Ambrose could say anything else, she kicked him hard between his legs and continued running. Cursing, he took a breath before staggering after her. He would have lost her in the maze if she had not taken a wrong turn and ended up at a dead end. Ambrose, still breathing heavily, caught up with her.

"Oh, it's you!" she cried. "Why on earth did you chase me and grab my arm?"

Ambrose stared. The moonlight was bright enough that he could see her face now. Of course, the one woman whom he

had been trying not to think about would invade his one place of solace.

“I never did catch your name.” He was surprised at how calm he sounded.

The woman scoffed. “Of course, *Your Grace*.” She said in mock respect. “How remiss of me not to introduce myself formally. I am Miss Elena Chamberlain, cousin to Miss Ana Chamberlain, whom I believe you are acquainted with.” She curtsied and smirked at Ambrose.

He grimaced and stepped forward, a rebuke about to leave his lips when he caught sight of her dress and went white. “Who on earth did this to you?” He snapped, looking at the front of her dress, which looked like someone had attempted to ripped it off her. It was still covering her, but sections of the bodice were torn slightly as if someone had tried to pull the neckline down. Anger coursed through Ambrose, and he looked her over for any sign of injury. “Who were you running from?” He took another step toward her but only saw confusion cross her face.

“Running from... Oh, I see; I was not running from anyone. Well, that is to say, I was not running from anyone until I realised I was being chased.” Elena looked up at him.

“Who was chasing you?” Ambrose was so close to her now but could see no visible injuries.

“You were chasing me, of course.” She almost laughed. “I assume you mean me no harm as I have ascertained you only mean to confuse me with your odd questions.”

“But I saw you running.”

“Ah yes, I find it helps me relax.”

“And your dress, it looks as though looks like someone tried to rip it off you. Give me a name, and I will make sure he pays dearly for his actions.” He said menacingly

“My dress?” She looked down and back up at him, blushing slightly as she registered the rip in the bodice and how low the neckline had become. “I am afraid that I am to blame for the damage; I dismissed my maid before I realised that I could not

get out of this contraption without her help. After trying unsuccessfully for a while, I gave up and instead came out here. It is a shame, of course, that I cannot keep up much of a pace in this dratted dress. Usually, I would have been able to outrun you easily.” She paused, and Ambrose relaxed with the knowledge that she had not been attacked. “So, you mean to say,” she continued, “that you were chasing me because you thought I had been attacked?”

“You are an infuriating woman, Miss Chamberlain, but no one should not be in danger on my property.” This, of course, was true, but it did not explain to Ambrose the visceral reaction he had when he saw Elena running through the dark garden.

“Ah yes, I am not unfamiliar with being called strange. However, I have not forgotten our last meeting and can only deduce that you want to keep me here at the castle as punishment.”

Ambrose did not reply because he was still uncertain why he had intervened when her cousin had been chosen.

Elena

Elena was stuck somewhere between vexation because her night-time run had been interrupted, and amusement at the odd conversation she had ended up having.

When she realised someone was following her, she instinctively kept running. It was only because she was unfamiliar with this maze that she had been caught in the first place. That and her ridiculous dress.

At her childhood home, Elena had grown up with a similar maze in her parents' garden and had always taken solace in running through the passageways. It was the one place where she was not overlooked and could be as unladylike as she desired. When she had come across the box hedge maze at the Westbrook Estate, she could not resist the temptation.

What was surprising, however, was that it was Lord Westbrook who had found her and run after her. His reaction to her dress had almost been comical. She resisted looking down at it herself but was conscious that, haphazardly trying to remove the dress herself, she had inadvertently lowered the neckline far beyond common decency.

Elena stared at Ambrose, and the heavy silence continued.

"I could not in good conscience let your cousin into the process. I have no desire for a Duchess who will be pining after another for the rest of her days."

Elena paused. "I suppose having a scheming Duchess who regularly breaks into libraries would be a better option for you."

"I cannot say I recognised you earlier in the great hall," he replied blandly.

At this, Elena fumed. "I suppose it is not uncommon for you to offend and falsely accuse women of breaking into your library whilst devising a plot to ensnare you."

"Ah, you see my predicament. I must say it is rather tiresome, but there is nothing false about my accusations." The

corners of his lips turned up in an almost smile.

“Well, now you have twenty other women moved into your home; it should be no bother for you to eliminate me from this process immediately.”

At this, he chuckled, and Elena had to fight the desire to kick him a second time that evening.

“Ah, but Elena, I would not want to deprive you of the opportunity to convince me of what an excellent Duchess you would make. It would not be fair of me to dismiss you so quickly.”

“You swine!” she shouted, unable to feign politeness any longer. “You seek to keep me here for your own amusement. You shall regret it, mark my words.”

With his playful laughter ringing in her ears, she turned and stalked back to the main house.

It was only a few seconds before Lord Westbrook caught up with her for the second time.

“What do you want now?” she snapped at him.

“I only wish to escort you safely to your room,” he said calmly.

Elena could detect no humour in his voice and decided she would not bother engaging him in further conversation. She realised that he was a contrary man and, therefore, the best course of action would be to ignore him entirely instead.

They arrived silently at her bedroom door, and she turned to dismiss him.

Lord Westbrook nodded and turned to leave but hesitated. “Do you need help removing your dress?”

Elena’s jaw dropped, but before she could admonish him, she was surprised to see him blush and stumble over his words. “I-I only meant with your laces, as you have dismissed your maid.” He regained his composure and shot her a rakish smile.

Elena glowered at him but considered. Her first reaction would have been to slam the door in his face, but she was so fed up with the restrictive dress that she paused. It was unfair to call for her maid in the middle of the night, and she had no desire to attempt to sleep in the restrictive contraption. Without a word, she turned. But instead of slamming the door, she motioned for him to assist her.

If he was surprised, he did not show it. Lord Westbrook began deftly unlacing her dress. Elena could not hold in a sigh as she felt her lungs expand and her spine relax. He paused before continuing. Just as he finished the task, his hand brushed the small of her back. Only a thin layer of fabric separated them, and she held her breath. After a moment, she felt his hand leave her back and sensed him step away. Holding the front of her dress to prevent it from slipping down, she entered her room and closed the door quickly behind her.

Ambrose

He stood in front of the closed door for several moments before turning and heading up another flight of stairs to his rooms. What on earth possessed him to offer to unlace her dress? Shaking his head, Ambrose walked faster. He was surprised that she let him help her and supposed it was only a deep hatred of the clothing that had swayed her.

She had been silent on the walk back from the gardens, and bizarrely, he had wanted to hear her snap at him. He had not been prepared for how much he had enjoyed helping her unlace her dress. The irrational desire to permanently remove her maid from the estate so that Elena would be dependent on him for the task every night flitted through Ambrose's mind. He shook his head. He must be ill. However, he was sure that her breath had hitched, and her body responded to him when he grazed her lower back with his hand.



Back in his rooms, Ambrose replayed the night's events. He was unhappy about being forced to marry, but undoubtedly had to begin ascertaining which of the women would make the best Duchess for the estate. He groaned at the idea of getting to know each woman well enough to make such an important decision. At least verbally sparing with Elena would be light relief from the task. He put the image of her dress gaping at the shoulders and neckline out of his mind and focussed on reading the files of the twenty other women selected.

Three hours later, Ambrose had to admit that the Queen's workforce had done a fantastic job in gathering information on the women so quickly. He supposed that the files for each woman had been put together ahead of time, but Ambrose was still impressed when the files had been delivered an hour after the guests had left and the women had been shown to their rooms.

He had tried to focus on the task at hand and read each file whilst making notes. Try as he might, he could not keep his attention from wondering over to the discarded file on the far right of his desk. He had refused to even open Elena Chamberlain's file on principle. Why waste his time learning about a woman who was potentially the least suitable candidate in the kingdom?

Dawn was only a few hours away, and as he had found out as much about the women from their files as he could, he decided to call it a night and practically fell into his four-poster bed.



The following day Ambrose rose later than usual and skipped breakfast in favour of spending the first part of the day in his study, going over the list of repairs to the farms on the estate. He had no desire to meet the women before their scheduled coffee afternoon, as the timetable that had been delivered to him by the Queen's assistant dictated. Thankfully, the Queen had departed, but Ambrose had no interest in interfering with the logistics of the upcoming weeks.

His uncle popped his head around the study door and tried to persuade Ambrose to walk down to the village with him, but Ambrose politely declined. He spent the rest of the morning in his study looking at reports but, in reality, got very little done.

Elena

The first morning at the Westbrook estate was as bad as Elena could have expected. She was awoken far earlier by her maid than she would have liked and before long she was dressed and heading down to find the rest of the others in the main entrance hall. When Elena arrived, all twenty other women were there, and she cursed herself for drawing attention to herself. She had woken up feeling tired but with a new plan formed in her mind. Elena would remain as unobtrusive as possible while watching Westbrook's interaction with the other women. Hopefully, he would be taken with at least a few of them and quickly forget that he had been entertained by Elena at all. Something twisted slightly in her stomach, but Elena promptly attributed it to her lack of breakfast. Whilst pondering when their morning meal might take place, Elena noticed a woman in a tailored navy suit holding a clipboard descending the stairs.

“Good morning.” She addressed the group. “My name is Selena Goodbody, and I have been charged with getting you prepared for this process and the responsibility of guiding you through it. I am honoured that one of you will soon become the new Duchess of Westbrook.”

The group whispered in apparent excitement, but Elena tapped her fingers against her arm impatiently.

“Please follow me. We have a busy schedule this morning if we are going to finish all of your makeovers in time for your first official introductions to the Duke.” Selena turned and headed back up the stone staircase.

The women were quick to follow, and Elena found herself caught up in the crowd. She inwardly groaned. There had been no talk of makeovers, and this was yet another thing that would prolong her time at the estate.

Selena herded the group into a large morning room that had been rearranged for the occasion. The ornate furniture had been moved out of the room's centre and replaced with countless styling stations, mirrors and rows of clothing. The

room was teeming with people dressed in matching black pinafores and professional name tags.

“The Queen has been kind enough to provide you with the services of her very own style team,” Selena announced. “It is their job to transform you into young ladies that all look as though they could be the next Duchess.”

At this, Elena looked covertly about. Her cousins had debated whether the selection process would be rigged to favour the upper classes, but when she looked around the group, she saw a large variety in the quality and style of the women’s clothing. They had all attempted to look their best, but some women wore silk dresses like Elena’s, and others were dressed in plain cotton.

The stylists stepped forward, and all began pairing up with the group. A short man with green hair approached Elena with a broad smile. “I am Michele.” He announced. “I am here to make you marvellous!”

Elena could not help but smile at his enthusiasm and tried not to think about what she would do if he tried to turn her hair a similar colour to his. She was far from vain, but the idea of walking around with such luminous hair made her feel slightly sick. She thought about refusing the makeover completely, if only to attempt to get herself kicked out, but the look on Michele’s face had her smiling in return and placidly following him to one of the spinning chairs.

Michele took a moment to look over Elena. His scissors were floating by his shoulder, poised as if ready to start snipping at any moment. Her hair was tied up in her usual style and Michele began unpinning it until it hung down to her waist.

“Such beautiful hair! What a crime it is to keep it hidden away in that atrocious updo!”

Elena had always loved her long hair, but it did have the annoying habit of getting in the way.

“There is only one thing for it.” Michele announced as he sat Elena in the chair. “We must cut it all off!”

The young woman in the chair next to Elena gasped, having clearly overheard their conversation. She had her hair half in rollers while a tall woman was applying a vivid shade of auburn to the bottom section with an enchanted brush.

Michele laughed loudly. “The look on both of your faces! As if I would do such a thing! We shall trim only the ends and then treat the hair with a serum of my own creation. It is imbued with water from the lake of Ezara in the Eastern realms to promote shine and vitality!”

Elena felt relieved and smiled tentatively at the woman sitting next to her.

Selena arrived at that moment rolling a rack of clothes towards her. “These were ordered for you. There were some late additions that have only just arrived. The Duke said that you had some requests.”

She walked away before Elena could ask her any questions so instead she asked Michele if she could leave the styling chair and began examining the clothes. As well as dresses cut in the current fashion, there were also looser fitting dressing with flowing sleeves and even several pairs of shirts and trousers. Elena gasped in relief and then paused. The Duke must have ordered these in the middle of the night for them to arrive so quickly. Somehow, this thought silenced her and sat back in the chair while Michele chattered away while he examined her hair.

Ambrose

Ambrose arrived outside the double doors of the garden room where the coffee meeting was being hosted. He was far from nervous, but the idea of having to speak to so many women and rationally begin to choose a match gave him a headache. One of his worst fears was that he would not be able to remember all of their names or their conversations. He had even awoken from a nightmare that morning where he had arrived at the altar and could not remember the name of his new bride. She had, however, long thick brown hair.

Shaking himself mentally, Ambrose forced his mind to return to the task at hand. He planned to ask them all the same questions at this initial meeting and move forward.

Selena Goodbody had been left in charge of the process, and although Ambrose was thankful not to be organising the events himself, he was slightly nervous about what he would be walking into. The Queen was a fan of a spectacle and doubtless had chosen someone to enact her vision.

Therefore, it was a shock when Ambrose entered the garden room to find it unchanged. The room was decorated in its usual blues and greens, and the only alteration that had been made was to move the sofas into small clusters and set two armchairs in front of the fire, a little distance away from the other seating. There were perhaps more vases of cut flowers than usual, but Ambrose was relieved at how little had been changed. Maybe this would be the informal meeting that Selena had briefed him on.

The double doors opened, prompting Ambrose to turn away from the fire and look towards the women entering the room.

He was dimly aware that the Queen had sent her team of stylists to meet the women, but he was shocked at how different they appeared. Before, he could have easily determined who was from each region and the wealth of their respective families. Although Ambrose was thankful for the range in backgrounds of the women, he cursed inwardly at their new appearances. Most of the women now looked so

different he would have to work twice as hard today to match them up with the initial impressions, they had made the night before. He scanned the crowd. It was clear that some of their hair colours had even changed; he was relieved to recognise the timid-looking woman with an olive complexion who had looked as though she might faint at the event last night; he also identified the unchanged platinum blonde hair and confident aura of the woman whose name had been called out first.

Another face caught his attention, and he was surprisingly relieved that her thick dark hair had remained the same. It was longer than he had realised and had taken on a shine he had not noticed in the dark garden the evening before. It looked as if Miss Chamberlain's hair had been threaded with tiny pearls. He looked down at her neckline, thankful to note that it was intact; before he could notice anything else, he caught her eye and had to stifle a laugh at the stern expression on her face.

Selena was finishing her welcome speech to the girls and turned to address Ambrose. "I suggest, Your Grace, that I introduce each lady, and you spend a few minutes getting to know them."

Ambrose nodded.

"This is Francesca Delaney." She motioned to the blonde woman who approached them. She wore an ice blue day dress and gloves in the current fashion. He noted that her appearance had changed less than some of the other women and her manners signalled her as being used to interacting in polite society. He supposed Miss Delaney would be a straightforward choice. She had likely been raised to become the mistress of a large estate. Ambrose greeted her and motioned for her to sit by the fire in one of the high-backed chairs.

Elena

The room was warm, and Elena had to pinch herself a few times to stop from sinking back into the soft sofa and falling asleep. The other women seemed excited, whereas Elena was just counting down the time until she could leave.

A woman approached Elena and paused, seeming uncertain whether to introduce herself. Elena smiled at her and motioned for her to sit. "I'm Elena Chamberlain," she said warmly to the woman.

"I am honoured to make your acquaintance, Miss Chamberlain. My name is Matilde Bernardin."

"Oh please, call me Elena. We are in such an unusual situation, and I will be leaving soon. We may as well dispense with such formalities."

Matilde leaned forward. "You're leaving so soon? What would make you think that?"

"Oh, I would make a terrible Duchess." Elena laughed. "I have no desire to be here, and as soon as Westbrook realises that I'm sure I'll be heading home."

"If that is the case, I will leave with you." Matilde brightened noticeably. "However, my mother will be disappointed. I had promised her that I would try and stay as long as possible so she would not think I had been timid and not tried at all."

Elena grinned, warming immediately to Matilde. "Ah, my aunt is the same. However, she knows me well and will not be surprised to see me return home so soon. I expect she will be vexed with me for a time but will soon forget."

"Your aunt sounds wonderful." Matilde replied wistfully. "I am afraid my mother will never forget that I made a mess of the opportunity to become a Duchess."

"You haven't made a mess of anything." Elena reminded her.

“Yet.” Matilda said grimly. “You barely know me. I *am* timid, and the idea of being centre stage as a Duchess makes me feel physically sick.”

“You have been very friendly to me, even introducing yourself.” Elena said, but privately did agree that she could not imagine Matilde being happy in the spotlight. “Let us not think of such depressing things. Neither wishes to be Duchess of Westbrook; let us enjoy our time here before we leave.” Elena surprised herself with her speech and smiled as Matilde nodded in agreement. She would not have thought it possible to enjoy anything about her time here but being with Matilde would be an enjoyable antidote to the miserable Duke of Westbrook.

With this happy thought in her mind, Elena practically skipped to the high-backed chair in front of the fire when her name was called.

“Elena.” The Duke of Westbrook stood up to greet her. “It is a pleasure, as always. I am glad to see you have not tried to rip your dress off yet; I have to say this new style does rather suit you.”

All of Elena’s good spirits disappeared in an instant and were quickly replaced with irritation.

“I believe I have not given you leave to use my given name, *Your Graceless*,” she said in a sickeningly sweet tone.

“Ah, but we are so well acquainted already.” He smirked. “I believe you should call me Ambrose.”

Elena glowered at him, which proved only to turn his smirk into a full-blown grin. She grimaced. Her plan to not engage in his teasing was failing already. “I should thank you for the additions to my wardrobe.”

He nodded in acceptance of her thanks. “I had to make sure you could get out of your clothes when I am not there to assist you.” He grinned and continued before Elena could say anything else. “How are you on this fine morning?”

“Oh, I am very well. I am enjoying my stay as your captive. Is it usual practice for Dukes to keep their potential brides as

prisoners before the wedding?”

Ambrose’s eyes flashed, and Elena knew she had hit the mark. “You agreed to be here. You agreed to take the place of your cousin. I am merely reminding you of your agreement.”

Elena bristled but could not think of a rebuke quickly enough before he continued quietly. “You also mistake me for someone who would enjoy the process of having women selected at random as potential brides.”

The glimmer had left his eyes, and Elena almost felt for the Duke.

He cleared his throat. “However, there is little I can do to change the situation so I must make the best of it. You, on the other hand, are not restricted in the same way I am and are free to go at any moment.”

Elena was silent. She was shocked at how easy it had been for him to agree for her to leave. She paused before getting up. “Thank you. I did think you would keep me here just to torment.”

He gave her a small smile, and she felt a slight urge to stay seated and continue their conversation.

“I do have to make you aware of something, however.” Ambrose continued. “I received a letter from your aunt this morning addressed to me, and one addressed to you.” He pulled out a small envelope from his jacket pocket. “I can only assume they both contain a similar message.”

Elena accepted the envelope and read it quickly.

Dearest Elena,

Despite my surprise at you taking the place of my own daughter, it would be an honour to have any relation become a Duchess. If you fail in this task, I have already had several offers of marriage on your behalf should you be forced (or choose) to leave the Westbrook estate. I, therefore, have written to the Duke directly to inform him of your popularity and the address of the most eligible

suitor. If we receive a better proposal on your behalf, I will update the Duke. I have chosen to notify him not only to show him the interest you have garnered but also to inform him where to send you should you leave the estate unmarried. As a young woman with multiple proposals, your home will be with your new husband. We will, of course, bring your belongings when we attend your wedding, whether that be at the Westward Estate or somewhere else.

Yours faithfully,

Aunt Marie

Pure shock washed over Elena. She had not been joking when she told Matilde that she thought her aunt would not take long to forgive her if she returned home without getting married. She hadn't even considered that she would not be welcome when she returned. The idea of being shipped off to an unknown man was shocking. She had always known that she came second to her cousins in her aunt's estimations, but she would never have anticipated such cold cruelty.

Ambrose coughed, and Elena was brought back to their conversation.

"I assume she has informed you of her plans should you not become a Duchess." He spoke slowly.

"Yes, she has made herself painfully clear," Elena replied quietly.

"Although I am aware that you have no desire to be a Duchess," Ambrose continued, "I would never ship you off to the highest bidder. I would suggest you stay in this process for as long as possible. There will be a point when I must keep the remaining three candidates, but until then, it gives us time to work out what we can do."

Elena stared at him, slightly dumbfounded. She wanted to be angry at him, but his kindness made that problematic, so

instead, she merely nodded.

Selena gestured to Ambrose to signify that she was about to call the next woman to meet with him.

Elena stood, still unsure of what to say.

“Before you go, Elena, or should I say, Miss Chamberlain.” Ambrose smiled and stood too. “I just have one question I am asking all of the young women.”

She nodded, and he continued. “If you were responsible for financing and redesigning the tenant’s housing on a large estate such as this, what would be the first thing you would do?”

“After inspecting the existing accommodation and ascertaining what the tenants need in their housing, I would draw up a budget and recruit local tradespeople to start the work.” She replied without pause.

“You seem very certain of your plan. Many women I have spoken to today suggested employing an architect and contracting firm to handle the whole process.”

Elena snorted. “I suppose this architect would come from the city and would never have lived in a cottage with a smoking chimney and damp walls. No, you would be much better spending your money locally and trusting those living in the accommodation to tell you what they need. Your role is not to oversee a grand project but to support the people they depend on you, They will have countless ideas and solutions to problems that you or I could spend years debating.”

“You have experience with projects of this nature?” Ambrose looked slightly surprised which only made Elena smile.

“I have experience with people. My aunt has tenants and I have always enjoyed visiting them. I suggest you stop thinking of them as tenants and start learning their names. It will be much easier and more fruitful when you know whom you are working with.”

Ambrose nodded slowly and bowed as Elena headed back to sit with Matilde.

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Ambrose

The next several women who sat opposite him could have been singing opera for all that Ambrose could remember. His focus returned briefly when he conversed with Matilde Bernardin. At first, she had been almost painfully shy, but when he asked her about the tenants' housing, she had spoken at such length and with such enthusiasm about budgets and figures that he had been intrigued.

As the women eventually filed out of the room, Ambrose went straight to his steward and arranged a trip to speak to the tenants. He cursed inwardly that he had not thought of such an obvious step until Elena suggested it. He had spent hours in his library pouring over reports about windows and roofing quotes without even asking the people who lived in the cottages what they needed. It was reassuring that none of the other women had thought to mention such a step, but even as he thought of this, the realisation depressed him. Some of them had made good suggestions, but only a few women seemed particularly interested in the topic beyond an opportunity to flirt with him.

Sighing, he headed off to find Selena. He was scheduled to make the first elimination in three days, but Ambrose had no desire to wait that long. At least five of the women were definitely not the right fit. One of the women had asked why Ambrose was planning on redeveloping the tenants' housing at all when they should "think themselves lucky to have a roof over their heads." She had then suggested that the money be redirected to the design and construction of a new wing of the castle and a folly in the grounds. Another had said that Ambrose should let the tenants fund their own repairs to "encourage them to take better care of their homes." Even thinking back over the conversations made Ambrose bristle with anger, and he was amazed that he had managed not to throw anyone out of the castle then and there. He might be forced to provide the estate with a Duchess within a timeframe, but he would be damned if he let someone with so little concern for his tenants have any responsibility over them.

He could not help thinking about Elena's response to his question and how succinctly she had answered him, even after the shock of the letter from her aunt. The thought of the letter made him feel even angrier, so he sat down at his desk to write a response.

Dear Madame Chamberlain,

I was surprised to receive your letter and perhaps more astonished after reading the contents. If your niece does not become the Duchess of Westbrook, it will be her choice whether she accepts another proposal of marriage. As such, I have made it widely known that any future proposals will be sent directly to Miss Chamberlain for her own consideration. I am sorry that she will no longer be welcome at your home. If Miss Chamberlain does become my fiancée, we will have to think long and hard about whether we believe it appropriate to extend you an invitation to our wedding. Your daughters would, of course, be most welcome. Miss Chamberlain has spoken of them with nothing but love and affection. I expect you to send all your niece's possessions to the Westbrook estate immediately, as they can be of no further use to you.

Sincerely,

The Duke of Westbrook

Ambrose felt some anger dissipate as he sealed the letter and instructed a servant to deliver it immediately. The idea that people might be sending proposals of marriage to Elena ignited some of his anger, but he pushed it away quickly.

It was not long before Selena arrived. She was not pleased that her plan for the initial elimination in three days time had been brought forward, but Ambrose was adamant, and she quickly caved.

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Elena

Matilde was shocked when Elena told her about the letter she had received from her aunt. Dinner had begun and Elena seized the opportunity to confide in her friend. All the young women sat around the long table and were chatting animatedly in groups about their conversations with the Duke.

“I’m afraid that coming here has left me in a more problematic situation than I thought,” Elena admitted.

“It seems that we are both in a similar situation now.” Matilde agreed. “Neither of us wishes to become the Duchess, and yet neither wishes to be shipped off to marry a perfect stranger.”

“I do think Ambrose will help us. He said he would not let me be sent away to marry a stranger, and I think he was telling the truth.”

“Who is Ambrose?” Matilde looked at Elena in confusion.

“Ambrose, the Duke.” Elena looked slightly abashed.

“You are on a first-name basis with him!” Matilde squeaked. “*Already?*”

Elena nodded and chewed on her lip. “I think if we speak to him, he will help you too.”

“Oh, but I doubt it. He may have said as much to you, but he cannot keep multiple women here who have no desire to become the Duchess and somehow prevent them from being married off.”

“Then why would he say as much?”

Matilde looked at Elena and gestured up and down. “Because you look like that.”

Elena recoiled and laughed. “If you suggest there is anything about my appearance to set me above the rest, you are sorely mistaken. You are far too modest; must I remind you how stunning you are?”

Matilde smiled at her. "I know I am not unbecoming, but that is not what I meant. I saw you both speaking in the garden room, and he looked at you differently. It is hard to explain."

Elena laughed, "That is the look of someone who cannot stand me. He was kind today, so I shall not be too mean about him. Last night he was awful, though, so my opinion remains largely unchanged."

"Last night?" Matilde gaped at her. "Now you must tell me the whole story."

Elena told her about meeting him in the garden but decided to omit the part where Ambrose unlaced her gown as, although she liked Matilde very much, it somehow felt too personal. She wondered whether she would tell her cousins if they were here and was mulling the question over in her head when Ambrose stood up and addressed the group.

He sat at the head of the table with Selena Goodbody and Sir Carmichael on either side. Matilde and Elena were sat at the opposite end, happy to have some privacy while they talked. This, however, had the slight disadvantage in that Elena was seated directly opposite him at the other end of the long table. Therefore, it was not too much of a surprise when Elena looked up and locked eyes with Ambrose as he began speaking. She looked away quickly and listened whilst admiring the gilt edge of her plate.

"It has been an honour getting to know each of you today while spending time together individually," he began. The group tittered with excitement. "As you are all aware, there is not much time before I have to find a wife. This also means that there is not much time for you to get to know me and what the role of Duchess entails. Therefore, I think it best to say goodbye tonight to several of you."

Small gasps and worried looks went around the table, and even Elena was surprised that he was sending candidates home so early. She squeezed Matilde's hand reassuringly and looked up to meet Ambrose's gaze.

"I must say that I wish you all the best; I only feel it is right not to waste anyone's time if I am certain we are not a good

match. The role of Duchess involves a lot of work, and I wish to find a partner to run the estate with me. It was not everyone's choice to be here, and I am aware that not everyone might wish to remain. It is, of course, your decision at any point to leave, and I am sorry if I have not made that clear before. It has also been brought to my attention that some of the women here are being pressured by family members to accept proposals in the event of them leaving the castle unwed. If this is the case and you cannot return home without being forced into marriage, you are welcome to stay at the castle as my guest while we work out a plan for your future. You must only speak the words, and I will understand."

Elena felt stunned and glanced at Matilde, still holding her breath. Ambrose began reciting the names of five women who would be leaving the process. He spoke to them individually, and only two looked angry enough to cause a scene. Thankfully any potential outbursts were diffused by Ambrose before they could escalate. After the five women had left the room, a tall willowy woman whom Elena believed was called Jennette stood up and spoke directly to Ambrose.

"I thank you, Your Grace, for your openness. I know that I would not be a good fit for the role of Duchess and would like to return home." Her voice wavered slightly, but she maintained eye contact with him. Ambrose spoke kindly to her and motioned for Selena to escort her and the other five women out of the room.

As Ambrose lowered back to his seat, Matilde coughed slightly, and all the eyes in the room turned to her.

"Your Grace," she said in a small voice. "My mother would kill me if I returned without accepting any marriage proposal, and I was quite at my wit's end with worry. I know that I would not be a good fit as a Duchess, but I can only beg of you not to send me home yet."

Ambrose smiled warmly at her, and Elena felt Matilde relax slightly next to her.

"I thank you for your bravery in speaking up. I can only imagine the pressure that you are facing from your family. You

are welcome to stay as my guest for as long as you need to. I would also like to speak to you about your financial ideas for the renovation of the tenants' housing; I think I am right in believing you are interested in the matter.”

Matilde blushed, and her words came out quickly. “Oh yes, Your Grace, I am very interested in the financial side of running a large estate. Any service I can be to you in this regard would bring me great joy,”

“Thank you, Matilde. We can talk about this in more detail tomorrow. Is there anyone else who would rather not be in this process?”

At this, he looked directly at Elena. She knew he had given her the perfect opportunity to say something and yet she remained mute. She should have been jumping out of her chair at the chance but seemed unable to get her words out. Last night nothing could have made her happier, but now she was more confused than anything.

The remaining women all looked around at each other, but no one spoke.

“If that is all, then I suggest we move into the drawing room for coffee,” Ambrose said lightly. He held his arm to Selena, and the two led the way through the double doors and into the adjoining room.

Matilde grabbed Elena's arm and pulled her slightly back from the rest of the women who were moving towards the doors.

“I can't believe it!” Matilde whispered. “I couldn't have thought of a better outcome myself.” She continued chattering about how relieved she was and then paused. “Wait a moment. I have been so preoccupied with my situation that I only realised that you didn't speak up after I did. Did I imagine that?”

Elena shook her head. “You did not imagine that at all. I'm not sure what came over me. I suppose I will speak to him later.” She trailed off uncertainly.

“That is unless you have changed your mind about wanting to leave the process.” Matilde said slowly. “Oh, that would be perfect! I can imagine you as a Duchess.”

Before Elena could laugh and dismiss the idea as she had been about to do, they were interrupted by a cold voice.

“Oh, I can scarcely believe my ears. Not only has the shy *Matilda* stepped down, but now her sidekick has finally accepted defeat. I’m surprised it took you this long.” Francesca sneered. “I’ve been watching you from the start. Stealing your cousin’s place and then prancing about like you own the place. I can’t wait until the Duke hears of this. He will be even more relieved than I am.”

Elena bristled as she knew that Francesca had deliberately gotten Matilde’s name wrong. But before either Matilde or Elena could speak, Francesca had already begun strutting after the rest of the women towards the Duke.

Ambrose

It was a relief to have the first round of eliminations over. He had asked five women to leave, one had left of her own accord, and one had decided to stay on as a guest. Selena looked as if she was about to throw her cup of coffee over him, but he was pleased. Twenty-one women had been reduced to fourteen, which surely meant that he would have more time with each person to work out who could be his wife. It was also a relief to know that every woman left in the process wanted to be there. He had already had a suspicion that Matilde had not been interested in becoming a Duchess from the start. Still, it was only when he learned of Elena's situation with her aunt that he realised that any number of the women in the process could be pressured to remain by their families. He cursed himself for not having thought of this from the start. It was a surprise that Elena had not also joined Matilde in staying on as a guest, but he had felt an overwhelming sense of relief when she had remained silent.

Ambrose snapped back into focus as Francesca Delaney approached him. He supposed she was an attractive woman in a conventional sort of way, and after reading her file he was sure she would make the most logical choice as Duchess. He could call this whole charade off in a moment, marry her before the week's end, and be done with the whole process. This thought was not as comforting as it may have been several weeks ago.

"Your Grace." She began in a sweet, yet conspiratorial voice. "I am afraid I have overheard something that I feel duty-bound to bring to your attention." She was interrupted by a visibly angry Elena who appeared next to her.

Something about the bizarre contrast between them made Ambrose stifle a laugh before speaking. "Perhaps, Francesca, you have heard of a terrible plot to disinherit me and cast me into the shadows of society." He said playfully, unable to keep the humour out of his voice. Francesca reddened and looked embarrassed.

“If only I had thought that far ahead.” Elena said calmly.

“This woman has no desire to be here! She should be made to leave immediately. I overheard her saying as much.” Francesca had given up trying to speak quietly and was practically shrieking.

“I have no interest in hearing snippets of gossip,” Ambrose said calmly. He looked at Elena but was unable to read her stony expression. “However, to settle this matter, I will ask directly. Miss Chamberlain, do you wish to remain in the process?”

Francesca had reddened even further at Ambrose’s dismissal of her. Elena did not even look in Francesca’s direction as she made eye contact with Ambrose. There was a pause before Elena spoke quietly. “I do.”

A second unexpected wave of relief flooded through Ambrose.

“But I heard her! She is only doing this to spite me!” Francesca shrieked.

“Enough!” Ambrose snapped. “As hard as it may be to believe, not everything is about *you*, Miss Delaney. You are permitted to change your mind at any moment of this process. You must, however, remember that the same privilege is also afforded to me.” He bowed curtly at both women and noticed a small smile creeping over Elena’s face before he strode away from them both.

Elena

The rest of the evening went by relatively quietly. Matilde, who Elena had believed to be shy when they first met proved to be incredibly talkative once they had become more familiar with each other. It was a relief for Elena to have Matilde with her, and she enjoyed spending the evening getting to know her better. Once they said goodnight and headed back to their own rooms, Elena fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.



The next morning when all the women had gathered at breakfast, a meal the Duke was noticeably absent from, Francesca continued shooting sharp looks at Elena and Matilde that they both ignored. Francesca's outburst the night before had garnered her the support of two of the other women whom Elena had first noticed yesterday at dinner. They had been laughing at Miss Lilian Lyle when she had struggled to identify which knife to use for her bread roll. Elena had been too slow to react at the time and say anything to the bullies, something that she was now berating herself for.

Matilde was happily informing Elena of everything she had found out about the castle and the other guests. "Of course, you met Francesca Delaney. Her family is nobility and has been as far back as anyone can remember. Her father is an Earl, so she is keen for the opportunity to marry a Duke. It would give her a higher status than her mother, you see." Matilde sipped her coffee and continued. "Then we have her new sidekicks, Charlotte Manes and Sara Sinclair." She motioned towards the two women sitting beside Francesca. Charlotte had dark brown skin and lilac hair and was, in Elena's opinion, one of the most beautiful women there. Or she would have been if not for the look of disgust that was usually plastered on her face. Sara was pale with watery blue eyes and wispy brown hair. She was currently laughing at something Francesca said and nodding in agreement.

“That makes up the terrible trio.” Matilde chuckled, clearly pleased with her nickname. When Elena glanced at her, she coughed into her coffee. “It isn’t mean when they have been hateful to nearly everyone in this room, you included.”

Elena did have to agree that three of them fit the description.

Matilde continued rattling off names and what information she had learned about each woman. “Miss Lilian Lyle is the only daughter of a baker. Miss Rosa Fenwick is a governess to a merchant’s family. Miss Jessica Smyth is a seamstress. I believe she specialises in magical gowns and I have heard her designs are in high demand. I don’t know if Miss Lucy Roe has an occupation, but she is an excellent singer. I think perhaps she is descended from sirens. Did you hear her perform last night, or had you retired to bed?”

Elena replied that she had heard Miss Roe sing and did agree that she was excellent. although she doubted that a distant magical ancestor had much to do with her skill.

“Miss Marianne Singer ironically *cannot* sing. Miss Lucinda Carroll and Miss Nikita James have already fallen out over something Miss Helena Jenkins allegedly said about them. Miss Bethan Wilkinson has befriended the kitchen cat, and Miss Ola Minnow knows the most scandalous poems off by heart. They are truly excellent.” Matilde sat back in her chair, clearly pleased with herself.

“My goodness Matilde, if finance does not suit you as a profession, you can always become a spy. I feel awful; I’ve been so consumed by my own affairs that I wasn’t aware of half of that information.” Elena exclaimed.

“People often think of me as nothing but a shy bluestocking and are often inclined to forget that I am even there. It has its perks, I suppose.” She smiled.

“Well, I am thankful for your disguise. It’s their fault for not seeing you as you truly are.” Elena squeezed her friend’s hand.

Matilde smiled. “It was a surprise that the Duke was not dismissive of my interest in finance. I must admit that I

supposed he would be rather priggish.”

“Oh, he has his moments.” Elena replied. “But you are right; he is not the man I initially thought him to be.”

The pair were interrupted from continuing their discussion by Selena entering the room.

“Ladies.” she announced. “It may have been a surprise to you all that there was an elimination so quickly after your arrival. I hope this reminds you of how serious the Duke is in his search for a wife. Every moment here is crucial, which brings me to the agenda for the next few days. You will all participate in a group date and an individual date. Half of you will have your group date this morning, and the rest will have your dates in the afternoon. Tomorrow, we swap.” Selena brought out a list and called out the names of each group and the times for their dates. Elena had a group date scheduled for that morning and her individual date the following afternoon.

“And Miss Matilde Bernardin.” Selena called out before spotting her sitting next to Elena. “The meeting about the financial plans for the renovations of the tenants’ housing is scheduled for 5pm this afternoon. Please present yourself at the Duke’s study at this time.”

Matilde nodded, and the rest of the women chattered excitedly about the morning ahead.

“Francesca, Elena, Lilian, Rosa, Jessica, Bethan and Lucinda. Please follow me.” Selena wasted no time gathering up half of the women headed for their date.

Elena rolled her eyes as Francesca stomped off ahead of the group after practically pushing her out of the way. Of course, she would be stuck with the leader of the terrible trio. Elena fell into step beside Lilian Lyle. Once the young woman ascertained that Elena had no desire to mock her for her lack of knowledge about high society, she became pretty chatty. By the time they reached the edge of the forest, they were on first-name terms, and Elena had learned a lot about her new friend.



Ambrose was already waiting for the group at the foot of a large oak tree. He smiled at the approaching women and thanked Selena for escorting them. To Elena's surprise, Selena said goodbye to the group and then turned to return to the house.

"I am sure you are all curious about what we will do this morning," he said, smiling. "We are lucky in this part of the kingdom, as in these woods there grows a plethora of healing herbs. It has been a long time since the castle has had a resident Herbalist, but we try to gather what we can. Today we will be foraging for Jewelweed; a natural antidote to poison ivy. In spring there are always more cases of poison ivy rash because more of the villages venture into the forest. Therefore, it is imperative that we replenish our stocks. In most places, the plant has stopped flowering this late in the year, but there is something about the soil in Westbrook that keeps the Jewelweed flowering until midwinter. As we all know, time is quickly approaching, so I was hoping to seek all your help today in gathering enough to last us through to late spring. I have a sample here to show you what you are looking for if you are unfamiliar with Jewelweed." He pulled out a cutting of a plant with bright orange flowers speckled with white spots and passed it around the group.

Francesca seemed unimpressed that she was being made to look for plants in the woods, but she smiled widely when Ambrose looked in her direction.

Elena looked over at Lilian. She would be invaluable today as she had an interest in botany. On the walk down to the forest, she had been telling Elena that she had already been out early this morning to forage at the edge of the trees for some of the plants that she used in her homemade balms and lotions.

Ambrose handed each woman a basket and gloves. "Beware of poison ivy, and please do not leave the sight of the rest of the group. If you have an issue, please come and find me."

Elena was unsurprised when several women had issues cropping up very early on. She was thankful when Lilian offered to work together. She was friendly and more than willing to share her knowledge. "Jewelweed is the common

name,” Lilian told Elena, “but it is more commonly referred to as *spotted touch-me-not*.” She chuckled, and Elena smiled. They began making their way through the forest, collecting more and more of the precious plant and soon, their baskets were almost complete.

“Oh look, Lilian!” Elena exclaimed. “There is a whole cluster just beyond that tree stump.” She hurried towards it when Lilian called out.

“Wait, Elena. We are almost out of view of the others; if we go any further, we will be completely out of sight.”

“I will only be a moment, and then we can head back. Our baskets will be overflowing.”

Lilian grumbled but followed, unable to miss the opportunity of gathering more Jewelweed. The two women held up their skirts as they clambered over a fallen tree. Elena stopped suddenly and gasped in shock. Lilian followed Elena’s gaze and jumped back. The figure of a man hunched over, was lying just a few feet away from them.

“Sir,” Elena exclaimed, running over to his form. He had been obscured by the tree and a Elena would have not seen him at all if they had not walked away from the group.

“Oh, be careful, Elena,” Lilian whispered. “He could be dangerous.”

“Oh hush, he is injured. Even if he is dangerous, there is very little he can do to me in this state. Lend me your scarf; he has a bad rash that will need covering before we can move him.”

Lilian passed her the scarf and Elena bound it around his right hand that was already bright red.

“Now run and get help. The others are only behind those trees.” As Elena spoke, she heard Ambrose calling out. “We’re here!” she cried, drawing his attention to them.

It took a few moments for Ambrose to get close to them and he looked angry. “Elena, how careless could you be? Your only instruction was to not wander from the group, yet here

you are-” he faltered as he caught sight of the unconscious man that Elena was examining.

“Ralph!” Ambrose said in a hoarse voice.

“Do you know this man?” Lilian spoke for the first time since they had made their discovery.

“He is my cousin. We will have to move him back to the house immediately. Lilian, run ahead and guide the rest of the women back. Once you get to the castle, go straight to the kitchens and tell Mrs Beaton that we have a patient coming to her that needs urgent medical care.”

Lilian nodded, picked up her skirts and ran at full speed towards the rest of the group.

“Ambrose, I don’t think it is just a poison ivy rash. He is unconsciousness and look at the colour of his lips. I think he has been poisoned by something much more sinister.” Elena whispered.

“Unfortunately, I think you are right. Let’s get him back to the house as quickly as we can. I can support most of his weight, but I need you to prop him up. Can you put his right arm over your shoulder?”

Elena nodded, and the two of them carried the tall man through the forest and then over the perfectly manicured lawns. It was slow going but before long they were within sight of the castle.

They were met at the steps up to the kitchen by Sir Carmichael and a group of groundsmen who had been searching the edge of the tree line for them. One of the tallest groundsmen took Elena’s place, and the group progressed much faster through the walled herb garden and into the kitchen.

A commanding woman in a long apron, whom Elena could only assume was Mrs Beaton, was directing maids to clear the kitchen table. Ambrose and the groundsman lifted the patient onto the table whilst Lilian and Elena stood at the doorway, unsure of what to do. At that moment, Selena appeared behind them.

“I heard what happened; you did well. Now go back to your rooms. Rumours are already circling. Please only repeat the story that you found a stranger in the forest who was suffering from poison ivy rash. Say nothing of his association with the Duke or what else ails him. We will make a formal announcement later.”

The women nodded, and with one look back into the kitchen, they hurried up the stairs.

They parted ways once they reached the guest corridor, each heading in different directions. As Elena unlocked the door to her room, she jumped at the sight of Matilde sitting cross-legged on her bed.

“How on earth did you get in here?” Elena looked at the windows, but they remained closed and bolted. “I locked the door when I left and only unlocked it to get back in!”

“Oh, that,” Matilde replied dismissively. “I learned a lock picking charm from my brother—quite a useful skill. I can also do it manually but it takes much longer. But tell me what happened; I have only heard rumours and they are almost too fantastic to believe.”

Elena sat down next to Matilde and told her the whole story, including what Selena had told her not to repeat.

“You must not repeat this, though,” she told Matilde. Despite Matilde’s knack for finding out information, Elena concluded that Matilde was not a gossip. It felt good to have someone to confide in, and the pair spent a few hours hypothesising how the Duke’s cousin could end up poisoned and unconscious in the forest so close to the Westbrook estate.



Just as it was getting dark, a maid knocked on the door to inform them that their presence was requested before dinner for an announcement. Elena and Matilde speculated about how much Selena would say and whether the Duke would be at the meal.



As it turned out, Selena and Sir Carmichael were already seated at the long dinner table when they arrived. When everyone was seated, Elena was surprised to see Ambrose join them at the table.

“Before dinner is served,” Ambrose began, “I must inform you about today’s events and apologise for having to cancel the one-to-one dates. My cousin was found in the forest and brought back to the estate. I believe he was travelling here before he became unwell. It was very fortunate that he was found when he was, and I am pleased to say that he is quickly returning to full health. If he continues to improve at the rate he has so far, he should be able to join us for dinner tomorrow evening.”

The group chattered with excitement, and Selena smiled stiffly. Despite the good news, Elena noticed that Ambrose looked tense.

“After dinner, I would like to spend time individually with each of the ladies I had to cancel on this afternoon.”

The room’s collective mood improved further, and after dinner the women retired to the adjoining room. Throughout the evening, each of the women who missed out on their date was called by Selena and disappeared for around twenty minutes. Each returned looking pleased and took great pleasure in telling the rest of the group about their time with the Duke.

Ambrose

The day had been a nightmare, and Ambrose was beginning to develop a headache. The only light relief he got from the conversations with his prospective brides was when Miss Ola Minnow recited a rather lurid poem that she had learned while travelling overseas. Ambrose decided that although she was better suited to life aboard a ship than as a Duchess, he would keep her in the process for as long as possible if only to hear her recite more poetry.

After spending time with the women, he headed in the direction of the library. He planned on finishing a bit more work as he knew that, despite how tired he felt, he would be unable to sleep after the events of the day.

Ambrose approached the door to the library and paused. He could hear a dragging noise followed by several thumps and a curse. Opening the door slowly, he carefully surveyed the room before sighing loudly.

“You!” he exclaimed loudly. “I should have you thrown out when I first caught you in here.”

Elena jumped at the sound of his voice and dropped the book she was holding. After climbing down from the stool, she had been standing on and checking the book over, she glowered at Ambrose. “Oh, let’s not start that again. I thought you’d still be flirting for at least another hour.”

Ambrose practically choked on his tongue. “That is *not* what I have been doing.” He said in an outraged tone. “The process of finding a Duchess is a gruelling one.”

She threw him a disbelieving look. “Oh, I am sure; having so many young women drooling over you must be hard.”

“Ah, I see,” Ambrose exclaimed. “I think I detect a hint of jealousy.” He smirked at Elena. “You did choose to remain in the process after all.”

She blushed and waved dismissively. “I am not jealous, only curious, I suppose.”

Ambrose grinned. “Let us get back to the matter at hand; why have I found you breaking into my library for the second time in one week?”

“Breaking into a room when the door is already unlocked is impossible. At any rate, I thought I’d have a few hours of peace to search.”

“Search for what?” Ambrose crossed over to the stack of books that Elena had clearly been collecting. They were all volumes about the nobility of the kingdom and family trees. “Ah, I see; you were searching for information about my cousin.”

“Am I that transparent?” Elena narrowed her eyes.

“You could have saved yourself some time and asked me directly.” Ambrose grinned.

“Aside from being too busy *not* flirting with your dates, I wasn’t sure if you would tell me. You looked surprised to see Ralph earlier, and it wasn’t just because of how ill he was. There is some discord between you both,” she said, and Ambrose was quietly impressed by how much she had observed.

“What else have you discovered about my dear cousin?” He motioned towards the books, some of which were still open. Ambrose was keen to hear what she had been able to work out.

“Well,” Elena began. “He is your paternal cousin, I believe, hence the fact that he is of no blood relation to your uncle, Sir Carmichael. His full name is Ralph Edward Gill and he holds no title.”

Ambrose nodded, confirming that she was correct and signalled for her to continue.

“He is an only child, both parents are deceased. He has been stationed at the Eastern border for the last few years. He has been there since before there was an invasion from Caltain several years ago. There has been talk of another uprising, but it is likely nothing.”

“Hang on, that is hardly information that is widely known. How on earth did you come to hear of that?” Ambrose

exclaimed. When she only shrugged and looked away from him, he sighed. I would bet it is your friend Matilde. She has a skill for acquiring information and it seems that she sees fit to share some of it with you. I would be careful about whom you mention that to; they might get the impression that you know more than you do or are involved with traitors to the King.”

Elena only nodded thoughtfully as if storing what Ambrose had said away to examine later.

“After being orphaned when he was ten, he came to live here until eighteen and left to travel abroad for a few years before enlisting in the military. He has served for over ten years and has been awarded several medals for bravery.” Elena must have noted the expression that briefly crossed Ambrose’s face because she stopped. “All of that information was easy to acquire, but I am now wondering about the information that wasn’t written in one of those books. Your cousin is two years your elder, which theoretically would suggest you had been close growing up. It would be easy to assume that you looked up to him, played games with him and grew up with him more like a sibling. From what I have heard about your parents, they were kind and would hardly have treated him any differently than you. Why is it then that you dislike him so much?”

Ambrose sighed and sat down in one of the plump armchairs across from where Elena was now perched on a stool. “I can tell you are not going to let this drop.” He sighed. “You are correct in most things; however, I did admire my cousin greatly at first. We had not seen much of Ralph before he came to live with us, as he grew up across the sea in the city of Lumeres. When his parents died, my mother was beside herself. She had not been particularly close with her sister since she had moved away to be married, but they had always communicated by letter. Father, too, was unsettled by the matter. Their home had been burnt to the ground, and Ralph only survived because he was walking through the town with his governess. Despite the tragedy in his life I admired him greatly and spent years trying to emulate him. But after a time...” Ambrose cut off, struggling to articulate what it was about Ralph that had begun to change. “He became more insular, solitary. We never spent very much time together.”

“Surely he was just young and grieving.” Elena said, clearly unconvinced.

“It is hard to explain,” Ambrose rubbed his forehead. “We should have been close; he always seemed distant.”

“You would have been very young at the time,” Elena said. “What caused you to lose contact?”

“Well, there were lots of small things, hard to explain. Just an impression, I suppose. He left when I was sixteen, and I haven’t heard from him since. I knew roughly what he was doing since we had mutual acquaintances, but I heard nothing directly from him.”

“Well, I declare that is ridiculous,” Elena exclaimed. “You have been estranged from your cousin for fourteen years for no solid reason?”

Ambrose had to admit it sounded ridiculous but could not shake the foreboding feeling he had when he saw Elena leaning over Ralph in the forest.

“I think perhaps this is divine intervention.” Elena smiled. “This is your opportunity to build a new relationship with your cousin!” Elena stood up and started pacing before the fireplace.

Ambrose groaned. “Just because you are close with your cousins does not mean everyone has to be.”

“How do you know I am close with my cousins?”

“You came into this process so that your cousin could still marry her innkeeper, and I saw you hug both of them whilst you said goodbye. That kind of emotion cannot be faked,” Ambrose admitted.

“Ah, but you demanded a family member take her place. You could have just asked for another name to be chosen.”

“But the likelihood of *your* name being chosen was much slimmer than you volunteering yourself.” Ambrose stood up from the armchair.

Elena looked at him directly. He thought that she must have been aware that this had been his thought process; he had

hardly been discreet. However, she looked at him with such intensity that Ambrose forgot what he was going to say.

“Why? Why did you want me to volunteer after how we met in the library?”

“Why did you stay?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“You know why I stayed. My aunt was ready to deliver me to the highest bidder.”

“I allowed everyone to stay here without being part of the process. Why stay in the running to be my wife?” Ambrose’s voice was hoarse.

They were so close now that Elena bit her bottom lip and looked away. Ambrose grabbed her shoulder lightly and turned her back to face him. “Why stay?”

They locked eyes, and after a moment’s pause, Elena lent forwards and brushed her lips against Ambrose’s. He didn’t hesitate to wrap his arm around her waist and pull her closer into an embrace.

After a few moments, Elena pulled away and looked up at Ambrose. Without saying another word, she picked up two books from the side table and crossed the room, turning back just as she reached the door, as if to say something but then thought better of it. She made eye contact with Ambrose just before she slipped out of the library and into the corridor.

Ambrose sank back into his armchair. The day had most definitely not gone as he had expected it to. He still had hours of work sitting on his desk, but instead, he sat in front of the roaring fire and enjoyed a sense of peace that he had not felt in a long time.

Elena

As much as she enjoyed Matilde's company, Elena was glad that her friend was not waiting in her room when she got back. Her mind was churning with the events of the day. She had barely processed finding Ralph nearly dead on the forest floor, yet she couldn't get the memory of kissing the Duke out of her head.

Sleep evaded her for a long time, and by the time she drifted off, she was plagued by strange dreams of faceless men and jewelweed growing through cracks in her bedroom walls.



Elena was woken by one of the maids who had first attended to her when she arrived at the estate. Coleen was a shy girl, but they had become almost familiar over the few interactions Elena had with her.

"Coleen, do you know if the Duke's cousin has awoken yet this morning?" Elena asked.

"Oh yes, miss. Cook, I mean Mrs Beaton, had me take his breakfast to him. He was ever so polite and *so* handsome." She blushed.

Elena smiled, gratified that there were already signs that Ambrose had been wrong about his cousin. "Is he indeed?"

Coleen blushed again and smiled widely at Elena. "I think if you offered to deliver healing remedy for Mrs Beaton you would be allowed to see him for yourself. She's been moaning all morning that she has been up and down three flights of stairs since he arrived"

Elena nodded, "Thank you, Coleen. I dare say I shall do just that."



After a hurried breakfast, Elena headed down to the kitchens. The second half of the women had a group date scheduled for the morning, and Matilde had a stack of accounts to familiarise herself with. Matilde had asked her over breakfast how the trip to the library had gone, and Elena told her what she had discovered about Ralph from the books. She hadn't mentioned Ambrose finding her or the more personal information he had revealed. He hadn't directly told her not to repeat it, but somehow, Elena wanted to keep their conversation private.



The kitchens at the Westbrook estate were set below the main level with direct access to the herb garden. When she had been there yesterday, she had barely noticed her surroundings, but today, it was bustling with activity. The large table Ralph had been laid upon was not spotless and covered in a clean table cloth. Elena recognised Mrs Beaton from the day before. She was busy stirring a large pot and appeared to be lecturing a young woman in a starched apron.

“Mrs Beaton,” Elena addressed Mrs Beaton politely. “I am gratified to hear that the patient has regained some strength.”

The older woman turned to face Elena. “Ah yes,” she took an appraising look at Elena. “I wondered how long before the first inquisitive young lady made their way down here. I suppose you wish to offer to deliver something to the patient’s room.”

Elena looked embarrassed but carried on, “A healing draft, perhaps? But it is not what it looks like.”

“It never is. Just be careful; I saw how the master looked at you. If you fancy a dalliance with his cousin, then I’ll be the first to turn you out on your ear.”

Elena blushed. When on earth had Ambrose been looking at her in such a manner?

Mrs Beaton carried on as if she had heard Elena’s unspoken question. “It was in the kitchen yesterday. As I said, be careful.” She crossed the room to a tall cabinet and pulled out

a small green bottle with a marble stopper. “Here is the healing draft. You will have to go to the family rooms on the third floor. I assume you know where they are already.” Mrs Beaton said as she placed the bottle along with a small glass on a tray and passed it over to a speechless Elena.

Elena opened her mouth to deny that she was looking for a “dalliance” with Ralph, but the stern cook had already turned back to the stove. Muttering her thanks, Elena walked past the a group of scullery maids who were covering their mouths to suppress their laughter. Elena kept her head high as she left the room and began the climb up the four flights of stairs.

All the guest rooms were located on the second floor, so despite what Mrs Beaton had assumed, Elena had never needed to go the third floor. When she reached her destination, she noticed that the corridor was even more resplendent than the floor below it. Even the doors were more ornate with swirls and scenes from legends carved into each panel. Unsurprisingly, however, there was no indication of which door was which. She cursed herself for not asking Mrs Beaton which room was Ralph’s. She had been so keen to leave that she had forgotten the most important detail. Elena suddenly also realised that one of the doors must lead to Ambrose’s bedchamber, and, although it was unlikely that he would be there at this time in the day, she reddened at the thought of stumbling into his room.

There were six doors in total, and Elena was about to take the plunge and test the first room when she heard a crash coming from within the second room. She paused before striding towards it and knocking one.

“Come in.” She heard a deep voice say.

Elena cracked the door open and was relieved to see Ralph sitting in a high-backed chair by a blazing fire.

“Ah, a visitor at last!” He said and flashed Elena a wide smile.

Elena had to admit that Coleen was right; Ralph was handsome. She noted that he didn’t have the strong jawline his cousin had, and his skin was much paler. She thought of

Ambrose's tightly curled hair and had to almost physically shake herself to stop herself from comparing the two men.

"Are you coming in?" he said, smiling again and motioning to the seat before him.

It was not difficult to deduce what the cause of the noise was. A small table with a tea cup had crashed to the floor and Ralph was already attempting to pick up the shattered pieces.

Elena crossed the room quickly and helped him with the task. She then took a seat in front of him on a two-seater settee.

"As you can see, I am not quite myself at the moment." Ralph acknowledged with a small smile and Elena noticed how his hands were trembling slightly. "I am told it is just an effect of the poison wearing off."

"Of course. It is only a teacup after all. It is good that you are recovering well. I should introduce myself," she said hastily, remembering her manners suddenly. "I am Miss Elena Chamberlain. I was in the group that found you yesterday in the forest."

"I have been told that it was *you* who found me and the group just brought me back," he said, still smiling and watching Elena as he spoke.

"I suppose it was," she admitted, somehow stuck for words. As much as she wanted Ambrose to be wrong about his cousin, she struggled to match this confident, charismatic man with the youth that Ambrose had described.

"I suppose I am not very much like Ambrose described." Ralph grinned, as if reading her thoughts instantly.

Elena started. "Am I that easy to read? You are the second person just this morning who successfully guessed my thoughts. I shall have to practice schooling my expressions in future." She said drily.

"Ah, but where would the fun be in that?" he said coyly.

"I will admit I did not imagine you to be so-" she broke off, trying to articulate what she meant.

“Handsome?” he suggested. “Breath-taking? Impressively intelligent and undeniably heroic?”

Elena laughed at this, and the two conversed more lightly from then on.

Time passed swiftly, and Elena was just about to broach the topic of how Ralph had ended up in the forest in the first place when the door opened and made them both jump slightly.

“Dear cousin, come and join us!” Ralph said as Ambrose entered the room. He was holding a tray of something Mrs Beaton had clearly prepared and sat it down next to the one that Elena had discarded when she entered the room.

“I do say, Ambrose, you do not look so fine playing nursemaid as our friend Elena does.” Ralph grinned. “I may call you Elena?” he smiled across at her.

“You indeed may not!” Ambrose cut across him and glowered at them both.

“Come and sit down.” Elena motioned to the space next to her and made eye contact with Ambrose, silently begging him to appease her.

He grimaced slightly but sat down beside her. She knew he was sitting somewhat closer than was typically polite and reddened slightly at the thought.

Ralph merely watched the interaction with a slight smile on his face.

“I thought you were on a date?” Elena looked over to Ambrose, who still looked uncomfortable.

“I was. It finished.”

“Did you take the young lady out looking for more injured cousins in the forest?” Ralph was still smiling. “I am looking forward to meeting more of your young ladies at dinner this evening, Ambrose.”

Elena could have sworn that she heard Ambrose growl and so she abruptly changed the subject. “I have never been to this part of the castle before; it is beautiful.”

“Ah, yes.” Ralph smiled. “This was my bedroom when I lived here. It hasn’t changed very much.”

Elena looked around in surprise. The room was opulent but resembled more of a guest bedroom than anything. The only personal thing about the room was the fully stacked bookshelf in the alcove.

Ambrose cleared his throat. “We should return to the other guests.” He motioned for Elena to accompany him, and they crossed to the doorway.

“I am so pleased you both dropped by.” Ralph followed them to the doorway. “I will see you at dinner.”

Ambrose practically pulled her out of the room, and they walked in silence back down the corridor before she broke the silence. “He seems to have recovered well.”

Ambrose just murmured incoherently under his breath.

“Why did you visit him?” Ambrose was still looking ahead.

“To see how he was, of course, and I suppose I was curious to meet him after what you told me last night.” She admitted.

“And was he what you expected?”

“Not entirely. You painted him as an introvert.”

“And?”

“And he was nothing of the sort. He was hospitable, gracious and even...”

“Charming?” Ambrose murmured.

“Well, yes, I suppose he was.” Elena admitted. “Is that a hint of jealousy I detect?”

“Of course not; that would be ridiculous.” Ambrose’s usual teasing manner had disappeared.

“Ridiculous? No, I think it would be rather hypocritical.” Elena laughed.

“How so?”

“You’ve spent the morning flirting with seven women, and I have had tea with one invalid.”

“I have not spent the morning flirting; why do you assume I am flirting with every woman here?” They had stopped walking and stood at the top of the staircase facing each other.

“Because you have been flirting with me.” Elena said boldly.

“Ah.” Ambrose paused, “Well, that is different.”

“How?” Elena could not stop the exasperation showing in her voice.

“You know how.”

She knew logically that Ambrose cared for her on some level, but truthfully she had been jealous of the other women. “And yet?”

“And yet I know you aren’t sure about this life. You stayed here in this process, which surprised me, but I need someone to want this life. Can you honestly say at this moment that you do? Or that you even want to get married?”

Elena looked away. “It is difficult.” She admitted. “I never thought I would want this kind of life or even get married, for that matter. This process is not what I expected. I need time.”

“I know,” Ambrose said gently. “And yet I must get to know the other women. I have a responsibility here, and the pressure I am under is outside of my control.”

“It is just that I have no desire to become a Duchess. If it were just you...” she broke off.

Ambrose looked at her as if willing her to continue her sentence.

Elena sighed and began again. “What happens if you do not marry before midwinter?”

“If I do not, I will lose this estate. I hope you know that the title matters very little to me, but I have responsibilities to the staff and tenants on this land. They have been sorely neglected for some years...”

“When you were away.” Elena finished the sentence for him. “What happened? Most people know that you were in the

military like your cousin. Then you vanished, and it took years to find you when your parents died...” She broke off.

“I think that may be a conversation for another time. We must get down to the great hall.”

Elena sighed. She knew it must be time for lunch and then the individual dates.

They walked down the staircase in silence. There was so much more to discuss, and Elena’s head was pounding. There was something about Ralph that she could not quite put her finger on.

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Ambrose

It had been a surprise to Ambrose to be able to admit to himself how drawn he was to Elena. Despite that, he knew that she she was still so unsure of the idea of becoming the Duchess of Westbook. After all, it was only several days ago that she had been plotting ways of getting out of the whole process.

He sighed. Ralph arriving suddenly made things much more difficult. Elena had been right; Ralph did seem different to how Ambrose had remembered him and described him to her. He appeared changed, and yet there were moments when Ambrose saw glimpses of the sullen teenager that he remembered as a boy. Trying to explain this to Elena had been fruitless. However, he could only hope that she would eventually see what Ambrose meant after she spent more time with Ralph. This idea made Ambrose uncomfortable, yet he knew he would have to stop coming across as so possessive of Elena in front of Ralph. Ambrose saw the interest that had flickered in his cousins' eyes and knew that his own interest in Elena would only spur Ralph on.



Standing next to the fountain, Ambrose mulled over his plan for his upcoming dates. Selena had planned walks in the formal gardens as an opportunity to talk to the women individually.

He was just wondering who would be first when Miss Sara Sinclair descended the steps onto the lawn. He greeted her formally. "Good afternoon, Miss Sinclair."

She greeted him in return and took the arm he offered her whilst they walked down the nearest path.

Ambrose made the mistake of looking back at the window directly overlooking them and saw the faces of most of the other women disappear quickly. Muffled laughter came from within, and Ambrose wondered if Elena had been amongst

them. He hadn't seen her face and wondered if she had gone to the library or, worse, back to visit Ralph.

Miss Sinclair was looking up at him expectantly and he stumbled, realising that she had asked him a question.

She looked slightly put out, but masked her expression quickly with a wide smile. "I asked you if you are a fan of hunting, your Grace."

"Not at all." He said bluntly and then realised that he should be making more of an effort to converse. "I mean to say that I saw enough death during my time in the military; I see no need to kill or inflict pain for the sake of entertainment."

Miss Sinclair laughed and squeezed his arm. "Oh, you are funny, Your Grace. As if wild animals have any capacity to feel pain. You must be a fan of fox hunting; my father is a great sportsman."

"I think that fox hunting is a ruthless activity that can hardly be called a sport."

Sara Sinclair's eyes hardened slightly, but she brushed a lock of hair from her shoulder and smiled.

"Oh, I assume you will change your mind as you get used to your position's responsibilities, Your Grace. It is not as if it is legal to hunt magical creatures anymore" she said sweetly.

Ambrose paused, anger flaring up. "I thank you for not telling me of my responsibilities, Miss Sinclair. If not for my position, we would not be taking this walk at all, and you would not be staying as a guest in my home. As is it, I am glad we have had this conversation, as I have found it rather enlightening. I need a Duchess with compassion for *all* living things, magical or not. Therefore, I ask you to pack your bags immediately. I will have a carriage brought around to deliver you back to your home today." With that, he turned and walked swiftly towards the house.

Once inside, he made the appropriate arrangements for Miss Sinclair's departure and then headed back to the fountain to wait for his next date.

After a few minutes, Miss Lucinda Carroll entered the formal gardens, and Ambrose greeted her. She replied so quietly that Ambrose barely heard her and their stroll in the garden became more and more bizarre as Miss Carroll spoke less and less. By the end of their date, Ambrose was relieved it was over, and Miss Carroll practically ran up the steps away from him.

Pondering how strange the interaction had been, he turned back to the fountain only to jump a few minutes later as he was thumped on the shoulder. It wasn't hard, but enough to surprise him.

"Ouch! What on earth? Oh, it's you." He huffed as he saw Elena holding a large book in her hand. "What on earth are you doing hitting me with that?"

"Oh, I had to restrain myself, you fool. I was tempted to push you into the fountain. Let's walk into the maze so no one can overlook us. It probably wouldn't do your image much good being scolded by one of your candidates." she said grimly.

He followed her into the maze, more confused than anything, and was about to speak when she cut across him.

"You cannot go around throwing women out without cause and making them sob. Sara might have been as dull as ditch water, but you shouldn't have made her cry, called her *useless* and told her to leave without any of her belongings. Now Lucinda is so terrified of you that she hasn't stopped shaking.

Ambrose paused for a moment and then burst out laughing.

"Now, what is so funny? Have you lost your mind?" Elena placed her hands firmly on her hips.

"If this weren't so ridiculous, I would be deeply offended that you believed the words of a woman you just insulted over me."

"You mean you didn't tell her to leave?" Elena paused.

"Of course I told her to leave; she was spouting some ridiculous notions about how wild animals don't feel pain, and

even suggested that I would eventually develop a huge passion for fox hunting.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, and before you ask, I did not call her useless. I was angry but I did not insult her. Neither did I tell her to leave without her belongings. I told her to pack her belongings whilst I arranged a carriage for her. I may have been frustrated, but I am not a total imbecile. I am sorry that Miss Lucinda Carroll is under the impression that I am a total monster, but she will not make a good Duchess if she is too frightened of me to speak.”

“Will you ask her to leave?”

“Not immediately.” Ambrose sighed, “I don’t want her leaving under such circumstances. However, I doubt she will change my impression of her. She may be a charming young woman, but I need someone with a little fierceness.” He eyed the thick book tucked under Elena’s arm that she had thumped him with, and she blushed.

“Is there anything else you would like to shout at me for, Elena?” he asked coyly.

She laughed. “I can think of a few things, but I should apologise first. I shouldn’t have believed Sara for a moment.”

Ambrose smiled, and the two of them fell into step as they walked through the maze.

“She told us you were telling her about your career in the military and then suddenly turned on her.”

Ambrose sighed, “I only mentioned that I had seen enough death during my time on the Eastern border and had no desire to spend my time killing for fun.”

Elena nodded. “I bet she didn’t like that; Sara spends most of her time telling us about the various *trophies* she collects.”

Ambrose shivered in distaste. “She’ll be on her way home before dinner.”

The pair continued their walk and arrived at a spot in the garden that overlooked the village. Elena motioned towards

the cluster of houses. “How are the redevelopments for the tenant’s housing going?”

“Much better. You were right, as it happens. The tenants knew exactly what they needed and what could be done with the existing structures. I haven’t had much time lately, but since I employed your friend Matilde on the financial side of things, the project has run smoothly. We should be on track to finish all the developments in time for the Midwinter Feast.”

“She is rather clever; I am sure she will meet the deadline.”

Ambrose nodded and continued. “The Queen is calling it her Winter Solstice Ball, but traditionally, it was the Midwinter Feast that everyone within a day’s journey would attend. Fortune tellers, dancers and folk singers would perform, and we would build a ginormous bonfire.” He motioned towards the open stretch of lawn next to the forest. “We haven’t held one here in years, not since my parents were alive.”

Elena surprised him by reaching out for his hand. They stood in silence, looking out over the space where the bonfire would once have been in comfortable silence.

“I know you lived with your aunt and cousins, but I know little else about your family.” Ambrose said hesitantly.

“My parents died during the attempted invasion from the Kingdom of Caltain. Our family home was very close to the border. I was away visiting my aunt and cousins when they were killed. I have lived with them ever since.”

“That’s why you knew about the military presence nearby.” Ambrose sighed with understanding.

“Yes, and I know you were stationed near there at one point too. You never told me what happened.”

Ambrose looked away from her. “I know the rumours say that I went missing, but it was much simpler than that. Unfortunately, simplicity doesn’t appeal to gossipmongers that much. I was captured during the attempted invasion. I was enlisted in the military, and there was a base camp on the border in a town called Grimshaw.”

Elena nodded, "Grimshaw was only ten miles from my parents' home."

"You probably know then how few soldiers were there before the invasion as it was so unexpected. We tried to hold them back until reinforcements came, but it was hopeless and I was captured. The invasion was unsuccessful thankfully as it was not long before a larger military presence did arrive, but I was taken hostage in Caltain for four years. I wasn't mistreated, I think they planned to ransom me when I inherited my title, but after a while, they practically forgot about me. Then the civil war in Caltain started and I saw an window of opportunity to escape. It was rather anti-climactic in the end." he paused, and realised that Elena was still listening attentively. "It is sensible that there is now a larger military presence on our border, but there is little threat of invasion from a country too busy fighting amongst itself."

Elena nodded, and Ambrose continued. "I am very sorry to hear of your parent's deaths."

"And I of yours." Elena replied.

"Now let us talk of happier things." Ambrose smiled and motioned for them to continue on their walk.

"What will the Midwinter Feast be like this year?" Elena looked up at him.

"The Queen wants an exclusive affair, but I have insisted it is still an open invitation; I will not budge on that."

She smiled. "It is good you are insisting upon what you want. It will also be the wedding night after all."

Ambrose opened his mouth to reply but stopped at the sight of Selena walking swiftly towards them.

"Your Grace," she called as she approached them. "I do not wish to interrupt, but it is time for you to meet Lady Francesca now. She is waiting at the fountain." Ambrose could have sworn he heard Elena grit her teeth, and he smiled.

"Of course, I should not wish to keep the young lady waiting." He said warmly. With a curt bow and a glint in his eye, he bade farewell to Elena and headed back towards the

fountain with a broad smile on his face and the distinct impression that Miss Elena Chamberlain was jealous.

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Elena

Elena was most certainly not jealous. Selena followed Ambrose back up the stone steps, and they both disappeared behind a tall hedge. After their intimate conversation, Elena had no desire to go back and sit with the other women speculating about how Francesca's date with Ambrose was progressing. Instead, she turned around and headed through the gardens and towards the village. She estimated it would be no more than a twenty minute walk, and the idea of getting some fresh air and a break from the atmosphere of the competition and the other women was definitely appealing.

Elena always wore sturdier shoes than were typically fashionable, and she was thankful that today she had chosen to wear a muted green day dress. The idea of turning up in the village in some of the gowns that Francesca had worn over the last few days would be mortifying. At least dressed how she was, she would blend in with some of the other women in the village. An image of Francesca with a low neckline and ruffled silk skirts laughing at something Ambrose had said kept slipping into her mind. Elena mentally shook herself and pushed the image aside. Why she would be thinking of Ambrose and Francesca at all was utterly beyond Elena's comprehension. She was most definitely not jealous. Elena reminded herself that she had no desire even to become the Duchess of Westbrook. A little voice at the back of Elena's mind asked her what she was still doing in the process if she had no desire to marry Ambrose. The idea of becoming the Duchess was overwhelming, to say the least. But marrying Ambrose... that would not be so bad. The idea of a woman like Francesca marrying Ambrose made her feel physically sick. In fact, any other woman marrying Ambrose...

She pushed the thought to the back of her mind, and within a few more minutes of brisk walking, she reached the edge of the village.



There were clear signs of recent improvements in the village. Shop fronts were freshly painted, and the main street was busy with tradespeople moving tools and materials. Elena had heard that since the old Duke and Duchess died of influenza when Ambrose was away, the whole estate, village and tenant's housing had fallen into disrepair. It was clear that now Ambrose was in charge, work was progressing quickly. No wonder he looked so tired, she mused; the planning going into this project must have been considerable. There was also the work that had taken place on the main house to make sure it was fit for so many guests and the redevelopments on the tenants' farms. Elena now saw what Ambrose had meant when he said he wanted a Duchess to take an active role in running the estate and land.

The high street was full of about a dozen shops, including a bookshop that Elena headed for. It was crammed to the rafters with shelves full of books, and there was a large table in the middle where new arrivals were stacked in neat piles. She mentally commended herself for always keeping a little money on her person as she bought a copy of a book entitled *Foraging for beginners: Naturally Healing Herbs* that she could not resist. Lilian had inspired her to learn more about the plants with magical properties, and she was looking forward to showing her new friend her purchase.

She thanked the salesman who wrapped her book in brown paper and headed towards the tea shop with a row of bright flowers planted outside. The lights were on, but there was a sign on the window. "*Closed for the afternoon; apologies for the inconvenience.*" She sighed and looked around for somewhere else to get some refreshment and noticed a tavern at the end of the row of shops. There was work going on outside the building to repoint the stone exterior, but as Elena approached, she noticed the door was propped open. Inside, it was warm and inviting. A large fire roared in the hearth, and she was grateful to see that the patronage was not exclusively male. She was surprised at how well-dressed and wealthy many of the patrons seemed. The village was clearly becoming more of a lively hub. Feeling more relaxed and less out of place on her own than she had initially thought she might be,

she headed to the bar and ordered a cup of mulled cider. She was looking around the packed room for a spare seat when a tap on her shoulder almost made her spill her drink all down herself.

“I didn’t think I’d see you here.” A male voice sounded just behind her.

Elena spun around and nearly dropped her drink for the second time, surprised to see Ralph grinning at her.

“I could say the same for you.” She regained her composure quickly. “I thought you were meant to be recovering.”

“Ah well, our Mrs Beaton is a dab hand at remedial drinks, and after yesterday’s misfortunes, I am pleased to say that I have made a miraculous recovery.”

“You were on death’s door!” Elena exclaimed, noticing that although he seemed even better than he had done that morning, he still had a slight grey tinge to his skin.

“It was Mrs Beaton herself who recommended a walk in the fresh air.”

“I bet she didn’t mean to a tavern,” she muttered.

Ralph chuckled and motioned for her to join him at a small table at the back of the room. Elena paused. Something was nagging at her that this wasn’t wise. Still, she reminded herself there was nothing wrong with sitting publicly with one of Ambrose’s relatives. One of Ambrose’s relatives that he *actively dislikes*, the small voice in her mind reminded her.

“So, what brings you to this fine establishment this afternoon?” Ralph grinned at her, a glint in his eye.

“The teashop was closed.” Elena didn’t mean to sound so clipped, so she elaborated. “I fancied a trip into the village. I was surprised about how well stocked the bookshop is, and then when I found the teashop is closed, I ended up here.”

“Ah, I fancy you needed some time away from the castle.” He smirked. “It can be quite oppressive at times.”

“Why come back then?” She blurted out. “You left when you were eighteen and haven’t been back since; why bother?”

He looked surprised for a moment but quickly regained his composure and leaned back in his chair. “You have been doing your research. I suppose Ambrose talked to you. It’s a shame he has never really liked me. I thought it was time to rebuild bridges and visit my cousin. I got a shared carriage to the village and was heading through the forest to cut the corned off the main track, and that’s the last thing I remember. Mrs Beaton told me that I must have been poisoned by something and I was lucky that you found me.”

Elena watched Ralph while he spoke and couldn’t detect anything strange about his story. It all made sense, yet why was there something nagging at her?

“You said Ambrose never liked you. Why is that, do you think?” She sipped her drink.

“Jealousy, what else. I was two years older, and his parents... well, his parents doted on me. When I joined the military, I had letters from them, but I felt that returning to visit them would somehow intrude upon Ambrose. I wanted to allow Ambrose to shine in their eyes, and now I have left it too late to reconnect with them.” He looked wistfully out of the window. “I suppose that is the cruel nature of fate.”

Elena set her cup back on the table. “You think Ambrose was jealous of you?” she asked in disbelief.

He chuckled. “Even now, I am afraid. You saw how he was when he found you alone with me. Yes, I dare say he would be very jealous if he saw us here now.” He winked and downed the rest of his drink.

“I should go,” Elena said, not wanting to admit what he said to be accurate but feeling more and more uncomfortable. “I will see you at dinner.”

Ralph nodded, and before he could say a proper goodbye, she turned and was halfway out of the tavern.

She nearly walked headfirst into Lilian, who was entering the tavern at the exact moment Elena was leaving.

“Oh!” Lilian looked as surprised as Elena was.

“The tearoom is shut.” Elena blurted out, explaining her presence in the tavern. “But of course, you know that.”

Lilian nodded, and Elena cursed herself for her strange behaviour. She was still thinking over everything Ralph had said. “I would offer to join you, she motioned inside the tavern, but I have an awful headache and am about to return to the castle.”

Lilian nodded, “Of course, do not let me hold you up. I hope you feel better before dinner.”

Elena said goodbye and headed quickly up the track towards the castle.

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Ambrose

After spending time with each of the women in the afternoon and dismissing Miss Sara Sinclair, he had gone to find Miss Lucinda Carroll to apologise for the confusion. He had no desire for rumours to spread and was thankful that Elena had been able to shed some light on why Miss Carroll had been so quiet. After their conversation, Miss Carroll agreed that the role of Duchess would not suit her disposition and seemed to be looking forward to returning home that evening. In the morning, Ambrose had said goodbye to two more women. Miss Nikita James and Miss Helena Jenkins had been so busy bickering through the group date in the morning that Ambrose was pretty confident that either would drive him mad if he had to marry one of them.

Ten women were left, and there were only eleven more days until his wedding day. *His* wedding day. He felt sick even thinking of it.

At that moment, Ambrose's uncle knocked on the door and entered the study. He sat down in one of the soft chairs by the fire and grinned.

"You are certainly making your way through the numbers, dear boy." He chuckled. "I heard you threw four young ladies out just today." Carmichael caught sight of Ambrose's sombre expression and paused. "I am sorry. I can see now that this process is taking more of a toll on you than I realised. Can I help with anything?"

Ambrose sighed, "There are nine women left, and I must marry one of them. I don't even know where to go moving forwards."

"Tell me about each of them. Let us try to make more sense of this."

"Well, there is Francesca Delaney. I suppose she is the obvious choice. She has been practically raised to become a Duchess and would be the choice that I am sure the Queen expects. Her father is the Earl of Chukesbury, so I must be

careful there. I do not have the time or energy to make enemies in the nobility.”

Carmichael nodded thoughtfully. “But?”

“But she is not the warmest of women, and her laugh sometimes sounds rather hollow.”

“I suppose it comes down to whether you want a Duchess, a wife, or perhaps both.” Carmichael eyes his nephew.

“Then there is Rosa Fenwick. She is a governess and is exceptionally well educated. She is a kind woman if a little reserved. Miss Jessica Smyth comes from a nearby town and has worked as a seamstress to support her mother. I have made the necessary arrangements for her mother to be supported for the rest of her life, regardless of the outcome of this process.”

“Very good of you.”

“It is only common decency.” Ambrose felt tired.

“Charlotte Manes is charming.” Carmichael chimed in. “But I suspect her friendship with Miss Delaney is calculated.”

“Yes, I thought the same thing.” Ambrose sighed. “You are rather observant, uncle.”

“Oh, I must be. I am invested in your happiness. I want the right match for you.”

Ambrose felt relief at having someone to talk to about the decision he would have to make very soon. “Lilian Lyle was one of the women who found Ralph. She is resourceful and did not fall into a fit of tears, which was a relief. Lucy Roe is very amiable, but I wonder if she has more of an interest in a career as an Opera singer than as a Duchess. Have you heard Ola Minnow recite poetry?”

Carmichael nodded, and both men chuckled.

“Bethan Wilkinson is very kind, she seems to have adopted the kitchen cat, and Mrs Beaton is now cursing the poor girl for luring her mouse catcher into a “life of luxury” as she calls it.”

“I’ve seen her stash some of her dinner in her napkin, and I am sure that cat is the intended recipient. I’ve heard that it now sleeps on her pillow.” Carmichael laughed. “She is clearly a kind woman.”

“Yes, I think she is. I don’t know how I feel about coming second to a kitchen cat for the rest of my life, though.” Ambrose said, smiling. “Miss Marianne Singer is very quiet, so I am afraid I don’t know enough about her. She plays the piano beautifully, though.”

“And then there is Elena Chamberlain.” Carmichael cocked his brow.

“Yes.” Ambrose sobered.

“Would she not make a fine Duchess?”

“Aside from the fact that she does not want to be a Duchess, she would be useless at doing what society expected of her, following protocol and anything else that involved rules of any kind.” Ambrose huffed.

“And yet?”

“And yet she would make an excellent Duchess. She might not be the choice the Queen expects, but she is kind, open, and not afraid to speak her mind.”

“Why is she still here then if she does not want to be the Duchess?”

“That is what I am struggling with. There are moments when-,” he broke off, remembering that it was his uncle he was speaking to.

“I know, dear boy.” Carmichael smiled.

“I dare not have hope, I could send everyone else away, and she might not choose me. I have responsibilities here. I must not let this estate go.”

“We have not spoken about the fact that it is Ralph who is next in line. He is your paternal cousin.”

“I cannot let that happen.”

“Would it be so bad? I admit I only met him a few times when I would visit my brother, your dear father, when you were young. If you did not marry, you would still be free to pursue anything or *anyone* you desire.” Carmichael said.

“I do not trust him. I know he has charmed you and Elena.”

“Perhaps it is time to try to let him in. He and I are your only living family. He wishes to build a relationship. Regardless of whether you marry in time, that is worth something, surely?”

Ambrose was silent. It would be hard letting go of an impression made in childhood, but perhaps that is all it was. He still felt that it was his duty to marry and keep working on the estate, but maybe he had been overly harsh on his cousin. His time being held hostage had made him perhaps too cautious. He was lucky compared to many of the military who had been captured as he had been treated well, almost like a guest in the large house that was only occupied by an elderly nobleman and the soldiers sent to guard him.

Ambrose sighed, “You are right, Uncle. I will endeavour to be more open-minded.”

Carmichael smiled and leant back in his chair. “I would give Elena a chance too. She may not fully realise what the role would entail. You are not a typical Duke; she may believe her future here would be restrictive.”

This thought hadn't occurred to Ambrose. Quite the opposite, in fact, as she had proved when she took her cousin's place. He thought about his own father, who had been loving and kind to his wife and then Ambrose thought about the other noblemen whom he knew. They were an awful bunch with only a couple of exceptions, and their wives always looked miserable. He would have to show Elena that being the Duchess of Westbrook would not be the restrictive position she feared.

With that idea in mind, he said goodnight to his uncle and walked towards his bedchamber. He thought he would speak to Elena in the morning, and it might be possible to end the whole process then and there. As much as she drove him to

distraction, he could not imagine being with anyone else at the Winter Solstice Ball.



He rounded the corner and was nearly at his bedchamber door when he saw a female figure come out of Ralph's room and carefully close the door. He was at the door within a few strides and caught sight of the woman's face.

"Elena!" he exclaimed, shock coursing through him. "What on earth are you doing in my cousin's bedchamber at this time of night? Don't even answer that! I can't believe you. I was ready to reassure you, beg you even to become my Duchess and here you are in the dead of night, slinking out of *his* bed. I bet you were having a good laugh at my expense." He barely had time to register the shocked expression on Elena's face before he stormed off and slammed his door behind him. He locked it quickly and went into the adjoining room. The sound of someone pounding on the door lasted for a few minutes before petering out and eventually stopping altogether.

He thought he would start looking at the other women more seriously tomorrow. He would find an honest woman and marry her on the night of the Solstice Ball. He couldn't send Elena home to be married off, no matter how angry he was. Instead, he would make her stay at the castle until she could make her own arrangements.

Elena

After pounding on Ambrose's door for as long as she could risk, she gave up and headed back to her room. She had never seen him look so genuinely angry, and he hadn't given her a second to explain. Fury pumping through her body, she practically ran down the stairs to the second floor.

She thought she had been lucky not to be detected and had almost gotten away with it. After dinner earlier that evening, Elena had seen Ralph head out into the gardens and had the sudden urge to search his rooms. After initially liking him, a sense of distrust had been slowly growing. He seemed almost too charming, and Elena wondered if he was not being sincere. She wasn't sure what she expected to find in his room and left disappointed. Being surprised by Ambrose had been the last straw, and she was too shocked at first to shout, which she now regretted. How unbelievable, she thought, that he trusted her so little that he would assume that she had been in bed with Ralph.

Elena barely slept but resisted the urge to walk about the castle. She had no desire for anyone else to shout at her.



The following day she headed down for breakfast with the other women and tried to catch Ambrose's eye. She expected him to seem angry or even to try to throw her out of the castle. The reality was much worse. He had sat, not at the head of the table as he usually did, but in between Lilian and Rosa and was calmly smiling and flirting with them both. When she cornered him as they were all leaving the table and asked for a private word, he smiled and said, "she would get her turn, just like the other women." This made her angrier than ever, and he decided to go straight to the library and wait him out. To her surprise, however, she found the room locked for the first time since she arrived at the castle.

Feeling deflated, she went to find Matilde. Her friend was sympathetic, but her mind was occupied with the ledger she was working through, and Elena resigned herself to a day of reading. Even going to the village was unappealing, and she waited while many other women were summoned for one-on-one dates. Lilian returned from her date with stories about the horse ride they had been on; Francesca was very smug about a trip into the nearest town in the carriage. After dinner, everyone sat in the drawing room, playing cards and talking. No matter how often Elena approached, Ambrose found a way to block her or start a conversation with someone else. Ralph had made a fine recovery and was sitting beside Matilde talking about his travels. Elena thought her friend must be bored stiff and contemplated interrupting them before she realised, she had no desire to speak to Ralph, especially in front of Ambrose. Instead, she said a quiet goodnight to the people sitting nearest to her and went to bed.



Three days passed in the same manner, and Elena couldn't find a moment to speak to Ambrose. Ralph was present at meals but noticeably absent for the rest of the day. Resentment had grown inside Elena, and now she felt more frustrated and irritated with Ambrose than ever. He had barely looked at her and yet had not sent her away from the castle. She supposed that he was being truthful about not sending her back to her aunt's house. After dinner on the fourth day, everyone sat in the drawing room, and Lucy sang while Marianne accompanied her on the piano. Elena was sick of being ignored and had given up trying to create an opportunity to speak to Ambrose. She excused herself, although only Matilde noticed her say goodbye.

She began walking back to her room but hesitated. It was still quite early, and Elena felt very much awake. She decided that instead of heading for the second floor, she would take refuge in the library. It was clear now that Ambrose was avoiding it, and she had never seen anyone else there. She thought longingly of the plush velvet sofa and the roaring fire

and quickened her pace. She would spend a solitary few hours getting lost in a new book.

Therefore, when she reached the library's threshold, she didn't think twice before twisting the doorknob and entering the room. To her surprise, the sofa was already occupied, and Sir Carmichael smiled warmly.

"Oh," she said without thinking. "Please excuse me; I didn't think anyone would be here." She turned, ready to dash from the room, when he spoke. "It's perfectly all right, my dear; I was just about to retire to bed. Please take a seat, and I will be gone in a few moments."

After hesitating for only a moment, Elena sat on the edge of an armchair.

"I didn't see you leave the group." Elena began, feeling surprisingly out of her depth. Sir Carmichael had always been friendly, but Elena had never directly talked with him.

"I suppose you were busy trying not to look at my nephew." He chuckled. "I think you were the only one there tonight with that objective."

Elena fumed. "Your nephew is a pompous ass!" She exclaimed and then covered her mouth.

Instead of looking at her with fury, Elena was surprised to see that her outburst had only made Sir Carmichael laugh even more.

"He can be, I am afraid. But what has he done now? I have noticed that he has been in a worse mood than usual for the last few days, but I haven't had a moment to ask him about it."

Elena snorted with derision. "He seems perfectly content to me."

"Well, I dare say that is what he wants you to believe. Nevertheless, tell me what is bothering you."

After contemplating the merit of pouring out her problems to Sir Carmichael, she concluded there was little chance of her making a worse impression after what she had already said. She sighed and began explaining how Ambrose had found her

coming out of Ralph's room and assumed the worst. Sir Carmichael was such an avid listener that before long, she discovered that she had explained everything that had occurred since she first came to the Westbrook Estate.

"I am confident this little misunderstanding will be solved in no time." Sir Carmichael said reassuringly. "My nephew is stubborn but has surely realised the error in his assumption and is now wondering how to talk to you."

Elena huffed. "He seems to have no issue talking to Francesca at dinner." She knew she sounded petty but truthfully could not stop herself.

Again, Sir Carmichael chuckled. "Things are not always as it seems." His expression turned more serious. "He must find a bride within a short time now. If you are unsure about becoming a Duchess, it is only realistic that he explores other avenues."

Being reminded of this fact made Elena feel slightly sick.

"You speak as though I am his first choice."

"I think we both know that you are his first choice, even with this little misunderstanding. Perhaps we know this *because* of this misunderstanding. If it were any other of the young ladies coming out of Ralph's bedchamber, they would have been packed and in a carriage within the hour."

"It is only because he promised he would not send me back to my aunt that I am still here."

Sir Carmichael sighed. "I think there is more to it, and we both know it. But I have a question for you. What are you so afraid of?"

Elena paused. "I do not know what you mean."

"I think you do. You are telling yourself that you do not want to be a Duchess because you do not want the restrictions of this life. However, you have grown up in this world and know that Ambrose is far from traditional. You must understand that the freedom you would have as the Duchess of Westbrook is unlike any other you may experience. Ambrose has been clear from the start that he is looking for a partner to

run the estate with him, and you have already taken an interest in the plans for the village and visited it yourself, which is more than can be said for some of the other young ladies. There is something you are afraid of.”

She chewed her lip and looked at the fireplace. It was so easy talking to Sir Carmichael, yet she struggled to articulate how she felt. “I told myself that I would never marry. I suppose it is hard to change my mind when it is set on something.” She said quietly.

“Why did you tell yourself this?” He said quietly.

“I suppose I didn’t always. I dreamed of a family growing up and being just like my mother. My parents were besotted with each other and had no qualms about letting everyone know.”

“Am I correct in thinking they were killed? I remember hearing about it from my friend stationed near the Eastern border.”

Elena nodded. “I was visiting my aunt and cousins at the time. I never left. They were so happy; we all were. They had everything, but it was all stripped away.”

“And so, you vowed never to let yourself be in the position to lose anyone again.” Sir Carmichael said quietly.

Elena was silent as they both listened to the crackle of the fire.

“When you say it so simply, it sounds ridiculous.” She said quietly. “Everyone has lost someone, and yet they go on.”

“Perhaps not so quickly as you think. We all have ways of hiding our pain, telling ourselves such elaborate tales to distract ourselves from the truth. I think you are courageous. It will only be a shame if the story you have been telling yourself stops you from living a good life with a man whom I dare say is in love with you.”

The pair sat quietly in the library for a few more minutes until Sir Carmichael stood. “Goodnight, my dear. I think it is time for me to retire to my book.” He headed over to the

drinks cabinet and poured himself a generous drink. “My nephew keeps the best brandy here.” He winked.

Elena stood up and said goodnight. He smiled down at her and then crossed to the doorway.

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Ambrose

The drawing room felt stuffy, and Ambrose felt a headache coming on. He had only a few days to decide which of the women he would ask to marry him, and he still hadn't spoken to Elena. After his initial anger subsided after seeing her come out of Ralph's bedchamber, he spent the first couple of days trying to focus as much as possible on getting to know the other young ladies. Even if there had been a misunderstanding, Elena had been clear in her reservations about becoming the Duchess of Westbrook. If he didn't want Ralph to have the title and become responsible for the estate and the tenants, he knew he should focus.

Finally, he had given up trying not to look at Elena but found that she was now avoiding him. He had been talking to Selina and was about to approach Elena after dinner when he realised, she was no longer in the room. Sighing, he spent a few more minutes conversing with the women before bidding them all goodnight.

Selena had been clear that she thought he should slim down his options at breakfast the following day so he could spend more time getting to know the women individually. She suggested only keeping four women in the process. He thought over the options. A marriage to Francesca would never be a love match, but most certainly, a sensible choice. There was little other than Charlotte's beauty that recommended her. Lilian had spent the earlier part of the evening with Ambrose, and he was confident she could hold her own. Rosa was intelligent and an excellent conversationalist. Jessica was still very reserved, and Ambrose felt he knew very little about her. Lucy was destined for a career in Opera, and Ambrose thought about whom he knew that he could introduce her to. Marianne was always trying to flirt with him in a manner Ambrose found slightly disconcerting. Bethan was a kind woman, but Ambrose felt that she still preferred the company of the kitchen cat to him. Ola was good company but imagining her as a Duchess was a stretch, and then there was Elena.

He was thinking about this dilemma when he rounded the corner and almost walked headlong into his uncle. “Oh, I am sorry.” He stammered but Carmichael just smiled.

“Off to the library?”

“I, er, no, I don’t think so.” He said and realised that, without thinking, that was precisely where he had been heading. He had avoided the library for the last few nights because he had not wanted to see Elena.

“I think you should; a bit of light reading is perfect for clearing the air.” Carmichael chuckled and continued walking down the corridor.

With this strange comment in his mind, Ambrose crossed to the library door and, without hesitating, stepped inside.

The fire gave off the only light in the room; at first, Ambrose assumed he was alone. Only when he approached the sofa, he realised that Elena was stretched out on it with a book on her lap. He stood there momentarily and then sat heavily in one of the armchairs.

“I suppose my uncle was here?” he said, finally putting two and two together.

Elena just nodded.

Ambrose realised very quickly that this conversion would be difficult. He paused to think of something to say when he heard voices from the hallway. Damn, he had not closed the door properly. He was just about to stand up to close the door when the voices became clearer.

“You should be more careful, he is already distrustful of you, and now she has gone off you. I thought you said you could charm her.” A female voice said in hushed tones. Ambrose was trying to identify the voice when another spoke. This voice he did recognise.

“I have, don’t worry. He is already jealous and apparently even caught her coming out of my room.” Ralph chuckled. “What luck. She must have been snooping for something or other. He now believes her visiting me at night.”

“That is *not* good. She clearly does not trust you if she has been routing through your room when you are not there.”

“All that matters now is that he acts.”

The pair were walking down the corridor, and Ambrose inched towards the door to get a glimpse of the figures, but by the time he did, they had reached the end of the corridor, and, to his dismay, he was unable to catch a glimpse of them. He was debating whether to follow when Elena appeared at his shoulder.

“It will be impossible to find them now. At least we know the truth about Ralph or some of it” she muttered.

“Ah, and now you believe me about Ralph.” He turned to Elena and closed the door behind him.

“I had begun to have suspicions days ago, so I was searching his room. I was going to find you in the morning to tell you what I had discovered when you found me. You’ve been ignoring me ever since.”

Ambrose felt somewhat ashamed. “I suppose I was relatively quick to conclude.”

Elena glared at him. “Regardless, I saw him in the village earlier and had a strange feeling.”

“In the village?”

Sighing, Elena told him all about her trip to the village and explained how she met him.

“And then you decided to search his room. What did you find?”

“That is exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. I found nothing and then there was how I found him.”

“Poisoned you mean? Ambrose said. “Mrs Beaton said he had ingested something poisonous that she could not identify.”

“I thought she was a specialist in that area.” Elena said.

“She is. That is why I was surprised that she didn’t have more to say on the matter.

“It seems that Ralph thought it unlikely that we would even discuss it. He seemed pretty pleased we haven’t been speaking.” Elena huffed.

“I should apologise,” Ambrose said gruffly, “I was angry, and even when I calmed down and realised there must have been a misunderstanding, I still felt frustrated.”

“Did you honestly think I was sneaking into Ralph’s room for some kind of illicit meeting?”

“I don’t know what I thought, I probably wasn’t thinking and that was the issue.”

“How on earth are we likely to be together if you don’t even trust me.” Elena turned and walked to the window.

“I do trust-” Ambrose began and then broke off. “Hang on a minute. Be together?” His expression changed from strained to playful in an instant. “Are you suggesting that you want to become a Duchess? I hadn’t realised I had even proposed.”

Elena stammered. “It is only that – your uncle said – I just thought....” She broke off when she realised, he was laughing and thumped him on the arm. “I had a conversation with your uncle, but perhaps he was mistaken about your intentions. Please forget I said anything.”

Ambrose stopped laughing. “What did my uncle say then?”

Elena looked away from him. “He said that you were, that you might be falling...”

“In love with you?”

Elena looked up at him and was surprised to see that he was wearing a solemn expression. There was only a hint of the playful glimmer in his eyes.

He stepped towards her and was about to speak when the door burst open, and Matilde stood breathless and panting. “Oh, thank goodness I found you both. You must come quickly! It is Sir Carmichael; he has been poisoned!”

Elena

Matilde led the way up the corridor and the stairs into one of the small sitting rooms on the first floor that Elena hadn't been into before. There were already a group of people standing around Sir Carmichael, and the room smelt strongly of smoke. Mrs Beaton was there with Selena, and they both knelt next to the chair that Sir Carmichael was slumped in. Lilian and Francesca were also there, standing near the fireplace, looking concerned.

“What happened?” Ambrose brushed passed them all and went straight to his uncle's side. “My god, what has happened?”

“I found him like that,” Matilde said. “I was working here earlier and left my ledger on the table. I came into the room and saw Sir Carmichael passed out on the chair.”

Selena interrupted. “I was talking to Lilian and Francesca in the hallway when I heard Matilde shouting for help and then called for Mrs Beaton when I saw what happened.”

Mrs Beaton looked up. “It was lucky you did, Matilde.”

“He was so still when I entered the room that I thought he was asleep, It was only when his glass fell from his hand that I realised something was wrong” Matilde said. “What happened to him?”

Mrs Beaton finished examining Sir Carmichael and stood up. “I believe the brandy he was drinking was poisoned. Selena!” She addressed the younger woman, “Go to the kitchens quickly and ask Maya to bring my medical bag. Meet us at his room.”

Selena dashed out of the room.

“Will he survive?” Ambrose asked quietly.

“Yes, thank goodness.” Mrs Beaton patted Ambrose on the shoulder in a maternal way. It was the most familiar Elena had seen any staff member be towards Ambrose and it was

reassuring. “He will be moved to his bed, and I will treat him from there. There is, however, the question of security.”

“Security?” Francesca’s voice had become even higher than usual.

“Yes, I will station two staff members outside his room and two inside at all times.” Ambrose had regained some of his usual composure and began issuing orders.

“Matilde, please go with Lilian, Francesca and Elena back to the drawing room and call for the others immediately. I will not have gossip circulating, so it is of the utmost importance that the young ladies are presented with the information at the same time. Please let it be known that there has been an attempt on my uncle’s life, and the culprit has not yet been apprehended. I will be down to talk with them as soon as I have seen my uncle safely upstairs.”

With this announcement, the room sprang into action as more staff arrived with a stretcher to carry Sir Carmichael to his room, and Mrs Beaton rushed quickly to gather healing supplies. Matilde looked stunned for a moment but then began ushering the women out of the room. Elena glanced over and saw Ambrose knelt beside his uncle. He looked ashen, and Elena wanted to rush over and wrap her arms around him. Instead, she followed the others out of the door and towards the drawing room.



When all the women and Ralph had been fetched from their rooms, some of them wrapped in dressing gowns, Matilde told them of the night’s events. Ambrose arrived looking exhausted, and Elena was feeling increasingly worried about him. She had no idea what he was going to say to the women. Their conversation just before Sir Carmichael was poisoned led Elena to believe he was about to call an end to the process. Still, his order to Selena had signified something else.

“Good evening. I apologise for the late hour.” He began. “I trust Selena has told you about the attempt on my uncle’s life.”

The women nodded. Bethan looked shaken, and Rosa looked as though she was about to be sick.

“After the events of this evening, the process will continue, and no one will leave the castle until after the Winter Solstice Ball. By that time, the investigation should be complete, and the criminal will be apprehended. There will be extra security for each of you for the next week, and I urge anyone who has seen or heard anything that could shed some light on this situation to tell me. No detail is too small. A carriage has already been dispatched to collect a detective from the nearby town of Limange.”

All the women looked around at each other.

“Does that mean that there will be no elimination?” Rosa asked, perking up quickly.

Ambrose sighed, and Elena could almost hear him gritting his teeth. “There will be no elimination, although, in truth, that is the least of my concerns at this moment. I will be married on the evening of the Winter Solstice Ball. Although no one is allowed to leave the castle until then, no one will be forced into marriage.”

Rosa blushed, and Elena felt an acute urge to kick the woman in the back of the shins. Shaking this unusually violent image from her mind, Elena huddled closer to Matilde, who was wearing only a thin shawl over her dress.

Ambrose bid them all goodnight and headed quickly out of the room.

Ralph was heading over directly to where Matilde and Elena still stood, and it was too late to pretend not to have seen him.

“You were both there? You saw him?” Ralph looked visibly shaken and Elena narrowed her eyes. She had immediately assumed that Ralph had something to do with the poisoning, although she had no direct evidence. She knew better than to say that to Ambrose, however.

“We were both there.” Elena said curtly.

“I know he was Ambrose’s uncle and not my own, but he is still family. Will he recover?”

He looked earnest, and although she still had reservations about Ralph, she struggled to see how he could fake such concern.

“Mrs Beaton is confident he shall recover fully; it is lucky that Matilde found him when she did.”

“Yes, I am so thankful she did.” He looked over at Matilde, and Elena was surprised to see her friend blushing. “I would be honoured to escort you back to your room.” Ralph addressed Matilde. “I have heard what a difference you are making to the financial plans for the estate and would love to hear more.”

Elena was about to decline on her friend’s behalf when Matilde stepped forward and quickly accepted the arm Ralph had offered her.

“Goodnight, Elena.” She smiled timidly. “We shall speak more in the morning.”

“Goodnight.” Elena addressed them both and watched as Ralph escorted her friend out of the room. She was torn. Matilde had clearly not minded being with Ralph, but there was still something about Ralph’s arrival at the castle that made her cautious of him. It felt wrong to follow them, but Elena felt uncomfortable with the idea of her friend in the company of someone she did not entirely trust. She walked quickly from the room just as the last few women were leaving. She skirted around Ola and Marianne who both still looked shaken and took the steps two at a time to the corridor. It was not long before she had almost caught up with Ralph and Matilde, but she kept her distance and followed the sound of their voices. She could not hear exactly what they were saying but she heard Matilde laugh regularly and was even surprised to hear the warmth in Ralph’s voice. He had openly flirted with Elena and always had a friendly word for the rest of the women but somehow, he sounded more relaxed with her friend.

Elena poked her head around the corner just in time to see Ralph kissing Matilde’s hand and bidding her goodnight. She

was relieved to see Matilde go safely into her room and close the door.

There was a large statue of a one-armed knight that Elena had to crouch down behind to avoid being seen by Ralph as he headed back down the corridor and walked past her.

Throwing caution to the wind, Elena decided that she may as well make the most of the opportunity and see where Ralph went next. Up another flight of stairs, he went, and Elena was unsurprised to find that he was heading in the direction of the family rooms. He knocked on a door, and after a moment, Ambrose emerged.

“How is he?” Ralph asked immediately.

When Ralph turned his back, Elena had managed to hide behind a thick curtain and was now close enough to hear their conversation clearly.

“He will be fine.” Ambrose sighed. “He was found in time, and Mrs Beaton is a miracle worker when it comes to healing elixirs and potions.”

“I can attest to that.” Ralph said.

“I heard you earlier. Do you care to explain?” Ambrose asked. “You were speaking to a woman outside the library. You boasted about making Elena jealous.”

“Oh, that.” To Elena’s surprise, Ralph grinned. “It just started as a bit of a joke. I could see immediately that you liked her, and when she visited my room, I couldn’t help but tease you a little. I got talking to Matilde over the next few days, and now I can see that my plan worked perfectly. I saw the way you looked at her earlier. Matilde and I both knew you were perfect for each other. We just thought you needed a bit of a nudge in the right direction.”

“Matilde was in on this?” Ambrose spluttered.

“She is a very intelligent woman and we both agreed jealousy would be the perfect thing to make you realise your true feelings.”

“So, you made me believe that there was something going on with you and Elena so that I would realise my feeling for her?” Ambrose asked incredulously.

“Oh, yes.” Ralph was still grinning. “We were rather pleased with ourselves. I assume you are just keeping the other women here while the investigation goes on.”

Ambrose nodded and still looked surprised. “You never fully explained why you were really in the woods when you were found. I have to say that your flimsy excuse is not holding up.” Ambrose was clearly not in the mood to waste time on idle conversation.

Instead of looking uncomfortable as Elena would have expected him to, Ralph looked almost relieved. “Truthfully, I was hoping we would get a moment to talk.”

“We are talking now.”

“I heard the news that you were getting married from someone I barely knew. I know I lost contact with you but finding out such important news from a stranger made me think. I regret not staying in touch with your parents, it may seem silly now, but I always thought you were jealous of the attention they gave me growing up. You never seemed to like me very much, and I thought it would be better for everyone if I stayed away.”

“You thought I didn’t like you?” Ambrose said in amazement. “You were the one who didn’t like me.”

Ralph looked at him for a moment, and then both men started to laugh.

“Oh, what a mess we have made of this,” Ambrose said, “I can only hope we can make a better go of things in the future. I suppose you are not coveting my title either?”

This question made Ralph laugh even louder. “Oh cousin, what an idea! I am perfectly happy with my career in the army, and I think we both know you are suited to the position far better than I.”

Ambrose smiled the first genuine smile she had seen on him since they had found his uncle earlier that evening.

“But there is something I do need to tell you.” Ralph carried on. “I arrived in the village and stopped at the tavern. I was nervous just turning up out of the blue after so many years, so I must admit I wanted a drink to settle my nerves. I was at the bar for about an hour and was just about to leave when a woman with her face covered came up to me. I thought very little of it at the time, but she asked if I was heading up to the castle and if I would be kind enough to deliver a wedding present to his grace. I said I was and would happily deliver the gift. She gave me a bottle of brandy with a ribbon around the neck and thanked me.” Ralph paused. “I must admit I am not proud of what I did next, but as I walked through the shortcut in the woods, I was still feeling quite nervous, and I opened the bottle of brandy. I only remember drinking a few gulps before I woke up in my bed. I should have told you about it immediately, but I thought Mrs Beaton would tell you if you needed to know.”

Ambrose was silent, and it was taking all of Elena’s willpower not to jump out from behind the curtain and join in with the conversation.

“Why tell me now?” Ambrose asked.

“Because of what happened to your uncle, of course. Surely it cannot be a coincidence? Matilde said his brandy glass was poisoned. Where did he get his drink?”

“I don’t know....”

At this, Elena threw caution to the wind and stepped out. Both men jumped in surprise.

“Brandy! He poured himself a drink from your cabinet Ambrose.”

Ambrose looked as if he was about to ask about her strange hiding place, but she interrupted him. “I was following Ralph; I was eavesdropping, but now we know he surely isn’t the poisoner. We also now know who the intended victim is.”

Ralph seemed unsurprised to learn that Elena had been following him. “That is exactly what I was getting at.” He

turned to look at Ambrose. “I think someone is trying to poison you.”

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Ambrose

The least surprising event of the whole evening was Elena jumping out from behind a curtain and joining in their conversation.

As much as it was a horrible shock to find his uncle poisoned, it was a relief to realise just how wrong he had been about Ralph. It was comforting now to know that he could trust his cousin and perhaps even go about building a relationship with one of only three blood relations he had left.

“You honestly think someone is trying to poison me?” He asked Ralph and Elena in amazement.

“Yes!” they both almost shouted in unison.

“I think we should speak somewhere more privately,” Ralph said, lowering his voice. If Miss Chamberlain could eavesdrop within plain sight, any number of people could be listening in.

Elena nodded her agreement, and Ambrose motioned them both towards his door. He headed straight down the narrow entry passage and straight into the large bedchamber fitted with a large velvet sofa and two snug armchairs. There was a fire already laid, and Ambrose wasted no time in lighting it before motioning to his guests to be seated. They both chose armchairs, so Ambrose sat down heavily on the sofa.

“Does anyone else know of your suspicions?” Ambrose looked at Ralph.

He looked slightly sheepish for a moment and then nodded. “Matilde knows and agrees with me.”

Elena was shaking her head. Clearly the relationship that had been building between Ralph and Matilde had also gone unnoticed by her.

“The real question is, what do we do next?” Ambrose asked, rubbing his temples. He felt exhausted, and this new turn of events only added to his worries.

“Are the staff loyal?” Ralph asked.

“They’ve all been here for a long time, and I have never had any reason to doubt any of them. I see no reason for them to have any reason to wish me ill, and to be honest, if they had, it would have been easier to bump me off before this process of finding a Duchess.”

“That is true.” Elena mused. “I think it is possible, therefore, to narrow it down to the guests in the castle.”

“But they were selected randomly; it seems unlikely that this poisoning was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Although they have been unsuccessful, there must have been planning that went into this.” Ralph added.

“Perhaps it was not so random,” Elena replied. “There may have been a way to rig it. Not all the women were present when their names were selected. Surely it would not be impossible to intercept one of the messengers or pretend to be that person. Or perhaps to make sure their name was selected in the first place.”

His head started to pound, and all these new possibilities made finding the poisoner even more complicated for Ambrose. “We must draw up a list of all potential suspects” he added. “We can then share our suspicions with the inspector in the morning and begin reducing the list. There are only seven days until the ball. I must write to my sister and tell her not to return to the castle until the last possible moment. I do not want her in any danger.”

Elena nodded. “There are all of the young ladies and Selena, of course.”

“I think we can safely strike you and Matilde from the list,” Ambrose said. “Although I find it unlikely Selena would have a motive, we should still consider it.”

Ralph crossed over to the writing desk in the corner of the room. “Do you mind?” he asked Ambrose.

“Go ahead.”

“I shall start the list then. Selena, Francesca, Lilian, Rosa, Charlotte, Jessica, Lucy, Ola, Marianne and Bethan.” Ralph spoke the names aloud as he wrote them on the parchment.

“We should begin by dividing them, each looking for a motive. It is a shame Matilde isn’t here, but I am sure she would be happy to help.”

Elena rolled her eyes, and Ambrose almost chuckled.

“I’ll take Francesca and Lilian.” She offered.

“I am probably best placed to investigate Selena. I’ll also take Jessica and Ola.” Ambrose felt exhausted but relieved they now had the beginning of a plan.

“That leaves me with Rosa, Lucy and Charlotte. Matilde can start digging for information on Marianne and Bethan.” Ralph was busy writing down the groups. “I think we should reconvene in the morning, perhaps in your library after breakfast.”

“Yes, that is a good idea. We must be covert, though; we don’t wish anyone to suspect we are all investigating.” She added.

Ralph nodded. “I will bid you goodnight. Could you tell Matilde of our plans before we meet?”

“Yes, of course.”

Ralph thanked her and headed out of the room, inspecting the corridor before he closed the door after him.

Elena

When the door closed behind Ralph, she supposed she should get up and follow him out. However, neither Elena nor Ambrose moved.

“It feels like a long time since we spoke earlier.” Ambrose broke the silence.

“It does.” She paused. “I can understand if things have changed?”

“Changed?” he looked confused. “You mean between us?”

She nodded.

“Of course not. At least they haven’t for me. Have you changed your mind about marrying me?”

Elena sagged in relief and smiled. “Technically, you haven’t asked me yet.”

The gleam returned to Ambrose’s eyes. “Oh, don’t you worry, I will. Although after tonight’s events, I don’t think right now is the perfect moment. I had wanted to ask you after dinner and send everyone else home in the morning. I thought we could spend the next week in each other’s company.” He sighed. “I am afraid this week is not looking that way now. I have no desire to keep our formal engagement a secret so if you have no objection, I will ask you properly when the poisoner has been found out.”

Elena nodded and sunk further into the armchair. “I just hope we can work out who it is before the week is out. You must be careful what you consume in the meantime. I think brandy is out of the question.”

Ambrose chuckled.

“I suppose I should head back to my room.” Elena chewed her lower lip.

“I suppose you should.” He said slowly.

“Although if there is someone trying to kill you, then it may be safer for me to stay...” she broke off.

“Oh, Miss Chamberlain. Your suggestion is scandalous.” He laughed and stood up and in a second he had pulled her up gently from the armchair and wrapped her in his arms.

His gaze dropped to her, and his expression sobered. “There are no expectations tonight, are you sure you wish to stay though?”

“I do.” She said boldly. “And you should know, I am no blushing virginal bride any more than you are.”

He laughed loudly. “You are full of surprises tonight, Miss Chamberlain. First you agree to become my Duchess, then you prove yourself to be adept at eavesdropping and finally you scandalise me with your wantonness.”

She thumped him playfully on the arm. “Be careful, Your Grace. I could carry on following Ralph back to his rooms.”

“Oh, I am afraid he would turn you away. I doubt he would want to upset your friend Matilde.”

Elena laughed. “I still can’t believe how I managed not to notice their budding romance. I usually pride myself on being observant, but I suppose I was so consumed by my own affairs I didn’t notice. I shall have to apologise to Matilde, we were both wrong about Ralph.”

“I am rather glad that we were wrong.” Ambrose pushed a lock of hair behind her ear and looked at her intensely. “I am so thankful that you took the place of your cousin. I have no real faith that I would meet anyone I liked in this whole process, let alone care for.”

Elena blushed and, instead of saying anything else, reached up to wrap her arms around Ambrose’s neck. He leaned down to kiss her deeply, and, in a moment, he picked her up and carried her over to the bed.

Ambrose

Ambrose awoke the next morning blissfully relaxed. Despite the events of the evening before and the fact that there was someone trying to poison him roaming about the castle, spending the night with Elena had been enough to make him forget all his worries for at least a while. Turning over, he realised that the space next to him was noticeably empty. On closer observation, he noticed a small piece of paper lying on the pillow.

Ambrose,

I thought it wise to leave before the sun had risen fully. I am going straight to Matilde's room to inform her of our plan.

Yours, Elena

He lay back on his pillow. It was sensible on Elena's part, but he still wished that she lay next to him. It wouldn't be long, he thought, until she would be there every morning. The Duchess' chambers adjoined his, but he saw no reason for Elena to need them as anything other than a place to store some belongings. Contentment flooded through Ambrose, but he shook himself awake. The future he was idly dreaming of depended on him finding the person who wished him ill.



After washing and dressing in a hurry, Ambrose waited in his study for the arrival of the investigator. Thankfully he only had to wait a few minutes before there was a gentle knock at the door and a tall, thin man entered the room. He was unassuming, and the only thing that was at all memorable about his appearance was the pair of rounded spectacles

perched on his nose. He looked as though he was in his early thirties, much younger than Ambrose expected.

“Please be seated.” Ambrose motioned to the empty chair on the other side of his desk.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I am Ezra Finnigan. I have heard there have been two attempted murders.”

Thankful that the investigator clearly had no interest in making small talk, Ambrose told him everything that had happened, including the information that Ralph had told him the previous night.

Ezra nodded. “I would of course, like to speak to your cousin, as well as everyone in residence.”

“The young ladies will be at breakfast, but I have instructed Selena to bring them all to the garden room for you to meet them in a few hours. Anything you need will be made available to you.”

“Thank you. If it suits you, I will begin by familiarising myself with the castle and surrounding grounds.”

Ambrose was relieved and thanked him. “I will see you later this morning.”

After Ezra left the study, Ambrose spent a few minutes looking through the papers on his desk. He preferred to work in the small library, but it was helpful to use his study for more formal meetings. He was, therefore, surprised to finally notice how messy his desk was. Ambrose could not easily be described as a tidy person as he was more prone to bursts of ideas and energies that would leave books and papers in disarray. However, because of how little he used his study for actual work, the room was kept tidy in anticipation of any meetings he might have there. On consideration, he did not remember having left nearly as many papers on his desk. He opened the top draw and again, found it in even more disarray than the top of his desk. The rest of the drawers proved to be in a similar state. Although the room itself was usually kept locked, the desk never was. Pondering why anyone would be

routing through his papers, he made a mental note to tell the others when they met in the library.

With this thought at the forefront of his mind, Ambrose left his study and, after checking on his uncle, headed straight for the library. He kept his most important documents in there, and he wanted to make sure that they had not been disturbed. Thankfully when he arrived, there was no sign that anything had been searching for anything. Ambrose checked and was relieved to find all his papers were as he had left them. Whoever had been looking for something clearly didn't know him very well, as the small library would have been the obvious choice for anyone who knew him well.

Ambrose's musing was interrupted as Ralph and Matilde entered the room.

"Good morning, cousin." Ralph greeted him warmly, and Ambrose did have to admit how nice it was to be on good terms with his cousin.

"Good morning. I am glad to see you both."

"How is Sir Carmichael?" Ralph asked.

"Still asleep, Mrs Beaton gave him something to help with the pain but reassured me that he will make a full recovery. She's been up with him all night; I told her to let a maid sit with him while she gets some rest, but she's having none of it."

Matilde smiled. "She was rather concerned about him last night; I wonder if she has a soft spot for him."

"They must have known each other for twenty years, that's how long she has worked here. If something is going on and I haven't noticed, I will be proclaimed the densest Duke ever to have lived. I feel daft enough not having realised about you two."

Matilde blushed and Ralph looked slightly smug.

"Where is Elena?" Ambrose asked Matilde. "I thought she would have been with you."

“We were together, but she said she had something to check on. I tried to go with her, but she insisted she needed to go alone.”

Ambrose gritted his teeth. Although he knew now that the target was himself, he still worried about anyone, especially Elena, wondering about the castle alone.

The door flew open, and a breathless Elena entered the room. “I am sorry I am late.” She announced. “Had to check something out.”

Ambrose was about to say something about the dangers of wandering alone given the present risks, when he noticed what she was clutching in her hand.

Ralph was the first to speak. “Is that the bottle of brandy I told you about?”

She looked slightly embarrassed but nodded. “I hope you don’t take it too personally, but I wanted to check that you were telling the truth before I trusted you completely.”

“Were you out in the woods looking for that?” Ambrose rubbed his temples.

She nodded and looked at Ralph. “The good news is, Ralph was definitely telling the truth, and we have another sample for Mrs Beaton to examine. Sir Carmichael drank the last of the brandy in here, so the bottle was away by the servants, and we were too late to insist the glass be removed from the room and kept as evidence.”

Ralph was grinning. “No offence taken; I am just impressed by your quick thinking.”

“Why not let me accompany you?” Matilde asked, looking slightly upset.

“I am sorry, I just thought with your... relationship.” She broke off.

“You didn’t think I could be impartial.” Matilde said coldly.

“We must focus on the matter at hand.” Ambrose interrupted. “We each have people to begin questioning subtly. I insist that this must be done in full view of other people; I

won't have any of you taking unnecessary risks." Ambrose looked directly at Elena who refused to meet his eye.

Ralph drew out a folded piece of paper from his pocket. "So, Ambrose is in charge of speaking to Selena, Jessica and Ola. Elena is speaking to Francesca and Lilian. Matilde has Marianne and Bethan, leaving me with Rosa, Lucy and Charlotte."

Matilde nodded. "How are we going to go about this?"

"We need to work out anything that could motivate any of these women to want me dead. I have zero suspicions at the moment, but we eliminated the servants, so it must be one of them. The investigator is here but with less than a week until the ball, we must catch whoever is responsible as soon as possible."

Ralph looked pensive. "I will head over to the green room; I know most of the women spend a few hours there after breakfast."

"I'm going to start by finding Selena." Ambrose said. "I have to speak to her about the contest anyway."

They both said goodbye and headed from the library together. After falling into step together, Ralph was the first to speak. "What happens now? With the process?"

Ambrose paused before speaking, checking that no one was close enough to overhear them. "I will marry Elena; she has agreed to become by Duchess."

Ralph grinned and clapped him on the back. "Oh, I am so relieved; well done! I was worried you would make a mess of the whole thing."

Ambrose grinned despite the backhanded compliment. "I am relieved myself; I didn't think I would find anyone quite like her. No one other than us knows, except Matilde, I assume. I am telling everyone I will make my offer of marriage at the ball itself."

Ralph was still grinning. "I wish you every happiness. Once we have apprehended the poisoner, we will have to celebrate properly. I will see you later today." They parted ways at the

end of the corridor, and Ralph headed up an adjoining corridor in the direction of where he hoped he would find Selena.

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Elena

Matilde stood facing her in the library. There was an awkwardness between them that Elena was not used to.

“I am sorry I did not trust you to be objective.” Elena began. “However, you did not tell me anything of your feeling for Ralph.”

Matilde blushed. “You are right, I am sorry. I just thought there was so much on your mind already and if I am truthful, it was nice having something just for myself.”

Elena smiled at her friend. “Can we just promise to trust each other in the future?”

“Gladly” Matilde grinned. “Oh, I nearly forgot. Post was delivered after breakfast when you had just left. I said I would pass this along to you.” She pulled out a crumpled envelope from her pocket. “I’m sorry it got so crushed,” she said apologetically.

“Thank you.” Elena had already ripped open the letter and sank onto the sofa to read it. Matilde perched on the edge next to her. “Who is it from? Your aunt?”

“My cousins.”

Dearest cousin,

We are so sorry to have not written earlier. We tried, but since Mother received the letter from the Duke, she has banned us from writing to you. We have only managed to send this letter by visiting Lord and Lady Perkins. I am afraid there is little chance of us attending the Solstice Ball as, if Mother is not invited, she will not allow us. We read the letter the Duke sent her and can only assume he intends to marry you! How he jumped to your defence! Oh, you must be so in love.

If you have not read a copy of the letter, which I can only assume you have not, we have copied it here for you to peruse. If you have any influence, please encourage the Duke to invite Mother, as it is the only way we can attend the ball and see you. We miss you greatly and hope to be reunited soon.

Yours always,

Ana & Sylvie

Elena passed the letter for Matilde to read and then unfolded the other piece of parchment.

Dear Madame Chamberlain,

I was surprised to receive your letter and perhaps more astonished after reading the contents. If your niece does not become the Duchess of Westbrook, it will be her choice whether she accepts another proposal of marriage. As such, I have made it widely known that any future proposals will be sent directly to Miss Chamberlain for her own consideration. I am sorry that she will no longer be welcome at your home. If Miss Chamberlain does become my fiancée, we will have to think long and hard about whether we believe it appropriate to extend you an invitation to our wedding. Your daughters would, of course, be most welcome. Miss Chamberlain has spoken of them with nothing but love and affection. I expect you to send all your niece's possessions to the Westbrook estate immediately, as they can be of no further use to you.

Sincerely,

The Duke of Westbrook

Elena gasped. She had been informed that some of her possessions had arrived in the castle and been put into storage. She had assumed these were more essential items of clothing, as her aunt would have been unaware that she had been fitted out with new clothing. She did not know that all her possessions had been removed from her aunt's home.

Matilde had finished reading the first letter and had just finished reading the second over Elena's shoulder.

"My goodness. Your aunt is even worse than I thought. We must find a way for your cousins to be able to attend the ball."

Elena was still in shock. "My aunt is never usually that bad. I don't know why she was suddenly so obsessed with marrying me off. She has never been the most maternal woman, but she has always been fair."

Matilde was rereading the second letter. "You do have to admit, though, it is rather flattering having a Duke defend you in such a way."

"I just wish he would have told me that he sent this letter. Now when we are married, my cousins might not even be there."

"Married!" Matilde squeaked. "You did not tell me he asked you, when will the formal announcement be?"

"He has not officially asked me, but there is an understanding. He will not formally propose or announce an engagement until the night of the ball. We must keep pretending that the process is continuing until whoever is responsible for the poisonings is caught."

"That is wise. Oh, but I am so excited! I knew he would choose you from the first moment I saw you both together. When did you change your mind about becoming a Duchess?"

Elena told Matilde all about the conversation she had with Sir Carmichael the previous evening. "It has happened so quickly. I thought we would be announcing our engagement last night but then the poor man was poisoned. I can't help worrying that the poisoner will succeed. Ambrose is so

worried about me that it seems as though he has very little sense of self-preservation.”

“We have to admit that he was in the military, just like Ralph and give him a bit of credit for looking out for himself.”

“Yes, but military man or no, Ralph was poisoned and would be dead if Lilian and I had not found him.” This comment sobered Matilde and Elena wrapped her arm around her. “Let us begin the search for the criminal. The sooner we begin, the sooner they will be caught.”

Matilde nodded, and they both left the library together.



Before she went to speak to Lilian and Francesca, there was something Elena needed to do. She had the bottle that she found in the forest tucked under her cloak as she walked quickly down the dirt track. Although she knew Mrs Beaton would be able to help her, as far as she knew, the cook was still tending to Sir Ambrose, and Elena had never felt like Mrs Beaton had warmed to her anyway. She had told Matilde her plans as they left the library, but she intended to be back at the castle by luncheon, so hopefully no one else noticed her absence.

When Elena arrived in the village she headed straight for the apothecary. It was a dusty looking shop front that looked like it hadn't benefited from lick of paint like the rest of the shop. A small bell tinkled on the doorframe as Elena entered and cautiously made her way to the back of the shop. Despite the dust, Elena felt herself relax instantaneously as she stepped over the threshold. There was something about the atmosphere that was calming and reminded her of her childhood.

An older man with a long beard and small spectacles was perched on a high stool behind the counter. He was totally engrossed in the thick book he was reading and seemed not to notice Elena approaching.

“Excuse me.” Elena began. “I am looking for someone to identify something for me.”

The man looked up, pausing for a moment to take Elena in. She waited awkwardly as he tapped his finger on the side of his book.

“Not from around these parts, are you?” He smiled.

Elena shook her head. “I should think you aren’t either. You practice the old ways here.”

The smile on his face grew into a grin as he replied. “You are astute. I find that there is demand here for magic that is fading in these parts.”

Elena nodded and pulled out the bottle from underneath her cloak. “I need help identifying a poison. I have a book – she broke off. But I have little skill in this area.”

“I see.” He motioned for Elena to pass him the bottle. “I suppose you are more interested in incantations and charm work?”

Elena nodded. “I am not very good. I only remember a little from my childhood. Only enough for a few minor works.

He was still examining the bottle as Elena chattered. He poured the dregs from the bottle onto a small glass plate, sniffed them, held them up to the light and finally dipped his little finger into the solution and tasted. Elena had her hand raised to object, but it was too late. She stared as he smiled back at her.

“This is no poison.”

Elena quirked her head.

“This is brandy, laced with a sleeping draught and an unusual herb that, once consumed, gives off the appearance of poisoning symptoms.”

Elena furrowed her brows. “But he was poisoned.” She said, still trying to get her head around this new piece of information.

“Did he die? If so, it wouldn’t have been from this.”

“But he was treated, and he recovered. Surely someone with knowledge of herbs would have detected this from the start.”

The shopkeeper placed the bottle back on the table. “Not necessarily. It depends on how familiar this person is with Eastern herbs. It is not common around these parts, and it wears off naturally. Any attempt at healing would not harm but ultimately would not have aided the recovery. It would fully wear off in a day or so.”

Elena thought of how quickly Ralph had recovered and nodded.

“Thank you, what do I owe you for your time?” Elena asked, reaching for her coin purse.

“No coins. I am just pleased to have been able to assist the new Duchess.” He winked.

“But how?”

“Do not fret, I will tell no one. Some of us see more than others.” He smiled again and turned back to his book.

“Then please accept my invitation to the Midwinter Feast.”

This made him look up. “Midwinter Feast, eh? I thought there was only a Solstice Ball?”

Elena held her ground. “This year, it shall be both, and please pass on the invitation to the other villagers. All are welcome.”

He nodded more somberly than before. “I thank you.”

“One last thing,” Elena asked. “Have you sold any of this herb to anyone recently?”

The shopkeeper’s eyes lit up. “Now you are asking the right question. I did indeed. A young woman came in with her face covered with a blue scarf a few weeks ago. She knew exactly what she was after.”

Elena thanked the shopkeeper and stepped out onto the street with much more on her mind than she had anticipated. She had hoped to find out the name of the poison used, but now she had more information than she knew how to make sense of. Surely the woman who had purchased the magical herb must have been the same woman who had given the bottle to Ralph in the inn. She walked quickly down the

Highstreet, pausing at some of the stalls. It was market day, and she had a little while before she needed to return to the castle. She spoke to a few stallholders, asking them if they had seen a woman with a blue scarf covering her face. It wasn't very much to go on, and no one had remembered seeing anyone of that description. She passed on the invitation to the Midwinter Feast and hoped Ambrose would not object. After all, it was he who had wanted the celebration to be more like it used to.

The last stall was occupied by a very elderly woman shuffling cards. Elena paused, about to ask if she had seen the woman in the blue scarf. Before Elena could open her mouth, the lady plucked out a card.

"The lovers. You are a lucky one! What a handsome man you have for yourself."

Elena peered down at the card.

"Sit down, m'dear. Let me show you what the cards have in store for you."

Intrigued, Elena sank down on the chair that the woman motioned to.

"I am Madame Romilda."

"I am..." Elena began, but the fortune teller interrupted her. "I know who you are, Elena Chamberlain."

Elena didn't know what to say, so instead opted to stay silent while Madame Romilda began shuffling the cards expertly. She motioned for Elena to cut the deck, and so she did, lifting half of the cards and placing them in a pile just behind the original.

Madame lay four cards in front of Elena.

"The Chariot." She motioned to the first card depicting a chariot racing along at top speed. "You've been through a time of upheaval and stress, but you have also overcome obstacles. This hasn't been an easy journey, but the end is in sight." She flipped over the second card. "Now, Seven of Swords. A man has been betrayed."

Elena looked down at the image of a man struggling to lift five swords. Two more were stuck firmly in the ground behind him.

Madame continued. "He has begun clearing the untruths, despite the strain on him, but there is still danger."

Elena looked again at the image of the swords stuck in the ground. The figure had his back turned to the shimmering blades. Flipping the third card, Madame continued.

"Next, the Moon. Something has been obscured. You are currently in the shadows, but all will soon be revealed. Trust your intuition and look beneath the surface."

"Finally," Madame Romilda turned the last card over and inhaled sharply.

The image of the skeleton stared with its hollow eyes out at Elena. "Death." She spoke as Madame seemed unable.

"Now it is not always as it appears." Madame had begun to compose herself. All that this card signifies is the end of an era, a big change, if you will. It is more about the new life, the growth in the future."

Elena nodded absently and drew out a few coins. She stood up, dimly aware that the fortune teller was still talking. Thanking her briefly, Elena began the walk back to the castle.

The wind had changed; it was sharp as it tussled Elena's cloak and pinched at her cheeks. She trudged up the hill, haunted still by the vacant eyes in the fortune teller's last card.

Ambrose

Ambrose had spent the vast majority of the morning speaking to Selena and still had not the faintest idea of any motive she may possess. He had initially hoped to speak to all the women before luncheon, but he had inadvertently walked into a meeting with Selena and a spokesperson from the Queen about preparations for the Midwinter Feast. The Queen was still adamant about calling it the Solstice Ball, but Ambrose cared very little about the semantics. The one positive about having stumbled into the meeting was that he had managed to convince both women of the merits of having a large bonfire. He was uninterested in place settings and linens, so Ambrose did suspect that they had agreed upon the bonfire if only to pacify him into deciding everything else himself. They also begrudgingly accepted that Ambrose was inviting people from the surrounding villages. Although, as he had said clearly to them, it was happening with or without the Queen's support.

The Queen's spokesperson finally left, and Ambrose was thankful to have a moment to speak with Selena alone. He attempted to make pleasant conversation whilst finding out details about her past. She seemed confused about his sudden interest and yet answered his questions openly. Ambrose found the whole discussion awkward but finally left feeling confident that Selena wasn't hiding anything.

He left Selena in her temporary office and headed towards the garden room where he knew he would be early for luncheon.

Elena

After trudging back up the hill to the castle, Elena had just enough time to dust off her dress before she arrived in the garden room for luncheon. Truthfully, since arriving at the castle, this was a part of the day that she had got used to skipping. Matilde did not always attend, and Ambrose was always surrounded by the other women. Today appeared no different, although Matilde was sitting with Bethan, clearly deep in conversation. Ralph was over by the fireplace with Rosa and Charlotte. He was flirting outrageously and although Elena knew it was all for show and that Ralph and Matilde were keeping their relationship a secret, Elena did feel for her friend. Ambrose was trying to fend off Francesca and make his way towards Jessica and so Elena saw the perfect opportunity to assist him.

“Francesca!” Elena skirted around the small tables laden with tiny plates and teacups. “I was hoping to be able to speak with you.” Francesca looked irritated at being interrupted but the look of relief on Ambrose’s face made it worthwhile. He took the opportunity to slip quietly away, and Elena carried on. “I heard your father is a rather important man in Odetta, one of the king’s confidants.” This was the perfect way to start as some of the tension slipped from Francesca’s face as she smirked.

“Oh yes, he is a favourite of the kings. That is why it is so sad that some of the other ladies here came so unprepared. How can it be a fair competition when I so clearly have the upper hand?” She smiled as if she had just said something very funny.

Elena winced but carried on. “You do clearly have experience that would make you an ideal Duchess. Although I can imagine your father would be very angry if the Duke does not choose you to be his wife.”

Francesca scowled. “He would be cross, but with the Duke, not me. I already have a long list of proposals waiting, one from another Duke.”

“Another Duke?”

“Yes, he lives not far from here. Father insisted that I had to take part in this process as there was not a formal engagement. You see, I will become a Duchess no matter what.” She smiled again. “Either here or there, it matters little.”

Elena nodded and chewed on her lip. Francesca stepped away from her and was already making her way towards Charlotte. If Francesca was telling the truth, and Elena instinctively thought she was, then there seemed no point in risking her prospects by trying to poison Ambrose. Francesca also seemed convinced that she was the front runner anyway, so there would be much more to lose if he died.

Elena was still deep in thought when Matilde approached her and drew her to the side of the room. “What did you discover about the poison?” She kept her voice low so they would not be overheard.

“It wasn’t a poison.” Elena quietly recounted what had happened in the village that morning, including the card reading that she had received.

Matilde shivered. “They are not always accurate are they, the cards? I had an aunt who would bring them out after supper whenever we visited her, and she was wrong far more than she was right.”

“It was strange, I can’t seem to stop thinking about what she said.” Elena mused.



Elena spent the rest of the day and the following morning in the company of Matilde, trying to find out anything about Francesca that may give her or anyone she was close to a motive to wish Ambrose dead. Matilde was having similar difficulties and both women had retired to Ambrose’s library to do some research. Elena was flicking through a large volume of family trees of Odetta’s nobility and successfully managed to find Francesca’s name entered. However, this is where the good luck ended, as there was nothing that linked Francesca

with anyone else in the household or provided anything that would give them anymore leads.

Sighing, Elena had to admit that, as much as she disliked Francesca, there was nothing that suggested that she had tried to poison Ambrose.

Lilian was much easier to talk to than Francesca and Elena found herself falling into friendly discussion with the woman before remembering that she had questions to ask. “Your father is a baker I believe.” Elena said.

Lilian paused, as if trying to work out if Elena was trying to be condescending. “That is right.”

“And your mother?” Elena stirred her tea as if she was only slightly interested.

“She died when I was an infant.”

Elena was having very little luck. “I am so sorry for your loss; it must have been hard. Did you at least have any other family when you were growing up? I know I would have been lost without my aunt when my parents died.”

Lilian sniffed. “I do have an aunt. Although I used to see her more when I was younger.”

“It can be hard when one has very little family. But you have your interest in horticulture? I hope you don’t think me rude in asking, but it is an unusual interest for a baker’s daughter.”

“I was always encouraged by my family.” Lilian looked put out and turned away from Elena, heading instead towards Ralph.

Elena had thought Lilian would be a possible suspect because of her knowledge of plants, but she was struggling to find any motive. She was still in the process, and although she may have guessed that Ambrose was going to choose Elena, that was surely no reason to want him dead. Elena watched her laugh at something Ralph had said and felt as stuck as she had for the last few days.

Matilde came over and sat next to Elena. She wasn't having much luck either and they were both aware of how quickly the Winter Solstice Ball was approaching.

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Ambrose

Spending the afternoon with Ola was more enjoyable than he had anticipated. Although he felt nothing more than friendship towards the woman, he had to admit that she was good company. He was also relieved that Ola seemed to have little interest in a romantic relationship with him. When he confronted her about his suspicions, she smiled. "Take no offence, your grace. It is only that I see how you are with Elena. There is little any of us could do to change that now." She noticed the concerned expression on his face. "But do not worry, I have spoken to no one about this and many of the young ladies still believe they have a chance. I understand your reason for not announcing your engagement yet. Any one of us could have poisoned your cousin or your uncle."

Ambrose thanked her and half-heartedly continued their conversation. Ola seemed very much aware that Ambrose was digging for information, but she was so well-natured about the whole affair that he had trouble imagining her poisoning anyone.



The inspector had finally begun questioning the women individually. He had spent most of the previous day speaking to the servants, despite the fact that Ambrose was certain that none of them could have had anything to do with the poisoning. Francesca seemed surprised that she would be questioned at all and took offence about being asked to accompany the inspector into a small office for their interview. In fact, she spent the whole afternoon telling anyone who was unfortunate enough to be near enough to her that it was "an insult to her character" and that her "father would have some stern words to say on the subject."

Ambrose sighed; he was finding the whole experience more draining than he had anticipated. The investigator was not disclosing any of his thoughts to Ambrose and it was becoming more concerning that neither he, Ralph, Matilde or

Elena had any strong leads. Elena had come up to his room again the previous night and told him all about her visit into the village. He had been frustrated at first that she would take such a risk on her own, but he was relieved that she was back safely. Elena had also seemed nervous when she told him that she had extended an invitation to the Ball to some of the villagers. However, she was relieved when Ambrose had thanked her and told her of the invitations he had issued to all the surrounding towns and villages. Once again, Elena had been gone before dawn and Ambrose found himself counting down the days to when they would be married and could spend leisurely mornings together.

Ambrose spent the afternoon visiting his uncle, who was still unconscious. Mrs Beaton reassured Ambrose that Sir Carmichael was stable, and it would be a matter of days before he woke up.

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Elena

Several days passed in a similar way. After breakfast Ralph, Ambrose, Matilde and Elena would meet in the small library and share any new information they had and their plans for the day. They would spend the day attempting to gather information and then when it was dark and everyone had gone to bed, Elena would sneak up to Ambrose's room to spend a few hours alone with him.

The day before the Winter Solstice Ball came around quicker than any of them would have liked. Elena had spent so much time with Lilian and Francesca that she thought her mind would explode. Francesca was happy to regale Elena with stories of her childhood, which always placed her in a position of grandeur. Elena listened diligently but had to admit that they revealed nothing about Francesca that was of any help at all.

Elena had been interviewed several times by the investigator but had to admit that she had little hope he would find the would-be killer. His questions were vague, and she had no idea how he would be able to find any more information than the four of them working covertly.



All the young women were sitting in the garden room when Ambrose and Ralph entered, accompanied by a couple. It took Elena a few minutes to realise that it was Ambrose's sister Rosalind and her new husband Sir Kempley of Wimpolst.

They entered the room as a group and there was a slight look of worry on Rosalind's face. Elena could only assume that Ralph and Ambrose had taken them aside when they arrived and told them everything about what had been going on in the last few weeks.

Rosalind began greeting each woman while Ralph and Ambrose took it in turns to introduce them. Eventually, they

arrived at where Matilde and Elena were sitting. Both women stood to greet the group.

“Rosalind, this is Miss Elena Chamberlain and Miss Matilde Bernardin.” Ambrose announced. “Ladies, this is my sister, Rosalind and her husband Sir Kembley.”

Sir Kembley was the first to speak after they had exchanged pleasantries. “Please call me Tobias, I cannot abide by being called Sir Kembley all the time, I keep thinking people are referring to my father.”

“Then you must also call us by our given names.” Matilde added and Tobias smiled widely.

“It would be my pleasure if you would both take tea this afternoon with me,” Rosalind said quietly to the two women. They both nodded and agreed to meet that afternoon in Rosalind’s private sitting room.

Ralph motioned for Rosalind and Tobias to carry on their tour of the room and they said their goodbyes.

Elena looked out of the window at the crisp winter day. Flakes of snow were falling quickly, and she could see the groundsman starting to assemble the bonfire for the celebration on the following evening.

Elena dragged her awareness back to the room. “We must do something to find whoever is responsible. The ball is tomorrow night, and the investigator seems as clueless as we are.”

Matilde nodded in agreement and they both set about their plans.



Elena was nervous about meeting Rosalind for tea, but she felt comforted by the fact that Matilde would be with her. They headed up to the third floor where the family rooms were located. Elena was unsurprised that Matilde knew the way without needing to be shown and realised how much time her friend had clearly been spending with Ralph. Elena knocked

gently on the door of Rosalind's private sitting room and when they heard her voice, they entered.

The room was beautifully appointed, with soft blue wallpaper and plump armchairs. The view from the windows was obscured by the flurry of snow, which had been falling constantly since the morning.

"Thank you for coming." Rosalind greeted them. "It is such a relief to be able to speak openly to you both."

Elena agreed and both sat down in matching armchairs and accepted a cup of tea from their host.

"There is no point making small talk at a time like this; we are all soon to be family anyway." Rosalind smiled.

Matilde blushed. "Did Ralph and Ambrose tell you everything?"

"They did. They seem to be no closer to finding the culprit and I wanted to ask you both if you have any suspicions."

Elena explained that although they had been making inquiries of their own, they had learnt nothing new in the last few days.

"But we do have a plan." Matilde interjected. "We plan to search all the guest rooms tonight. We just need to create a diversion so they will all be out of the way."

Rosalind paused for a moment and then her face lit up. "I can arrange something for after dinner tonight. I'll ask all the women to perform something. It can be a song, a poem or anything they like. Matilde, you will not be expected to be there and Elena, you could make up some excuse to leave early. I think I could keep them all together for at least an hour. Would that give you enough time?"

Elena beamed. "That is perfect, I dare say they will all be eager to make a good impression on you."

Rosalind smiled and they set to work putting the finishing touches to their plan.



Dinner seemed to last forever, and soon enough everyone headed through to the area that Rosalind had set up for the performances. The women had all been chattering throughout dinner about what they were planning, and Marianne was complaining about how little time they had to prepare.

Matilde said goodnight, hinting that she had more work to do and headed off. Elena waited until Bethan had sung a rather sombre song before she complained of a stomach ache. Francesca looked smug and whispered loudly to Charlotte that “Some people have no talent and simply do not want to be exposed.” Thankfully Elena was already at the door when she heard that because she would not have been able to keep the smile off her face.

Elena caught up with Matilde and they both headed quickly up the stairs. To speed up the process of Matilde picking the locks on all the doors, Elena had spent the rest of the afternoon learning a charm for locking and unlocking. They began searching Selena’s room, but it was so neat that it only took them a few minutes to realise that there was nothing incriminating to be found. Being careful to leave everything as it had been when they entered the room, Elena charmed the lock and they carried onto the next room. They found a lot of rather risqué books in Ola’s room and the kitchen cat was spread out happily on Bethan’s bed, but they found nothing incriminating. Having spent the hour searching through each room, they went back and sat on Matilde’s bed to try and puzzle it out.



It was much later than usual when Elena headed up to Ambrose’s room, Matilde walking beside her. She was not surprised when her friend timidly suggested that they could walk together as she was going to see Ralph.

They snuck up the stairs and were about to say goodnight when Elena noticed that Ambrose’s door was slightly ajar. Matilde was still standing out in the hallway when Elena slipped through the door. Panic shot through her as she saw a figure holding a pillow over Ambrose’s sleeping form. She

rushed over and grabbing a candlestick from the side table, she brought it down swiftly on the figure's head. Elena had moved so quickly that with the element of surprise, it seemed that she had knocked the woman out cold. Matilde rushed into the room and with a shout, was quickly followed by Ralph. The light from the open door illuminated the room and Elena gasped in shock as she realised the woman was Mrs Beaton.

The cook lay sprawled on the side of the bed, still clutching the pillow and a handkerchief. Ralph leaned over and tugged it from her hand. He put the cloth briefly to his nose before pulling it away and staggering back. "This would have knocked him out cold."

Elena was next to Ambrose and checking for a pulse. "He's alive, just. If we'd been any later, I don't know what would have happened."

Ralph knelt beside Mrs Beaton. "I never would have guessed. Ambrose was so adamant that all the staff were beyond reproach. Matilde, could you run and fetch the investigator and Selena? They should be the first to know. I don't want to leave Elena or Ambrose alone with this woman"

"And wake up Rosalind!" Elena called. "Oh, we will need Lilian first, she has the most knowledge when it comes to healing."

Matilde left the room at a run. To Elena's relief Ambrose seemed to be waking up. She shook his arms gently and lay her head on his chest in relief when his eyes opened. "Thank goodness, thank goodness. For a moment I thought I had lost you. I will kill that woman myself. To think, she nearly succeeded, and I was busy suspecting Lilian Lyle."

"What woman?" Ambrose asked groggily.

"I am afraid our attempted murderess is none other than Mrs Beaton." Ralph glowered down at the woman who was still unconscious at his feet. "And to think, I saw her as a second mother growing up. How could she?"

Ambrose looked even more confused and looked up at Elena. "What happened?"

Elena filled him in about Rosalind's plan to distract the women while she and Matilde searched their rooms.

"And then I found her, leant over you with that drugged handkerchief and a pillow smothering your face." Elena finally broke down and let the tears flow.

Ralph looked stricken. "She must have known that she needed to knock you out before she could suffocate you. She would have been overpowered otherwise when you awoke."

Ambrose looked shocked and wrapped his arm around Elena. "I suppose she must have gotten fed up with all of those failed attempts."

Elena let out a ragged breath. "At least now we know who is responsible."

The door banged open, and Lilian entered the room swiftly followed by Matilde, Selena and the inspector. Lilian wasted no time in heading straight for Ambrose. "May I check you over?" She seemed unsurprised to see Elena sitting practically on top of him.

"I should explain." Ambrose began.

"Matilde filled me in on the way." Lilian said as she checked his pulse and held her hand over his brow.

"I mean about Elena and myself."

Lilian paused and then smiled. "You must think I am as blind as a bat. The only woman in the whole castle that did not see your relationship from the start was Francesca and it matters little to her anyway as she is constantly reminding us that she is going to be a Duchess no matter what happens."

"I did not like to lie." Ambrose looked surprised.

Lilian smiled again. "With an attempted murderer on the loose, I do not blame you. At least now Elena will stop attempting to investigate me."

Despite the shock, Elena chuckled. She was relieved that there was no animosity between her and Lilian. "Was I really that obvious?"

“Painfully.” Lilian grinned. “But I will forgive you if I am invited to your wedding.”

“Of course!” Elena smiled and watched Lilian continue her checks. After a few moments Lilian looked up at both of them.

“There is no permanent damage. You will feel sleepy for a while and maybe slightly dizzy. This should fade with a few hours of sleep.”

Ambrose and Elena thanked her and turned their attention to the inspector who was attempting to bring Mrs Beaton back to consciousness.

She opened her eyes blearily.

“How could you?” Elena could not stop herself from shouting.

It took a moment for Mrs Beaton to respond but then she did. “How could I put the rightful heir in the perfect place to become the next Duke? It is his birth right.”

Elena looked confused for a moment and then realisation dawned on her face as she looked up at Ralph. “You tried to kill Ambrose so that Ralph could become the Duke?”

“I spend years tracking his successes in the military waiting for him to come home, and then he did.”

“But the bottle of brandy from the tavern?” Matilde asked incredulously.

Mrs Beaton snorted. “It wasn’t hard to find out when Ralph would arrive and get a young woman to follow him and give him the brandy. I know him well enough to know that he would be nervous and could not resist a sip or two.” She smiled at Ralph affectionately and he looked as if he was about to be sick.

“But why would you want it to look as though he was poisoned?” Elena asked.

Mrs Beaton looked cross. “It would have made more sense if I had been successful on that first night. I planned to dispose of him,” she motioned towards Ambrose, “on the night that

Ralph arrived. It would have given him the perfect alibi, no one would have suspected Ralph at all.”

“You tried to kill him that night?” Ralph looked astonished.

“I failed,” she snapped. “The next time was no better and I nearly killed Sir Carmichael. The only reason either of them survived was because they were found quickly so that I was able to give them the antidote. This time I didn’t want anything to go wrong. If it wasn’t for that harlot, everything would be perfect!” She glowered at Elena.

“But how did you know Ralph would even be found?” Matilde interjected.

“Because I told everyone how desperate we were for jewelweed. I even suggested that going out foraging would be a good way to get to know the young ladies.” She cackled with laughter.

“This is madness!” Ralph cried. “I’ve never wanted to be the Duke!”

“But you were born for the role! I saw it when you were young, so much better than your simpering cousin. I waited for you, I waited for you to take your rightful place!” Mrs Beaton began weeping.

“If I may, Your Grace.” The inspector interrupted. “I found the same poison that Sir Carmichael ingested in her rooms. I think this is conclusive.”

Ambrose still looked shocked, and Ralph had gone very pale. “Yes, take her away. Take any staff you need and a carriage.”

Mrs Beaton accompanied the inspector out of the room, still muttering. Selena followed, mentioning that she would make any further necessary arrangements.

“She’s mad.” Ambrose said. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it. I knew she didn’t warm to me but after working here at the castle so long, I never thought she would do something like this.”

At that moment Rosalind and Tobias arrived and Matilde began to explain the events of the night.

It was several hours before everyone went back to their rooms, although Elena was still curled up next to Ambrose and she suspected that Matilde was still with Ralph. “Sleep, we can talk more in the morning,” she whispered gently to Ambrose who looked as though he was struggling to keep his eyes open. It was not long before Elena too fell into a dreamless sleep.

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Ambrose

Waking up with Elena still in his arms was a welcome surprise. It took a few minutes before the events of the previous night to come flooding back. Ambrose pulled Elena closer to him as she began to stir.

“I am pleased you’re still here. We have a lot to talk about.” Ambrose said quietly, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

“Ambrose, I...” she broke off as there was a sharp knock on the door and Selena entered followed by several maids. She seemed unsurprised to see Elena there but wasted no time in chivvying her out of the bed, muttering about how much needed to be done.

“Good news, Your Grace.” Selena said hurriedly. “Your uncle has awoken and should be able to attend the celebrations this evening.”

A huge sense of relief flooded over Ambrose and saw a similar expression on Elena’s face.

“Another piece of news arrived from the inspector.” Selena carried on in a quieter voice.” Mrs Beaton is dead. She had a vial of poison on her person and when she was locked in a cell last night in town she took it. Her body was found this morning. I have informed the other staff and young ladies about Mrs Beaton. “

He felt numb, which was so at odds with the feeling of relief that he had just been feeling since he woke up. Ambrose nodded and thanked Selena for delivering the news to him.

There was a lot to do, and Elena smiled softly at him as she was whisked out of the room by Selena and the maids.

Elena

Elena hadn't realised how late they had slept but Selena was in a huge panic. The Queen's team of beauticians and hair stylists had once again taken over a large room on the second floor. Michele greeted Elena warmly and she was surprised to see that his vivid green hair had transformed into a pale shade of lilac since she had last seen him. Maids brought trays of tea and refreshments while all the young ladies were prepared for the ball. Elena didn't see Ambrose all day. She dearly wished to speak with him after the events of the night before, but she was unable to escape the room. Her hair was piled high in rollers and Michele flitted about applying makeup to her face with various brushes.

The news about Mrs Beaton had come as a shock but Elena forced herself to focus on the good news about Sir Carmichael waking up. She tried to not think about the image on the card that Madame Romilda had pulled for her in the village. Death. She had been so worried about Ambrose and she had to admit that it was a relief that she did not have to worry about his life being in danger anymore.

Matilde was sat with her own stylist at the opposite end of the room and all the other women were chatting and gossiping about everything that had gone on. Elena felt numb to it all and was content to let the hum of their chatter roll over her.

Eventually, when the sun had set and the curtains had been drawn, Michele spun the chair around so that Elena could see her reflection. Her hair cascaded down in rippling waves and Michele had enchanted tiny gems so that they nestled in tiny clusters. Elena was relieved that the makeup was subtle, but she noticed the delicate shimmer on her cheeks.

Michele wasted no time in helping her into the gown that hung on the rack behind them. Each of the women were wearing silver but Elena was breathless for a moment as she looked over her dress. It was sheer at the top and rather than the structured bodice that was fashionable, it was silken as it hugged her waist and floated down in folds to the ground. The

neckline was made of tiny gems glittering in the light. Rather than the stiff dresses she had gotten used to, this fit like a glove and Elena felt as though she could move as freely as she wanted to.

Matilde was standing just behind her smiling warmly. As she was not technically in the running to become the Duchess of Westbrook, she was wearing a deep burgundy dress instead of silver. It suited her well and Elena smiled back in return.

“Elena, you look truly stunning.” She beamed.

“As do you. I wish we had more time to talk, so much has happened.”

“And we will. But tonight, you must enjoy yourself. We will have so much time to discuss everything.”

Elena hugged her friend tightly. “I am so thankful for your friendship. I don’t know what I would have done without you here.”

Matilde grinned as Selena appeared and motioned for them to join the rest of the women leaving the room. Michele waved goodbye and Elena thanked him profusely before saying her own goodbyes.



The great hall had been transformed into a magical winter forest. Snow had been enchanted to fall from the ceiling, disappearing just before it reached guest’s heads. The tables had been moved to the sides of the room and piled high with plates of food and wreaths of holly. Candles burned on every surface infusing the whole room with warm light.

All the guests had already arrived, and everyone turned as Selena entered followed by all the women. Elena managed to spot her cousins and aunt and waved. She had managed to convince Ambrose at the last minute to invite her aunt as she knew it would be the only way she would see her cousins. Her aunt had acted poorly but Elena knew that she needed to forgive her in order to continue to have a relationship with her

cousins. Aunt Marie looked strained, but Ana and Sylvie waved enthusiastically back with big grins on their faces.

The orchestra had stopped playing as the group had arrived and Elena's gaze was drawn to the raised platform now at the front of the hall. The Queen was dressed in a stunning gown that looked as though it had real icicles hanging from it.

"Dearest friends," the Queen began. "It is my honour to preside over this wedding tonight. As you know, to officially claim his title, the Duke of Westbrook must be married tonight! He has had several weeks to choose from the women selected at random by my own hand. I know you are all excited to see who he shall choose."

On cue, Ambrose stepped from behind her. Elena's heart jumped frantically in her chest and Matilde gripped her hand. "I will not pretend that I was excited about this process." Ambrose began and the crowd murmured. "I had no desire to have a wife chosen for me and I had little hope that I would get on with any of the young women." The crowd seemed confused at this. "However, I have never been so glad to be wrong. There was one lady who from the first moment captured my attention. She challenged me, pushed me and even infuriated me. There was never a time that I was not enchanted by her and, in time, I was relieved to find that she was at least a little fond of me." Whispers and sounds of amusement rumbled around the room and Elena held her breath. "There has been darkness here in the castle, and it was only last night when the person responsible for my attempted murder was apprehended. I wanted to wait until the case was settled before making an official announcement and I am so pleased that I can now do so. Elena Chamberlain," he looked directly into her eyes as every head in the room turned towards her. "I will work every day to deserve you. It has always been you and I cannot imagine you walking away from me tonight. Would you do me the greatest honour of becoming my wife and the Duchess of Westbrook?"

Elena approached the platform as if in a trance. Every person in the room was looking directly at her, but it was only Ambrose she saw. "I once said I wouldn't marry you if the

Queen herself ordered me to.,” she said softly. “And yet, I too have never been so glad to have been wrong.”

Ambrose grinned and wasted no time in sweeping her into his arms and kissing her deeply as the crowd cheered and applauded.



The crowd hummed with excitement as Elena and Ambrose stood on the platform waiting to say their vows. The Queen was addressing the crowd but Elena was only focussed on Ambrose.

When the Queen stepped towards them, Ambrose smiled reassuringly and took Elena’s hands.

“Will you, Elena, take this man to be your husband?”

“I will.” she spoke clearly and was relieved to hear how steady her voice was.

“Throughout your lifetime do you promise to stand by his side in both the good and the bad times?”

“I do.” Elena smiled.

“And will you, Ambrose, take this woman to be your wife?”

“I will.” Ambrose kept his gaze fixed on Elena throughout the exchange.

“Throughout your lifetime do you promise to stand by her side in both the good and the bad times?”

“I do.”

The Queen smiled widely and addressed the crowd. “Then it is my honour to present to you all, the new Duke and Duchess of Westbrook!”

Cheers erupted from around the room and tiny balls of light flitted around the room. Elena found herself practically pulled off the platform by Matilde and embraced by her good friend.

Elena was greeted and congratulated by what felt like everyone in the kingdom before she recognised a woman coming towards her. “Madame Romilda!” she greeted the card reader warmly and stepped towards her.

“I see I was right about you.” The older woman smiled. “And I am pleased that you are passed your turmoil.”

Elena nodded.

“Perhaps you would like to draw a card-” She went to pull something out of her bag.

“I think I have had enough of cards for a lifetime!” Elena laughed. “I will take my chances without knowing I think.”

Madame Romilda smiled. “As you wish. Congratulations, *Your Grace.*”

Elena thanked her and walked through the doors to the terrace. She needed a moment of calm. Heading towards the railings, she looked over at the blazing bonfire.

“I see you are trying to escape your own wedding already?” Ambrose appeared just behind her.

Elena laughed and embraced him. “I would accuse you of the same thing if I was not happy to find you out here.”

“Then perhaps I can ask you to dance?” He motioned to the lawn covered in a fresh layer of snow. They could head the orchestra playing inside and Elena gladly took his hand as they descended down the steps.

While a ballroom full of guests danced in the crowded ballroom, The Duke and Duchess of Westbrook took their first dance as newlyweds out in the snow, under the stars.

The End

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Afterword

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading *The Duchess Contest*. Writing this has been a labour of love and it would mean the world to me if you could take a minute to write me a review on Amazon, Goodreads or any other platform.

For all the latest news, info on the next release in the series visit www.evamorland.com to subscribe to my newsletter and my instagram [@eva.morland.author](https://www.instagram.com/eva.morland.author).

The newsletter will also include information about the opportunity to become an ARC reader and receive a free copy of all upcoming releases early in exchange for a review!

Yours,

Eva Morland

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Acknowledgement

Above all else, I have to thank my husband. Although I didn't show him a single word of this novel until I completed a first draft, he has been nothing but supportive. He was the first person to read *The Duchess Contest* and I look forward to him reading the next novel!

Throughout thick and thin, he has supported me and I honestly would still be nowhere near to completing this book if it were not for him.

So once again, thank you.

Also thank you to you, reader, without whom this book would lie stangant. I hope you enjoyed reading it and I look forward to sharing with you the next installment from the Kingdom of Odetta.

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