

A LADY'S PROMISE

a historical
romance

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Covenant Communications, Inc.

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PRAISE FOR RANEÉ S. CLARK

A Lady's Promise

“This is such a beautiful slow-burn romance that readers will experience a roller coaster of emotions!”

—Readers' Favorite

“I've been a fan of Raneé S. Clark since *Playing for Keeps* and was excited to hear she was delving into the world of historical romance. *A Lady's Promise* did not disappoint. Genuine, enjoyable, and absolutely lovely from the first word to the heart-satisfying end.”

—Sarah M. Eden, author of the Gents series

“A delicious slow-burn romance with seemingly insurmountable odds set in turn-of-the century New York. This beautiful story explores the complications of family, the reality of losing people we care about, and love in all its messy forms. I adored it.”

—Jennifer Moore, author of the Blue Orchid Society series

“*A Lady's Promise* is a beautiful, tender story. I fell in love with the heroine in the first chapter. I kept turning pages as the delicious tension grows throughout the book. So happy I was able to read another wonderful story by Raneé S. Clark.”

—Jen Geigle Johnson, author of the Royal Regency Romance series

“An exquisite tale of complex family relationships and the love that can be found among scars.”

—Kate Condie, author of *A Winter's Vow*

to Kaylee Baldwin

*This story would never be in print form
if it weren't for your encouragement and friendship.*

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CHAPTER ONE

New York City

November 1895

PRINCE BAXTER HAD BEEN WARNED by the huffs and shuffling of papers coming from his older brother's desk that he ought to escape the library for somewhere more congenial. But the day was icy, the wind whistling through any possible space in the mansion his brother owned on Fifth Avenue, making the whole thing chilly, no matter how the servants scurried about stoking fires and closing off rooms. Prince couldn't convince himself to leave the chair by the fire, even with the ominous-sounding murmuring and grunts coming from Preston.

At last the storm broke, beginning with, "Now, *really*, Prince. Puppies?"

But Prince had been raised by his mother, Ellen Baxter, and mostly on her own from the time he was eleven; it took so much more than censure about puppies to unnerve him. She was the most impetuous woman he knew. That had led to discomfort on more than one occasion, such as a midnight walk down their street in Paris in the middle of winter simply because the stars and snow were so magical she couldn't resist.

"If you'd seen the things yourself, you'd have been hard-pressed to say no," he said. He took a casual sip of hot coffee that Williams, the butler, had brought in earlier.

"For fifty guests?" Preston rubbed at one temple already sprinkled liberally with gray hair. At thirty-five, he was ten years older than Prince, and they'd lived very little of their lives together until Prince's mother had died last year, leaving him with no income. Their father—their only shared parent—had left his second wife a decent inheritance, but it hadn't lasted past her own death. She'd left enough debts for Preston to settle that even Prince cringed a bit.

"Miss Darlington was overwrought with joy, and that's what matters." The comment sounded ridiculous in the face of such a large bill, but Prince would survive his brother's scrimping

ways—though he was worth millions—only by laughing over them.

“Couldn’t you have simply given Miss Darlington a puppy?” The lines around Preston’s eyes tightened, the same as they did any time the heiress was mentioned between them.

“Ah, but Mr. Darlington was impressed that every guest received one—”

“Along with the diamond-studded collars, no doubt,” Preston said dryly.

Prince couldn’t understand Preston’s worry. It was a drop in the buckets of money his brother had accumulated. Their father had not made the vast Baxter fortune. Preston had. Daniel Baxter had been quite rich, but Preston had taken his small inheritance upon the man’s death and turned it into a pile of money large enough to rival that of the Astors and the Vanderbilts. One lavish dinner party to impress Prince’s—hopefully—future in-laws would not send him and Preston to poverty.

Preston gave a long sigh and sat back in his chair. “If such grand gestures are required to win the affections of the Darlings, perhaps it’s not the best match. I wish you to be wise when choosing a companion for life.”

It was the best match. Prince had no desire to stay a moment longer than necessary under his brother’s penny-pinching thumb. Prince required a very healthy dowry to allow him the style of life he’d enjoyed in France with his mother—one with leisure and without stress. Those were his best memories. He remembered little of his father, who had died when Prince was eleven, but his mother was a light. A beacon. Everyone had enjoyed being around her, laughing and living.

Prince took another sip of coffee. “We cannot all be millionaires,” he said, too much bitterness marring his carefree tone.

“You certainly will not be for long, after I’m gone,” Preston muttered, shuffling back a paper and staring down at another one.

“Do not fear, brother,” Prince said with a raise of his brows. “By the time that comes, you’ll have doubled your wealth.” Preston’s worn-out looks attested to that.

Preston pushed away from his desk and stood, walking around it and then leaning back against it as he stared at Prince. “I’m afraid that is unlikely.” He dropped the papers onto the desk and then walked toward the fire. He turned to gaze at it, most of his profile blocked from Prince. “I’m dying,” he said in a softer voice.

Silence followed. Prince opened his mouth, unsure what to say. Questions crowded inside him. Dying? Preston might be older than Prince, but he wasn’t old enough to be dying. As he stared at his brother, he couldn’t help but remember the strong young man who had carried Prince up the stairs on his shoulders. He pushed those thoughts away. It had been a long time since they had shared that kind of relationship.

“Stomach cancer,” Preston said, his voice more certain now, as though relating another one of Prince’s expenditures. “Dr. Morton will operate, take out the tumor, but he says the cancer has spread too far for him to save me.” He paused again, intent on the fire.

“I’m sorry,” Prince said. It pained him, but he was unused to sharing sympathy with anyone, especially Preston. This moment felt more awkward than anything, but a pang of anger struck him. For better or worse, Preston was the last of his family.

Preston shrugged, then turned to face Prince, putting his hands behind his back. “I’m making my peace with it. I’ve known for some time now.” He dropped his gaze briefly before going on. “I don’t like doing this, Prince . . .” He cleared his throat. “But if you marry Miss Darlington, if you continue on in the way your—”

“The way my mother lived?” Prince challenged. He stood. Dying or not, he wouldn’t allow Preston to deride her anymore. He’d done enough during her life.

Red rose in Preston’s cheeks. “The way you’re going on now. Spending money without care. No interest in honest

work.”

“You may send me off to your offices whenever you wish,” Prince snapped.

Preston huffed. “I won’t force an occupation on you. But I don’t plan to leave any of my money to you unless you make a change. I feel as though I would be doing you a disservice.”

Prince gave a dry laugh. When their father had died, Mother had gone to France because Preston had refused to pay her bills, forcing them into a cheaper European lifestyle. Preston had the means to care for his family, but he’d refused, giving Mother much the same argument that he was giving Prince now. She had to economize. Her spending was too lavish. He wouldn’t support it the way his father had and allow her to spoil Prince and turn him into an entitled brat. Compared to some of the bills many of the Society wives racked up in an effort to outshine each other, his mother’s silly purchases had been mild, but Preston had been able to see only the road of ruin she was assuredly leading Prince along.

Hypocrite. The man lived in a palace now but couldn’t spare anything for his family. Preston always knew better—how to improve their character, how to manage the money, all of it.

Prince ground his teeth together but found the will to calm his temper. Preston was dying. Millions of dollars could be Prince’s if he convinced Preston he intended to spend the money responsibly upon his brother’s death. To practice philanthropy and economy and not indulge in any of the lavish, outrageous expenditures so many others of New York’s elite prided themselves on.

“I see,” Prince finally said, granting his brother a lazy smile, though uncertainty and frustration churned within him. “I’ll attempt to amend my ways, perhaps even see Mr. Davies about something worthwhile for me to do at that company of yours.” He took one last sip of his coffee and set the cup down on a nearby table. “Miss Darlington will be quite disappointed.” He laughed and strode from the room, avoiding balling his fists in the anger racing through him until he was alone in the chilly hallway.

Another pang clenched his insides as he thought again of Preston—he was dying.

He let anger override whatever grief threatened. He would give Preston what he wanted, and when his brother was dead, he'd buy everyone in New York a blasted puppy.

His temper had ebbed by the time he found himself in Solomon Davies's study. Davies was the younger brother of Preston's capable manager, Amos, and the closest friend Prince had in New York. He'd never gone by Solomon as long as Prince had known him, which, admittedly, was only about a year.

Prince didn't typically drink spirits, but he made an exception now. He suspected the money spent on this brandy would fall under his brother's category of unwise spending. That made it all the more soothing.

He took another long sip.

"Think you could stomach working at the offices?" Davies asked.

"For millions? Certainly, though it sounds incredibly dull, and I was never any good at it." Prince set down his brandy and sank lower into the armchair he sat in, frowning at the fire. "Your brother might not enjoy babysitting me."

Davies chuckled. "I'm sure you're not as bad as all that."

"I'm sure I'm not as good as all that either."

"Would Preston be impressed by a charitable endeavor?" Davies stared into the fire along with Prince.

"I suppose so."

"Miss Darlington might be impressed as well. Ladies are always discussing their philanthropic projects."

"It's as good an idea as any." Prince smiled to himself. "My mother brought home more children off the street than I could count when I was younger, insisting to my father that we could find a place for them. It exasperated the housekeeper to no end, having to train them. Half of them ran away, I believe." He smiled and thought of the ones who stayed, who were

unfailingly loyal to his mother, who wrote letters to her when she and Prince moved to France, keeping her apprised of all the goings-on in Preston's household.

"I wish I had met her," Davies said.

Sorrow swept through Prince, surprising him. She wouldn't have liked the way he'd reacted to the news of Preston's illness. Or that the conversation had turned to monetary matters. Would she have fussed over Preston, even after being separated from him so long? After all Preston had put them through?

"Are you okay?" Davies asked in a sympathetic voice.

"Of course," he said tightly. In the last few hours, his thoughts had been drawn to before their father's death and Prince's departure from New York, when Preston had filled his life with memories. Prince was irritated by those memories, memories of a brother he no longer knew.

He reached for his glass, tossing down more of the brandy, trying to separate himself from the emotions he wished to sweep away. He had no desire to suffer that over a brother who abandoned him nearly fifteen years ago.

He would not feel guilt over his conversation with his brother either. It was Preston who had turned the conversation to matters of inheritance. It was his brother who had declared money more important than family ties.

"We'll find something," Prince said under his breath. "I'll be the dutiful little brother."

CHAPTER TWO

ISABELLA STUDIED HER COUSIN-IN-LAW BESS as she impatiently waited for the guests to be called into dinner at the Fairhaven home. Bess didn't relish being a chaperone. She'd much rather stay at home with her children. But after weeks of badgering, Isabella's aunt Cassandra, with the help of her son Robert, Bess's husband, had managed to persuade Bess to bring their children to the city for a visit—for the whole Season, if Aunt Cassandra had her way. She couldn't believe Bess didn't enjoy the balls, the dinners, and the opera.

Wynhall, the De Vries family estate in Peekskill, where Robert and Bess lived, was “*so close,*” Aunt Cassandra would complain. Why couldn't Bess and Robert bring the children more often? With Aunt Cassandra's responsibilities to Isabella during the Season, she couldn't visit as frequently as she liked either. So she ignored Bess's insistence that she wasn't inclined to go back and forth between Wynhall and the city. Aunt Cassandra wanted her grandchildren nearby. She had even stayed behind this evening to spend time with them, as she'd done with all but one event in the week since Bess and Robert's arrival, forcing Bess to play the part of chaperone to Isabella.

Isabella bit back a smile as she caught sight of Bess opening the silk reticule that hung from her wrist to once again look furtively at the time on the pocket watch she'd convinced her husband to let her use for the evening. Bess's shoulders drooped and Isabella turned away. By Isabella's estimation, they had been at the Fairhavens' only ten minutes. The butler hadn't even arrived yet to call for dinner. It would be a long night for Bess.

“My love,” Robert said, not bothering to keep his voice low as he leaned over from the seat next to Bess, “the children are likely in bed by now and hardly missing you at all. And being spoiled by their grandmother is a very important milestone of childhood.” His voice was gentle, but Isabella didn't miss the hint of amusement.

Fortunately, Bess was too busy nodding at her husband's

advice to have heard the slight tremor of laughter in his speech. At least, her strained smile didn't show any reaction. "Yes, of course you're right."

He gave her an affectionate look before sitting back.

Isabella forced herself to participate in Bess and Robert's conversation and managed to comment now and again, but she was too impatient to enjoy herself. Usually, her inattention could be blamed on a new project taking up her thoughts, like the jars and wires she'd been working on in her efforts to replicate an electrical experiment or the plans for a homemade water heater she'd been sketching out because her lady's maid, Margie, had commented on how convenient it was that Isabella could take hot baths with such ease. But ever since Aunt Cassandra had summoned Bess and Robert to the city, it had been difficult for Isabella to ignore her ever-building guilt that after three Seasons, she still hadn't found a husband.

With Aunt Cassandra so eager to see her married, perhaps Isabella ought to look up a manual on attracting men and study it with as much vigor as she did electricity and engineering.

Bess touched her on the arm, and Isabella looked up to see Preston Baxter standing above her, holding out his hand to her. Isabella's father had been a mentor to Preston, and Preston had remained a dear family friend even after her father had died.

"Well, hello," she said, taking his hand and rising. She frowned slightly at Preston's appearance. He looked thinner, though she could be imagining it. He appeared older, with gray somehow spilling into the hair at his temples seemingly overnight and a full invasion in the neat mustache and beard he wore.

"Good evening, Isabella."

"Are you feeling well?" she asked before he could engage in any small talk. "Has Mr. Davies been calling you into the office more than usual?" The manager of his chain of department stores, according to Preston, was far more capable than he was at running things, lessening the need for Preston to visit his office more than once or twice a week.

Preston's smile tempered his tired expression. "Am I well? You look quite lost this evening," he said.

She shook her head. "Woolgathering, as usual. Everyone here will think me very rude." She chewed on her lip.

"You worry too much," he chided, an oft-repeated phrase for him. He never thought ill of her and had always told her what a genius she was, no matter what a stretch that was. "Most of the people here have likely not noticed you, and if they have, it has been only to admire you."

She scoffed. "I doubt that." But even just a few words of conversation from him had made her feel more at ease. "Why have you rescued me?" she asked.

"I've convinced Mrs. Fairhaven to give me the privilege of escorting you to dinner."

Isabella looked toward the door. The butler must have called for dinner, because more than one couple was making their way out of the drawing room.

He patted her arm. "What's worrying you?"

She sighed, grateful she wouldn't have to force the topic. Preston had known her most of her life. She could confide her worries in him, and he would likely have a solution. She trusted him implicitly. "I must not go another Season without marrying. Aunt Cassandra has bullied Bess into coming, and you know how she hates the Season. I've been a burden long enough."

Preston gave a short laugh as they entered the dining room. He led her to her chair and waited until he was sitting next to her to continue their conversation. "You're no burden. She and your uncle simply want to see you taken care of. We all do."

Isabella reached over and squeezed his hand. "I know. You've all done so much. It is high time I repaid you. My aunt is too old to be trotting around at all hours of the night." Isabella's mother had died when she was five, and then her father when she was barely twelve, leaving her under the guardianship of Aunt Cassandra and Uncle Benjamin. She hated imagining what Aunt Cassandra and Bess must think

privately of her and her failures.

Preston gave a hearty laugh. “Your aunt is hardly old. She simply wants to spend her time spoiling her grandchildren.”

His words didn’t tease the worry out of her like he surely thought they would. “Yes, I’ve been keeping her from her maternal duties since I arrived on her doorstep.”

“Oh, come.” He tried frowning, but his eyes were dancing. “You were hardly left in a basket here. Your aunt wants to see you well and happy, Isabella, as much as she did her sons. Trust me.”

He was right, but Isabella was not wrong either. Aunt Cassandra did long to see her make a happy match, but she also longed to see the end of her own chaperoning days.

So Isabella shrugged. “Very well,” she said, hoping Preston accepted her response. “But you’ll introduce me to some nice, eligible bachelors?”

He picked up his spoon. “If it will make you happy.”

She nodded. “I must do my part. I knew I could count on you to help me.”

“Always, Isabella. Always.”

His reassurance eased her worries enough that she enjoyed dinner and even allowed herself a few minutes in the drawing room with the other women afterward to ponder her plans for the water heater. The half hour in the drawing room passed slowly. Bess checked her watch often. Poor Bess. Her heart was meant to be at home with her little family.

When Preston came in with the other men, Isabella asked, “Have you thought of someone to introduce me to?” as soon as he approached.

He shook his head and laughed. “You only just made the request, Isabella.”

“Preston.” Isabella gave a long sigh. She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Bess was constantly checking her watch this evening.”

His laugh grew, and Isabella smiled, glad that some of the weight in his expression seemed to lift. “I noticed.”

“I must get married.”

“Isabella,” he said softly. “Stop fretting. All will be well. I promise you.” Turning toward Bess and Robert, a twinkle in his eye, he said louder, “Shall I make our excuses early, Mrs. De Vries?”

“Oh, please do.” Bess perked up, and her eyes filled with relief. Beside her, and out of her view, Robert shared an amused look with Preston. “Mrs. Fairhaven won’t be the least bit offended if *you* do it,” Bess added.

Isabella looked up at Preston with a grin. “Mrs. Fairhaven has a soft spot for him. She wishes Preston had married her daughter.”

A shadow passed over Preston’s expression. “Lucy is much better off.”

“Preston?” Isabella furrowed her brows. He waved her question off and crossed the room to speak with the hostess.

Soon he and Isabella were leading the small party outside, where their two carriages awaited. Before handing Isabella into Robert’s, Preston held her back. “I’ll call on you tomorrow to discuss this new obsession you have with getting married,” he teased.

Relief bounced through Isabella. “Will you bring me someone to marry?” she asked, hoping she sounded as though she were teasing as well. It would make this process so much easier if Preston would choose a suitable candidate and arrange everything.

“Something like that,” he said.

She questioned him with a scowl, but he didn’t explain further.

CHAPTER THREE

ISABELLA GLANCED BETWEEN HER NOTEBOOK and *The Practical Engineer's Handbook*, making a sketch of the water heater she intended to construct for the small bathing room the maids shared in the servants' quarters. It would be simple but efficient. It wouldn't bring her fame and fortune, as she sometimes lay awake at night thinking of, especially lately.

It was not as though Isabella really *wanted* to be famous. And the De Vries family was well enough off, but outfitting a young woman for a Season was no small expense. Isabella's father had left very little money to be settled on her, and her uncle had nothing to add. Anything he had went toward dresses, owning the fashionable house on Madison Avenue—the list of expenses went on and on. Uncle Benjamin was no Gould or Vanderbilt whose obscene fortunes supported lavish dinner parties, balls, and the like without their blinking an eye.

And Isabella's curiosity and tinkering with replicas of existing innovations would not make her a rich woman. Nor would it make her family proud. But it would change Margie's world for the better. The thought made Isabella smile.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the butler entered. "Mr. Preston Baxter to see you."

"Oh, send him right in, of course." Isabella tucked away her book and notebook. The drawing room was often quiet, unless there were visitors. Today Aunt Cassandra was upstairs with her grandchildren, leaving Isabella to receive any visitors herself.

Isabella stood and rounded the table, greeting her friend when he entered the room.

"Hello, hello," he said. She looked beyond him, which made Preston chuckle. "I'm alone. Come, let's sit down."

Isabella obeyed and kept her comments to herself. Preston had promised to help her, and so he would. She would have to be patient, even though the quicker she could accomplish an engagement, the better for everyone. There might be some talk if things were hasty, but nothing too bad, Isabella hoped.

He studied her face as they sat, his expression softening as a small smile lit his weary appearance. Isabella had heard rumor after rumor about his younger brother. She knew little about Prince Baxter except that Uncle Benjamin thought him reckless. Perhaps that was the cause of the new lines in Preston's face and the exhaustion in his countenance. She dreaded thinking her failed Seasons caused her family the same disappointment Prince Baxter's irresponsible spending did for Preston. She didn't have a significant dowry or stunning beauty to capture the attention of a young man, but looking back, Aunt Cassandra had likely presented many suitable options, and she'd ignored them in the same careless manner as Prince spent his family's fortune, thinking nothing of the future. She'd been dreaming of love, no doubt, or caught up in her own studies.

"You have his eyes, though far more beautiful than James's ever were," Preston said, speaking of her father.

Isabella raised her brows at his sudden nostalgia, then laughed. "Thank you."

"As promised, there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Have you found me a husband and come to offer his proposal?" she asked lightly.

"Are you prepared to accept it, then, sight unseen?" He raised his own brows, matching her expression.

"If he's been chosen by you, I've nothing to fear," she tossed back. Preston's influence and loyalty to her family meant she had complete trust in him.

"I've come to recommend a husband, though not in the way you're expecting. What I mean to suggest will suit both our purposes. I'll warn you that it's rather shocking. It would, however, finally allow me to pay back your father after all these years—"

"Now, Preston, you know what he used to say about that," Isabella scolded, softening it with a smile. "There was never anything to repay."

“Nonsense. If he hadn’t sold me that building for my first store—and for such a low price that I felt like a thief—I wouldn’t be where I am today, though James would never accept that.” Preston gave a long sigh.

“He was happy to have done it.” She patted his arm and gave a little sigh of her own. It had been nearly ten years now, and she’d started to forget little things, like the sounds of her parents’ voices and the exact shades of their eyes. Any time Preston spoke of her father it brought back memories that filled the empty spaces those fading memories were leaving behind.

“Isabella.” Preston reached over to take her hands in his. “I should build up to this, I suspect, but I find I have little time to do so.”

“You’re being very vague. I think it would do us both better if you would get to the point.” Other memories pricked in her chest—the hours just before her father had died and the anguish that mingled with pain in his expression. “*I have very little time.*” She shook them away.

“I would like to ask you to marry me,” he said in a rush. “In name only, so that I might settle my fortune on you.”

Isabella gasped. “Preston!” She stood, blinking in surprise at him. He tugged at her hand, and she slowly retook her seat. “You can’t be serious. What about your brother?”

Preston drew in a long breath. “I do hope he will meet the conditions I’ve set—that is, that he will take more care in his current habits. I don’t blame him for them. He learned frivolity and luxury from his mother, who never had a care for anything unless it pleased her.” He shook his head. “She doted on Prince, and many loved her; I was very fond of her myself, though Prince doesn’t believe it. He worships her, and he seems to find comfort in the silly expenditures she enjoyed. It will lead him down a disreputable path.”

“And if he doesn’t meet your expectations, you intend to leave it all to me?” Isabella’s voice rose to a squeak.

“I intend to leave a vast sum to you, whether Prince lives up

to my expectations or not. I have long intended to. But my lawyer has advised me that you have a better chance of standing up to any of Prince's challenges in court if I make you my wife, though Barnes has done everything he can to make my wishes ironclad. It's only because I worry what Prince will do to get the money that I propose this drastic action." Now he stood and faced her. "He has connections that could make it difficult for you, and the last thing I wish after my death is for you to be required to fight for what I mean for you to have."

Discomfort squirmed in Isabella's chest. "Preston, I don't want to cause discord in your family." The gossip that would arise, whispers about Preston marrying someone fifteen years younger than himself, leaving his fortune to her. She tried to push them away. He wanted to help.

He shook his head and paced away. "That discord was sown long ago. This plan has no bearing on my relationship with my brother. I love you as a dear friend, though I know the money is no replacement for what you've lost."

She stood and went to him. "*You* have been a lifesaver, Preston," she assured him. She took his hands the way he often took hers, holding them and staring into his eyes. "You don't need to do this. A little matchmaking will suffice."

He shook his head. "You won't dissuade me from leaving you an inheritance. I'll give you independence so you will not feel pressured to find a husband."

She frowned at him. "I see I've made you worry."

He chuckled. "You're always thinking of those around you, Isabella. An admirable trait. But sometimes I believe you think on it too much."

"Preston, you do not—"

"I decided this many years ago—shortly after your father died and it became obvious he hadn't been able to leave you much. I knew I would make my fortune and that you would benefit. You won't talk me out of it now." He rested his hands on her shoulders. "I'll court you in public, and when we are

married, I'll act as a loving husband in order to ensure that Prince has no evidence to present that you married me for money only, but I assure you that the role of husband and wife will end there. I won't require anything else of you." His look was stern, and Isabella's cheeks colored at the delicate topic.

She could only stare at him and take a deep breath. His proposition would allow Aunt Cassandra and Bess a reprieve from the Season. And Isabella *was* quite fond of him. It wasn't what she'd expected when she'd asked for his help, but her analysis of his plan proved it would solve the problem she'd brought to him.

Even if the talk of her and her family would be nearly unbearable.

He bowed his head toward her, reminding her of the way he'd cajoled her when she was younger. "*Come down to dinner and join the family,*" he'd said a week after her father had passed away and she had scarcely left her room. "*I'll buy you any tool you want if you will learn needlepoint as your aunt wishes,*" he'd said when she'd been stubborn about the proper pursuits of ladies.

"Please, Isabella," he said in that same tone. "Allow me to do this for you."

She shook her head. "But, Preston, surely you mean to marry for love, don't you?"

"I have not believed so since Anna died." He lowered his gaze, falling silent.

Isabella had been so young when he was engaged to Anna, but she remembered being in awe of the beautiful woman. Her death had brought Preston so low. Her father had worried over him. And then Father was gone too, and somehow Preston had rallied for Isabella.

She swallowed. To know love like that—she had often wished for it. From the sadness in Preston's eyes she knew such a love would never come to him again. "Are you sure?" she asked quietly.

The sadness lifted, replaced with a wary expression. "I'm

certain. There is something else you should know, something else that prods me to make this proposition.” He drew in a long breath. “I’m dying. I have only a few short months, perhaps a year if I’m lucky, but not more.”

It took several moments for her to digest the information, but then it stung. She blinked at the tears forming. “Preston?” she whispered. “*I have so little time.*” The words created a band on her chest, thick as steel.

He led her back to the couch, waiting for her to sit down before sitting next to her. “I’m sorry,” he said softly, as though it were only her receiving bad news. She swallowed.

“What is it?” she asked in a hushed voice.

He pressed his lips together. “Cancer. But I’m well enough to marry you, if you agree, and give you several months of contented married life.” He likely could not help the teasing grin he used to relieve the heaviness of the moment. “My doctor promises me.”

She tried to smile, too, as she shook her head at him. She couldn’t comprehend what he was saying to her. “How can you be caring for me amid all of this?”

“I have some selfish reasons as well. I do hope my marriage might make Prince see that I’m quite serious about disinheriting him. It’s not my money I care about. He may spend it all in a week, but I do not like the character it has made him out to be. This is the last thing I can hope to do for him. I’ve failed for too long to let him down at the last.”

It was all a great deal of information to take in. Losing Preston would be too much. “I must think on this.”

He nodded. “I have time enough that you need not answer right away. I’ve spoken to your uncle and told him everything about the circumstances. He is agreeable so long as you are.”

Emotion welled inside her that she had no desire to express in front of her dear friend. She swallowed it back, hoping to survive the rest of the visit. “You must know, Preston, that you’re very kind, no matter my answer.” She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, pressing her lips together as she

leaned back.

He must have sensed her building emotion. He took his leave, pressing a handkerchief into her hand and reassuring her before he left. Once he was gone, Isabella hurried to her bedroom, collapsing onto her bed as a rush of tears overcame her.

The days that followed her father's death had been filled with people doting on her and slipping her treats, surprising hugs from the housekeeper or a maid, Uncle Benjamin sitting quietly with her. But soon after, she was expected to go on living her life, despite how upended her life had become. Preston had been as attentive to her as everyone else, but he'd continued to be so, spoiling her even when all the other attention died away.

He'd taken her on carriage rides in good weather and told her stories about her father, highlighting her father's generous nature. He'd told her about the time rain had left the streets a mess and Preston had gotten mud all over her father's carriage as they rode to their club together. They'd come upon a man her father had hired the week before to clean his building, trudging toward the office building, filthy and soaked. Her father stopped the carriage and offered him a ride, meanwhile scolding Preston for the mud he'd left on the seat.

She and Preston had laughed together, but admiration had shone in his expression. In the years since, Preston had often brought up similar moments, and he always credited her father for the sale of the building that had made him a millionaire.

Her father had instilled in Preston lessons on kindness and generosity—memories she'd thought he'd told her about to make her feel better, to help her remember her father. As she'd grown, however, she'd seen that Preston was giving her the same lessons her father had given him.

With Preston gone, who would fill her heart with memories of him?

* * *

“I'll not dispute that it was very wise of you to ask Mr. Baxter

for time to think it over.” Aunt Cassandra peered at Isabella as Isabella paced in front of the window of the sitting room.

Aunt was embroidering alongside Bess. The nanny had insisted upon naps for the children, with slight censure for Aunt Cassandra for how late they had stayed up the night before. Aunt Cassandra and Nanny Carlson had shared a look, and Bess’s smile was far more resigned than anything else to Aunt’s grandmotherly mischief. She’d whispered to Isabella that her own mother took little interest, and it made her happy that one grandmother doted on them.

“Yes,” Bess added, returning Isabella’s thoughts to Preston’s proposal. “Quite wise.”

“Mmm” was Isabella’s answer. She’d turned the offer over and over in her mind. Once she’d cried the worst of her tears and declined dinner because of a headache, she’d lain awake half the night as she wavered over whether or not she should accept Preston’s offer. It had banished thoughts of the water heater from her mind for the time being.

She was fonder of Preston than she suspected she would be of anyone he introduced her to. She hadn’t much considered love in the past weeks as she worried over her unmarried state. Her analysis of her situation with her aunt and cousin-in-law had left love out of the equation.

But Preston’s proposal would not hinder the possibility for love in her future either. A year, he’d said. Her chest tightened again. Losing Preston at such a young age, the way she’d lost her parents, seemed quite unfair. And what must his younger brother be thinking? She had an inkling of the loneliness he must be feeling. She had her aunt and uncle and cousins, of course, but she could remember the sting of those moments, of knowing that what remained of her family wasn’t the same as having her dear parents with her. For Prince Baxter to have lost his father and mother and now to lose his only brother already . . . poor man.

“I think it very right that Mr. Baxter would like to settle at least some of his money on you,” Aunt Cassandra continued, her needle moving quickly along the edge of the reticule she

was making for herself. “Your father would never hear a word of Mr. Baxter paying him back, but we thought it so perplexing that he would refuse Mr. Baxter’s offers to make up the difference between the sale and the price your father could have gotten.”

“Father thought of him like a son, not a business partner.” Isabella paced back the other way, her defense of Father automatic.

Aunt Cassandra gave a soft huff. “I’ve always thought Preston Baxter very intelligent. It is quite the match, Isabella. Of course you should accept it, though I know it came rather suddenly and a girl does need time to catch her breath.”

“It *is* very sudden” was all she could say in response. She could not blame her aunt. Isabella had come to the same conclusion many times in the past day since Preston’s offer. “But what will people say about us?”

Aunt Cassandra put down her reticule to scowl at Isabella over the top of her spectacles. “Say? About what? His age?” She gave a laugh. “He’s thirty-five. Hardly old. Just last week I was reading something in a magazine about a sixty-year-old man marrying a twenty-five-year-old woman.” Aunt Cassandra frowned and shuddered. “They will hardly take note of you.”

The age difference had not been what Isabella was thinking of. Tongues would wag about Isabella and her family and even Preston when he died so soon after their marriage and left her all that money. She clenched his already wrinkled handkerchief.

“There is the matter of you benefiting as well,” Bess said to Aunt Cassandra, “having settled your charge so soon in the Season.” One corner of her lips quirked, and Isabella nearly laughed for the first time since Preston’s visit.

Aunt Cassandra put her embroidery in her lap and blinked at Bess. “Well, that is an advantage, of course; I can’t deny that. I don’t find the same joy in the Season as I did when I was young.” She gave a sigh and took off her spectacles, turning to Isabella. “You’re fond of him, aren’t you?”

Isabella nodded. “Oh yes, I am.” She sat down in a chair, realizing how fatigued she was from her restless night’s sleep and pacing.

Her aunt studied her and then asked, “Do you have a beau I’m not aware of?”

The tender question reminded Isabella that though her aunt grew impatient with her charge, she did care for Isabella and wouldn’t force her into anything, which couldn’t be said of all guardians. Her smile returned. “No, Aunt, I have no beau to worry about.”

Aunt Cassandra gave a nod. “You will not make a smarter match than Preston Baxter.”

The conversation was broken by a maid coming in. “Mrs. De Vries,” she said, turning to Bess. “Nanny Carlson said you wanted to know when the baby woke.”

Bess brightened and set aside her sewing, but Aunt Cassandra put a hand on her arm. “I’ll go.” She gave a pointed look at Isabella. Though her cousin-in-law grimaced, she nodded her consent and sat back down, watching as Aunt Cassandra left the room.

“I think your aunt believes you’re more likely to confide your reservations to me than to her.” Bess leaned forward, her expression earnest and caring.

Isabella crossed the room to sit in the spot Aunt Cassandra had left.

Bess reached over and took one of her hands. “If you don’t wish to marry Mr. Baxter, I’ll help you convince your aunt it is the right thing.”

“He is dying.” Isabella had not told anyone this. “He has less than a year, his doctor tells him.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she appreciated the soft “Oh” of sympathy and the squeeze Bess gave her.

“There is hardly any reason to refuse him. Even if I disliked him, I would be a rich widow in a matter of months. I feel as though I would be taking advantage of him.” She related to

Bess what Preston had told her of disinheriting his younger brother in an effort to help him and the assurances that Preston had given that theirs would be a marriage in name only.

Bess sat in silence for several moments when Isabella had finished speaking, tilting her head in thought. “You must trust yourself, Isabella, in making this decision. Only you can decide what is best for you. But from what you’ve told me, Mr. Baxter wishes to give you this money to set you up for the future. You would not be taking advantage of him but allowing him to take care of you, which it seems he would very much like to do.”

“Whether or not it is true will not stop people from saying it.” She hated the idea that after his generosity to her, people would talk only of their marriage and how she’d taken money his brother should have had.

“People will always talk. You cannot stop them, and what matters is that we know your heart. There is nothing else you can do.” Though Bess’s tone was gentle, the hint of a scold ran through it.

“You’re an exceptional mother, you know,” Isabella said instead of responding to Bess’s admonition.

Bess only raised an eyebrow and then gave a sigh. “There are marriages begun on far less, Isabella. You could count yourself lucky if it’s what you want.”

Just talking with Bess, and the fact that she *had* mothered Isabella in such a tender way, eased her heart more than anything else had. “Thank you.” She stood and hugged her cousin. “Now, Aunt Cassandra is likely spoiling Tommy much more than you can imagine. You had better hurry.” She winked, and Bess gave a laugh before leaving Isabella to her thoughts.

Accepting Preston’s offer would mean that both Bess and Aunt Cassandra would soon have all the time they wanted with the children. Isabella could become a boon to her family. And with him having little other family left, she might be able to be of some comfort to Preston. Their new relationship would allow her to care for him in his last days. There seemed

to be few downsides to his proposal.

She clutched the handkerchief tighter and nodded firmly to herself. As Bess had said, many marriages began far less agreeably.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRINCE STARED AT MAX DARLINGTON, one eyebrow raised. Surely he'd misheard the man in all the noise of the Hoffmans' spacious drawing room. He'd certainly struggled to hide his skepticism of the gossip filtering through the guests attending the Hoffmans' musicale. "I think if my brother were getting married, he might have told me." He had a vast fortune that any number of women had been seeking for years, but he'd turned a blind eye to their advances since his fiancée had died years ago. It was one of the few things Preston and Ellen Baxter could agree on—that they wouldn't love again. "Who is he supposed to be engaged to?" Prince asked, suspecting the information would prove to be just what he thought it was—a rumor.

"Isabella De Vries," Darlington said with an air of authority. "My wife heard it from Cassandra De Vries herself." He settled a look on Prince that dared him to challenge that. "The man has enough money to buy whatever bride he wishes. It's no wonder he's chosen a girl half his age and with a figure like that." His leering gaze traveled across the room to where Miss De Vries stood with her family and Preston. Darlington's lewd expression said everything he meant about Miss De Vries's figure.

Prince stiffened at the crude words. He found it unlikely the rumor was true, given that the De Vries family were very good friends of Preston's. They had seen each other quite a lot recently, but that was thanks to Preston's illness. He'd spent a quiet Christmas and New Years with the De Vries family, as he was still recovering from his recent surgery, and they were likely among the few in Society who knew of his cancer. It was no surprise that the gossip had started spreading, given that most did not know the truth.

"Perhaps your wife misunderstood," Prince said carefully. "My brother may be rich, but he's the most morally strict man I know." Though Prince had to stall his pursuit of Miss Darlington, he did mean to stay on the best terms with her father so he might resume it after Preston died. Even so, he made sure his tone held warning for the slight against Preston.

Whatever his faults, he was not one to marry a young girl without true affection.

“You think my wife is lying?” Darlington snapped.

“Not at all.” Prince shook his head. “Only that perhaps she misheard Mrs. De Vries.” He let his tone slip into conciliatory. He suspected Darlington’s defensiveness might have come because of embarrassment. Either that or the red in his cheeks was due to anger. Prince hoped it was the former. He put an arm around Darlington’s shoulders. “I can’t think of any reason my brother would choose now to marry”—especially given the fact that he was dying—“but let’s go ask the man himself.” He nudged Darlington in Preston’s direction.

Darlington resisted for a moment, staring at Prince frankly before saying, “Are the rumors that he’s disinherited you just as ridiculous?”

This time Prince did let loose a laugh, even if his insides had frozen. “Of course.” He just had to curb his spending for a few months and drudge away at that office, reviewing orders for merchandise.

Darlington nodded and allowed Prince to guide him to the other side of the room. Until now, Prince had purposefully kept his distance from his brother. Darlington and others took pleasure in noting the chilly nature of his and Preston’s relationship and gossiping about its cause. The last thing Prince needed was for Darlington to put too much stock in those rumors. This nonsense about Preston being engaged was a case in point.

Prince kept his smile firmly in place when, upon coming closer, he found the beautiful Miss De Vries with her arm through Preston’s and his brother standing close enough for Prince to understand why Darlington believed his wife. It didn’t mean that the ludicrous rumor was true, though it might mean that Prince had better be on his guard. Rumors did generally start because of some truth. Preston’s butler, Williams, had told Prince that Miss De Vries had called every day after Preston had undergone his surgery.

Prince hadn’t met her. He’d found reasons to stay with

friends for a day or two at a time and attend every dinner invitation that came his way, not to mention the musicale evenings or anything Society might think of. Perhaps Preston had needed him close by, but Prince couldn't stomach the sickroom. Too much disappointment, in his experience.

"Good evening, Preston," Prince said when he and Darlington joined the group. He looked expectantly at his brother and gave a glance in the young woman's direction. She was quite beautiful. She had golden-colored hair fixed into some complicated twists and knots on top of her head and curls framing her face. Her wide blue eyes studied him with an innocence that was lacking in Miss Darlington's expression. Miss De Vries's small pink lips spread into a slight, kind smile at his glance.

"Good evening, Prince," Preston said, his tone sounding weary. "Miss De Vries, my brother, Prince Baxter."

She bowed her head. "How do you do, Mr. Baxter?" She had a sweet voice, but it was confident. Miss Darlington too often ended her sentences with an inflection, as though she were unsure Prince would agree and would take it back if he didn't.

"I've heard you were a frequent visitor to Preston these last few weeks." He raised a brow and hazarded a quick look at his brother, who pursed his lips.

Miss De Vries's cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. "Yes, I was. Mr. Baxter was a very good friend of my father's."

Prince relaxed and gave Darlington's elbow a nudge. "Almost like a father to Preston, isn't that right?" Surely Darlington didn't believe Preston would marry the much younger daughter of his beloved mentor.

"Yes, that's right," she said.

Prince turned to Preston, who's jaw was clenched, but whether that was because of Prince's bold question or the pain that seemed to nag him, Prince couldn't tell. "You wouldn't believe the rumors Darlington has been telling me about you and Miss De Vries, Preston."

Preston's eyes flashed. So, yes, his hard jaw was because of his irritation with Prince. He lowered his voice. "That is something we can discuss later."

Prince blinked. From the corner of his eye, he saw the color in Miss De Vries's cheeks deepen. "It's true?" He'd dropped his voice, though more out of shock than out of any respect for Preston or his, apparently, bride-to-be. "You're engaged?"

"Won't you excuse me?" Darlington said to the company around him, though Miss De Vries, her aunt and uncle, and Preston cast him only glances before he slipped away.

Preston took a deep breath. "Miss De Vries has honored me by accepting my proposal, though we had intended to wait some time before announcing it." Miss De Vries, for her part, stared hard at the floor in front of her. Prince couldn't say what her aunt and uncle thought of the conversation since, after a quick glance in her direction, he did not take his eyes from his brother.

"Surely, you're joking," Prince said. "She must be a decade younger than you."

"Enough," Preston snapped, his voice low but threatening. He released Miss De Vries's arm and moved a step closer to Prince. "Please do not insult Miss De Vries. We can discuss this later in a less public place." He cast his eyes around, and only then did Prince take note that conversations near them had all but died.

Prince drew in a long breath. He gave Preston a sharp nod, an even sharper one to Miss De Vries and her family, and stalked away. Frustration burned in his stomach, mingling with unexpected shame. Of course this had been the wrong place to express his disbelief in the engagement. Already he regretted the embarrassment it had caused Miss De Vries and his brother, but he faulted Preston for not telling him, for being considered someone worth only a general announcement, rather than a family member worthy of receiving good tidings.

He slowed his steps across the drawing room, willing his anger to fade. He would strive to minimize the damage from his outburst, prove to Preston that he was not the careless child

Preston thought him to be, and prove to anyone else that the episode was a misunderstanding. He plastered on a smile and prepared to make a joke of it to Max Darlington.

* * *

Preston accompanied Isabella and her aunt and uncle home from the Hoffmans' musicale. Aunt Cassandra and Uncle Benjamin carried most of the conversation. Preston made a better show of trying to join in, though Isabella knew he was stewing as much as she was over the incident in the Hoffmans' drawing room.

When they arrived home, her aunt and uncle walked ahead into the house, leaving Preston to walk slowly in with Isabella. "I'm sorry about my brother."

Prince Baxter had been scarce the past few weeks. The fact that Isabella had spent so much time at Preston's home and had not encountered the younger brother spoke to the subject. Preston had admitted he thought the obvious signs of his sickness had reminded Prince of his mother's death. But how could Preston not inform his own brother that he intended to get married?

"It's fine," she finally said.

Preston patted her hand where it was looped around his elbow. "Our marriage may be an unusual union, but I know enough to realize that when a woman declares something is fine in the same tone you just used, things are certainly not fine."

A light laugh escaped Isabella. "I'm only embarrassed."

They entered the house, and Preston paused in the foyer and turned to her. He sighed. "For you that is no light thing. Please put my brother's behavior out of your mind. It was no fault of your own, and you cannot dwell on what others thought."

"I'll try," she promised. Whispers must already be circulating about how she was turning the brothers against one another. A wedge in an already precarious relationship.

Preston's worn expression said he didn't believe her, but he didn't press her. "Good night." He kissed her hand and took

his leave.

Hours later, Isabella couldn't sleep. For many nights after Preston's surgery, she would lie awake worrying, trying to convince herself that though he had looked so very ill when she'd seen him that day—his face so pale, his words weak—he *was* recovering.

And he'd recovered. In the face of how she would benefit from his proposal, her company seemed like a sad repayment. But being able to attend the musicale together tonight had lifted her spirits anyway. It meant more time with him. It was also one of many events Preston intended to escort her to so that his interest in her could be witnessed. Prince Baxter had made certain it was witnessed this evening.

Heat climbed up Isabella's cheeks again, and she let out a huff. She tried to believe Preston that the scene was Mr. Baxter's fault. *He* had incited the whispers that had circled the rest of their time in the drawing room. She'd stood by calmly while he'd expressed his surprise loudly and in front of everyone. If she could only convince herself, perhaps she would not feel so heavy with embarrassment.

Mr. Baxter could have temporarily set aside Preston's failure to tell him and shaken her hand; he could have wished them happiness even if he didn't feel it. He could have been friendly. She'd watched him from the corner of her eye half the evening. He'd flirted and smiled with every other young lady.

She pressed a hand over her forehead and closed her eyes, groaning. How foolish she was. When Prince Baxter had entered Mrs. Hoffman's drawing room before the musicale, her silly heart had given a thump. He'd looked like a stronger version of Preston, the man Isabella was already starting to miss. The brothers' smiles were mirrors of each other, though Mr. Baxter's lacked the genuine mirth of Preston's. She thought back to her younger years, when Preston was succeeding quickly despite his young age. She would sneak downstairs after dinner and listen to the way he laughed with her father, until one of them would catch her. Preston would always beckon her to come inside the library with them and sit

next to him. She'd been so sure she and his brother would be friends, as she had been with Preston.

Had she made a mistake in accepting Preston? She'd done so out of love for him, to help him, and to bring her family the ease his money would provide. But Mr. Baxter's reaction to the news had solidified her fears of marrying Preston, proving others would see the situation as Mr. Baxter did: a much younger woman spending the last days of a dying man with him for his millions.

She sat up and reached for the *Engineering Magazine* on her bedside. There was an article on steam engineering that she always enjoyed reading. She must distract her mind until she was too exhausted to keep her eyes open. Then perhaps she could chase these anxious thoughts away and get some rest.

* * *

Prince didn't meet with Preston until they had both returned home from the musicale that night. Preston had taken the De Vries family home in his carriage.

"How dare you behave so rudely to Miss De Vries," Preston said, his voice low with anger as he marched into the library when he'd returned home.

Prince set aside the letters he'd been perusing—proposals from Davies for philanthropic endeavors Prince could engage himself in. "I was in a state of shock," he retorted, his own voice rising. "She can't be more than twenty. I didn't think the rumors could possibly be true." But, though he may blame his anger on her age—and perhaps Darlington's lewd words had pricked Prince's temper—Prince was smarting at the lack of respect Preston had shown him by keeping this from him.

Preston glared at him from behind the desk. "Even so, you should not have laughed at her to her face over it." He blew out a breath, cringed, and then turned away. "Good heavens, Prince, spoiled as you are, I did not believe you this ill-mannered."

"I'm not a child," he bit out. He ignored Preston's short, dry laugh. "And had you been kind enough to share your plans

with me, we might have avoided the situation.”

Preston’s shoulders sagged as he turned away. “Our courtship has occurred in a rather unorthodox manner.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Though I did propose, I intended to spend time courting her before we announced it.”

It was then that Prince realized why Preston, with only months left to live, might suddenly find interest in marrying. “You never intended to give me a chance to keep the inheritance, did you?”

Preston pulled in a deep breath and steadied himself on a nearby chair. Prince had to close his eyes against how heavily his brother leaned on it. He wouldn’t soften to sympathy.

“I’ve long intended to leave Isabella part of my fortune. It was her father’s generosity that allowed me to succeed when I could have so easily failed. Even as my wife, Isabella will only inherit *all* my money if you do not meet my requests to learn economy.”

“And if she produces an heir?” Prince shot back. He was not in the mood to be conciliatory. He regretted the scene he had caused, yes. But in the hours between confrontations, Prince had only grown angrier over Preston scolding him like a child.

Preston’s jaw twitched and his eyes narrowed, his expression almost reminiscent of the aversion Prince had felt when Darlington had leered at Miss De Vries, but then Preston turned away. “All the more reason for you to prove you mean what you’ve promised me,” he murmured.

Prince barked with laughter. “How is that? No one will expect you to leave your fortune to your brother when you have a wife and child. It’s an excuse for you to cut me off completely.”

Preston’s demeanor remained stiff, and he looked down at the desk as though matters of great importance rested there. “I give you leave to consult my lawyer if you wish, but half of my fortune is set aside for you if you meet my conditions, even if I have an heir . . .” His voice trailed off. “Excuse me. I believe I may have pushed myself further than I should have.”

He moved slowly past Prince and back toward the library door. He paused there, saying over his shoulder, “I think you owe Miss De Vries an apology,” before he shuffled out.

Of course he did. Prince did not need reminders of basic manners.

He would certainly be consulting Preston’s attorney to confirm what he’d said. He wouldn’t put it past his brother to believe that his word alone would keep Prince in line. Prince dropped into the chair by the fire, scowling at the flames.

The letter he’d been reading before crinkled underneath him, and he pulled it out, throwing it onto the table. He couldn’t afford to lose his inheritance. He didn’t intend to work. Business had never held any interest for him. The hours he spent at Preston’s office sucked the life from him.

But he also had no desire to pinch and “economize,” as Preston was so fond of saying, the way his mother had been forced to. Keeping up in New York Society required vast sums of money. Parties, dinners, social events. Trips back to Europe. The most fashionable clothes for his future wife—Miss Darlington would certainly insist—and summers in Newport.

His mother’s face swam before him, wearing the strained, forced smile she’d adopted whenever she had to speak with the housekeeper about sorting out the household bills. Prince had no doubt the years of “economizing” had weakened his mother. Preston could have easily spared the money to finance his mother’s extravagances. Instead she’d died with nothing. Yes, Preston was morally strict—to a fault. And he insisted everyone live up to his high standard or suffer.

Prince narrowed his eyes at the letter on the table. If Isabella De Vries was going to stand in the way of his rightful inheritance, he would do far more than apologize. He would befriend her. Surely she would speak for him to his brother and convince Preston not to cut him out of his inheritance. He had best keep this enemy close. A smile spread over his face.

He would keep her very close indeed.

CHAPTER FIVE

ISABELLA STOOD WITH HER HANDS on her hips as Margie poured water into the tank of Isabella's latest contraption. "We must bank the fire a bit," she said, coming forward toward the fireplace, ready to take a few logs from the small stack Margie had brought up.

"Better let me do that, miss," Margie said, setting down the pitcher of water and turning to the logs. "Don't want Mrs. De Vries scolding me about soot on your dress."

Scowling, Isabella stepped back, twisting her fingers together. She wished she could have had more hands-on experience with her water heater, but though her uncle was lenient in the eccentricity he and her aunt allowed, he didn't go so far as to allow her to learn blacksmithing, deeply as she'd wanted to build the components herself.

Margie added a few more logs, then had to step back as the heat intensified. "It's such a marvel, miss. The girls upstairs can't stop talking about hot baths, as though they've never had one in their lives."

Isabella's scowl turned to a smile. Aunt Cassandra would much rather that Isabella's charity work turn to things more conventional than building a water heater for her maid and the bigger things she hoped to accomplish one day. This water heater was only a copy of someone else's hard work, not an original notion. None of her devices ever were. In reality, with a little cajoling, her uncle might have purchased a water heater for the bathing room the maids used. It was only to satisfy Isabella's curiosity and make her feel useful to someone that she'd built it herself.

She heard a gurgling in the iron pipe her uncle's blacksmith had fashioned for her. Once it was put together with the copper coil the blacksmith had also made based on the design she'd given him, she'd fitted it inside her fireplace, along with the tank that would feed the contraption water.

"Miss, how's the water going to get from that pipe to the tub?" Margie nodded to the tub she'd brought upstairs from

the kitchen for this experiment.

Isabella gestured to a pipe coming midway from the tube and pointed down into the tub. “The heated water will rise up and pour into it there,” she said. Margie squinted and Isabella gave a shrug. She wasn’t quite sure how to explain thermosiphoning in a way Margie would understand. Aunt Cassandra had blinked in confusion when Isabella had tried to explain her plans when asking for permission to order parts from the blacksmith.

Isabella and Margie were both distracted from the explanation by the sound of water trickling into the metal tub. Margie gasped with excitement and hurried over, Isabella on her heels.

Margie dipped her fingers gingerly into the water, pulling them back with a nod. “Amazing, miss,” she declared.

“Oh my goodness, what’s going on in here?”

Isabella and Margie turned toward Aunt Cassandra’s voice, where Aunt stood in the doorway. “My heavens, Isabella, you’ve got soot all over your hands.” She sighed, then jumped when a hiss echoed from the water heater and more water trickled into the tub.

“Forgive me, Aunt.” Isabella hid a smile as she rubbed at her hands with the apron she’d put on to protect her dress. Though it was her oldest and most worn dress, Isabella didn’t want to ruin it. “What is it?”

“Mr. Prince Baxter is here to see you. Hurry. Get cleaned up.” Aunt Cassandra gave a huff as she backed away toward the door.

Isabella bit her lip. “Just him, Aunt? Not Preston as well?” She couldn’t think of any reason the younger brother would be here to see her. He’d shown how he felt about Preston marrying her.

“Yes,” Aunt Cassandra said, inching her way from the room while she kept an eye on the water heater. “And after the way he treated you at the Hoffmans’, I wouldn’t blame you for not seeing him, but I think you had better take the high road.” She

gave another jump as the water trickled into the tub once more, and she retreated to the door. “And you ought to turn that off. I don’t want it exploding and burning down the house while you’re seeing to guests.”

“Yes, Aunt. I’ll be down as soon as I can.” Isabella just refrained from giggling as her aunt hurried from the room, then took two thick towels from a nearby chair and motioned for Margie to do the same. Mustering all their strength, they carefully lifted the contraption as high as they could to remove it from the fire. Carrying it all the way upstairs would require the footmen to do the heavy lifting. “Have Grant and Watson carry this upstairs right away,” Isabella said.

“Yes, miss.” Margie bobbed enthusiastically, and Isabella grinned at her giddy expression. It really was nothing, but Margie’s excitement warmed her anyway. Isabella hurried into her own modern bathroom to wash her hands and face.

Fifteen minutes later, she entered the drawing room. Mr. Baxter, who was pacing near the window, turned upon her entrance, and cast her a bright, beaming smile. It was such a contrast from the smirk he’d worn the night before and then the stormy expression that had overtaken it after meeting Isabella. She couldn’t help but return the smile.

“Miss De Vries.” Mr. Baxter bowed to her.

Isabella put out her hand, surprised by the change in his manner toward her. As she knew Preston wished for a closer relationship between himself and his younger brother, she was determined to be kind to him. “Mr. Baxter, you’re to be my brother. No bowing.”

His expression lightened even more as he straightened and took her hand. “Yes, of course, *sister*.” His tone was all warm and welcoming now, with none of the outrage from before. “I’ve come to apologize. My manners at the Hoffmans’ were deplorable. Please forgive me.”

Isabella drew away her hand, which he’d held much too long, and nodded to him. “Of course,” she said. “That’s quite understandable. I was also surprised to learn that Preston had not spoken to you.”

She stepped back and settled into a chair, motioning for Mr. Baxter to do the same. He obliged, sitting in the chair next to her and perching on the edge so far that there were only a few inches of space between his knees and hers.

He seemed as eager as she was to see the incident brushed away, though probably for different reasons. Isabella wanted to avoid gossip about what he thought of her marriage to Preston. She couldn't speak for Mr. Baxter, but he was treating her as though they would soon be very good friends, and that eased her mind.

She pushed away thoughts of how handsome he was. There was no denying that. He was a younger version of Preston, but up close she saw more of the differences now—mischievous dancing in his green eyes and wide, full lips that must have come from his mother.

Goodness, she'd been staring at him. She stopped that instantly. She was engaged. To his brother. However platonic that relationship was to be, it wouldn't do to ogle his younger brother. It would be unpardonable. And if she thought people were talking now, it would be nothing to the gossip if even a little hint got out that she might fancy Preston's brother.

"Preston has probably told you how strained our relationship has been since I returned to New York." Mr. Baxter cast her a chagrined look. "And with his illness now . . . I haven't been as attentive as I should be."

Sympathy swelled in her chest. Preston had told her a great deal about Mr. Baxter's life and how much he'd lost.

"Grief often makes us behave in odd ways," she said, understanding that Preston's weak state due to the cancer would bother Prince when he had watched his mother die only the year before. "After my father died, I used to sit outside the drawing room and listen to my aunt and uncle talk in the evenings." She swallowed, embarrassed for sharing such a personal detail. "I didn't want to be alone." Mr. Baxter's eyes widened, and he tilted his head at her. She let out a breathy laugh. They didn't know each other well, not well enough for her to tell him silly stories about her childhood. "Forgive me,"

she murmured, blushing and wondering if she'd misinterpreted his friendliness. Perhaps he'd come only to be polite and not to establish a friendship between them.

"Were you young?" he asked gently in a voice huskier than the bright tones he'd used before.

She blinked, surprised by the change. "I was twelve. I was very young when my mother died. Only five."

He cleared his throat. "I hardly remember my father. Perhaps we have that in common." This statement was accompanied by another smile and his tone returning to normal as he nodded. "And you've known Preston all your life."

"Yes, I'm very fond of him." That had never been a lie, and she'd repeated it often, hoping people would understand that she wished to marry Preston. He would need companionship and help in his last days, and she could provide that for him. She squeezed her hands in her lap. If only she could make people understand that.

Mr. Baxter stood suddenly. "I'm tasked with extending an invitation to you and your family." He turned his gaze to the rug beneath them, creases forming across his forehead. "Preston would like to spend some time at Davenleigh, and he hopes you and your aunt and uncle will join him." He pressed his lips together when he looked up. What did he think might escape them?

Isabella had been expecting an invitation to Preston's Hudson River Valley home. He'd been speaking of his beloved country home more often recently. He wanted to regain more of his strength sooner, and he hoped time resting at Davenleigh would hasten his recovery for the grand wedding he wanted to give her. "*For appearances,*" he'd said firmly to her. "*It won't do to spend time courting you and marry you quickly. There will be rumors, and Prince will pounce on them once I'm gone.*" For once, on this topic, Preston had not chided her for heeding the gossip of others too much.

"Miss De Vries?"

Isabella reddened. Perhaps Mr. Baxter would think she had nothing but air in her brain and couldn't carry a proper conversation without letting her thoughts run away. "Yes, of course. Tell him thank you for asking."

He squinted at her in concern. "Miss De Vries, I am—" He cut himself off with a cough and shook his head. "I'll leave you in peace now." The huskiness to his voice from before touched his words ever so slightly. There was more to his words than what he said, though Isabella couldn't guess what. He was smiling again, stretching out his hand when she stood. "Friends?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied automatically.

He kept her hand in his before he brought it to his lips and kissed it, surprising her. "Good day."

"Good day, Mr. Baxter."

He nodded and strode from the room. Isabella looked down at her hand, then glanced around, unsure what to do next. That simple kiss had left her thoughts frozen, and it took several seconds to shake them loose. She'd had the attention of handsome men a time or two before and hadn't acted like a ninny then.

"Miss De Vries?" Margie's voice turned Isabella's attention to the door. "The boys have the heater upstairs. Katy and Eve wondered if you have a moment to come and explain how it works."

"Of course. I would love to." Isabella hoped her addled brain wasn't obvious to Margie. She'd better get her wits gathered, or the maids wouldn't believe she had been capable of constructing the water heater properly. She followed Margie back up the stairs, turning her brain resolutely away from Prince Baxter's suddenly friendly behavior.

CHAPTER SIX

PRINCE WASN'T SURE WHAT TO make of the conversation around him during the Darlington's dinner party. On the one hand, at least they had stopped discussing his brother and Miss De Vries. The guests had peppered Prince with questions all evening.

"Of course it's the money," someone had said, making Prince cringe and defend Miss De Vries. It wasn't the money—not for her.

The conversation, thankfully, turned. However, the current discussion of horrible living situations in the overcrowded areas of the city depressed Prince. He'd hoped to escape the pallor that Preston's sickness had left over his household and relax at a lighthearted dinner party. As he leaned back in his chair, he let his thoughts roam over the elaborate display of the room, from the exquisitely embroidered damask tablecloth with the crimson velvet runner to the china that had been polished to such a sheen that it sparkled. The wainscotting, frieze, and doorways all featured delicately carved ornamentation. The crystal chandeliers and the pastoral scenes painted on the walls all spoke loudly of the Darlington's wealth.

He couldn't help but contrast it with the simplicity of the De Vrieses' drawing room. The furniture there had been older, nothing like the ostentatious pieces here. But there had been a timeless quality to them. Despite that, he'd tried to remember that Preston intended to make Miss De Vries a wealthy woman capable of decorating a room with all the splendor of the dining room he now sat in. But instead he'd been enchanted by the art in the De Vrieses' drawing room, suspecting the pieces were chosen because the family liked them, not simply for the price. The paintings were not as numerous as he'd seen in other drawing rooms either. It had made the room inviting. It had reminded him of the small landscape painting his mother had insisted on bringing to Paris. It was by an unknown artist but had been given to her by his father. She wouldn't part with it. It hung in Prince's room now, though he often couldn't bear to look at it.

“The entire city block was one giant tenement building,” a young man to Miss Darlington’s right was saying, drawing Prince from his thoughts. “The inner flats had no windows, no ventilation.”

“That is to say nothing of playgrounds or hospitals,” Miss Darlington added. There was no rise to her voice when she said it though. Prince sat up and dared a glance at her. Considering the sweet smile gracing her lips, one would have thought she’d commented on an invitation to an upcoming ball. She took a sip of her coffee.

“I don’t know when you have time to think about anything like that, Rosalind.” A young lady across from her gave a breathy laugh. “Between all the letters I must write and all the visiting, I don’t have a moment to spare on it.” She and Miss Darlington shared a look, and Prince thought Miss Darlington might have tipped her gaze to the ceiling before quickly darting her gaze back to her coffee.

There was some soft laughter at the other woman’s statement, and Prince joined in—and then earned a glare from Miss Darlington. At least, he believed it to be a glare. Indifference soon covered her expression, whatever it had been. “Well, someone must care,” she said with a shrug and a slow blink of boredom. It left Prince confused about her personality.

“You’ll have time to think about all of that once you’re married.” Mrs. Darlington smiled at her daughter, but a flick of her eyebrows upward told Prince the statement was pointed.

“Of course.” Miss Darlington’s tone was still indifferent, and he grimaced at the return of the questioning rise in her tone, but she turned to him with her shoulders straighter. He studied her expression, looking beyond the eager facade of a socialite.

“Hospitals?” he asked in a low voice. Her comment had hinted at her interest in something other than all the letters and visiting the other woman had mentioned, though Miss Darlington, for some reason, seemed reluctant to admit to it. At her mother’s advice, perhaps?

Miss Darlington shrugged. “I’m sure there are any number of causes to become involved in. There’s a club for everything.”

“And they’re all dull.” The young woman with the breathy laugh showed it off again, a contrast to the sharpness in her tone that said all wasn’t as it seemed with her. She and Miss Darlington might be a more intriguing pair than Prince had originally thought. The young woman turned to him. “I simply must know more about Mr. Baxter’s soon-to-be sister-in-law. My mother says everyone was so sure your brother would never marry after his fiancée died all those years ago.”

“Count me among that number.” He nodded toward her since he couldn’t remember her name. He would have to fix that. He’d seen her in Miss Darlington’s company a fair number of times, and she’d spoken informally enough to Miss Darlington that he could conclude they were friends.

Another round of laughter followed his statement, and Prince’s shoulders relaxed. They didn’t seem to know about Preston’s illness yet. He didn’t want a second round of the pity and false friendship he’d experienced after his mother’s death. “I assure you Miss De Vries is genuinely attached to him,” he found himself saying. Worry at that being true was the only explanation for how his visit with her had unsettled him—especially considering the personal details of her grief she’d shared and her truly trying to befriend him, as if they really *would* be brother and sister. He clenched a hand underneath the table, irritated by the memories that conversation had brought back to him. He didn’t remember his father all that well. Had barely grieved for him those many years ago. But the quiver to Miss De Vries’s lips when she’d spoken of her own father had nearly made him divulge something of his mother. Especially given that his mother had lived her life with the same openness and easily given friendship. He couldn’t allow himself to begin to *like* Isabella De Vries. Not when he intended to make sure she didn’t steal his inheritance. His friendship with her would all be for show.

“Oh yes,” the young woman said, leaning in his direction from across the table. “Fond enough to convince him to leave

the whole of that fortune to her.” Prince caught admiration in her expression.

“Oh, stop that, Lily.” Miss Darlington waved at her friend. Blast, Prince couldn’t call her by her first name. “Mr. Baxter’s brother would never do such a thing.”

Prince forced a smile and reached for his own coffee to ease his dry mouth. “There is quite enough to go around.”

“They are very much a happy family,” Miss Darlington went on. “They are all going out to Davenleigh together.” She tilted her head at him, her expression making it clear that she expected an invitation at some point.

She would be waiting for some time. Prince had no intention of extending one, and Preston’s disapproval was the least of his reasons. Good heavens, if he brought her to Davenleigh, her mother would expect a proposal within a few weeks.

Mrs. Darlington turned toward Prince, her fingers fluttering against her throat as she sat up in surprise. “Are you going too, Mr. Baxter?”

“Yes,” he said, making sure regret showed in his reluctant smile. Mrs. Darlington was eager to marry her daughter off to the brother of the esteemed Preston Baxter, while Mr. Darlington didn’t mind the slower pace Prince was now forced to take. Prince’s pursuit of Miss Darlington must look like a friendship with the family for the time being. “Preston wishes me to come,” he added.

“I see.” Mrs. Darlington stared down into her coffee, stirring in her sugar and cream with precise movements, her eyes narrowed. “After his recent illness, I’m sure your brother needs some quiet time away from the noise of the city. I expect he could recuperate very well with Miss De Vries as company. He needn’t monopolize your time as well.”

“I’m my brother’s to command,” Prince replied, ignoring the thought that Preston had very little time left to monopolize at all.

The discussion turned another direction until Mrs. Darlington finished her coffee and rose from the table, the

other women following her example to leave for the drawing room. After lighting a cigar, Mr. Darlington came and took his daughter's vacated seat next to Prince. The other men in the room had gathered in groups around the table, but most were at the other end, leaving Prince and Darlington almost entirely alone in the large dining room.

"So," Darlington said, setting down his tumbler of brandy and a bottle next to the empty tumbler the footman had left for Prince. "Is your brother as fond of Miss De Vries as she is of him?"

"Of course." Prince ignored the alcohol. He didn't usually drink anything stronger than champagne in public. His mother had enjoyed doing so a little too often for Prince's comfort. "They have been dear friends for most of her life."

"I see," Darlington said, his eyes slightly narrowed.

He'd always thought Preston looked on her more as an older brother would than anything else, but he must have been mistaken. Prince clenched his fists as he recalled Darlington's crude insinuations. Prince often thought it snobbish how some of the old knickerbocker families like the Baxters looked down their noses at the extravagant lifestyles of those who had made their fortunes in business the way Max Darlington had, never mind that Preston's old money had been transformed into outrageous wealth through business as well. It was often jealousy that drove exclusion of families like the Darlings, rather than the fact that these nouveau riche really had no manners. But in Darlington's case, it was true. The way he'd spoken of Miss De Vries was evidence of that. He lacked the social finesse of older families like the Baxters and the De Vries family.

"My wife seems to suspect your motives toward my daughter by skipping out on half the Season to go to Davenleigh." Darlington took another puff on his cigar.

Prince shifted his weight and forced himself to keep a ready, convincing smile on his face. He couldn't say anything that would commit himself to Miss Darlington and risk his words getting back to Preston, but neither did he want to jeopardize

the future. “You know as well as anyone what Preston can be like. He has asked that I come, so I will go.”

Then why not ask us along? The question hung in the air while Darlington sat back and studied him.

Prince stood, ready to escape the man’s unnecessary questioning. He put his hand on the back of Darlington’s chair, leaning closer. “Preston is still quite ill,” he said in a low voice before straightening. “Hardly entertaining for anyone.” The last thing Miss Darlington would want would be to spend several weeks in the middle of the Season as the guest of a dying man. “I think I’ll join the ladies.” He deserted the dining room, a few of the younger gentlemen who were speaking of the terrible housing conditions following him.

“You say you toured rotting buildings?” Prince asked Mr. Fields.

He nodded. “Some people are making a ruckus about how terrible the conditions are, hardly fit for people to live in. My mother spends a great deal of time raising money to do something about it.”

An idea wormed its way into Prince’s brain. So far, he and Davies hadn’t hit on any specific thing to prove that Prince would spend Preston’s money in worthwhile ways. Perhaps this was the answer. “And is there something to be done?”

“Build hospitals and playgrounds,” Mr. Fields’s companion, Mr. Roberts, said with a smirk. “Though, I don’t think you’d need to go that far to impress Miss Darlington.”

No, but it might impress Preston. Even if Prince spent a great deal of Preston’s money on a project like this, his brother couldn’t disapprove. According to those at the dinner party, the tenement buildings were in desperate need of fixing. At dinner, the party had spoken of overcrowding, poor ventilation, and a serious lack of modern facilities, among a number of other problems.

The men reached the drawing room, and Prince entered through yet another carved and oversized gilded doorway. As in the dining room, the family money was displayed in spades

here. The brocaded walls were embroidered with elegant garden scenery half hidden by expensive paintings. It was funny, really, how desperately New York Society sought to copy the nobility of Europe, the exclusivity of their social circles, and their manners and even went as far as marrying their daughters off to dukes and earls, despite the noblemen's crumbling estates and dwindling fortunes. Yet the tastes of these ridiculously wealthy businessmen and their wives were so American—flashy, opulent, bragging about the wealth their European counterparts often lacked.

Across the room, Miss Darlington sat on a sofa, its wooden frame etched with floral scenes and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The seat beside her was empty. Prince made his way toward it. "May I take this seat?"

"Of course. I saved it for you." She tilted her head at him, a position she likely knew showed off her long porcelain neck and slender face. Her wide hazel eyes appeared blank, but Prince had glimpsed something more during dinner. "Would you like coffee?" She was already waving over a footman.

"Yes, thank you."

Miss Darlington poured him a cup from the service that was brought to her and handed it to him. "Well," he said after taking the first sip, "when did you get a notion to build hospitals and playgrounds for the poor?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, then blinked, clearing the expression away. "Hospitals? Well, a young lady must be interested, you know, or they'll say she's heartless. But, as Lily said, when have I time to build hospitals? You would be surprised to learn how long it takes me to prepare for a ball."

"I had thought no time at all." He grinned.

"Oh, Mr. Baxter." She giggled and shook her head at him. That giggle sounded a little . . . off, now that he was really paying attention to her. In the chair across from them, Miss Lily, whose last name Prince hadn't identified, hid a smile behind her cup.

"Do you plan to be at Davenleigh for a long time, Mr.

Baxter?” Miss Darlington asked, her full bottom lip slipping out into a slight pout.

“As long as my brother asks.” He gave a lighthearted shrug, grateful that Miss Darlington accepted his flippant remarks about his brother and didn’t endeavor to understand him and make him uncomfortable the way his conversation with Miss De Vries had. He would have to steel himself against Miss De Vries’s attempts to get to know him and befriend him and play them to his advantage instead.

Miss Darlington studied him, her finger tapping soundlessly against her cup, although the lighthearted air never left her expression. “And we won’t see you for however long he decides to hold you prisoner?”

“Miss Darlington, I don’t believe it will be so long that you will begin to pine for me.”

“And suppose another gentleman comes along and proposes?” She lifted her chin, and even with a half smile on her lips, there was something intimidating in her steady gaze.

“Then I shall have to challenge him to a duel.”

Miss Darlington relaxed, her smile turning more natural. “How gallant. Well, it *is* the duty of a lady to wait upon a gentleman and his leisure. I’ll attempt to do so with grace.”

Prince had always considered the cost of obtaining Miss Darlington’s dowry and eventually inheritance as easy. She enjoyed gaiety, like his mother, and never asked too much of him. Her conversation tended toward lighthearted matters when he was with her, and she paid little mind to him—something he assured himself would continue after their marriage.

But there was an edge to her statement about ladies waiting upon gentlemen that made him lean forward. “Do you find it a trial to wait upon the gentlemen of your acquaintance?” he asked.

“Never.” But she raised her eyebrows in a way that contradicted her statement. He’d misjudged her, it seemed. And that intrigued him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ISABELLA TRIED NOT TO THINK about how easy it was to push Preston around in the greenhouse behind the main house at Davenleigh. She'd made sure to oil the roller-skating wheels she'd attached to the legs of the lightest but most comfortable chair in his drawing room. The square back of the armchair made her grip easier, but much of the ease was owed to the fact that Preston had lost at least thirty pounds since his surgery.

He lifted one of his feet from the footboard one of the stablehands had made for her to attach to keep his feet from dragging on the floor. "You're quite clever, Bella."

She gave a short laugh. "I've likely ruined one of the nicest chairs in your drawing room."

"I'd much rather spend an hour or two rolling about in here than sitting in this chair inside. You can buy another later if you'd like." He waved. From the corner of her eye, Isabella saw Nurse Higgins, the nurse Preston had engaged to look after him, lift her head from the flowers she was studying nearby. Perhaps she'd thought his gesture a summons. A moment later she went back to her perusal. Isabella hoped the nurse was enjoying the walk through the greenhouse with them. Preston wasn't the only one who needed to get outside and see more than the dismal late-January grayness that was visible from his bedroom window.

"You're blinded by love," Isabella teased. "It really isn't clever. We could have purchased a wheeled chair for you just as easily."

He reached up to take her hand. "We could have, and it would have been a convenience, but this is much more comfortable and full of the thoughtfulness I've come to expect from you. I'm sure the maids at your uncle's home are enjoying their heated baths just as much as I am enjoying this." He smiled proudly. "You care for people, and that is important to me."

Yes, her little inventions made her friends and family happy,

but there was more she could do beyond copying the ingenuity of others for her family's convenience.

Before she could respond, he pointed to a small pond and the plants around it. "Closer here, if you don't mind. A moth orchid," he said, reaching to caress a pale-pink flower. "Quite exotic. Come look at this, Nurse Higgins," he called. "You won't see one of these just anywhere."

Isabella smiled to herself over his enthusiasm as she, too, admired the flower, leaning over to take in the scent and listening to him tell Nurse Higgins about the flower's acquisition.

Preston's discussion about the orchid was interrupted by a short cough. Isabella stood and moved back behind the chair, frowning at the top of his head. She worried about him, and she wanted to be able to do what she could to ease his final days. That would be much easier as his wife, but when they had set the date for their wedding, February 18, he'd insisted they would need the time to plan—and for him to recover after his surgery. And he'd kept insisting, in the ensuing weeks, that they would not change it. There was enough gossip already, thanks to their age difference, without adding to it with a hasty wedding, especially given that speculation about Preston's illness was also now rampant. Isabella did not disagree with Preston in this analysis, but there was no mistaking that he had worsened in the last few weeks. Was he in denial about that?

She pushed him onward, Nurse Higgins trailing behind to allow them some privacy. But Isabella couldn't stop herself from pressing him again on the wedding date. "I think we ought to move the date up and be married here, at Davenleigh. A simple affair."

Again he waved dismissively. "The doctor assures me I have the time to keep the date we have already set. Do not be impatient. A month will fly by soon enough, and I wish you to have as lavish a wedding as you desire."

"*You* are the one who wants a lavish wedding, Preston. And for all your scolding about how much I worry about gossip, you worry quite a bit yourself."

He grunted. "I cannot risk Prince having any more evidence than he already does to insist you married me and convinced me to change the will for you before dying. Besides, weddings like these take planning, as your aunt will tell you. I would say that a young lady gets only one of these, but I suspect you will have one more." His tone lightened as he pronounced the last, the bitterness from when he spoke of his brother melting into a softer expression.

Still, she prickled. She always did when Preston spoke like this of his brother. The difficulty of their relationship unsettled her since it contrasted so sharply with the kindness of the man she'd known from her childhood.

"Oh, hush," she said as she pushed on, scowling. Preston had taken to joking about his health and their marriage, at least when no one else was listening. It sometimes brought a smile to Isabella's face and sometimes made her chest ache. Perhaps she would be independent when he was gone, but it wouldn't make her any less lonely. "If that is the kind of wedding you would like, that is the kind of wedding we will have."

"I'll do everything in my power to protect you." Preston leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath.

Isabella slowed her pace but looked away. With her chest aching from his jokes and her eyes stinging at the increasing hollowness of his cheeks, she could barely stand to look at him. She already missed the man who had always insisted she come to dinner with him and her father, no matter that she hadn't been properly old enough, and acted as though her conversation was the most enthralling he'd ever encountered.

"Here," he said, indicating she stop in front of some flowers Isabella didn't recognize. Preston leaned forward, his smile growing. He brushed his fingers over the silky white petals. "I remember telling your father he was going to financially ruin himself with the number of jasmine flowers he insisted on sending to your mother. I was a foolish young man who didn't understand why he would continue courting her even though they'd been married for so many years."

Isabella had to gulp back more emotion. After Preston died, would she be able to coax stories like these from her uncle? He'd been several years older than her father, and sometimes she felt as though her uncle hadn't known her father the way Preston had. Perhaps, in their evenings together here, she should encourage her uncle and Preston to talk about her parents to remind her uncle how much she enjoyed hearing the stories. "I suspect she adored it," she said.

Preston nodded. "Immensely. When Anna and I became engaged, your mother encouraged me to continue showing Anna my affection, even though I believed I had secured it." He reached into his pocket, producing a pair of clippers he'd brought along and snipping a flower off. He handed it to Isabella.

"Thank you," she said in a low voice, leaning over to kiss his dry cheek. He'd begun speaking of Anna more often, making Isabella wish she'd asked him more about Anna before. She hurried back to her position behind the chair as sadness swirled through her. She recognized that Preston could speak easily of Anna now because he looked forward to joining her soon.

"And what were her favorite flowers?" she asked.

Thankfully, a smile rested on Preston's lips as he gazed across the greenhouse. "Roses," he said softly. "Pink ones." His gaze took on an unfocused look, and though Isabella wanted to ask more, she knew Preston was lost in a happy memory.

They turned a corner to find Prince Baxter standing in front of a camellia bush, his hands behind his back and his head bowed. It snapped up a moment later, his gaze going to theirs. He blinked at Isabella. She'd caught intense sadness in his expression, so moving that the invisible bands around her heart wrenched a little tighter. Who knew a greenhouse could be so full of sorrow? Mr. Baxter turned away and stepped back, and when he met her gaze again, it was blank.

Until Preston said, "Those were your mother's favorites."

Mr. Baxter swallowed. He reached forward and fingered one

of the small pink flowers, avoiding looking up at Preston and Isabella. “You remember that?” He laughed lightly.

“Father always had them grown here.”

Mr. Baxter stepped away from the flowers and turned to face them fully. “And they grow here still.”

Preston shrugged. “They are beautiful, and like your mother, they bring joy into a room.”

“Hmm” was Mr. Baxter’s only answer, the men holding each other’s gazes as Mr. Baxter pursed his lips, his eyes narrowed in skepticism.

Isabella jumped into the silent argument. “Preston has told me she was also quick-witted.”

Another laugh escaped Mr. Baxter, this one sounding more genuine. “Yes, she was.”

Preston chuckled as well. “Rumors once reached me that the Marquis d’Allais had been paying a great deal of attention to her, and when I wrote to ask what d’Allais’s intentions were, she replied, ‘I haven’t the slightest idea, Preston. He has such a knack for keeping me in the dark.’”

Mr. Baxter’s shoulders shook, and Isabella couldn’t help a gasp that ended in her own laugh. “She sounds delightful.”

To her surprise, Preston and his brother responded in time, “She was.” Mr. Baxter, hands behind his back, reeled at his brother’s agreement.

“I’ve never said otherwise,” Preston said, to Mr. Baxter’s surprise. Preston turned back to the flowers. “In the next letter she wrote to me about the grief that lingered for Father, how, even after all those years, she couldn’t imagine herself married to another man or to even push Father’s memory away to spare herself the pain.” He turned to Isabella after this revelation, seeming to ignore the narrowed gaze of his brother. There was so much understanding in his expression that Isabella thought Preston knew exactly what Mrs. Baxter had meant, that perhaps they’d even commiserated together. “I think it’s time I returned to the house,” he said.

Isabella nodded. “Of course.”

“If Miss De Vries would like to continue her walk through the flowers, I would be happy to escort her,” Mr. Baxter said. His glare from a moment ago had disappeared.

Isabella began steering the chair carefully in the narrow walking space between the plants. “That is very kind of you, but I must see Preston back.”

Preston waved a thin hand. “Nurse Higgins can do that, Bella. I’m surprised she has left us so long on our own—ah, there she is.” The nurse must have heard his request to go back to the house. She hadn’t strayed far from them during the walk in case Preston needed something.

Nurse Higgins had clipped a small flower Isabella didn’t recognize, and it sat now in a buttonhole of her coat. Isabella couldn’t help a grin. The woman was so absorbed in her work, rarely speaking to anyone besides Preston and on occasion Isabella, to give or receive instructions—to see a bit of her personality in that flower warmed Isabella.

“Do you mind wheeling me back to the house, Nurse Higgins?” Preston asked when the nurse had fully approached.

Isabella protested. “Preston, I don’t mind—”

He shook his head, a look of imperiousness crossing his face that she’d rarely seen before the cancer began taking hold. “You’ve been in my sickroom enough. Nurse Higgins?”

“Of course, Mr. Baxter.” The nurse moved toward the back of the chair, waiting for Isabella to relinquish her spot.

“All right.” Isabella managed a smile, forcing herself not to react to Preston’s dismissal. His pain often affected his temper, and her recent reading about cancer persuaded her that his pain must be near constant. She stepped from behind the chair, moving to the side of it. “I’ll be in to read to you this afternoon.” She gave him her hand, which he took and squeezed. At least, he made an attempt to. Isabella barely felt the pressure.

Once Nurse Higgins had wheeled him away, the younger Mr. Baxter stepped forward. “Bella?” he questioned.

Her cheeks warmed at the question. “He used to call me that when I was a child. Then, when I was sixteen, he said he must stop because I was a grown woman. The habit has returned since his surgery.”

Mr. Baxter smiled, yet she caught the tightness around his eyes. “I find I’m rather jealous.”

Him, jealous of Preston? Over her? “Then, perhaps you had better call me Isabella instead of Miss De Vries. Since you are to be my brother.”

“Not Bella?”

“You had better not. People are talking quite enough.” Margie had already told Isabella how much the servants at Davenleigh had remarked on Preston’s engagement to such a young lady when he was so very ill. Her loyalty was all for Preston, and though she didn’t always agree with his actions in protecting her from Mr. Baxter’s possible maneuvering after Preston’s death, she would not undermine them by allowing Mr. Baxter to use such an intimate nickname.

“It hardly matters what people are saying,” he said. “Anyone who pays a second of attention to the two of you can see that you’re not marrying him for his money.”

“I’m not,” she said, but as she stared up at him and the kindness in his smile, her voice came out very softly. Relief danced through her that at least one person saw what she hoped was obvious. “He needs a companion.”

“You’re good for him.” Mr. Baxter’s forehead wrinkled with a kind of uncertainty as they ambled through the greenhouse. “I’ve seen him soften with you.” He forced a laugh and shrugged. She felt a kinship in that moment with Mr. Baxter—they were both trying to understand the many sides of Preston.

“Perhaps you can make sure you talk of that when people ask,” she said. “So they know the truth and won’t believe what others say about me and Preston.”

He turned his face to her. “Is it really so important?”

That people believed her and Preston to be genuinely in love? That was supremely important to Preston. And Isabella

longed to keep his good name intact as well as her aunt and uncle's. "Yes. I hate to think of people saying ugly things about our families."

He laughed and Isabella prickled. "I find that people will believe what they wish no matter what we say." He didn't allow her a moment to reply. "I see that you're a fine companion to him, and I'm glad. I'm not a very good one."

"That's not true." She scowled at his thinking so little of his relationship with his brother. Although, perhaps there was bit of truth to it. He did tend to disappear when Preston needed company.

"It doesn't help that I irritate him whenever we speak." Mr. Baxter gave a sigh, but Isabella caught the humor in it.

"You didn't just now."

He shrugged, mischief in the smile he tried to hide and the twinkle in his green eyes. "A rare occasion. Perhaps his condition is softening *me* as well. Even I didn't expect that."

"You and Preston are more alike than you think," she said, biting her bottom lip as she studied Mr. Baxter. "He, too, likes to make light of his illness and . . . what will follow."

Mr. Baxter stopped, turning to face her. "Does it bother you that we make jokes to lighten the heaviness of what will come?"

She paused, wondering if this was how he'd dealt with the grief of losing his mother as well. "Not when Preston does it, no—well, it does a bit because it reminds me and I don't like that—but you, I think, are hiding. Pretending you will not be affected."

It was several moments before he spoke again. When he turned to begin walking once more, he left more space between them than before. "You don't know me very well, Isabella. Perhaps I won't be. It is no secret that Preston and I aren't close."

"You're jesting," she said, shaking her head. "He is your last relative. I don't believe you won't be affected." Aunt Cassandra hadn't wanted to raise another child, not when hers

were nearly grown, and in all honesty, Isabella didn't consider herself close with her aunt either. But she would be extremely affected if Aunt Cassandra were dying.

"Perhaps it's time we returned to the house." The smile Mr. Baxter plastered on was so false Isabella thought she might be able to peel it off and see the real feelings he hid beneath it. "Your nose is turning red, and though I find it darling, I don't know if your fiancé will think so."

She nodded, heat likely turning the rest of her face as red as he claimed her nose was. Mr. Baxter did not speak to her again as they walked back through the greenhouse and along the wet path to the house. She could only think of how she'd offended him and was bungling every conversation she had with him. Before they parted in the entryway, she turned to him. "I'm sorry for speaking to you as I did. It was impertinent for me to presume to know your feelings when we're barely acquainted. Please forgive me." She twisted her fingers together in front of her skirt, uncomfortable from the wet bottom of her skirt swishing against her stockings. Or perhaps just uncomfortable with her behavior.

He waved her off with another ridiculous smile. "Please don't worry yourself about it. Preston has probably already warned you that, like my mother, I'm rarely bothered by anything."

Before she could respond, he'd bowed his head and hurried away. It left her more disconcerted than the day he'd kissed her hand.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PRINCE COULDN'T EXPLAIN HOW EVERY encounter with Isabella left him more unsettled than the last. He hadn't thought himself capable of making such a muck of charming a woman, and yet he couldn't count more than a few sentences in which he'd accomplished his task. It was unlikely she had a very favorable opinion of him.

She kept trying to understand him. That hadn't happened in any conversation he'd ever had with Miss Darlington.

Prince paced across the rug of his bedchamber. It was a plain room, with a large bed, two armchairs near the fireplace, and an upholstered wooden settee at the end of the bed. Unlike at the Darlingtons', the furniture here had plain wooden accents, polished to a shine but unornamented. At least, in his room.

Prince tried to push aside thoughts that Isabella had forced in. He didn't love his brother, not the way he'd loved his mother, and he wouldn't fall to pieces when Preston died. He'd had months to come to terms with any grief he might face.

He stalked to the four-poster bed, pushing the call bell next to it, and his valet appeared a few moments later.

"Your speed is impressive, Thompson," Prince said, picking up his gray frock coat from the bed, where he'd discarded it earlier, and handing it over.

"As you've often praised me, sir." Thompson's dry English accent sounded bored, as usual.

Prince had never witnessed any greater emotion on the man than a raise of an eyebrow. Davies had, on more than one occasion, mocked Prince's choice of having a valet, challenging him to be his own, independent man. Prince had always laughingly responded that a man of his stature must have a valet, especially an English one. The truth was his mother had insisted, and she'd hired Thompson when Prince had "become a man" in her eyes. She'd always insisted he must appear to be as wealthy as their name insinuated. "No

American servant will ever be as loyal,” she’d told him with a firm nod. “The Europeans have us there, son, and it’s no wonder everyone wants the same servants a duke or an earl has.” But more than anything, she had wanted the very best for him. She was the only one who ever had. He blinked away the memories. This afternoon had been full of them, accosting him, to his surprise, even in the greenhouse.

“How do you find the maids here?” Prince asked, standing still as Thompson rearranged the clothing Prince had put amiss during his pacing, securing his tie and smoothing out his shirt.

“Excellent,” Thompson replied, without giving anything away of the charismatic reputation Prince often heard about. He wondered if his mother had known about *that* when she’d hired Thompson.

“Call for a carriage, please. I intend to take the train back into the city.” Davenleigh had that advantage—it was situated close enough to the city that returning for an evening wouldn’t be a burden. Many of the millionaire businessmen who had purchased homes along the Hudson River Valley did so for just this convenience.

“Yes, sir.”

There was nothing in Thompson’s words to elicit more explanation, but Prince went on anyway. “I have some business I need to attend to. Davies sent word to me yesterday of a possible building to invest in. The restoration project we discussed.”

“Of course, sir.” Thompson nodded and, apparently satisfied with Prince’s appearance, moved to leave the room.

“I’ll be back by tomorrow morning,” Prince couldn’t help adding. Thompson would make sure Preston’s butler, Williams, knew, and if Preston questioned his brother’s absence, he would have an explanation.

“Yes, sir.” Thompson nodded again and left.

Prince sat and reread the letter Davies had sent to him about the building on West 38th Street whose owner was interested in selling. When Thompson returned to tell him the carriage

was ready to convey him to the train station, he stuffed the letter into his pocket and hurried downstairs, hoping to avoid anyone before he escaped.

However, when he passed the open door of the study, Preston called to him from inside. “Williams tells me you’re going back into the city,” he said from his seat near the fire as Prince reluctantly entered the study. Preston looked even smaller in the high-backed armchair than he had in the wheeled contraption Isabella had been pushing him around in earlier, his frock coat too large, his trousers too baggy.

“Yes, some unexpected business. I’ll return by tomorrow morning.” Williams had likely told Preston this as well. Prince could imagine his brother’s thoughts. Preston had requested he come to Davenleigh, that they spend time together before his impending death. And here Prince was, deserting him after only a few days.

“Business?” Preston’s eyebrows rose, and he squinted at Prince. His own lap was full of papers, likely reports that his business manager sent over every day. Preston’s business had done well enough over the course of his sickness, even when Preston couldn’t make it into the office for weeks at a time. Still, he liked to oversee it all.

Prince had been glad for the excuse Preston’s demand to be at Davenleigh had given him not to go into the office for a length of time either. When Preston died, Prince would be glad to leave it all in Mr. Davies’s capable hands.

When his brother looked at him expectantly, he explained. “An apartment building on West 38th I hope to invest in could use some renovating and a responsible landlord.” Prince slid the brim of his hat through his hands, waiting for Preston’s approbation. It was his money, after all.

His brother’s lips spread into a slow smile. Perhaps even a proud one. “Ahh, yes. The conditions on that end of town are terrible, aren’t they? But renovating one building may be a drop in the bucket.”

“One drop is better than none.” Prince nodded to his brother, stepping backward. “I’ll see you for dinner tomorrow.” Before

Preston could continue the conversation, Prince hurried away.

* * *

When Prince followed Davies out of the coach in front of a large brick building, every single sense was assaulted. People crowded the sidewalk, and noise rained on him from every direction. He swallowed back revulsion at the smell—the hints of enticing foods ruined by refuse of every sort.

“Need we go inside?” he asked. The smells there would be infinitely worse, he assumed. So many people crowded into such small spaces with little ventilation, Davies had explained.

“You don’t want to take a look at what you’re buying?” A smile tipped the corners of the man’s mouth, giving away that he saw through Prince’s attempts to appear unmoved by the pure poverty before him.

“I can see from here that I’m getting exactly what I thought—a building in desperate need of repair.” Prince edged away from the coach he and Davies had arrived in, but only enough not to look like a coward.

Davies tipped an eyebrow up and headed for the steps. Prince had no choice but to follow.

He’d been correct to assume the smell would be worse inside. Though it appeared most of the adults were away working, some women and many children crowded the sliver of space that might be called a hallway. Prince tried not to stare when a very young girl, no more than five, he guessed, bounced a baby, likely a sibling, on her hip as she paced up and down the hallway.

The smell got worse the farther in they ventured. “No windows here,” Davies pointed out.

Everywhere Prince turned, the rooms were crowded with the evidence of far more people living here than could possibly be comfortable—or even bearable. Bedding was tucked away in drab rooms, enough that Prince suspected they would cover the floors of the apartments. More than one or even two families slept in these rooms. Clotheslines crisscrossed the rooms, and women—but mostly young girls—tended to

mounds of laundry. Even the kitchens held beds alongside rough wooden dining tables and rickety shelves.

Prince took his first deep breath when they returned to the street, but even then he couldn't escape the scene of poverty around him. His eyes strayed to three young children huddled around a grate for warmth. He swallowed roughly. When he stepped up into the coach, warm blankets would be thrown over his legs to ward off the chill.

"I don't know that this visit encouraged me," he said when he and Davies had entered and closed the door of the coach. Prince's feet were frozen and his fingers like icicles, though he'd been walking through a building. He couldn't imagine trying to sleep in that awful place at night with so little warmth. "We talked of making the conditions better while keeping their rents the same. How can we do that without evicting half the building? There must have been two to three families in each apartment."

Davies nodded his understanding. "They may overcrowd the rooms, but we can improve the conditions."

"I'll have to talk with my brother, of course," Prince said, trying to push the dismal scenes from his mind to focus on how he could improve them.

"Yes, of course," Davies said.

Prince was quiet during the return trip to Preston's Fifth Avenue home, listening as Davies discussed the many aspects of their endeavor. He tried to focus on his friend's words, but he couldn't forget the picture of the young girl watching over a baby not that much younger than herself. At five years old, Prince had been spoiled. His father, mother, and Preston had all doted on him. He and Preston had taken full advantage of the rooms at their disposal for games—in a home half the size of the house Preston owned now but palatial by the standards of the rooms they'd visited today.

Even the flat Prince had occupied in Paris with his mother had been far more spacious than necessary—leaps and bounds more luxurious—and he'd jokingly often called their means dire. Should Preston decide to disinherit him, Prince would

never be forced into the conditions of that young girl and her infant charge. He went to bed not entirely sure he wanted to thank Davies for the experience. The scenes haunted him the rest of the night.

CHAPTER NINE

ISABELLA Poured the tea for Preston from her place in a chair beside his bed without needing to ask his preferences for its preparation. Though he was sitting propped up against several pillows, he stared out the window at the snow coming down. She mixed in the cream and sugar, just as he liked it, and held it out to him. "Preston. Your tea."

He turned at the sound of her voice, adjusting, with difficulty, to sit up straighter. Nurse Higgins hopped up from her chair on Preston's other side, helping him while Isabella remained seated, feeling useless. He grumbled as he turned back to the window, a scowl on his face. His weakened state bothered him more every day. Nurse Higgins had reported on his mood as soon as Isabella had arrived, ticking off a list, with no real emotion. Isabella had listened, all the while wondering if the nurse's detachment was necessary for a job in which the woman went from one sick or dying person to the next.

When Isabella had come to sit next to Preston after receiving the report, she'd found him struggling to shift across the bed to turn on his lamp. Her help, it seemed, had also not been appreciated, so she kept getting distracted, studying the lamp by the bed, wondering how she might adjust the pull on it so Preston could work it without too much trouble.

His sigh brought her thoughts back to the present, and she set his tea on the tray in front of him. "Thank you, Bella," he said, his voice weak.

"Mrs. Phillips suggested peppermint. She says it will settle your stomach and you'll be able to eat more." Isabella took a plate of toast from where the tea service rested on the bedside table and set it on Preston's tray as well. He took a sip of the tea and made a face. She cut off any arguments from her patient. "You need strength, and that comes from eating. I know it's not appetizing, but you must. Am I right, Nurse Higgins?"

"Of course, miss," she said, settling back into her chair and pushing her spectacles up her nose as she picked up her book.

“Tea?” Isabella offered her.

“Yes, please.” The woman glanced over the top of the book, but like Preston, she didn’t need to tell Isabella her preference. Isabella had performed this ritual enough times since Preston’s surgery that she knew the nurse’s as well as she knew Preston’s. She poured from the other, larger, pot the housekeeper had sent up with Preston’s morning meal.

“Have you seen Mr. Baxter yet this morning?” Isabella asked. She put her focus on stirring the tea, forcing herself not to look at the lamp yet again. She had it well enough memorized to make a sketch in her notebook later.

Preston shook his head slightly. “No. Williams said he arrived earlier though.”

“I’m glad he has kept his promise to you to return quickly. What do you think of his project?” Talk of Mr. Baxter’s building project was ample distraction. Isabella was just as enamored with it as any idea she had for the lamp. “Uncle Benjamin said at breakfast this morning that your brother seems very interested in this building and the possible improvements.”

Breakfast was the rare time she had with her aunt and uncle since they had all come to Davenleigh. Aunt Cassandra enjoyed the short distance between Davenleigh and Wynthall, where Robert and Bess had returned home, and spent much of her time there, and of course, Isabella spent most of her time with Preston.

She walked the nurse’s tea around the end of the bed to set it on the small table next to her. When she noted the stack of books already upon it, she murmured, “Nurse?”

“Thank you, miss.” Nurse Higgins took the tea from her and set it atop the stack of books. As Isabella traipsed back around the bed, the nurse reached for the teacup with surprising accuracy, given that she never lifted her eyes from the page before her.

“I’m hopeful that Prince’s new interest means he has taken my suggestions for his future to heart,” Preston said. “His

mother was a very generous woman, and when he was younger, Prince had a tender heart. I'm not surprised Solomon has interested him in such a project. Prince only needed the prodding." The ghost of a satisfied smile lit Preston's expression as he turned carefully toward Isabella.

"It does sound admirable. Some of Mr. Riis's reports on those conditions are shocking."

"Yes, indeed. I'll be interested to hear what Prince thought of the building he visited yesterday." Engineers far smarter than Isabella had proposed the changes needed to make the crowded buildings more livable, but her brain hummed with thoughts of improvements anyway. She suspected Mr. Baxter wouldn't be as accepting as Preston would be of her getting involved in the matter, especially given the bumpy beginnings of their acquaintance.

"Shall I have him come in and sit with you while you eat?"

"I would rather have your company right now, Bella," Preston answered, lifting his cup for another sip of his tea. "I'm quite cranky in the mornings and any interaction with my brother will likely turn sour."

She nodded, even though they had precious little time to mend fences. "I think I may have driven Mr. Baxter off," she admitted.

Preston set down his cup, his thin eyebrows jumping high. "You? I find that unlikely. Of all the current residents of this house, I believe he likes you best of all. I'll admit I had hoped having him here would allow you to influence him. I've told your uncle often enough that I wish Prince was as thoughtful and kind as you."

Isabella thought Mr. Baxter's interest in helping the people living in those awful tenements was evidence of his kindness and thoughtfulness, and Preston had just been boasting of his brother only needing a prodding. Perhaps the distance that had grown between the brothers over the years was too ingrained for Preston to overcome quickly, however necessary swiftness was.

She set about making her own tea without looking at Preston. “I told him I thought his act of not caring about your health was just that—an act. He assured me I was wrong and fled the house soon after.” So much for being a good influence. She was impertinent and a know-it-all. “I should keep my nose in my own business and let you and Mr. Baxter worry about whether or not he will be bothered by your . . . absence.”

“Bella.” Preston sighed. “The last time Prince was bothered by my absence was when he was eleven years old.”

She huffed. “I don’t believe that.”

Preston gave a sad smile. “He has every right to believe I abandoned him and his mother. In my youthful self-righteousness I supposed I could cure her of her spendthrift ways and in turn teach Prince economy. I was wrong.” He turned back to the window. “She went on spending, and he learned to despise me.” He said the last in a quiet voice, thick with regret.

Isabella put down her tea, frowning at Preston. “I’m sure you were doing what you thought best.”

“That was exactly the problem. I was arrogant. What business did I have thinking I had the right to tell her how to live? Especially when it cost me my relationship with Prince? I certainly could have afforded to pay for all of it.”

She forced a smile. “There is no point in bemoaning what you cannot change. But you can mend it now.”

A sad smile crossed his face, and he took her hand in his. “Yes, you’re right. I don’t foresee leaving my bed for some time this morning. Would you go ask him if he would care to spend some time with me?”

“I think you’re only saying that to please me, but I will all the same,” she teased, but hope soared through her. She would do anything to help them. Someday Mr. Baxter would come to regret not taking the chance to make amends with Preston. The only happy memories Mr. Baxter had now of his brother were those from childhood. It would do them both good to create

new ones that he could remember when Preston was gone. She stood, her hand gripped in Preston's.

He brought her fingers to his lips. Their roughness, chapped from dehydration, made her swallow emotion. "In the short time I have to court you, I'll do all I can to please you, especially when you're very sensible."

She leaned over to return his kiss with one on his cheek before hurrying from the room, blinking back sudden tears at the thought of not having him much longer. She couldn't pretend to ignore how much he'd weakened over the past weeks. Every day she had to face that he would not be with her much longer, perhaps only a month or so beyond their wedding day. If only she could convince him that the grand wedding he'd planned wasn't practical. But she dare not bring it up again. Though he may joke about his mortality, his failing strength was a constant irritation to him. Perhaps Nurse Higgins might have better luck broaching the topic.

Isabella leaned against the wall outside of Preston's room, the molding on its panels jutting into her back as she closed her eyes and took deep breaths to chase away her tears. Her father's death had been sudden and shocking, leaving her a wreckage of emotions she had been too young to grasp at the time. Now she mourned Preston every day. She couldn't decide which was worse.

By the time she found Mr. Baxter in the study, sitting behind the desk and alternately reading something in front of him and then making notes, she had composed herself. "Good morning, Mr. Baxter," she said to alert him of her presence.

He started, furrowing his brows before switching on his charming smile. The initial unease at seeing her pricked at Isabella's chest. "Good morning," he said, standing and rounding the desk.

"How was your visit to the city? Preston says you're interested in tenement housing." She tilted her head in question, eager to hear more about his project.

"Yes." He nodded. "I was shocked at the conditions. It makes one eager to do something." His gaze went to the floor,

eyes narrowed. A moment later, he smiled up at her. “And to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

“Officially, I’ve come to ask you to sit with Preston. He’d like to see you.” For Mr. Baxter’s sake, she ignored the flash of fear that crossed his expression. “But first I would like to apologize again for my disrespect yesterday. Soon we will have only each other, and I think we must be friends to comfort each other.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Has the earth swallowed up your aunt, uncle, and cousins?” he asked with amusement. “It must have been recent, for I just saw your uncle pass by in the hallway.”

Though heat rose to her cheeks, at least his expression looked genuine. Nothing like the fake cheer he’d subjected her to the day before. Still, the way his eyes twinkled unnerved her. It was abominable of her to be so attracted to him, especially given how Preston distrusted him.

“I meant . . .” What did she mean? Already she’d imagined some sort of bond between them. “I meant in missing Preston. As his family.”

Mr. Baxter leaned against the desk. “What a blessing that I’ll have you to comfort me in my grief.”

The fact that he smirked at her and that his tone was dry said he believed himself unlikely to mourn his brother’s passing, but Isabella ignored it now. She quirked an eyebrow, willing to play his game for the moment. “I, too, am glad I’ll have someone else to remember him with and share stories to keep his memory alive.” She flashed an innocent smile.

“I’m afraid I have precious few. I was only eleven when my mother and I moved to France.”

She and Mr. Baxter hadn’t talked of what had driven them away, but the bitterness Preston had spoken of shaded his brother’s tone. “I have some to fill in those years,” she said carefully. Would it make Mr. Baxter feel worse that Preston had played the part of a devoted older brother to her after Mr. Baxter and his mother had gone?

“I don’t suppose you ever sailed a pirate ship with him?” Mr. Baxter tilted his head at her, his smile mischievous and . . . enchanting. Her cheeks warmed at the thought of coaxing something real from him. Guilt flooded through her as she realized how much she was enjoying this conversation.

“Alas, no.” She moved to take his arm but stopped herself, instead stepping toward the door and motioning with her head for him to join her. “We enjoyed countless tea parties, though, which I challenge you to top.”

A bark of deep laughter escaped Mr. Baxter, and he followed her out of the study. “Tea parties? Are you quite serious?”

“Oh, Preston was an excellent guest. I still remember how he likes his tea.”

They reached the stairs and began their climb. “Are you sure your knowledge is not because you’re rarely away from Preston’s side?” he asked. “Your aunt was complaining this morning of how little she sees you since you came here. It seems your attention is all for Preston. I’m quite bitter of it, my dear.”

Isabella laughed over his flirting. She might feel guilt for enjoying their time together, but she understood that he was a charmer. His actions were all part of an act he played.

“My aunt must own to some of that herself,” she said. “She and my uncle have spent a fair share of time at Wynhall with Robert and Bess. She cannot stay away from her grandchildren for two days at a time, I think.”

“She must have been quite a doting mother to you, then.”

Isabella caught genuine reminiscing in his tone and almost smiled, imagining the lovely memories he must have of his mother. It was not difficult to imagine her doting on her son.

“Not quite,” she said with a shrug. “My aunt wasn’t prepared for another child when I came to them. My cousins were nearly grown already. She’s eager to see me married and settled.”

Mr. Baxter paused at the top of the stairs, turning to eye her.

“I’ve seen genuine affection for you in her interactions,” he said thoughtfully.

“Oh yes. I know she cares for me.” Isabella led on, slowing a little to wait for him to follow. “But, as my uncle has said, being a grandmother is Aunt Cassandra’s natural vocation. She is much more at ease spoiling her grandchildren than doting on her children.”

“Much less responsibility when the children behave like hoodlums because of all the overindulgence,” he mused with a teasing smile.

“I think you’re right.” She stopped in front of the door to Preston’s room. “Here we are.”

Mr. Baxter froze and blinked at her. “You’re not coming in as well?”

She bit back a smile. “Are you frightened of your brother? I assure you, though he may have been able to put you across his knee when you were young, he won’t be able to do so now.”

Mr. Baxter laughed softly, but even so, he glanced at the door with an uneasy expression. “I would be more comfortable if you’d come as well.”

Isabella reached out and put her hand on his arm, squeezing it. She lowered her voice. “I’ll agree that seeing him deteriorate as he has frightens me as well.” He opened his mouth, probably to contradict that he was at all bothered by Preston’s obvious mortality, but she knocked on the door and led the way in before he could say any more.

* * *

Prince had barely stepped into the room before his brother’s voice greeted him. “Good morning, Prince.”

Preston lifted an arm and waved him toward a chair Isabella was already pulling across the floor to join one like it next to the bed. He supposed she expected him to take that one.

“Good morning,” he said, settling in.

“Tea, Mr. Baxter?” Isabella asked, setting about preparing a

cup. “How do you take it?”

He nodded his agreement and answered her question about the preparation while avoiding looking over at his bedridden brother.

“So what do you think of this building of yours?” Preston asked once Isabella had served him his tea and taken her seat. “I’m very curious about the project.”

“It’s abominable.” Prince relaxed. It was unlikely he and Preston would find much to argue over if his new effort impressed his brother, and Prince’s mind had been almost solely occupied with the building since the day before. The building had become more than a means to an end to him, even after only one visit.

“One can only imagine,” Preston said solemnly. His eyes, even lined with tiredness, twinkled in opposition to his statement. His pride at Prince’s interest in the building pinched at Prince.

“Even a little thing like plumbing will make a world of difference, I suppose,” Isabella said. Her excitement also belied the seriousness of the topic, and it drew a smile from Prince.

“Shall we commission you to have water heaters made for all the tenants?” Prince asked. Given the stories of the water heater he’d heard from the servants and seeing his brother’s very original wheeled chair, courtesy of Isabella, he had little doubt of her interest.

Her cheeks flushed. “Heavens no. You’ll find someone with much more experience to do it more efficiently than I can manage, no doubt.” She took a sip of her tea. “And what do you think you’ll do about elevators? Will you use hydraulic or electric? I was reading something very interesting about electric elevators recently. They say they will soon be the better performing of the two.” She glanced between Preston and Prince when neither responded. “Well . . . ,” she said softly, looking back down into her cup and not finishing her sentence.

“I’ll admit I haven’t given much thought to elevators,” Prince said. “Though, they did come up in my reading as one of the possible improvements we should look into.” Prince took a sip of his own tea and, determined to reduce her embarrassment over her knowledge, went on. “You favor an electric one, then?”

She beamed. “They do occupy less space. And the Astors have even had one installed.”

“It’s an excellent idea. I’ll certainly bring up the point with any engineers we consult on the project. Davies and I are meeting with an engineer friend of his tomorrow afternoon, in fact. Mr. Henson.”

Still her blush continued, and she looked away from him. “Thank you.” She raised her eyes back to his. “Please, tell us more about the improvements you must have been studying about when I interrupted you earlier. I’m—we’re”—she gave Preston a glance—“we’re very interested.”

A look at his brother said Preston was as captivated by her thoughts on the subject as Prince was. He couldn’t help studying his brother as he was distracted by Isabella. Preston looked on her like a doting brother would, so what did he mean by marrying her? He insisted to all how desperately fond of her he was—which wasn’t a lie, Prince supposed. He was well able to read that in their every interaction. But romantically? Prince wasn’t sure he believed that.

“Mr. Baxter?” Isabella prodded with an understanding look. To her it must seem that he was silently preparing for Preston’s loss. He’d let her think it.

“Will you tell me more of your ideas?” he asked, knowing she would deflect back to him.

“No, thank you.” She looked away, fiddling with her teacup. “Preston and I are so eager to hear yours.”

Preston shared a smile with Prince and obediently turned his full attention to his brother.

“The conditions were quite stirring. I haven’t been able to get them off my mind.” He took another sip of tea and then a

deep breath, preparing for a long conversation that both of his companions would insist on. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad with Isabella here. Of course, it would be much easier to flirt with her if he did acquiesce to being her friend. And yet, it was beginning to feel less like a strategy and more like just that—a genuine friendship.

CHAPTER TEN

AFTER PRINCE'S FIRST DAY IN the greenhouse with Isabella, he ought to have known it would end up like this—her persuading him right out of *his* plans, rather than the other way around. She'd managed to coerce him into coming up to his brother's room for an hour or so every day since his own return three days ago.

Today, when they arrived, Preston was sitting up already. A change from the last few days. That boded well for the wedding, which was less than three weeks away now. Perhaps Preston would be strong enough for it.

His glasses were perched on his nose as he studied some papers on a small lap desk. He was holding up one, squinting at it as he read it, and didn't notice Prince and Isabella at first. Isabella hesitated, and Prince could guess that she didn't want to interrupt a rare moment when Preston was able to work. It would put him in a good mood.

He lay down the paper and picked up the fountain pen from the side of the lap desk before he saw them. His face lit up upon seeing Isabella, and he laid the pen back down, moving the tray aside as they came closer.

Prince didn't enjoy the sickroom in the least—on this subject he agreed with his brother—but Isabella's company made almost anything bearable. After she moved Preston's papers to the nightstand and straightened them, she entertained Preston and Prince with a drawing of a device she intended to install on his nightstand to allow him to turn on the lamp without assistance.

She explained each section, listening to Preston's input and adjusting based on his needs. Prince smiled through it all, only mildly tempted to slip away, thanks to her distraction.

"I've been dying to know," Isabella said as she closed her notebook and set it on Preston's nightstand. "Whatever happened with the Marquis d'Allais?" She looked to Prince first, but he hardly remembered the man. He'd been one of Mother's many suitors over the years, all eventually sent on

their way because of her continuing grief over her late husband.

The pink in Isabella's cheeks rose, and she turned her gaze from Prince, whom she must have assumed would answer, to Preston. "Nothing, really," Preston said. "She flirted a while longer, but I don't believe she thought herself capable of love again."

"Ahh." Isabella's voice was filled with understanding and concern.

Had Mother and Preston commiserated over their losses together? Until Isabella, Prince had believed his brother would never love anyone besides his beloved Anna. Truth be told, he still believed it. Jealousy pricked his chest that Isabella would concede to such a marriage when she must know this as well.

She glanced over at Prince, swallowed, and turned back to Preston. "Will you tell me how Anna died?" she asked. "I know she was very sick," she continued in a rush, "but I was quite young, I think."

Prince shifted uncomfortably. It was one thing to encourage Preston to talk about Prince's mother, but he saw right through Isabella's strategy in asking about Anna. She was digging deeper, trying to convince him to relate to Preston's grief and how it might have influenced what had happened between them. Anna had died while Prince and his mother were living in France. His mother had fretted about returning to comfort Preston, but they never had. Prince assumed Preston had refused to pay the passage.

To his surprise, his brother answered her. "Cholera." He looked somewhere between Prince and Isabella, blinking his eyes slowly. "We had gone to New Orleans on a holiday. They believe she contracted it there." His voice dropped to a rough whisper. "I should have never taken her." He coughed and reached for the glass of water on his nightstand.

"Don't blame yourself," Isabella said quietly.

Preston forced a smile for her. Prince must admit that imminent death was softening his brother to some extent. "All

right,” Preston agreed. A submission they all knew was false.

Soon after that Isabella suggested they leave the room and allow Preston to rest. She gathered her notebook and papers from the nightstand, straightening everything inside the notebook and then studying it as they left the room and walked down the hall. Her eyes were narrowed in concentration, but there was a sheen of tears behind her forced focus.

Prince hurried forward to keep her from stepping too close to the stairs, touching her elbow to guide her down the hallway. “Oh,” she cried softly. “Well, thank you, Mr. Baxter. That would have been quite a tumble.”

“My pleasure. Who would bully me into spending time with my brother if you were confined to your room with two broken legs?” He grinned at her, and when she opened her mouth to argue—likely his use of the word *bully*—he hurried on. “Ahh, but you wouldn’t be there long, would you?” He nodded toward her notebook. “You’d have something thought up within a day or two to have you back on your feet, I’m sure.” If Prince kept on the topic of her inventions, it would keep her from wanting to discuss Preston and Anna with him.

She huffed and then laughed. “You give me too much credit. My contraptions are silly, really.”

Prince thought of how Preston’s eyes had lit up when Isabella had first explained her idea for the lamp. “They’re priceless to those in your care.” He wondered what she might make for him. Had she come across some difficulty of his yet and set out to solve it? His heart warmed at the thought of being included in the circle of people she helped with her ideas.

He held out his arm to escort her back to her room, but after a quick glance at him, Isabella avoided his gaze and his arm and hurried her step, glancing around her as she did so. Prince kept up with little trouble. “Thank you, Mr. Baxter,” she said, forcing a smile. She stopped and turned. “You mentioned a meeting with Mr. Davies tomorrow. I wondered if you might secure some supplies for me so I can fix Preston’s lamp.” She opened her notebook and withdrew a small piece of paper. “I

don't like the idea of leaving him, even for a few hours."

"I would be happy to," Prince said as he held out his hand and she passed over the list.

If he'd had any sense, he would've played dumb and convinced her that she must accompany him. The woman could use a few hours away from this house, from watching Preston die. But she loved Preston, and cajoling her to leave him would only bring Prince guilt.

Well, he'd made a mess of this whole business. He'd sought to persuade her to believe he was the kind of man Preston wanted him to be. Trouble was, she'd wanted to be his friend, scrambling his plans from the beginning.

"Thank you." She dipped her head at him, clutching her notebook, and hurried off to her room.

Prince opened the list and scowled at it. Perhaps he wouldn't have to play dumb at all. He knew where to obtain the string necessary for her endeavor, but he wasn't certain about some of the other supplies. Perhaps Mr. Henson could help.

* * *

Nearly a week after Prince had returned from the city with Isabella's supplies, she'd used their visit with Preston to install a pulley system that would allow Preston to turn on his lamp. Nurse Higgins had helped him into a chair nearby since he was gaining more strength, and he'd watched as Prince assisted Isabella with the pulley system. Prince had hardly been needed. She'd wielded her hammer with an expertise that impressed him.

Prince could almost say he enjoyed himself during their visits. As promised, Isabella told her fair share of stories about Preston and his visits to the De Vries household. Prince could even admit that a sort of peace stole over him when he saw how joyful the stories made Preston, especially the ones Prince told of their adventures. Preston had never begrudged Prince any of his time when they were younger. He'd taken him out on their father's yacht and insisted it was a pirate ship and arranged treasure hunts inside their home and even on

occasion in the nearby Washington Square Park.

So why had Preston allowed money to push Prince and his mother away?

When Preston joined Prince and Isabella and her aunt and uncle for dinner the day after Isabella installed the lamp's pulley system, Prince sighed in relief, partly because his brother's health had improved enough to allow him out of his bed but mostly because Isabella would be forced to stop convincing him to go up to Preston's dark, sickness-riddled room. No matter how enjoyable their shared happy memories were, inside that room, Prince could not escape the memories it brought of the last days of his mother's quick but violent fight with influenza and the last days before his father had died.

As within the suffocating bedroom, Isabella led the conversation at dinner as though the man next to her was not a walking corpse. There was a hesitancy to her manner that Prince thought might be from her insecurity as hostess. She'd clearly been trained well for this part, even if her aunt was somewhat distant in her affections. He suspected, by Isabella's constant darting gaze to her company and even the servants, that, as usual, she was concerned about gossip.

"And what about your tenement house, Mr. Baxter?" she asked with a quick glance toward Preston before settling her gaze on Prince.

His brother beamed as much as his pale-gray face would allow. "Yes, Prince. We are all interested in how your project has progressed."

Something tickled in Prince's chest to see Preston so delighted at the venture. "It seems to be a waiting game. The experts are all busy, I've been told, and soon all will be arranged." The tickle returned when Preston's enthusiasm dimmed a bit, possibly at the careless tone Prince had used out of habit.

"Ahh, yes." Preston grimaced. One never knew if it was the conversation or his ever-present pain. "Sometimes the most exciting things are very tedious undertakings."

“So I’ve found.” Prince nodded. His correspondence from Davies was often filled with details Prince didn’t care for—notes from the engineer, negotiation details for acquiring the building, and so on. He and Davies had looked over the building once again with Mr. Henson, discussing the possible improvements. The dismal conditions had left Prince saddened but also invigorated to begin work. He’d thought himself incapable of good, hard work.

Perhaps this wasn’t exactly what Preston had had in mind when he’d threatened to disinherit him, but Prince enjoyed it. The progress, though it seemed slow, brought excitement with every small thing. And the little girl he’d seen on his first visit, with her small charge, was always on the edge of his mind. He wanted to help her.

He turned to Mrs. De Vries. “Has Isabella told you of her latest contraption?” he asked, casting a teasing grin in Isabella’s direction.

Her cheeks turned pink, she frowned in the direction of the footmen in the room, and she turned to her food.

Mrs. De Vries’s lips quirked, but her expression also held wariness. Prince found himself wondering about the little devices Isabella must have tinkered with growing up, and given what he knew of her relationship with her aunt, he could imagine how her aunt must have bitten her tongue and held back her disapproval over a hobby she considered to be hardly appropriate for a woman.

“I think Bess holds some hope that you will find a cure for Tommy’s crankiness,” she said to her niece.

“The poor baby is getting new teeth,” Isabella explained when Prince cast her a look for explanation. “And I have a few ideas.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “The trouble is making them safe for a baby . . .” Her voice trailed off as she was seemingly lost in thought, and those around the table laughed softly.

“Well,” Prince said to Mrs. De Vries, “she has made it possible for Preston to turn on his lamp from his bed. It’s ingenious. I’m in awe that she accomplished it without tipping

the lamp right over.”

“Levers and pulleys,” Isabella said, her tone indicating it was nothing to be impressed by.

“Cassandra.” Mr. De Vries turned to his wife, his eyes dancing. “Do you recall the day she convinced Robert to help her attach a sail to that board she’d glued wheels to?”

Mrs. De Vries burst into laughter. “And they rode it down the hill at Wynhall. It’s a wonder neither of them cracked their heads open. How I managed to train her into a proper young lady, I’ll never know.”

“Uncle Benjamin!” Isabella cried amid more laughter around the table. “You swore to me that you wouldn’t tell Aunt Cassandra.” But despite her indignation, her eyes danced too.

Prince found her laughing expression beautiful, and he caught himself staring at her.

“Oh, Isabella,” Mrs. De Vries said, her voice almost breathy from the mirth, a situation that surprised him, given the staid countenance she had held since arriving at Davenleigh. “He told me that very night, swearing me to secrecy and making *me* promise not to lecture the two of you. ‘No harm done, Cassie. Best leave it,’” she imitated her husband in a low voice that made the group laugh harder.

As Prince watched the small family, for Preston truly could be called a part of it, his insides clenched, and it was all he could do not to excuse himself from the table to take a deep breath. He forced his own laughter, though the moment weighed on him. It felt so reminiscent of his life in Paris with his mother. A table of friends enjoying each other’s company, his mother entertaining them all with her wit.

But there was something even deeper here. There was love in these memories—true caring, and not the flighty superficiality his mother had used to pretend Preston’s actions hadn’t hurt her or that she didn’t grieve for her husband. Everyone had expected Ellen Baxter to react in the carefree way she always had—and so she did.

“With so small a party,” Preston said, pulling Prince from his somber thoughts, “I think we shall skip formality and all adjourn to the drawing room.”

“Agreed,” Mr. De Vries said, scooting back his chair and moving to help Preston.

Isabella stood as well, taking Preston’s arm in hers, flanking him with her uncle as the group made their way from the dining room.

Prince strode toward Mrs. De Vries. “May I have the pleasure of escorting you?” he asked, ready to pull back her chair for her.

“Oh yes.” She beamed at him as she stood and took his arm to follow the slowly moving group ahead of them.

When they reached the drawing room, Isabella was convinced to play the piano for them. She’d barely begun when Mr. De Vries stood in front of his wife. “Cassie?” he said, holding out a hand.

“Oh, don’t be foolish, Benjamin,” she said, waving him away. “I’m not a girl anymore.”

Mr. De Vries was not deterred. He smiled at his wife, and though her cheeks turned red, she allowed her husband to waltz her around the room. Prince had taken a seat far from the piano Isabella played at, hoping to excuse himself from conversation, at least for a little while. He found now that it allowed him to watch Isabella as she played. She kept glancing at her aunt and uncle, a soft smile on her lips, covering up the missed notes from her distraction with sweet grimaces. He was struck by the thought that he’d never sat in a room and stared at Miss Darlington. Pursuing her was something of a business transaction. He saw that in Miss Darlington’s actions toward him as well—she was careful in her words, negotiating with flirtatious comments meant to draw him in.

But Isabella was . . . delightful. He was drawn in by her ideas and her genuine joy in small things. She found goodness wherever she could, and there was something enticing to that.

A few moments later, Nurse Higgins entered the room and

glided over to Preston. After a quiet conversation between the two, she approached the piano and bent over Isabella.

“Oh no, that’s quite all right. I enjoy playing,” Isabella responded to what must have been an offer to take over at the instrument.

“I insist,” Preston said. “You ought to have a dance or two. I’ve stolen you away from the Season and all the balls you might have gone to.”

Isabella did relinquish her seat then, and Nurse Higgins took over so quickly that hardly a note was skipped. Mr. and Mrs. De Vries glanced in the nurse’s direction but then returned to whatever whispered conversation was making Mrs. De Vries’s cheeks pink further, just like her niece’s.

But Isabella had given up her job to lecture Preston, it seemed. “You know I don’t mind about the Season at all,” she said as she sat next to him. “And you’re hardly able to dance with me.”

Prince made his way across the room to stand next to them. He’d bumbled through most of his attempts to win her over, so it was about time he did what he’d set out to do—secure her friendship so that her husband would not take away Prince’s inheritance.

His thoughts flitted to the tenement building, the horrible, cramped conditions, and the small girl caring for that baby. A drop of Preston’s money would be enough to give that little girl a better place to live—her and others, if Prince could manage it.

“I’m happy to take Preston’s place,” he offered Isabella. “Won’t you dance with me?”

Isabella glanced around the room, and Prince followed her gaze to Arthur, the footman standing by the door and waiting for any instructions from the family. Her inspection turned back to the piano and Nurse Higgins. “I don’t think it’s proper,” she said, staring down at her hands.

Prince bit back laughter.

Preston’s eyebrows furrowed. “Bella?”

She twisted her fingers, not looking at Preston or Prince, and then lowered her voice. “We should not encourage gossip.” She eyed Preston with a pointed stare. Gossip. Her ever-present worry.

Preston’s gaze flicked to Prince, and his eyes tightened for a moment, but then he waved. “Here, in my house, Mrs. Phillips will tell me of any whispers, and I’ll swiftly correct them.”

Prince made a show of bowing, hoping to remove Isabella’s anxiety by lightening the mood. “I know I’m a poor replacement for my much-better-looking brother, but I would be honored.”

She stood, taking Prince’s hand. “I suppose one quick dance would not be too improper.”

But Prince felt the tremble of her hand against his. He gave it a quick reassuring squeeze. Even so, Isabella was stiff as he moved to dance with her.

“Your uncle is attentive,” he said, introducing an easy conversation topic he hoped would calm her.

“His and aunt’s shows of affection have increased since Robert married.” But instead of relaxing, she gave a shrug, one he recognized as her trying to appear indifferent. It should not have made him feel closer to her to find that she had emotions she pushed away as well. Perhaps that was why she understood too much of the things he tried to hide. “They are ready for an empty home, I suppose,” she said.

“I think it foolish to try to hurry you out of the house.” Prince smirked, enjoying the way she shifted her gaze away from him as her chin dipped with embarrassment.

“Mr. Baxter, if you continue to flirt with me, I cannot dance with you.”

“You put me in quite a predicament, then.”

“You’re as impossible as Preston.” She huffed, keeping her attention anywhere but on him.

He chuckled. “My mother used to say the same about my father, so I suppose it’s a family trait.”

She met his gaze again, tilting her head in disbelief. “I rather think that always insisting on getting your own way is a result of being spoiled. Bess tells me Tommy is quite impossible after he is left in Aunt Cassandra’s charge.”

Prince lowered his voice. “People will always talk, Isabella,” he said kindly.

She turned her gaze to the paintings in the room. There were too many, like in every room of the Darlington household, but he knew these had been chosen with care, most of them by his mother.

“I must do what I can to stifle it,” Isabella said.

He tried a different tactic, raising an eyebrow even though she refused to look at him. “That’s somewhat judgmental, isn’t it? Believing that the servants would whisper mean things when, from everything I’ve seen, they adore you and are devoted to you as though you’re already mistress of this house?”

Her gaze whipped back to meet his. “I don’t think . . . that’s not . . . that’s not what I believe.”

He smirked, pondering how to illustrate his point to her. “Do you love Preston?”

She hesitated for a fraction of a moment, and the way her eyes flicked to his lips made him still until she said, “I do. I love him.” It was determined, fierce, and protective.

Dare he guess it was a sister’s love?

He swallowed that thought. There was no point in voicing that he suspected their relationship wasn’t romantic. “Then you must let people see it and be willing to weather whatever they will say. You cannot stop the rumors, especially when you marry Preston and he—” She sucked in a small breath, and he remembered how often she avoided using the word *die* in any of its forms. He hurried to think of another way to say the words to spare her feelings. “And he is gone soon after,” he amended. “There will be quite a lot of gossip, and you will have to be strong.” Her jaw tightened, and he recognized the fierceness from a moment before, when she declared she loved

Preston, increasing. “Would you back out to save Preston and your family from the gossip?”

“No.” This time her answer came quickly, and Prince felt the prick.

“Not even for a much younger beau?” he teased.

“Mr. Baxter!” But she couldn’t hold her sternness for long, as his trick for alleviating her worry over difficult topics worked once again. Her expression softened, and she shook her head with a rueful smile. There was some triumph in that, being able to comfort her in this small way. Being her friend.

“There is probably something to what you’ve said.” She sighed.

“Preston knew what he was doing when he offered you your independence,” Prince reminded her, hoping his bitterness at his brother’s choice did not leak into his words. If he had any chance of convincing her he was worthy of the inheritance, she couldn’t suspect how he begrudged her what Preston would settle on her.

But what if he doubted his own motives? The time spent in her company had muddled what he’d set out to do. A voice inside him said he was proving himself to Preston, that his brother did believe in him. That Isabella truly was a friend, not a means to an end.

She nodded but didn’t speak again, and when Nurse Higgins ended the song, Isabella pulled away from Prince. She hurried back to her place at the piano and insisted on continuing her own performance.

Surprising himself, Prince took a seat next to Preston to listen to her play a complicated classical piece the De Vrieses could no longer dance to.

“Did you say something to upset Isabella?” Preston asked.

Prince prickled at the immediate blame, but he didn’t rise to it. Isabella was dear to his brother. “I only tried to explain that worrying over gossip was unnecessary. There is nothing she can do to stop it. But I’m unused to playing the part of consoler, I suppose.” Truthfully, he’d rarely been called upon

to do so. Miss Darlington certainly never sought him out for solace.

“Your mother always did insist on bearing her burdens silently,” Preston mullied. “Even when Father died. I never saw her shed a tear.”

“Neither did I,” Prince admitted.

“I should have seen then that she was only hiding, but I was grieving as well. I was arrogant and bitter.” Preston let out a long breath, one of a man resigned to pain.

Prince stood, unable to continue the conversation. He didn't know if Preston meant to insinuate that he suspected Prince of doing the same thing now, but the barb struck anyway. “Good night, Preston,” he said stiffly. “I believe I'll retire now.” He didn't wait for his brother to respond, and Preston wouldn't be chasing after him. Prince caught Isabella's eye as he hurried from the room, her eyebrows pinched in worry and her gaze darting to Preston. Prince passed by without a word and fled, ashamed of how often that had happened since he had come to Davenleigh.

He found refuge in the empty, quiet study, though the strains from Isabella's playing drifted toward him. The woman herself danced through his thoughts in the same light way her fingers danced on the keys.

“I should have seen then that she was only hiding.” If Preston hadn't been insinuating the same about Prince, Isabella had tried to tell him. The rhythm of her music slowed, and the soothing notes drew him to the doorway. Likely she was playing this for Preston, hoping to bring him peace in his painful moments, significant even on a good day like today.

But Prince leaned against the doorway and let himself believe she played for him, and he ignored what that might mean about his feelings for her.

After all, hiding from difficult truths was in his blood.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ISABELLA TAPPED HER FINGER ABSENTLY against her knee as she sat with Aunt Cassandra in Bess's sitting room, waiting for her cousin to come down and join them. She stilled her finger and then turned to the window. Davenleigh was several miles from Wynhall, where Bess and Robert had come since leaving the city when Isabella and her aunt and uncle had come to stay with Preston. Isabella couldn't possibly see Davenleigh from the sitting room window, but she tilted her head to search the whitened landscape anyway. The February day was deceptively bright, sunshine blinking off the acres of snow that surrounded the house.

Aunt Cassandra chuckled. "You remind me of Bess every time she has to leave her children."

Isabella straightened, repenting of all the times she'd teased her cousin over just such behavior. "Preston is resting. I wouldn't be with him anyway," she said to remind herself more than anything. Apparently troubled by Isabella's lack of planning for the wedding despite the event being two weeks away, Preston had enlisted Aunt Cassandra to prod her. Aunt Cassandra, in turn, had convinced Bess to take some time away from her children to plan with them, although she'd had to promise to come to Wynhall so Bess wouldn't have to leave Tommy any longer than necessary.

"I think you and Bess could use a break, even if you both guilt yourselves for it," Aunt Cassandra said.

Isabella smiled. "I don't know anything about being a mother, but I suppose she must take care for her own nerves as well, or she'll end up a frazzled mess."

"Indeed." Aunt Cassandra nodded. "I'll admit I felt very awkward holding my own children, especially when they were as upset as Tommy, but it pained me even so to know when they hurt. I used to sit up in bed and listen for their cries." She gave a soft smile.

Bess bustled into the room, Tommy on her hip. "I'm sorry. Have you been waiting long?" She took a seat near them both,

and Tommy snuggled tighter into his mother. “Nothing has gone as planned today, and Nanny had to have a break. We’re both at our wit’s end.”

“Neither of us would ever complain about Tommy being part of our party,” Isabella said. The strain in Bess’s face said that disagreeing might tip her over the edge.

“Agreed,” Aunt Cassandra added, reaching out to hold her grandson’s small, pudgy hand. Tommy squeezed her finger and even gave his grandmother a tired smile.

A footman came in, and Bess requested tea while Tommy chewed on her beaded bracelet. Once the footman had gone, she tugged the bracelet away from her son. “He puts everything in sight in his mouth,” Bess said. “I’m terrified of him swallowing something he shouldn’t.”

Aunt Cassandra nodded. “The boys were like puppies when they were getting teeth, gnawing on everything they could pick up. Poor things.”

Isabella studied Tommy as the women discussed various remedies. The little one’s eyes were drooping, even as he leaned over and sucked on his mother’s bracelet once again. Bess absentmindedly pulled it off her wrist and tucked it underneath her. Poor baby. If only he had some jewelry of his own, though Isabella couldn’t think of anything safe for such a small child.

The tea arrived, calling her attention away since Bess requested that Isabella serve. She pushed her thoughts on children’s jewelry away, knowing her aunt would move the topic on to wedding planning as soon as she could.

Sure enough, once Aunt Cassandra had her cup, she got down to business. “First, a dress. We should plan a trip back to the city to find one.”

Isabella waved her suggestion away. “I haven’t worn my rose-colored ball gown yet, Aunt. It would do very well, don’t you think? The wedding will be quite small, you know, and I don’t think I ought to overdo it.” Though she couldn’t convince Preston to move the date or give up the idea of

spending a small fortune on the festivities, she had at least convinced him that the fewer the guests the better, using his arguments about gossip against him. The fewer people who saw how truly ill he was, the fewer people there would be to talk.

“Not white?” Aunt Cassandra’s voice lowered a hitch. “I . . . I worry what people would say, dear, quiet and small as it will be.”

“Oh, yes. You’re right.” Isabella hadn’t thought of that, although Aunt Cassandra’s idea of “quiet” was an argument for another day.

Mr. Baxter’s voice dropped into her thoughts then, telling her how she might be judging others by assuming mean motives in everyone, from the footmen to the guests at the wedding. She’d never thought so lowly about people, but was she doing what he said?

“Surely I have something in my wardrobe that we could fix up,” Isabella went on. “From my debut, perhaps?” Preston might have been right to worry. Finding a dress that would be ready in time would be impossible. Isabella hadn’t even thought of that before now.

Aunt Cassandra’s brow furrowed. “Oh, I suppose if that’s what you wish. Quiet or not, I hope the occasion will be everything you want.”

“I don’t want to overtax Preston,” Isabella said. The thought of him having to endure an extravagant event made her cringe, even if it were one of his own making. Though he’d recovered some strength in the wake of his surgery, he required a great deal of help and plenty of rest, even just to spend an evening downstairs with his guests.

Aunt Cassandra nodded, then took a sip of her tea. “Yes, we must consider that. Perhaps you ought to wait until he is fully recovered so you may have the festivities you deserve.” Her countenance brightened at such a plan.

“Preston—well, we both wish to hold it sooner rather than later.” Isabella glanced at Bess, in whom she’d confided the

true nature of Preston's proposal.

Aunt Cassandra's expression fell. "Yes, of course. Perhaps we shall have a grand celebration once he's recovered."

Isabella conceded to this. "Yes, perhaps."

"And who shall you have serve as your bridesmaids?" Aunt Cassandra pressed.

"Oh." Isabella blinked. There were many things she hadn't considered. It seemed so long ago that she'd contemplated seeking out a book on marriage, but perhaps after accepting Preston's proposal she ought to have found one on weddings. Preston wanted this one to be as grand as Aunt Cassandra did, but Isabella's studies had likely included too much on science and not enough on events such as this. "I think one will do," she said. "That way Mr. Baxter can serve as Preston's best man—or there may be someone else Preston wishes—but that isn't for me to plan, of course." She turned to Bess. "Would you do that honor for me, Bess? Serve as my bridesmaid?"

"Me?" Bess jerked and then cringed. Tommy had fallen asleep in her lap, and Isabella hadn't seen Bess so much as twitch a finger in the direction of her teacup. "I'm hardly a maid, Isabella." Her lips widened into an amused grin. "The bags underneath my eyes have aged me ten years at least."

Isabella let out a laugh. "Well, it is either you or Aunt Cassandra." She looked over at her aunt, whose cheeks turned pink.

"Don't be silly, dear," she said, but Isabella caught the pleasure dancing through her eyes that Isabella would think of her.

"It is a small family affair. I don't believe anyone will comment upon Bess as my maid of honor."

"Very well," Bess said. "I accept."

"Now the reception." Aunt Cassandra went on as though she were ticking items from a list. She rushed on before Isabella could say anything to dampen the plans. "I know the dinner will be small as well, but I insist on all your favorite foods and lovely music . . ."

It occurred to Isabella as her aunt continued that, for all her protestations about Isabella having the wedding she deserved, perhaps Aunt Cassandra wished for it just as much as, if not more than, Isabella herself. Bess's wedding, and those of Aunt Cassandra's other two sons, had been planned by the brides and their mothers, save for a few details Aunt Cassandra had taken care of. She wasn't generally affectionate, so it had never crossed Isabella's mind that her aunt might cherish this occasion of acting as mother of the bride.

"Yes," she said, surprising her aunt with the interruption. Isabella reached over and hugged her, blinking back silly tears. "Yes, we should have all the things you think best."

Aunt Cassandra took her handkerchief and brushed a few tears off Isabella's cheeks when she sat back. "Isabella?"

Isabella shook her head. "It's all so overwhelming, I suppose. Thinking of marrying. I'm so glad you're here to guide me through it, Aunt. Thank you."

Aunt Cassandra's confusion turned to a gentle smile. "You're quite welcome. I think your cousins will make very nice ushers, don't you?"

"Yes." Isabella nodded, her smile growing. "Yes, that sounds perfect."

* * *

Isabella fingered the smooth clay pearls, studying the chain. Her idea for jewelry safe for Tommy to chew on had come to fruition when she'd seen her lady's maid's clay pearls earlier that morning. Margie had been baffled by Isabella's offer to trade the necklace for one of Isabella's own of glass pearls. It had taken some convincing that Isabella wouldn't mind parting with them and that she desperately needed the clay ones.

She reached into her embroidery bag resting at her side in the drawing room, where she and Aunt Cassandra were sitting. Aunt Cassandra was uncharacteristically quiet as she worked her needle, except for her quiet humming. Isabella recognized it as the song she'd played a few nights before for her uncle

and aunt to dance to.

She found some red embroidery floss and smiled as she pulled it out. Tommy would enjoy the bright color. With a careful snip, she freed the clay beads from the necklace Margie had given her, making sure she collected them in her lap and didn't lose any. She wouldn't need them all, but it wouldn't do to have them rolling all over the floor either. She cut the length she'd calculated into three even strands and then braided them together for extra strength. Then she set about rethreading the beads onto it.

She couldn't help that her mind wandered as she set about the task. It hardly took all her concentration. And with Aunt Cassandra humming dancing tunes, her mind automatically turned to Prince Baxter. Much like always, he'd been behaving as though nothing had upset him after speaking to Preston the night they'd danced. He visited Preston's room with her, though less often. Preston *had* been up and about more since he'd come down to dinner that night, so perhaps Isabella was overthinking the situation. Mr. Baxter's words to her about gossip suggested that perhaps Isabella overthought things too often.

Both men spoke of their relationship as strained beyond repair, Preston only conceding that he might have a chance of mending it when Isabella pushed him to try. In his eyes, he'd done too much wrong in pushing his brother and Mrs. Baxter away after his father's death. Though he mentioned it less now, he hung on to suspicion about whether Mr. Baxter would live up to his terms for gaining his inheritance. And Isabella couldn't get a straight answer from Mr. Baxter regarding his feelings on the subject. If it was true that their estrangement was too great, then why did it frighten Mr. Baxter so much to speak of his feelings?

She held up the little necklace, closing the ends and trying to envision it around Tommy's neck. She decided she needed a few more beads, at least, to make it long enough for him to be able to put into his mouth—only under the supervision of his mother and nanny, of course. But hopefully it would be some relief to his poor, aching gums.

She let out a quiet sigh, not wanting to disturb Aunt Cassandra. Isabella didn't wish to discuss her worried thoughts about the Baxter brothers. Aunt Cassandra had tried to be a comfort to Isabella after her father's death, but she'd struggled to be the soft, nurturing comfort Isabella needed. She wouldn't understand Isabella's desire to help Preston and Mr. Baxter, and worse, she might misinterpret Isabella's concern for Mr. Baxter as a fancy for him.

Her thoughts hesitated, as though checking their own truthfulness. She scolded herself. Perhaps she found Mr. Baxter attractive, and she did enjoy spending time with him . . . when they were both with Preston. But that was because she enjoyed the stories the brothers told and the whisper of comradeship they'd once had. She didn't have a fancy for him.

She focused her thoughts back on helping him. How could she be a comfort to him after Preston's death if he wouldn't trust her? He would only end up unhappy if he continued to bottle his feelings, refusing to allow anyone to help him. However strained their relationship, surely there was still love there.

She held up the small beaded necklace, smiling at the way the bright embroidery threads peeked between the beads.

"Well, that's certainly a new style of jewelry," Aunt Cassandra said.

Isabella looked up to see her aunt smiling at her. Their time in the country and being able to spend more time with her grandchildren had done her good. The Season was a stress on her, and Isabella couldn't blame her aunt for wishing not to go through it anymore, and with a girl no less. Isabella's previous three Seasons had been far more taxing than those of Aunt Cassandra's sons.

"It's for Tommy," Isabella said, getting up to hand the necklace to her aunt. "I thought he might like to chew on the beads. And Bess might even put it on some ice sometime. The cold would sooth the poor baby's gums."

"Oh! So clever!" Aunt Cassandra took the necklace and ran

the beads through her hand.

Isabella sat in the chair next to her. “Do you think Bess will like it?”

Aunt Cassandra grimaced. “I think she will like anything that will make Tommy stop crying for a few minutes. She’s with him constantly, though the nanny is capable enough. You know how she hates to leave him when he’s in pain.”

Isabella noted the compassion in Aunt Cassandra’s tone rather than judgment for Bess’s hovering ways. Perhaps spending more time with Bess and the children had softened her aunt’s heart on that score. Or perhaps seeing more of them had left her less bitter about the separation. Isabella couldn’t help an inward giggle at that.

“You’re a wonder,” Aunt Cassandra said.

“I’m sure I’m not the first to think of a necklace for a baby to chew on, and I owe you for sparking the idea when you talked to Bess about my cousins chewing on everything.”

“Isabella,” Aunt Cassandra chided. “Do not minimize your thoughtfulness. You may wish you could do more with your knowledge, but your family is grateful we get to benefit from your genius.”

Heat rose in Isabella’s cheeks, and she let her fingers brush over the necklace again. It wasn’t much, but it did make her happy to think of Tommy and Bess’s pain relieved for a few moments. Perhaps it would change their world for that small amount of time. That brought happiness to Isabella, even though it was a small thing.

“Thank you,” she said, leaning over to surprise her aunt with a hug. It took only a moment for Aunt Cassandra to soften into it, wrapping her arms around Isabella. Isabella lingered, then straightened. “I’m going to take this upstairs.”

Aunt Cassandra patted her arm before Isabella left the room, and Isabella couldn’t help but smile as she gazed at her creation and thought of her aunt’s words.

“She’s so obviously smitten with him.”

The words brought Isabella to a halt. She recognized the voice of one of the maids, Ida, and she edged forward carefully to peer around the corner of the hallway to see the maid standing with the housekeeper, Mrs. Phillips.

Mrs. Phillips *hmped* but gave a short nod.

“It’s ridiculous,” Ida went on. “The way she falls over herself when he’s around.”

Isabella’s face filled with heat, and she could only think of Mr. Baxter’s comment about judging the staff that adored her and were devoted to her, in his words.

Hardly, she thought, swallowing hard. Had her attraction to Mr. Baxter really been so obvious? And was she surprised to hear the servants talking about it, when her living as though she was already Preston’s wife was odd enough? She’d pushed against the thought of judging the staff this way, but she’d obviously been worried for a reason.

She straightened. Ida and Mrs. Phillips stood in her way to taking the beaded necklace to her room. She must act as though she hadn’t heard them. She rounded the corner, and both women fell silent. Isabella forced a smile and strode past them, trying to seem as unconcerned as possible.

When she entered her room, she glanced back to see both women hurrying down the hallway, out of sight. Isabella sagged against her door, blowing out a breath. How utterly awful. She was *not* smitten with Mr. Baxter. And did they think allowing one dance with him was falling all over him? Why, if she were in the city, going to balls, she would dance with young men despite being engaged to Preston.

The question was what should she do? She had to stop this gossip, but even though she acted the part of the mistress of the house, she wasn’t actually the mistress. Preston wouldn’t like this kind of talk spreading. It would be exactly the sort of thing that might undermine the legitimacy of their marriage. She would tell him and let him take care of it.

When she entered his room, Isabella found Preston sitting in a chair rather than his bed. He shifted through some papers,

squinting at each through his spectacles. He was usually in a better mood when he was able to do some work or read over reports Mr. Davies brought him, but Isabella often worried it would be too much.

“What good news does Mr. Davies bring you today?” she asked as she took a seat near Preston. She should ring for tea, but the thought of it being brought by the maid she’d just overheard gossiping about her was enough to deter her.

“Everything is well.” Preston cast her a smile.

“Well, your company is in good hands.” Isabella forced cheerfulness over the matter, even though words like *smitten* and *ridiculous* churned in her stomach.

“I must have sent it on to the office,” Preston murmured, shuffling through the stack again.

“Is something missing?” Isabella asked, moving to help.

Preston shook his head and waved at her to settle back in her seat. “No, no. I’m sure I sent it to Mr. Davies. My memory isn’t what it used to be, as you can imagine.” He set down the stack of papers on a nearby table and turned to her, his eyebrows furrowing instantly. “Has something happened?”

Perhaps she *was* just as easy to read as Ida supposed. But she must have misinterpreted Isabella’s feelings. Mr. Baxter had certainly flustered her the night they danced, but not for the reasons the maid thought.

“I’ve . . . it’s only that I’ve just overheard some of the staff . . .” Isabella drew in a deep breath and looked down at her hands. “Discussing me in a way that might . . .” Hurrying off to Preston to solve the problem was so much more difficult than she’d imagined it would be.

He took off his spectacles and peered at her, his face stern. “What did they say?”

“They seem to be under the impression that I have something of a fancy for Mr. Baxter,” she said in a rush, getting it out as quickly as possible. “But I have no idea why. I haven’t done anything—”

“Of course not.” Preston sighed, shaking his head. “I’ve had Mrs. Phillips listen for such talk. It’s not surprising that most people would think you better suited for Prince. I’ll have Mrs. Phillips take care of the matter at once.”

Isabella’s cheeks heated, but she didn’t inform Preston who, specifically, might need talking to. She couldn’t bear to. She could only nod her agreement to the plan and finally gather her courage to ring for tea.

She must watch her behavior with Mr. Baxter even closer than she had been. He’d been wrong about the servants. She only hoped he was also wrong that there was little she could do.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PRINCE STEPPED OUT OF THE carriage behind Davies. Though they'd enjoyed several days of sunshine, the air was bitterly cold. The tenants at home during the day would likely be crowded around fireplaces inside, trying to ward off the chill.

The temperature did help somewhat with the smell, though the vile odors of the neighborhood around the tenement building no longer surprised him when he came. Staring up at the building, he thought again of the enormous amount of work it would take to bring it to even a decent standard of living. And yet, thinking of the undertaking—doing something important, with the added bonus of not having to think too much about his emotional shortcomings—brought with it a prickle of excitement that surprised him. What had begun as a means to satisfy Preston had become something Prince cared deeply about.

He'd considered that watching Preston waste away would be exhausting, but the emotional toll had been far greater than he'd thought it would be. He'd believed he could keep himself apart from it, and though he supposed losing Preston wouldn't bring the same grief that losing his mother had, the honesty in his feelings that Isabella seemed to exact from him, even if he admitted little to her, weighed on him. Was it his mother's quick and unexpected passing that made her death less stifling? Isabella would tell him it was the fact that he'd truly mourned for his mother, rather than pushing aside the possibility of sadness as he was doing now. It was possible she was right, but nonetheless, grieving Preston was far more complicated than Prince cared to allow. Their relationship was less strained of late, but the fact that Preston had driven Prince and his mother from New York all those years ago still hung between them, a topic that would never see resolution before Preston's death, especially since Prince avoided it as much as possible.

It had been a relief to get Davies's message that Prince was needed to discuss some of their plans and to make another visit to the building. Since Preston seemed quite proud of Prince's new endeavor, he'd sent his brother off for a day or two in the

city with a bright smile on his gray face.

“I assume all the details are in hand for the purchase?” Prince asked as they stepped up toward the building.

Davies nodded. “Right on schedule. Have you made arrangements for your portion of the funds?”

“Of course.” Preston had assured Prince he would write to Mr. Barnes, his lawyer, about it, and Prince felt safe from his brother disinheriting him. He and Davies stepped into the cramped hallway, and Prince frowned. “Will the tenants be able to live on the premises while we remodel?”

Davies sighed, likely the same worry bothering him. He lowered his voice. “Some will not be able to find other accommodations, but I suspect the inconveniences of the remodel construction may be preferable to other living situations.”

Prince eyed an apartment they passed on their left and imagined the changes he’d spent many hours discussing with Davies. Each apartment would include more windows, private bathrooms, and running water, among other improvements. “It seems like so little,” he said, thinking of how multiple families would crowd the apartments.

“And yet it will be a vast improvement.” Davies gave him a wry smile.

“Mr. Davies! Mr. Baxter!”

They turned at the sound of a young girl’s voice coming from one of the apartments they had passed. Twelve-year-old Mary Egan waved to them, grinning from ear to ear. Since the women of the Egan family took in laundry, Mary spent most of her day doing that as well as tending to the four Egan children who stayed home while the oldest boy worked with his parents at a garment factory nearby.

“Good morning, Miss Egan,” Davies said, giving the girl a formal bow.

Mary giggled, and without taking her gaze off the two men, she reached to her side and scooped up the youngest Egan child, who was barely out of infancy. “Good morning. Have

you come ta start work?” Her eyes danced with curiosity, and it reminded Prince a great deal of Isabella. He often found himself wondering whether, if Mary had the family support and means Isabella did, she might have been able to take her education further than the few years she’d spent in school before having to leave to help her family.

“Not quite yet.” Davies smiled at her in sympathy.

“And what will you do once the work starts?” Prince asked. His concern for the residents of the building brought the question bubbling out without his permission. “Will you stay in the building and weather it?”

Mary shook her head. “Mam says that won’t do for the laundry. We’re ta be staying with my aunt, who lives two buildings over.” She waved her hand down the street. That sounded crowded.

“I have fresh bread, still warm.” She grinned at them, her cheeks pink with excitement. She always made sure Davies and Prince had fresh bread to eat whenever they visited the building. The last time they’d visited, Mrs. Murphy, who lived in an apartment with her three grown boys and their families, had told them that Mary had bragged to the whole building about serving Mr. Davies and Mr. Baxter. Despite their worry over her feeding them the family’s scarce food, they wouldn’t dream of turning her down. “There’s butter,” she added, hitching the baby up as she backed toward the apartment. “I bought it with the money you gave me last time.”

Prince nearly laughed at her delight. They’d meant for Mary to use the money to replace food they’d eaten.

A grimace passed across Davies’s face before he chased it away and said, “We wouldn’t dream of missing your bread, Miss Egan.” He swept off his hat, and he and Prince followed Mary inside.

Though the Egans were one of the few families who didn’t live with other families in one apartment, their apartment was always full. Other mothers sent their younger children over for Mary to keep an eye on, and they always had a family member staying with them. The fullness of the apartment was likely the

reason it was a few degrees warmer than the hallway they'd been talking in.

They finished their bread quickly, Prince sharing half of his with a toddler who stared up at him without blinking. Mary bubbled with importance when they left, nodding her understanding that they had work to do.

Their visit to the building took longer than usual. With each time they came, residents grew more comfortable with talking to them, and Prince often found himself stopping to speak to them for a moment, always interested in their lives, which were so vastly different from his own. Isabella would be enchanted by them all, he felt sure.

He scowled at that thought as they left the building and climbed back into their carriage. He'd spent a great deal of time thinking of her lately, and he'd come to the conclusion that he couldn't play games with her any longer. In that simple way of hers, she'd demanded friendship from him and then coaxed him into giving it. He had no desire to see her unhappy. If she knew he'd befriended her in order to make some kind of alliance, it would hurt her. It had been a shameful thing to do in the first place. As he came away from the impoverished people he was coming to know better every day, that shame intensified at his annoyance over the prospect of losing half of a massive fortune. A day of Prince's wages could pay the Egans' rent for months, and his motives for helping them had, until recently, been purely selfish

"Are you attending the evening party at the Sherwoods'?" Davies asked as the carriage rolled away from the building.

"Mrs. Darlington was able to finagle an invitation for me to be included, despite my constant coming and going." He smiled at the matron's wording. She would prefer his just coming, but spending a few weeks at Davenleigh was also helpful in providing him an excuse to draw out his attentions to her daughter. He couldn't offer for Miss Darlington until Preston died. He inwardly flinched at the callous thought but quickly dismissed it. He wouldn't allow Isabella to convince him to feel for Preston's imminent passing, even if his attachment to her had grown.

“Miss Darlington will be pleased to see you, I suppose,” Davies said, amused.

“I’m sure she’s found plenty of men to dance attendance on her while I’ve been away,” Prince replied.

Davies answered with a smile.

Prince looked forward to the easy evening. Miss Darlington would need only compliments and shallow conversation. Her mother may require some artful topic-dodging, but he suspected it would be simple compared to navigating his time with his brother and the De Vries family.

“When does your brother return?”

“Next week. Then he and Miss De Vries will marry.” Prince frowned into his lap as he thought of the impending ceremony. The thought of her actually marrying Preston had begun to bother him. Another reason to spend an evening or two away from her and her impossible expectations for him.

“And his health?”

Prince’s breath hitched and he cursed inwardly. “Worsening,” he said, forcing indifference.

“I’m sorry.” Davies was the only soul he’d told of the true nature of Preston’s illness, trusting the man’s confidentiality on the subject. Preston desired it so that fewer whispers would pass about his marriage; Prince desired it to avoid any unnecessary pity.

He shrugged away the sympathy. “Thank you.”

Davies studied Prince as though he would say more but then turned toward the window. Prince did the same, staring at the dirty, slushy roads they passed over. His friend wouldn’t press the subject, but Prince considered ways to change the topic just in case.

“I shall see you tonight, then?” he said when the carriage stopped at Davies’s lodgings.

“Yes, I’ll be there.” Davies paused on the sidewalk and turned back to Prince. “As little and as simple as our undertaking seems,” he said, “it *is* important.”

The warmth and tingle of excitement that had wriggled through Prince when Davies had showed him the plans earlier returned. He grinned. When he envisioned the changes they would make, he couldn't help but picture the improvements in the Egans' or the Murphys' apartment.

"Yes, it is." He gripped the feeling of accomplishment as the carriage rolled away, hoping to drive out everything else.

* * *

Sitting next to Miss Darlington that evening in the Sherwoods' drawing room had brought with it the cheerful numbness he'd hoped for. She'd entertained herself by finding out how very little Prince knew of Preston and Isabella's wedding. Everyone was talking of it, she assured him, and she was ever so disappointed that he couldn't tell her more. He would have to omit the fact that it was a topic of gossip when he reported to Isabella and Preston. It would only unnerve Isabella, when Prince was trying to convince her how fruitless worrying over the talk was.

"I believe her cousin-in-law will be her only attendant," he offered when Miss Darlington questioned him on that subject. He suspected she cared far less than she pretended, so perhaps this little bit of information would be enough for her.

She gasped and her eyes widened. He would not have caught the slight mocking to the gesture if he hadn't been skeptical already of her interest. "Mrs. Robert De Vries? But she's married!"

Prince chuckled. "I suppose that isn't done."

"Never," Miss Darlington declared, the dryness in her tone sarcastic and making Prince wonder if it was true that married women didn't usually act as bridesmaids. "And how is your tenement house?" she asked, changing the subject. She tilted her head, affecting a bored expression, but he caught the light in her eyes that he'd seen when she'd spoken of hospitals and playgrounds for the poor.

"Davies says it is coming very well. I'm concerning myself, at the moment, with where all my tenants will stay while we

tear up their homes.” In truth, he’d forced his mind upon it most of the afternoon. The amount of time his thoughts strayed to Isabella unnerved him, and he tried to excuse it by insisting to himself that Isabella was as interested as he was in his endeavor.

Miss Darlington’s brows furrowed, the bored look cast away. “That is a predicament.” She blinked and sighed. “I suppose there is little you can do to accommodate them.”

Prince nearly smiled. As one very practiced in hiding his true feelings under a mask of indifference, he recognized that mask on Miss Darlington. “I’ve been pondering it nonstop. I hope to come up with something. You don’t have a spare tenement of your own, do you, Miss Darlington? To house them all temporarily?”

Her lips quirked. “If I discover one, I shall pass along the information to you.” Her gaze drifted around the ornate room they sat in. “You’d think that with such large homes at our disposal, we could think of something,” she murmured.

He leaned toward her. “Your concern for hospitals and playgrounds is quite endearing, Miss Darlington.” He did not want her to be under the impression that he expected her to be a socialite concerned with only social events and gossip.

She laughed lightly. “Yes, it is very good to know I don’t have a heart of stone, isn’t it?” As cheery as her voice remained, the words held a note of challenge.

“Yes,” he replied. He sat back, puzzled, though it seemed unlikely that she would enlighten him on why she pretended not to care for issues he imagined she cared deeply for. He shifted, scanning the room. “I see a card table opening, Miss Darlington. Do you care to play euchre?” That would require only conversation on the game.

“Yes. That sounds enjoyable.” She avoided his gaze as he stood and offered his hand, laying hers lightly on his before she rose and crossed the room with him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ISABELLA STARED DOWN BEFORE HER at the fillet of beef in what was likely a rich, delicious mushroom sauce. She pushed some across her plate, glanced at Preston sitting beside her, and tried to ignore the turning of her stomach. She'd been able to take a few sips of the bisque and one bite of the fish. Her conversation with Preston earlier that afternoon was heavy on her mind.

He'd barely suppressed a smile when he'd said, "I've spoken with Mrs. Phillips."

Isabella had pressed her lips together, waiting to hear his report from the housekeeper over the gossip. What did he find funny about something that could derail his plans to leave her an inheritance? The grand wedding, the stories he made sure were talked of so no one doubted his love for her—he'd been so insistent that any little whisper of the true nature of their agreement could endanger their plans if Mr. Baxter heard the stories and used them to throw suspicion on Isabella. She didn't want to believe Mr. Baxter capable of scheming to take away the inheritance Preston wished to give her, but Preston's suspicions on that score hadn't seemed to lessen. Given the brothers' history, could she blame Preston for not trusting Prince as readily as she had?

"It seems the new maid—Della?" he asked. Isabella had nodded, though she'd heard the girl's name only a few times. "It seems she's very fond of Stanley, the footman."

"Oh" was all Isabella could say.

Preston had coughed just then, which she thought was very suspicious timing.

The evidence of her horrible misunderstanding was now all around her. Lukewarm tea had arrived when she'd ordered it after her visit with Preston. An air of disapproval had swirled around Margie as she prepared Isabella for dinner—a mark that Isabella had truly done wrong since her maid was usually unfailingly loyal to her. The footmen were stiff and avoided eye contact. She was not at all certain the cook hadn't done

something to her food.

She couldn't stop the horrible guilt from sitting in her stomach, leaving no room for food, even if it hadn't been sabotaged. Mr. Baxter had been completely right, and in the fog of her worries, Isabella hadn't stopped to consider that the servants might be as loyal to her as he'd claimed.

To top it all off, despite Preston insisting he was well enough to come down for dinner, he looked gaunter than she'd ever seen him. He'd been served only broth and bread, which he'd eaten little of, and his eyes kept glazing over, keeping him from any real conversation with anyone at the table.

How could she eat dinner when he must be very near to . . . leaving her?

"Isabella?" Mr. Baxter's voice drew her attention away from her plate and her dismal thoughts. He beamed at her. "Shall we have Nurse Higgins play for us this evening? I think we are all in need of something lively. Don't you agree, Mrs. De Vries?" He gave a fleeting glance to Isabella's aunt but turned his gaze back to Isabella.

Aunt Cassandra cast a hesitant look in Preston's direction before nodding. "Yes, perhaps we do."

"Aunt Cassandra should sing for us," Isabella suggested. The idea of dancing with Mr. Baxter again frightened her. Mrs. Phillips and Ida may not have been talking about her, but in the wake of it all, she couldn't press away her fear. He was strong and handsome, and he made her stomach flutter. It wouldn't do.

"I protest." Mr. Baxter shook his head, keeping his intent expression on Isabella. "I must have another dance with you." Had he been sitting beside her, she felt sure he would have taken that moment to lift her hand and kiss it. Her fingers twitched at the thought and then warmed.

"I think I should keep Preston company, unless he would like a dance." She attempted a smile as she turned to him.

He chuckled softly. Anything more tended to turn into a cough these days. "I think I'd better save my strength for a

dance on our wedding day.”

“See? You must let me dance with you before you’re a dull married woman,” Mr. Baxter declared. He studied her in a way that made her think he meant more to that statement than lighthearted banter. Could she be blamed for thinking the worst of the servants’ gossip when Mr. Baxter spoke like this with everyone listening?

Yes. She could. Perhaps they did wonder at the strange relationship between her and Preston, but the more she thought about her betrayal to them, the more she remembered their loyalty to him—and in turn her. They deserved better.

“I have so little time to convince you to throw Preston over for me,” Mr. Baxter was saying. He affected a silly pout that made Isabella laugh.

Preston laughed as well, the sound full of air. “Come now, Prince. Is it fair to undermine a man in my condition?” he said in mock protest.

“All’s fair in love and war, brother.” Mr. Baxter grinned.

Isabella smiled genuinely as well. Shockingly, her worries about Preston had lessened with all this ridiculous talk. She raised her eyes to meet Mr. Baxter’s, prepared to give him a lighthearted lecture on his behavior toward her, but she met an expression of concern, of actual friendship, and her reply fell away. She dropped her gaze.

She did *not* fancy Mr. Baxter.

And yet she and Preston were not in love; there was no disloyalty in her thinking how kind Mr. Baxter was. But she must dash away such thoughts. She’d complained about the servants’ behavior so swiftly that perhaps now they would take notice of his silly flirting.

“I . . . I’m quite devoted to Preston, as you know, Mr. Baxter,” she said instead, forcing a cheeriness that was not quite aligned with the heat growing in her chest. “You have no chance.” With the turn of her own thoughts, she couldn’t help but once again take in the room, worried that not everyone saw the joke in her words. But her aunt and uncle wore entertained

smiles as well, despite the fact that Isabella had not accomplished the lightheartedness the brothers had.

“Ah, but, Isabella, you never know what one dance might do.” Mr. Baxter, it seemed, was not willing to give up.

“You’re quite right. I might decide you’re too spoiled to stand,” she said, enjoying the way he burst into laughter.

“Impossible” was his declaration, and after another round of laughter, the topic passed.

Isabella snuck a few more observations of Mr. Baxter, smiling to herself. His flirting was audacious, but it had lightened dinner. For that she thanked him.

* * *

Two days away from the claustrophobic household had refreshed Prince. He had a smile on his face after his first dinner back with his brother and the De Vrieses. The conversation had been pleasant, and Prince had enjoyed Isabella’s company—along with her aunt and uncle, of course. He could admit that he looked forward to the moments of genuine friendship he shared with her.

While she played the piano to accompany her aunt’s singing, Preston had told him in undertones of the incident with the servants and the conversation Isabella had misunderstood. Though Prince felt for her and her embarrassment, he did hope it would soften her vigilance for gossip. Sharing amusement with Preston over it had done something good for Prince as well.

And the cheerful evening had proven that a little of the weight of Preston’s illness had lifted from Prince, even if his mind was concerned with some of the smaller problems at the tenement. Problems Davies had gladly let Prince turn his mind to as he took care of the larger issues. Davies had suggested that, if all went according to schedule, they could begin the renovations on May first, allowing the tenants to take advantage of the citywide moving day to have a greater opportunity for making temporary living arrangements. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better than nothing if Prince couldn’t

come up with anything better in the meantime.

Preston had gone to bed early after dinner, looking more tired than ever. Talk between Isabella and Mrs. De Vries had turned to wedding planning, so after listening for long enough to be polite, injecting a few teasing comments that made Isabella blush, and gaining no conversation with the snoozing Mr. De Vries, Prince had excused himself to the library to pore over papers and engineering journals, searching for inspiration.

He'd smiled when he found one of the engineering journals missing from the stack he'd left it on. Isabella had likely taken it. He wouldn't bother asking for its return. He hadn't found any use in it, and he liked imagining her curled up with it, a joyful smile on her face. That smile, and the times at dinner he'd been responsible for its appearance, enchanted him far too much. He'd even noted that the number of times she checked the room with worry had lessened, even in light of his flirting and talking of her throwing Preston over for him. If that was because of his words, it cheered him to think he might have done some small amount of good in her life.

He rolled his eyes at how pleased he was with himself over such a little thing and tried to turn his mind back to the problem at hand. It shouldn't be too difficult. With every step he and Davies took in the project, Prince found himself more and more driven. It was a bonus that having something to occupy his mind took it from other, less pleasurable, thoughts. Like the way Isabella had dabbed at Preston's lip with his napkin when she thought no one was paying attention to them. Seeing his brother decline into the status of old man was unpleasant. Watching how Isabella would be relegated too soon from a young bride to a nurse and caregiver made Prince's stomach turn. It had driven him to tease and flirt with her during dinner, hoping to lighten her mood.

The clock on the mantel soon chimed the midnight hour, making Prince look up in surprise. His cheek rested in his hand, and a paper fluttered to the desk beneath him. He'd fallen asleep, which meant he wouldn't do any good here in the library any longer. He pushed away from the desk,

stretching out his sleepy muscles before standing and making his way out into the dark grand hallway.

He stood there in silence, listening to the creaks of the old home, the soft hiss and clanks of the remaining gas lamps still lit. He took a long breath. Davenleigh had been their father's home, and Preston hadn't changed much in the house since they were younger, except to modernize where necessary.

Prince stepped toward the staircase, resting his hand on the wooden banister as he stared upward. The one lecture he could ever remember Preston getting from their father had been when he'd caught the two of them riding down these stairs on one of the mattresses from Preston's room. Prince smirked as he thought of his fifteen-year-old brother receiving a stern setdown, only to turn to five-year-old Prince and wink the moment their father was out of sight. Their relationship had been so simple then. The memory of a tall, healthy Preston brought to mind the vision of the frail, old man he'd been at dinner. Prince hurried up the stairs and away from such dour thoughts.

A few lamps remained lit upstairs as well, and as he crossed the landing to move toward his bedroom, Prince became aware of a figure sitting beside the door of Preston's room. Closer inspection showed long blonde hair scattered over the figure's shoulders and her white nightgown covered by a floral-patterned wrapper.

"Miss De Vries?" he asked in a low voice. Something about the intimacy of her night clothing and the quiet sniffles he now detected had him protecting himself with formality.

"Oh." Her voice came out in a breathy tone thick with emotion.

Prince hurried closer, holding out a hand to help her up from the floor, but she pinched her lips together and stared at it. The low lighting made it difficult to see much of her expression, so he crouched down next to her.

"Have you been sleepwalking, my dear?" he asked in a light tone. Discomfort with the situation made him fall back on making a joke.

Isabella let out a small laugh that turned into a half sob, half snort. She buried her face in a crinkled and wet handkerchief. She took a long breath and then said tremulously, barely raising her head, “If you don’t mind, could you pretend as though you haven’t seen me, Mr. Baxter?”

Since he was beginning to suspect she didn’t intend to move from her position, he lowered himself from his crouch to sit next to her, leaning his back against the wall.

“I take it this means no?” She waved at him.

“I confess my curiosity is piqued. What can you be doing here in the middle of the night?” He had to strain to keep his bright tone. As he’d confessed to Preston, he was no expert in consoling—quite the opposite. “It seems an odd place for . . .” He cleared his throat and left the sentence unfinished.

“I didn’t realize anyone would be about at this hour.” Her tone was high, that of a woman on the verge of more tears.

Perhaps the dimness of the hallway made him bolder. Or he realized that, as he couldn’t leave the poor woman crying in the hallway, he must make a valiant attempt to comfort her. He scooted closer, letting their arms touch, and turned to study her. Her cheeks were wet, even as she wiped at them. He pulled his own handkerchief from his unbuttoned waistcoat and held it out to her. She took it gratefully, mopping up more tears. It did little good, considering they still flowed.

“I was twelve when my father died,” she whispered, staring down at the handkerchiefs in her hands. “Everyone kept calling me a young lady, but sometimes at night I became so frightened that everyone would die and leave me alone. My aunt. My uncle. My cousins.” Her voice pitched lower with every sentence. “I would sneak out of my room and sit beside the door of my aunt and uncle’s room.” She turned to him, her expression so pitiful that Prince couldn’t muster a light remark. He couldn’t even think of one. He could only stare at her trembling lips and the red in her cheeks, the curls pressed against one side of her head, wet with her tears. He longed to take away her pain, and the fact that he couldn’t made his chest ache as she continued. “But sitting out here will not stop

Preston from . . . from . . .”

“Dying,” Prince finished for her in a soft voice. He reached around her shoulders and pulled her toward him, stroking the back of her hair as her sobs renewed.

What had she said about how they could comfort each other when his brother passed? How they would remember him, tell stories of him to keep his memory alive? If there was any chance Prince could ease this pain of hers, even for a moment, he’d take it.

“Whenever I was disappointed,” he began in a halting voice, “Preston would bring me jumbles.” He felt Isabella take a deep breath, her sobs quieting as she listened to him talk about his favorite cookie as a child. “He would convince our cook to make them, and we’d hide them in his room. He wouldn’t tell my parents, and I could eat as many as I liked.”

“Just as I thought.” She hiccuped, and her voice was muffled, her face pressed as it was against his shoulder. “Spoiled.”

Prince laughed. “When my father died,” he went on, his voice stronger, “Preston took me out on his yacht, but not to play pirates. He said everyone expected me to be a strong young man, but there, on the yacht, I must cry all I wanted and be sad.”

Prince had curled up against Preston much the same way Isabella was curled up to him now, and he’d cried. But when his mother died? Though Prince had remembered Preston’s words, his actions had been those he’d learned from his mother. He’d grieved behind closed doors and placed a limit on the time he could miss her.

“We will wave goodbye to New York for five minutes,” his mother had said when they boarded the steamer for Europe. “And then we’ll remember what a grand adventure we’re going to have and never miss it again.”

He clenched his jaw. Life with his mother *had* been a grand adventure. Isabella felt the same about Preston, from the stories she’d told. It was better for them both to hang on to

that, rather than spend time crying over something they couldn't get back.

"Come," he said in a gentle voice all the same. "You're alone with me in only your nightgown and wrapper in a dark hallway at midnight. We must get you back to your room before you're ruined and I'm forced to marry you to save our reputations."

Isabella pulled back, letting out a watery giggle. "I suspect that's your intention. You've probably bribed some maid to happen upon us."

He grinned. "Yes, and I'm feeling quite guilty about that now, seeing how smitten you are with my brother." He gave a mock sigh as he stood and helped her to her feet. "I shall give up my amour for you." They had moved enough into the light that he caught pink rising in her cheeks.

"Perhaps you'd better let me go on alone," she said, becoming more herself—concerned about the whispers and gossip—possibly because of the way he was staring at her. "After what I thought about the housekeeper, they'll be more suspicious of my relationship with you."

Prince bit back a reply that she hadn't learned what she should from that experience. "I may be spoiled, but I cannot allow you to make your way back to your room by yourself in the state you're in," he chided. He pulled her arm through his and continued down the hallway with her.

"You won't tell anyone of this?" she asked softly.

"Your secret is safe with me," he promised.

Judging by the shadow of a smile that flitted across her lips, he might not be so horrible at consoling after all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ISABELLA TRIED VALIANTLY, BUT SHE couldn't stop the heat from rushing to her face when she walked into the dining room the next morning and found only Mr. Baxter sitting at the table. He looked up, blinking in surprise before hurriedly standing from his chair.

"Good morning, Isabella," he said, his voice tinged with disbelief. He moved around the table, taking a chair for her and holding it while she sat. "I confess I didn't think I'd see you about so early this morning."

"I like to help Nurse Higgins with Preston's breakfast," she said.

Mr. Baxter moved to the side of her chair, peering down at her, and she averted her gaze from him. "I don't think he'd miss you this one morning."

She shrugged and swallowed back emotion. She had shown plenty the night before, and she must marshal it. Once her tears started, she may not get them to abate for some time. "Yes, but I cannot afford to miss one . . . in case there might not be another," she said in a low voice.

"Ah." Mr. Baxter's answer was short, and he gave a tight nod.

The heat in her cheeks intensified as she stared down at the table. To think of the state that he'd seen her in the night before. She did hope he would keep his promise about not telling anyone. Their time together had been innocent, and it had been an immense comfort to Isabella to have him confide in her as he had, but if anyone in the household knew she'd sat with him while in her nightclothes, it would be a scandal. She had tried hard last night to remember what Mr. Baxter had told her before—that they could trust the servants. That not everyone was out to spread gossip. Her determination to do better was weak this morning with so much at stake.

She poured herself a cup of coffee, sipping it and avoiding any more conversation until she'd settled her emotions back down. She now regretted not asking for some coffee and toast

to be sent up to her room, but she normally took breakfast downstairs, chatting with her aunt and uncle or sitting for a few moments sipping her coffee alone, and she hadn't wanted to alert anyone that she'd spent half the night crying in the hallway. To the best of her knowledge, her aunt and uncle didn't know about the nights she'd spent huddled outside their bedroom.

She was also worried whether she could trust Mr. Baxter not to use last night against her in the future. He'd been so genuine that she found it hard to believe in Preston's suspicions that Prince might fight the will. Preston had told her his brother had connections that would make it possible to throw suspicion on Preston's motives, that he would use Preston's sickness to prove he hadn't been in his right mind when adding Isabella to the will. He worried over so many things, but surely Mr. Baxter wouldn't stoop so low.

"Tell me," she said when the knot in her throat had dissipated and she could make her voice bright. "What was it that so occupied your time in the library yesterday evening?"

A teasing smile lit Mr. Baxter's face, and it made her think of the little things he'd said the night before to ease her burden. Him sharing them with her had been the true comfort, but his jokes to lighten the mood were appreciated as well. She had needed the smiles.

"Avoiding wedding plans," he said.

Isabella laughed at his mischievous look. "It's not that bad."

"When I'm not the groom, it is." He raised an eyebrow and tilted his head at her, his eyes dancing.

Isabella widened her eyes, glancing over to the footman who stood sentinel at the door should they want something not already offered at the buffet. He'd avoided her gaze studiously though—more consequences of Isabella's accusations, she assumed—so she might find it difficult to catch his attention if she did want to request something.

She glared at Mr. Baxter. "You really are impossible," she whispered. If there were any whispers about last night, his

ridiculous flirting would take on a whole new tone that could be misinterpreted easily.

“Isabella.” He sighed. “You cannot spend every moment worrying about what the servants are going to say.” He cut a piece of his bacon and put it in his mouth.

Of course, he wouldn’t understand that Preston insisted their courtship look as real as possible in order to thwart any plans Prince might have to challenge it. “I would rather not add speculation about my relationship with you,” she said in a huff. She gave him a pointed look, and when his expression turned confused, she said in a bare whisper, “Especially after last night.”

Mr. Baxter let out a loud laugh. “What a story that would be. I think Preston would find it hilarious, don’t you?” He lowered his own voice. “I promised, didn’t I? You’re safe.”

She narrowed her eyes. She suspected he’d gotten his carefree attitude toward what people thought from his mother. She must have had to weather quite a bit of gossip herself when she and Mr. Baxter had left New York for the Continent. But then again, she’d gone to Paris, far out of earshot of any rumors.

“What did Mr. Davies have to say about your tenement?” Isabella asked, changing the subject.

Prince smiled in his charming way, but he acquiesced to the change. “Everything is going smoothly so far. He showed me all the ingenious improvements we’ll make to attempt to make the apartments a little more livable, and we met with some of the tenants.”

“Are the planned improvements everything you discussed before?” Isabella leaned forward, wishing she’d been able to see the plans herself.

“Much of them, yes.” He tapped a couple of fingers on the table on the other side of his plate. “We may have to wait to begin renovations until next spring so that our tenants have somewhere to go if they wish while the changes are being made.”

Isabella frowned. “Many of them won’t have that option.”

“That’s what I was working on last night.” His downturned expression must mirror hers. “Davies believes some will not mind a little dust. It will likely be better than what they might find elsewhere.”

Isabella took several bites of her toast, mulling over the dilemma and not coming to any conclusions either. “It makes one feel quite guilty for having two homes with so many empty rooms, doesn’t it? Do you think Preston would mind if we put them all up here?” she said, grinning.

Mr. Baxter let out a half laugh. “Or perhaps at his home in town?”

Isabella finished her coffee and moved to leave, even though a part of her wished to stay and discuss Mr. Baxter’s project with him. She’d already told him she’d gotten up this morning to spend time with Preston. And even if Mr. Baxter’s undertaking was fascinating, they would have more time in the future to discuss it. She couldn’t say the same for Preston.

“Good day, Mr. Baxter,” she said as she stood. “Perhaps you could come up and tell Preston about the latest developments.”

He stood with her but hesitated before he answered. “Yes. Perhaps this afternoon.”

“If you do, I promise to tell you about the time Preston snuck me into one of my parents’ balls.” She smiled at him before taking her leave of the room, already thinking about the stories Mr. Baxter might tell to match hers.

* * *

Isabella was glad when Mr. Baxter took her up on her offer and spent a nice hour in Preston’s company that afternoon before excusing himself to spend more time studying in the library, hoping for inspiration on the puzzle of the tenant housing. It had taken over his thoughts, it seemed, though Isabella suspected he preferred those thoughts to pondering the imminent death of his brother.

He made the effort in the following days as well to come and spend time with Preston and Isabella, talking of a myriad

of subjects, but more often than not, the brothers regaled Isabella with some tale of their childhood. It was a wonder they had so many stories, considering that they had been separated when Mr. Baxter was so young.

Two days before they would all remove from Davenleigh and go back to town to prepare for the impending wedding, which would take place in five days, they sat in the sitting room adjacent to Preston's bedroom, and he was even able to sit upright in a chair for most of the visit instead of lying in his bed.

After Isabella related to Mr. Baxter a story about the pony Preston had bought for her for her birthday, Prince turned wryly to his brother. "A pony, Preston?"

Preston returned the gaze, the ghost of a smile on his gaunt face. "Anna insisted," he said with a shrug. He was speaking of her more and more. The loving smile was what worried Isabella the most. She could not, of course, blame him for a wish to escape a body so riddled with pain, but she longed to hold him here with her. How could she bear to lose one of her greatest friends? "One lives and learns," Preston said, interrupting her musings. "There are some worthwhile extravagances. If you wish, I'll purchase one for you now to make up for my failings before."

Isabella tensed, waiting for Mr. Baxter to make an excuse to flee, as he so often did, when this kind of talk of the past came up in their conversations. To her surprise, he gave a bark of laughter.

"I would agree in an instant, except I fear I may be too large to enjoy a pony now." He settled back into his chair, showing a comfort in the situation that Isabella hadn't seen on him in past visits. Perhaps it was because Preston sat in a chair, a hint of his former strength returned, instead of lying in bed, where his failing health was too obvious.

Preston chuckled. "Perhaps a puppy instead?" He arched a brow. "With a diamond-studded collar?"

Isabella stared between the men as they both laughed at something she didn't understand, then let her gaze settle on

Preston. His countenance, though weary and sickly, had an air of tranquility to it. It both soothed and worried her. Pain racked his body every day, and he often refused the morphine Nurse Higgins offered to alleviate it. He wanted to remain lucid for Isabella, he claimed. But it was for his brother as well, she suspected. Preston may claim some mistrust remained, but there was a level of trust here as well. He wouldn't talk so fondly of Anna with Mr. Baxter here to witness it if he really believed his brother might turn on Isabella after he was gone. That was something.

"You've been stuck inside too much of late, Bella," Preston said, interrupting her thoughts.

"That is a consequence of winter," Isabella said, brushing off his worries. "It is often too cold outside to leave the house. I look forward to spring, don't you?"

Preston raised an eyebrow at her. "There is always the greenhouse to enjoy. I would like your opinion on what to send you for your bouquet."

"I would enjoy a stroll." Mr. Baxter stood, perhaps too quickly. "Do you mind if I join you?" For all his comfort in the room, he wouldn't pass over an excuse to withdraw.

She cast him an apologetic look. "Forgive me, but I think I would prefer to stay with Preston for the time being." Mr. Baxter gave her a short nod of understanding, which warmed her insides and reminded her of the way he'd wrapped his arms around her and stroked her hair. She'd thought too much on those moments in the hallway. Preston had little strength for affection, and in any case, Isabella would not burden him with her sorrow at his diminishing health. "You may send me whatever you wish, Preston. Or perhaps Mr. Baxter will come back with some suggestions."

Preston's gaze was on his brother, his jaw tight. At Mr. Baxter's quick offer to join her in the greenhouse? Day by day she tried to dismiss Preston's suspicions, the remnants of the bitter relationship they'd carried on before. Just a moment ago she'd considered his suspicions all but buried. Mr. Baxter had proved them wholly unfounded. He'd changed.

To her relief, Preston's expression relaxed. "I intend to take a nap so I may join everyone for dinner. Your cousin and his wife will be here this evening to send us off, and I would like to enjoy the company as much as possible. Go for a walk." He avoided adding that she should do so in Mr. Baxter's company. "Nurse Higgins is very good at watching over me and seeing to my needs."

It *had* been several days since Isabella had walked outside. "Very well," she consented.

She and Mr. Baxter left Preston's room, going their separate ways to retrieve warmer clothing. Isabella smiled in the mirror at the long, fitted coat and straightened out the collar. Then she stopped herself. What did it matter what she looked like on her walk with Mr. Baxter? She quickly dismissed her thoughts, hurrying out of her room and toward the front door.

Mr. Baxter met her in the grand hall and held out an arm for her as she approached. "You look quite becoming in that ensemble," he said.

She blushed at the praise, but she forced herself to forget it just as quickly. "Thank you, Mr. Baxter."

He leaned his head toward her as they exited the house and made their way to the greenhouse. "I believe, now that I've heard you snort, Isabella"—she gasped at his reference, which widened his grin—"that you ought to call me by my Christian name."

"You promised you would keep my secret," she chided. It was difficult to be truly annoyed with him. The silly way he flirted with her lent a boyish sort of appeal to his antics, and with the sun shining above them, she found it hard to resist his cheerfulness. The sun did little to warm the air, but the snow sparkled in its light, adding to her lightened mood. She could not call him Prince. No, that would be taking things too far. Her mind ran away with daydreams too often as it was.

"I haven't told a soul." He made a show of holding up his free hand, as if taking an oath.

She laughed and tried not to lean too close to him for

warmth as they made their way along the stone path. “I almost feel as though I should apologize for getting a pony when you did not,” she said as they entered the large outbuilding. The sun had done its work here, warming the place so that it was almost comfortable.

Mr. Baxter smiled. “I told you how he used to buy me cookies. Preston spoiled me as a boy, and when I was . . . away, he took to spoiling you. It’s in his nature.”

“I think he missed you very much,” she said quietly, hoping that talking of that time would not make Mr. Baxter run away from her.

He peered at the path ahead of them. “I think Preston and my mother might both have been a little stubborn,” he admitted. “And later, perhaps I was as well.”

“Mr. Baxter—”

“Prince,” he corrected, turning to her.

She dipped her chin in embarrassment, worried about why his stare had her swallowing uncomfortably. She shook her head. “I shouldn’t,” she said.

He pretended shock. “I am to be your brother.”

“People will—”

Now he shook his head. “You cannot stop them from talking. It’s not worth worrying over. Even if the servants had been speaking of you when you overheard them, Preston’s interference would only have confirmed, in their minds, that you’re smitten with me.”

Heat flooded Isabella’s face. “You know of that?”

“Preston told me,” Mr. Baxter confirmed, his eyes dancing with merriment. He didn’t even try to hide his amusement at her misstep like Preston had.

Isabella huffed at him. “So I’m to ignore it when such things could damage Preston’s reputation? Could ruin—” She cut herself off from admitting Preston’s suspicions. “Could ruin me?” she finished instead.

He sighed. “Isabella. Trying to combat gossip with perfect behavior is a fool’s errand. There will be gossip no matter how well you play your part. You and I know the truth.” He held both of her hands in his, staring down at her, the same concern in his expression as that night outside Preston’s door.

Did she know the truth? Her relationship with Preston was platonic in every sense, the means to an end to help him settle a fortune on her. To give her independence. To keep his younger brother from challenging his wishes.

But Prince?

Her mind caught hold on his name. Her fingers burned where he held them. His first name felt so much more intimate than when she called Preston by his.

“Prince,” she tried, clearing her throat when the name came out as little more than a whisper.

He pulled her closer to him. “Yes, Isabella?”

The very purposeful way he said her name sent a shiver up her spine. She scrambled to remember what she’d meant to say. He waited, his eyebrows rising with every second that passed.

“I believe Preston very much regrets his actions all those years ago.” She nearly snapped her fingers in triumph at remembering.

Prince tilted his head. “I’m beginning to see that,” he said in a soft voice.

“That is . . . good.” She fought against the temptation to lean closer.

Prince, it seemed, did not. He lifted his hand, brushing a thumb gently along her jawline, his eyes intent on hers. She drew in a deep breath, stepping away from him. He dropped his hand but didn’t douse his fiery gaze.

“I believe I’m supposed to be finding my wedding flowers.” Her voice was nearly as hoarse as it had been the night she’d cried in his arms, but this time for reasons altogether different. “What do you suggest?” she asked.

He finally turned away, peering at the flowers around them, before stepping toward a pot of full red roses. He fingered the petals before turning to her, his expression now wiped of any of the intensity it had held moments ago. “Perhaps roses?” he suggested in a benign voice.

Yet he’d chosen red roses, a symbol of passion and love.

Her cheeks flamed, his insinuation so much worse than his blistering gaze from before. She whirled and marched on through the greenhouse. “I’m not sure those set quite the right tone.”

Even with the chill of the air around her, heat licked at her face, and her heart was beating too quickly at the idea of Prince—perhaps she had better stick with Mr. Baxter—harboring any kind of passion for her. Really, they hardly knew each other, though the weeks they’d spent together at Davenleigh might make her feel otherwise. She drew in a sharp breath. He was to be her brother. She stopped in front of a pot of small blue flowers. She didn’t turn back to him when she spoke but kept her voice bright, as though the moments before hadn’t unsettled everything inside her.

“I’ve always been rather fond of forget-me-nots,” she said. Hopefully he understood her unspoken message. She’d made a promise to Preston, and Prince, no matter how fascinating, would not make her fail to remember that. “They will look very nice with a white dress, don’t you think?”

When she next glanced up at him as he approached where she stood, he kept the same placid look on his face. “Any flower here will look lovely.”

She let her shoulders slump in gratitude that he hadn’t added some embarrassing compliment. “Yes. Your brother has such a vast collection; all of them are beautiful.” Her eyes were drawn to the orchids Preston had shown her. Next to the pale-pink flowers he’d told her were rare and valuable were more orchids in a deep red. Her blush rose again, and though she thought mixing those with a white lily might make a wonderful bouquet, she wouldn’t dare mention anything that might cause Prince to get the wrong idea.

Long after her cheeks had cooled and they'd turned their conversation to innocent, amiable topics, her heart skipped a time or two as she thought of Prince's warm fingers on her cheeks and foolish musings of how it might have felt if he had kissed her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PRINCE HAD LECTURED HIMSELF AT least a dozen times during the opera performance to keep his eyes on the stage and off Isabella, who sat beside her aunt in front of him and Mr. De Vries in Preston's box at the opulent Metropolitan Opera House. Over the past three days he'd tried to find a way to apologize to Isabella for his behavior in the greenhouse, but she'd avoided all mentions of it and their night in the hallway. For a man who had first intended to flirt to make sure he retained his inheritance and then later to lighten her burdens, his mind had too easily been taken over by thoughts of how soft her skin had felt underneath his fingertips and how little he could tolerate the idea of her marrying Preston, though for reasons far different from when he'd first learned of their engagement.

What had he tangled himself up in? He had no doubt of his brother's love for Isabella De Vries. It shone in Preston's every action. It did tend more toward that of a loyal friendship, but admittedly, Prince didn't spend much time with him and Isabella. There might be affectionate moments he missed. Isabella was fond of him as well. That was evident by her unrelenting tender care. By her need to stay at his side at all times. Had Prince deluded himself that hers was the care of a dear friend and not that of a woman in love?

It was a relief when the intermission came. Though he took Preston's place as Isabella's escort and she took his arm as the two couples moved from the box to call on friends in their own boxes, at least he couldn't stare at her as he had been doing for the first act.

Before they reached the box of Mrs. Fairhaven, whom Isabella wanted to call on to give her news of Preston, he spotted Miss Darlington and Mr. Fields headed in their direction. He would focus on her and his uncomplicated feelings for her for a few minutes.

She beamed at them. "Mr. Baxter. Miss De Vries. So you've all returned from your retreat to Davenleigh."

"Miss Darlington," Isabella greeted.

Miss Darlington then introduced Mr. Fields to Isabella before the conversation turned back to Isabella and Prince's recent stay in the country.

"And has your brother recovered? I don't see him here with you." Miss Darlington glanced over the crowd behind Prince and Isabella, but Prince didn't even see Mr. and Mrs. De Vries in the crush of people going to and fro.

"Well enough to return for his wedding," Prince said.

Miss Darlington turned to Isabella. "I've heard it's to be a rather small affair."

"Yes. Once Preston has—well, we shall probably have a larger celebration later," Isabella replied.

"I'm sure it will be spectacular," Miss Darlington said with a light laugh.

Prince himself was shocked at the money Preston was spending on the wedding. For a man who had put up such a fuss about Prince's spending, some of Preston's own expenses were so extravagant that he would have called them foolish at one time.

Isabella's cheeks turned a deep shade of pink. "Preston will not be deterred. He says he will spare no expense." Her laugh sounded forced, though that confused Prince. Preston doted on Isabella. Was she embarrassed by the expenditures, given his treatment of Prince?

Miss Darlington's brows furrowed as well as she studied Isabella, and then her gaze went to the way Isabella's arm looped around Prince's elbow. He ignored the glance, though he did notice that Miss Darlington had divested herself of her Mr. Fields's arm.

Isabella swallowed. "Mr. Baxter has been quite busy since we returned, dealing with his tenement house. This is the first we have seen of him."

She must have caught Miss Darlington's gaze as well, though she didn't remove her arm. Prince was grateful for that. Separating herself from him would've only drawn more attention.

“And have you solved your problem of where to house your tenants?” Miss Darlington asked. She blinked slowly, her expression already bored, but Prince saw through the act to the curiosity in her eyes.

“Miss De Vries did wonder whether Preston would mind us putting them up at Davenleigh.” In truth, Prince was no closer to discovering a solution beyond Davies’s original suggestion to hold off the construction and hope that the bulk of the tenants could find other housing.

“Oh!” Isabella said in a soft voice at his side. She turned to Prince, squeezing his arm. “Pr—Mr. Baxter, what if we *could* find people to take tenants in who couldn’t find anywhere else? Your brother’s home likely has extra rooms in the servants’ quarters, and I know Uncle Benjamin’s does. Might there be a way to house a family here and there?”

Miss Darlington’s chin came up as she turned back to Isabella. “There might be a few people with hearts left in this city,” she drawled.

Isabella bounced slightly, nodding at Miss Darlington. She took the opportunity, in her excitement, to withdraw her arm and turn her attention to Miss Darlington. It was smooth enough to appear natural, but by the pink lingering in her cheeks, Prince suspected it had more to do with her fixation with what people would say about them. “I know it sounds ridiculous, but perhaps some of the women could help in the houses and they might pay a little rent. It would be the same as if you hired someone for work, wouldn’t it?”

“More people might be willing if the families had references from employers and such.” Miss Darlington’s voice almost sounded excited, but Prince didn’t dare look at her in fear that she would sweep away the progressive lady in favor of the bored socialite.

Isabella’s nod picked up speed. “I believe I know a few ladies who might be willing to help organize such an effort.”

“And I,” Miss Darlington added.

Isabella brought Prince back into the conversation by

turning to him. “Some of them will be able to find housing elsewhere, but we might be able to help those who can’t. We can organize an effort.” Her eyes danced, and Prince fought not to lose himself in them, especially in front of Miss Darlington.

“You’re fortunate you’ll be married soon and able to devote time to such worthy efforts,” Miss Darlington said.

As she studied Isabella, her gaze held hunger, and Prince didn’t believe it was for the husband Isabella was soon to have but the freedom to make change. It was too bad Miss Darlington hid so much behind her father’s money and her mother’s insistence on a good marriage. Preston would approve of her eagerness to do good.

“We must go see Mrs. Fairhaven,” Isabella said, her expression reluctant as she smiled at Miss Darlington. She reached out to take Miss Darlington’s hand. “I look forward to seeing you again to discuss our ideas,” she said warmly.

Miss Darlington smiled wider than Prince had ever seen grace her lovely face. “I, too, Miss De Vries.” They said their goodbyes, and Prince once again offered his arm to lead Isabella to Mrs. Fairhaven’s box.

“Am I to be involved in this endeavor at all, Isabella?” he asked as he paused at the door.

Her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink. “Well, of course.” She gave a shrug, and her expression turned slightly saucy. “We shall keep you up to date on our progress.”

He glanced over his shoulder, catching sight of Miss Darlington’s back as she and Mr. Fields returned to the Darlington box. He was intrigued. Her mother’s pointed remarks about saving any philanthropy work for after she was married made him suspicious that Miss Darlington had a charitable agenda once that day came—whether it be hospitals or playgrounds or finding homes for his displaced tenants. If he could find a way for Preston to see that side of her, he might not disapprove so much. Would her spending Preston’s money on the poor of New York be enough for his brother to overcome his dislike of Mr. and Mrs. Darlington’s showy

spending? He intended to marry Miss Darlington, after all—it was too complicated to consider a future with Isabella in that role. Not as his brother’s widow.

“I know it may not work,” Isabella said, her expression holding enough animation for both her and Miss Darlington. “But it’s a start, don’t you think?”

He reached to pat her hand where she held on to his elbow, letting his fingers linger over hers as they stepped inside the box. “It’s more than I’ve come up with, my dear.”

Her gaze moved first to their hands and then to study his face. This time he kept his hands to himself—well, except for where he clasped her fingers so she wouldn’t break the connection, and while she didn’t pull her hand from his arm, she did tug him toward Mrs. Fairhaven.

Their visit with Mrs. Fairhaven and her guests was brief, but the older woman did spend all of it asking genuinely about Preston. Isabella assured her that he was doing “as well as can be expected,” her smile marred by the sadness in the words as she expertly avoided revealing Preston’s true fate.

Prince was glad to pull her away so they could return to their own box for the second half. By the shallow way she breathed, he surmised she was on the brink of tears. It relieved him when her shoulders relaxed as they stepped back inside their box. He didn’t broach the subject with her.

“You know,” she said, her voice bright as he led her back to her seat at the front of the box. “It was practically your idea.”

“My idea?” He made sure to keep his voice lighthearted, but he didn’t have to fake his confusion at what she was talking about.

“You told Miss Darlington about putting the tenants up at your brother’s home. I wouldn’t have thought of it if I hadn’t heard you say that.” She settled into her seat, gazing out across the audience and, he thought, avoiding meeting his eye.

Ah. She meant the discussion with Miss Darlington. Perhaps it was validation that Isabella liked Miss Darlington too, but he warmed at the thought of their friendship. “I was repeating

what you had already said. Admit it; you're brilliant."

"Most clever," Mr. De Vries chimed in. "What has she thought of this time?"

Isabella waved away his praise. "I'm quite certain you won't think so once you've heard this idea, Uncle. It's ridiculous, I assure you, but it might work anyway."

Mrs. De Vries raised her eyebrows at Isabella, but Mr. De Vries shook his head. "Some of the greatest ideas were once looked upon as ludicrous," he declared.

Prince thought he'd best explain, especially to show Isabella's guardians that he approved of the endeavor, though like her, he wasn't sure how successful it might be. "Isabella thinks perhaps we can persuade some wealthy families to open their houses—or at least their servants' quarters and such—to tenants who may be displaced while Davies and I renovate. She mentioned there may be extra servants' rooms at your own home, for instance."

Isabella stiffened right along with her aunt, who took a deep breath before she responded. "I think the idea is very charitable, though I find it difficult to think of opening my home to a stranger."

Isabella nodded. "I think many others will feel the same. As I said, it may not work at all, but it's a start, and perhaps there are some ways to make the idea easier. Let's think on it while we watch the performance." She turned her attention to the stage, one of the few in the opera house doing so. Mrs. De Vries murmured agreement. Isabella cast one more look in Prince's direction, her frown communicating the possible uphill battle they had before them.

He would remember to assure her that, with luck, perhaps the number of tenants needing temporary quarters would be few. And then he fixed his gaze in such a way that no one would be able to tell whether he was enthralled by the performance on the stage or the exquisite lady before him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ISABELLA LOOKED UP FROM THE book she'd been reading to Preston, checking on him from her perch in a chair near his bed. Since their return to the city, she'd been coming to visit in the morning to read to him and chat with him before returning home for some time and then coming back in the evening to have dinner. Today she'd come to his room to find Nurse Higgins already sitting with him, squinting at the sewing project in her hands.

"Isabella?"

Preston's weak voice made her blink. "Yes?" She tilted her head at him, studying how wan his smile looked even though his eyes danced with a tease. Usually he nodded off while she read to him. She'd found today's reading, *Edison and His Inventions*, enthralling. She'd discovered it a few days before sitting on the desk in the library. She was sure Prince had left it for her, and the small token warmed her heart.

"Are you pondering how to follow after Mr. Edison's footsteps?" Preston asked.

"I was making sure you hadn't fallen asleep," she said, running her gaze down the page to pick up where she'd left off.

"I see."

She glanced up to see Preston smirking at her. She smiled back but returned her focus to the book. The last several days had seen Preston worsen, perhaps, she thought, because he'd insisted on attending a handful of small social events, and they'd drained him of what little strength remained. Their wedding was only two days off, but she worried he might not be able to stand for even the few minutes it would take to pronounce them man and wife. All his planning for the overdone event would be useless if he couldn't attend.

She told herself that none of that mattered. The marriage would be in name only. "*You and I know the truth,*" Prince had said. The people that mattered knew the truth. But would that be enough for her when whispers raged all over the city

about Preston marrying quickly and dying days afterward? How could she bear people thinking the worst of him when they did love each other, just not romantically?

At the thought of love, Prince's face darted across her mind. The way his fingers had brushed across her cheek. How she'd caught him staring at her during the opera the night before. She shook the thought out.

"I'm sorry," she said to Preston, excusing her woolgathering. "I have so much to think about. The wedding, you know."

"And what will happen after," he guessed in a weak voice. "What people will say." His smile was knowing.

"You know I can't help it." She winced at how sharp she sounded. What other people said about Preston and Prince didn't seem to bother them at all. She had the advantage with Preston, though, as he had to gather strength to speak, so she went on quickly. "You shouldn't lecture me." She made sure her tone was lighter now. "You're bent on a ridiculous wedding, all to prevent gossip."

He huffed. "To protect your inheritance from my brother's possible intervention."

"Another judgment that is perhaps unfounded." She raised an eyebrow. Preston seemed to genuinely regret his treatment of Prince and his mother, and Prince's behavior at Davenleigh and since they'd returned had been kind and genuine. Why did Preston hold on to years-old grudges? She could only blame his cancer.

Preston met her gaze for several long moments. "Perhaps," he finally conceded. A trickle of relief worked its way through Isabella at the softening in his features. She returned to reading, wishing her voice did not sound so thick and that emotion hadn't built pressure behind her eyes, threatening release.

A knock on the door a moment later was a blessing. *Please let it be Prince*, she thought, excusing her traitorous thoughts just this once. He would understand how difficult it was to

watch Preston waste away. Even if he didn't believe he would grieve for his brother, he'd mourned his mother, had watched her suffer, though Isabella gathered his mother's decline had happened rapidly. He understood Isabella and supported her when he could.

The butler, Williams, entered. "Miss Rosalind Darlington to see Miss De Vries." He presented a card for Isabella to take.

"Miss Darlington?" Preston said, his surprise evident and his tone sharp.

Isabella guessed that he must be in pain. It happened frequently.

She stood and collected the card. "Your brother introduced us at the opera yesterday evening. She would like to help with Mr. Baxter's problem of displaced tenants. I discussed our plans with you this morning."

"Yes, I remember." Preston's voice remained cold.

She turned to study him. "Shall Williams tell her I'm unavailable just now? I can always return her call later." If Preston was in pain, he needed the distraction, and Miss Darlington would understand.

"No. Go ahead and see her. I would like to rest now." He lifted a hand a few inches above the bed where it had rested, weakly waving at her.

She hurried back toward his bed, leaning over to place a kiss on his cheek. His skin was papery thin and chill to the touch. "Then, I'll bid you farewell now so I don't wake you later." She frowned at the tense lines in his expression.

"Goodbye, Bella." His voice was gentle for the first time since Williams had entered the room.

She followed the butler from the room. "Tell Miss Darlington I'll be there in a moment," she said, surprising herself with how easily her tone had taken on that of mistress of the house. She supposed so much time ordering Preston and Nurse Higgins around had prepared her for that responsibility.

"Yes, Miss De Vries." Williams strode off.

Isabella took her time coming down the stairs, glancing around to make sure no servants were about before taking several deep breaths and trying to dismiss her melancholy. She'd seen so little of Prince in the days since they'd returned from Davenleigh that she didn't know why she'd expected him to come see her and Preston. She prayed he'd be there for her when Preston did . . . die. She swallowed back the pain that came with thinking the word. She must compose herself to see Miss Darlington. It wouldn't do any good to dwell on those thoughts now. She squared her shoulders and hurried the rest of the way to the drawing room, filling herself with courage and purpose. Working on Prince's project with Miss Darlington in the coming weeks would be a welcome distraction, she felt sure.

Ignoring another wave of emotion at the thought, she stepped into the drawing room to find Miss Darlington there with another young woman.

"Miss De Vries." Miss Darlington came forward, her beautiful face open and smiling. She was far more cheerful than Isabella had observed at the opera. Isabella thought perhaps that might have been because of the way she'd held Prince's arm. "We called at your uncle's home and were told you were visiting here. We hope you don't mind that we were bold enough to follow you, as your aunt and uncle expected you to be gone for some time."

"Not at all." Isabella gestured to a grouping of seats in the rather expansive room. A time or two Isabella had considered how she might make the too-large room cozier and more inviting. Maybe there was a smaller room she could use for personal calls once she and Preston were married.

Miss Darlington took a seat and then turned toward the young woman with her. "I impose upon you even further, but I felt it necessary. May I present to you Miss Lily Holland?"

Isabella nodded at the young woman. "A pleasure, Miss Holland."

Miss Holland returned the greeting but then turned to Miss Darlington expectantly. It gave Isabella a chance to study the

woman. She was much shorter than Miss Darlington, and she had a round face and full lips. She was as pretty as Miss Darlington, but not in the same elegant way. There was something shrewd in her eyes, a confidence Isabella envied.

“I’ve brought Miss Holland because she’s going to be drumming up support for our new project and dealing with the figures. She has an excellent head for numbers, and we mustn’t let Prince tell us to leave all the business to the men. I have no intention of letting them have all the fun.”

Isabella blinked at her and gave Miss Holland another glance. “No, of course not,” she murmured. For her part, Isabella hadn’t even considered that Prince, or anyone else involved with the project, would try to keep the women from working with them. Miss Darlington, it was clear, had exactly those suspicions. *From experience?* Isabella wondered.

Miss Darlington was already galloping onward. “I’ve already got quite the list of people willing to provide temporary rooms—with the proper references, as we thought. That was quite brilliant, Miss De Vries.” She beamed at Isabella as though it had been her idea, when in fact, as Isabella remembered it, Miss Darlington had been the one to think of asking for references. “My dear friend Mrs. Gage is going to be helping us talk to the tenants. I think you had better go with her. You’ve definitely got the kindest disposition of us all, and Mr. Baxter says you’re quite clever. An inventor! I think that’s marvelous.”

“Well . . . thank you. I’m sure he must have exaggerated—”

“Nonsense.” Miss Darlington waved her off. “If we’re going to be friends—and I sincerely hope we are going to be friends—I won’t hear you dismiss your intelligence. There are no men here to play to—no pretending that must be done to save their egos.” Her eyes snapped.

Isabella had never played to a man’s ego in all her life, but she suspected Miss Darlington knew exactly what that meant. Isabella gave the woman a wide smile. “All right, then, but I must say, you’ve gone forward with far more confidence and cleverness than I might have muddled about with.”

“We’ve been waiting for this moment, I assure you.” Miss Darlington pressed her lips together. “You’re fortunate, Miss De Vries. You’re soon to be married, and no one will bat an eye if you choose to spend your time on one philanthropic project after another. As members of the society we belong to, we aren’t given the time to devote to such matters until we’re settled. Lily and I have figured out how to use our positions efficiently, but mind you, we are properly jealous of you.”

Isabella had given a lot of thought over the past few years to the independence marriage would bring to her, to the idea of no longer being a burden upon her aunt’s time. But she’d never wished it with as much fervor as Miss Darlington’s words held now.

“I do hope you find yourself fortunate soon as well,” she said.

Miss Darlington’s eyes narrowed for the first time, much like when she’d scrutinized Isabella when they’d met at the opera, but the expression disappeared in an instant. “Thank you,” she said. “As you see, I’m quite good at heading up worthy projects, and I’ll see success with this endeavor as well, though perhaps later than I had planned.” She inched closer to Isabella. “Now I come to the second reason for our visit. We think you an excellent candidate for the Ladies Society of Benefactresses and Philanthropists.”

Isabella wanted to express a more sophisticated response, but nothing came to her, so she could only stare in question at Miss Darlington.

“You’re correct to assume, by your expression, that it is not well-known, which serves our purpose very well right now. You would be its third member.” She glanced over at Miss Holland, who nodded. “It’s quite new,” she added, and Isabella caught a hint of nervousness in her words.

“I’m . . . delighted to be thought of.” Though it had been weeks since she’d turned her mind to anything except for Preston’s care, her thoughts did skitter back to the water heater she’d made for the maids. Perhaps Miss Darlington could help her find a way to do more of that. The project with Prince’s

tenants would be a perfect beginning. Her involvement at the tenant building may lead to her finding other things to improve there. She thought of how Preston and her aunt had praised her thoughtfulness in the small things. She did have an eye for that, and it might be put to use among the tenants. “Thank you.”

Miss Darlington’s lips broke into a wide grin. “Wonderful.” She nodded to Miss Holland and returned her attention to Isabella. “We wouldn’t dream of taking any more of your time since we have surprised you here, but we’ll visit again soon. You won’t be able to make this week’s meeting of the society, considering your wedding, but I’ll send a note around about the next. They’re very informal but quite helpful in coordinating our efforts where we can. We have precious little time to work with between all the balls and parties and trips to the opera.” Her lips went into a thin line at the pronunciation of all these events, another surprise to Isabella. Her first judgment of Miss Darlington had had her assuming the woman was the type to enjoy Society gatherings.

“Good day, Miss De Vries.” Miss Darlington nodded at her, her smile returning.

“Good day,” Miss Holland echoed.

Isabella nodded to them both as they went out, and then she dropped into a seat, trying to sort through all they’d said. Despite the heavy thoughts that had plagued her all morning about Preston’s health, a small smile broke through as she contemplated what the women had told her. The project to take care of Prince’s tenants was in full force and likely to be successful, especially given what Isabella had seen of Miss Darlington’s organizational abilities so far. A little thrill went through her to think that she could continue such endeavors, all because of Preston’s generosity. What better way to thank him than to brighten the futures of others? The thought gave her the exact comfort she needed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PRINCE SMILED INTO THE FIRE in the library, his thoughts unapologetically upon the sparkle in Isabella's eyes as she'd recounted to him earlier that day her surprise visitor. And perhaps his smile had something to do with being correct all along in what he'd assumed about Miss Darlington's hidden thoughts. Whatever specific plans she and Isabella had discussed—some of which Isabella had explained during dinner—the self-assurance it had given Isabella was visible.

After they'd finished dining and her aunt and uncle had returned home, she'd gone up to see Preston since he hadn't been able to join them, as they had expected. Prince ached over the worry he'd seen in her expression when she went up, his memories of his mother's last days increasing the empathy that surged through him as he watched her slow ascent up the stairs to his brother's bedroom on the second floor. He'd nearly followed to hold her hand through it.

His own time with Preston had become more difficult. The stories Preston told of Prince's boyhood were both welcome and painful. He longed for the brother of those days, not just for the return of their brotherly friendship but also for the health of a young Preston. By the regret that always laced Preston's tone, he longed for those days as well.

“Prince?”

The voice startled him out of his reverie by the library fireplace, and he looked up to see Isabella standing in the doorway. “You've come to bid me good night?” he teased, standing and offering her a smile.

Her expression was exhausted and pulled down, much different from that of the woman who'd left the dinner table an hour before. Though he'd seen the weariness when she'd headed upstairs, he assumed Preston had worsened even further to bring about this drastic change in her attitude.

Her chin trembled, and she didn't move from her spot by the door. Prince hurried to her, and she held out her hands for him to take, something she hadn't done since their moment in the

greenhouse less than a week before.

“He is very bad,” she said, her tone low, as though she couldn’t manage to force any more sound out.

He stroked her hands with his thumbs, though he wished he could pull her into his arms. Williams stood a few feet away, the picture of a dutiful chaperone. With Nurse Higgins to watch over Isabella while she stayed with Preston and a maid to accompany her home when she stayed longer than her relatives, she was never alone; at least Prince could take comfort in that.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, meaning every word with a throbbing that brought back the pain of the last moments of his mother’s life. How he’d wished so badly for her to stay, to get well. How he’d made himself a fool by begging her to do so, even when he’d known she would not wake again. “I’m sorry, my dear,” he repeated.

“You must go see him.” Her words were hitched, but she swallowed and plowed on, pulling her hands from his. “He’s asking for you.”

Prince’s chest constricted. He had no wish to open those painful wounds he’d ignored for so long. “He’s not . . . what about the wedding, Isabella?”

She gave a short, soft laugh. “He’s promised me to last until tomorrow afternoon. But please, go and see him. He was insistent.”

“I will.” His readiness surprised him, though he was beginning to believe he would do a great deal if Isabella asked him to.

“Good night, Prince.” She nodded to him and walked away, her shoulders hunched and her head down. He stepped into the hall and then followed to the entry, watching with relief when her maid joined her at the door and put an arm around her to escort her home.

He stood there for several minutes, long after she’d descended the steps into her carriage. It had rolled away before he warily went upstairs to look in on his brother.

His desire to shield her from pain, his willingness to do anything for her—he couldn't deny the path his heart had taken to her. A foolish path with no happy ending. Tomorrow it wouldn't matter any longer that he might be falling in love with her. She would be his sister then.

Would it be wrong, with his brother so near death, to ask if he would consider allowing Prince to court his fiancée? What Preston wanted, most of all, was to see Isabella taken care of. He loved her dearly. Would Preston consider releasing her from their engagement when he had mere days left to live? Did Prince even dare ask such a thing? Would Isabella even want it? She cared for Prince, but she'd made it clear their relationship was one of friendship.

Prince ought to be flogged for letting his mind turn to such things when his brother was dying and Isabella was distraught over it. He promised himself to put it all aside as he did as she'd asked and entered his brother's bedroom.

The light was dim, and Prince had to come close to the bed to make out Preston's figure, huddled among the pillows and blankets, more skeleton than man. He clenched his teeth and took the seat he had so often seen Isabella sit in at Preston's bedside.

Nurse Higgins stood and leaned over the bed, laying a gentle hand on Preston's arm.

"You don't need to wake him for me," Prince said softly, shaking his head at her.

"He was adamant." Nurse Higgins continued to gently prod Preston until he slowly opened his eyes. "Your brother is here," she said.

It took several moments for Preston to fully wake. Nurse Higgins adjusted the pillows, trying to help him sit up a little more, but she gave up when Preston moaned in pain.

"Leave us," he said in a hoarse voice, his tone demanding.

Nurse Higgins gave a single nod, making Prince start with panic. What if something were to occur while she stepped out?

"I'll be right outside the door," she assured him before

striding out of the room. She made no other move to reassure him, but the confident nod she gave him as she passed eased his mind.

Preston stared at Prince, his brow furrowing in the same stern expression Prince remembered from his and his mother's last days in New York before they'd gone to Paris, and his guard went up involuntarily. He forced his fingers to relax from their clench, reminding himself that Preston had suffered a great deal and had refused morphine, insisting that he be lucid for his nuptials with Isabella.

"I think you should rest, Preston," Prince said, hoping the emotion threatening to close off his throat did not color his words.

"There is not time for that." Preston's voice was halting and cracked. "How could you allow Isabella to form an acquaintance with Miss Darlington?" he snapped.

Prince stiffened. "We saw her by chance at the opera. It would have been incredibly rude not to acknowledge her."

Preston let out a harsh laugh. "By chance! I was barely back in town an hour before rumors reached me—everyone speculating about how soon you would propose. That's quite the opposite of what I asked of you two and a half months ago."

A retort was on the tip of Prince's tongue that he had no intention of marrying Miss Darlington. But was that true? If Isabella married Preston, why shouldn't Prince marry Miss Darlington? She'd shown herself to be far more intriguing than her healthy dowry. "Those are rumors," he said. But there was resignation in his tone, and Preston's eyes narrowed at his answer.

"She's not fit company for Isabella. My bride will need guidance in caring for her inheritance so she'll be taken care of as I wish." His voice rose with each word until he had to stop and take several panting breaths to recover from his short tirade. This wasn't the man Prince had spent hours with in the last few weeks. The man Prince had thought he was beginning to forgive for sending him away. "She isn't to be guided by a

spoiled socialite.”

Whether his brother was sick or not, Prince could not stand for Preston to behave this way. His own voice carried a derisive edge. “You’ve judged Miss Darlington far too harshly. She and Isabella engaged in conversation at the opera over possible solutions to the problem of where my tenants may live during the renovation. Miss Darlington visited in order to report to Isabella that she has made significant progress in bringing their idea to fruition.”

“Oh yes.” Preston’s weak voice filled with sarcasm. “The building you intend to remodel to prove to me that you can be wise with my fortune. And Miss Darlington will help you.”

“A building I intend to purchase with your blessing,” Prince reminded him.

“Ha,” Preston barked and paused once again to regain his breath.

Prince stood, drawing in a breath of his own. Preston’s accusations stung. He’d begun his project to appease his brother, but that had all changed. He cared for the residents and their well-being, and thoughts for what would come next already danced around in his brain. But for what good? For all his brother’s insistence that he wanted to teach Prince, it seemed he still desired to be in control. Prince had been a fool to believe Isabella that he might grieve Preston like he had his mother. Perhaps Preston had regretted some of his actions—or perhaps he just regretted that they had not turned out like he wanted them too. Prince had changed. His brother had not.

Nevertheless, he took the opportunity to attempt to salvage the moment. “You’re tired and ill, Preston. You’re in pain and overreacting.”

“Enough,” Preston hissed. “I won’t allow you to throw away Isabella’s future. The stability I wish for her to have. Her independence.”

Isabella’s future. “She always was your favorite.” Prince could not help the words escaping. She’d gotten the pony. She’d gotten Preston. And now, in his absence, she would get

the security Preston had had no interest in giving Prince and his mother.

Preston glowered at him but didn't say anything further.

Prince moved away from the chair. "Good night." He let the past few weeks slide through him, let what he'd always known about how little Preston cared for him assure him that the stories and time spent together to make amends had been nothing but the desperation of a dying man worried about the end of his lonely life.

He strode out, glanced at Nurse Higgins sitting in a chair outside the door, and went straight to his bedroom to pack a bag. His valet could follow in the morning with the rest of his things—Prince didn't want to bother him with a complete removal so late at night, but he intended to follow his mother's example. Perhaps because he understood for the first time why she'd taken him from New York and from Preston. She couldn't beg for support from someone unwilling to give it.

Later, when he'd secured a room at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, he sat down to write a message. He'd have to apologize to Isabella for not attending her wedding.

* * *

Though Isabella's aunt had tried to insist that she spend the morning of her wedding readying for the ceremony, Isabella had persuaded her that a half hour in Preston's company was necessary. He'd been so unwell the night before—his countenance severe and his temper brooding. She felt sure his pain had been intense. Every movement had brought a tightening of his jaw, a wince, even low moans. He'd refused all of Nurse Higgins's and Isabella's efforts to get him to drink a little tea, and she'd caught him more than once struggling to breathe. She'd been fearful when she'd left, and grateful that Prince had acquiesced so readily when she'd begged him to see to his brother.

When she arrived at Preston's home and hurried to the second floor, it surprised her to see Nurse Higgins dozing in a chair outside the room. Knowing the woman had gotten very little sleep the last week, Isabella tiptoed past, putting her ear

to the door. Mrs. Stanley, the housekeeper of the Fifth Avenue home, must be sitting with Preston to give the nurse a break, but why Nurse Higgins hadn't gone somewhere more comfortable to take her nap, Isabella didn't know.

She was surprised to hear a man's voice in the room, and her heart leaped at the thought of Prince seeing to his brother. After his passing, she'd find comfort in knowing their relationship had been mended.

She gave a light tap on the door. Neither brother would mind her stepping in. They'd tease her about a bride seeing her groom on the wedding day, and she smiled to think of it.

She pushed open the door when Prince—or so she'd assumed—called out for her to come in, but she was surprised to see one unfamiliar man tucking papers into a leather briefcase and another younger, equally unfamiliar man waiting behind him.

The older man looked up. "Ahh, Preston. I assume this is your future wife?" He laid aside the case and came forward. "Forgive my poor manners, but I'll forgo asking Preston to present me. Mr. Alexander Barnes, Preston's lawyer."

Isabella's brow furrowed, but she wiped away her confused expression. "A pleasure to meet you, sir." She came closer to the bed. "Forgive me for interrupting. I assumed Preston was with his brother."

Mr. Barnes pressed his lips together, glancing to Preston before giving Isabella a tight nod. "No harm done. We were just finishing some business. We shall leave you with your groom." He forced a smile and then turned to the younger man. "Louis." He strode to the door, Louis following.

Isabella came to Preston's bedside, noting how much grayer his face looked than the day before. Someone else could have taken care of any meetings he needed. Prince, perhaps. "What was that?" she asked, trying not to sound like a stern mama scolding a wayward child. When she heard footsteps enter the room, she glanced over her shoulder to see Nurse Higgins returning to her chair inside the room. She offered Isabella a smile filled with weariness. Isabella could interpret that the

night had been restless.

“Don’t give me that look, Bella,” Preston said with a slight smile, though his eyes retained the cloudy gloom that had hovered the night before. She could only assume his pain was horrible. “Just some business I needed to see to right away.”

“And no one else could have seen to it? Where is Prince?” She scooted her usual chair so that it sat next to the bedside and then leaned over to take one of Preston’s cold hands.

“I had to see to it.” Preston drew in several long breaths and closed his eyes, a grimace tightening his features. “And what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be preparing for this afternoon?” He didn’t open his eyes as he asked.

Isabella forced a smile, though he couldn’t see it. If she gave in to tears, he would certainly hear it. “Perhaps we’d better have Mr. Carter shown up here later to perform the ceremony.”

Preston opened his eyes and turned to her, his smile more natural than she’d seen in several days. “I’ve been saving all my strength, Bella, so that I might stand for a few minutes to be pronounced your husband.”

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. She hoped that in the dim light, with the curtains drawn, he wouldn’t notice. “Oh, have you?” She looked across the bed, where Nurse Higgins dozed again in her chair. Isabella supposed that in the nursing profession, learning to nap when and where one could was a highly sought-after talent.

Preston laid his other hand overtop Isabella’s. “It will be all right, my little darling,” he said.

It was all she could do not to burst into sobs. He’d said those very words to her after her father died. She remembered the way he’d sat next to her in Aunt Cassandra’s sitting room and held her hand like he did now.

“Whatever comes,” he went on, his voice barely above a whisper, “I promise you will be taken care of.”

She sensed that perhaps he needed this reassurance more than she did. “Yes, I know.” She forced her voice to be strong. How, when she’d had all this time to give a proper goodbye,

did losing Preston feel as if she were losing her father all over again?

He drew in another labored breath. “I mean it, Bella. No matter what people say—about me or about you or our marriage. None of that will matter.”

“I know.” It was Prince’s words she heard in the subtext. “*You and I know the truth.*” She finally understood what he’d been trying to tell her. She could behave perfectly. She could do everything right. And people would gossip. But she would know who she was and who she loved. Those who loved her would know as well. “I know,” she whispered again.

“Good.” He gave her hand a light pat. “Now, you must hurry and ready yourself. I know you have a lovely day planned.” He smiled at her, and it reached into his whole face.

“Yes, Preston.” She smiled back, then leaned over to kiss his cheek. “I shall see you soon.”

“Of course, Bella.”

She gave Nurse Higgins unnecessary instructions to see that Preston rested, and then she left the room trying not to think of how he would manage to come down to the sitting room for the ceremony later. Between her and Nurse Higgins, they’d have to convince him to allow them to wed at his bedside. He barely had the strength to turn his head to her, let alone make it down a flight of stairs and stand for even five minutes. Better to send all but the family and their dearest friends away and hold a private ceremony. Then the guests could enjoy the expense Preston had gone to at the celebration afterward. She’d persuade him when she came back after dressing.

She went downstairs slowly, hoping Prince would appear. He could tease her and make her feel better. But the house was quiet, only the sound of Mrs. Stanley’s soft humming as Isabella passed the drawing room. A peek inside told her that the woman was giving the room extra care for the wedding later. Already the chairs inside had been rearranged, a table placed at the front of the room spilling over with more flowers than could have come from Preston’s greenhouse.

The footman went to fetch Isabella's maid from where she'd been taking tea in the kitchen while she waited for Isabella.

"You're a strong woman," Margie whispered as they walked down the stairs to the carriage.

"I don't feel it today," Isabella murmured back, and Margie responded with a sad smile.

* * *

Margie had just finished dressing Isabella's hair when a note arrived from Preston's home. Isabella lowered herself back into the dressing-table chair before she opened the note, somehow sensing its gravity. She wasn't surprised to read that Preston was gone. That he hadn't lasted through their wedding, as he'd promised. Perhaps he'd sensed his time was coming. It must have been why his business couldn't be put off—he was making assurances that even though she wouldn't be his wife, he could take care of her.

Margie put her arm around Isabella, squeezing her and murmuring comforting words. Isabella pressed her hand against her mouth, swallowing back tears. Only a moment had passed before Aunt Cassandra hurried into the room, her eyes wet.

"Your uncle has had a note from Williams." She opened her arms to Isabella. The simple batiste gown she wore rustled gently as she wrapped her arms around Isabella and whispered reassurances that washed, mostly unheard, over her.

Her thoughts turned to Prince. Had the brothers been able to say a proper goodbye? How she wished she could have seen him this morning. Would he let himself grieve for his brother, whatever their differences, or would he hide his pain away? Her heart ached even more than before.

There had been so many tears the past weeks that Isabella was sure she was only tired by this point. But more came, and Aunt Cassandra ordered tea and stroked Isabella's back and cried with her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PRINCE HAD NOT INTENDED TO step foot inside Preston's Fifth Avenue mansion for a very long time. He'd known his brother's death was imminent, and yet he hadn't faced the reality that it could be so soon. Almost the moment the news had been delivered to him, he'd hurried off to see Isabella. Despite his bitterness over her relationship with Preston, he didn't blame her. Her heart would be broken, and he hoped he could ease her pain a little—even if he had to pretend his own over Preston's death. However, when he arrived at the De Vries residence, he'd been told that she was at Preston's home, as she'd intended to be when there was still a wedding to be held.

So he'd gone straight to Preston's home to find her. He looked in on the drawing room but found only Mrs. De Vries there with a handful of people he didn't recognize. She caught his eye and tilted her head toward the stairs before turning back to the guest at her right.

Isabella was standing outside of Preston's room when Prince located her, facing the closed door, hands clasped in front of her within the folds of a navy-blue dress with a high collar and large puffed sleeves.

She didn't turn as he came toward her, and nothing about her stance indicated that she even realized he approached. He slowed, noting with a pang in his chest that her cheeks were wet. Her color was wan, her chin dipped, and her gaze steady on the door.

"Bella." The nickname slipped from his lips in a soft whisper without him realizing it. It had been the dearest term Preston had used for her.

She turned, drawing in a hiccuping breath before hurrying the final few steps toward him and throwing herself into his arms. "It was wrong," she cried into his shoulder, "but I needed you to come. I needed you to come."

Prince's arms tightened around her, and he turned his face into her hair. He found himself whispering platitudes, ones he

didn't quite believe himself about how Preston was now at ease, that he was finally with Anna, and that everything would be okay. Everyone had said the same kinds of things to him when his mother died—none of it had felt true, but Prince couldn't think of anything else to say. Friends of his mother's had tried to comfort him. They had patted his shoulder, sniffed delicately, and spoken of what a great joy she'd been in their lives. A few letters had come from America. Preston had come as quickly as he could, but by the time the only person who'd had an inkling of what Prince was suffering had arrived, Prince had walled himself off.

Isabella believed she and Prince shared the ability to mourn truly for Preston, and he couldn't bear to let her know he and Preston hadn't healed their relationship as she'd so desperately wanted. Would she discover that Prince's grief was only for her and her tears?

As on the night when he'd found her sitting outside this room, her tears eventually calmed, but she kept her head resting against his chest. Prince made no move to push her away, even though they stood in the hallway where anyone could come upon them. When Isabella recovered herself, she would worry about what people would think, but Prince trusted that his brother's servants would understand the consolation Prince and Isabella could provide each other. Thompson, his valet, had reported to him how offended the women of the household had been when Isabella had assumed they'd been speaking of her. And still, Thompson said, they would sniff and in the same sentence pronounce something like, "Well, she's been a saint with Mr. Preston." They would honor Preston's memory and Isabella's service.

She took a long breath in and then drew back but kept ahold of his arms. "I'm sorry . . . again. But I'm very glad you've come."

She didn't step back from him, leaving little space between them. He pulled out his handkerchief, swiping gently at her cheeks and then tucking the handkerchief back inside his coat. She drew in another breath, one that didn't shudder the way it had before, and her large blue eyes widened as she stared up at

him. The temptation to take her back into his arms, to hold her and kiss her, surged through him. He beat it back. Now was a wholly inappropriate time—as inappropriate as his thoughts that Preston’s death had been fortunate timing. That now Prince would be allowed to court her . . . eventually.

He couldn’t help but lean forward the slightest bit and kiss her forehead. Her hands tightened on his arms, and she whispered his name in a way that made it almost impossible for him to pull away.

He found the strength to step back, but he took her arm and threaded it through his. “Is he . . . ?” He tilted his head toward the door.

She flushed and gave a slight nod. “They’re preparing him.” She shuddered and grimaced. “I’ve tried not to think about it. It’s gruesome, I know, to stay up here, thinking I’m close to him.”

“It’s not gruesome,” Prince assured her. “I don’t think I left our flat for days after my mother died.”

Isabella gave him a small, grateful smile. “I should be downstairs with Aunt Cassandra, but I don’t have the fortitude. I don’t even have a proper mourning gown on. I should have thought of that, prepared better. I knew it wouldn’t be long . . .”

He tightened his jaw and stared at the door with her. “They shouldn’t have come, and your dress is perfectly acceptable. They cannot expect you to be dressed in mourning clothes already. Any mean words—”

“Do not matter,” she interrupted and gave him a smile. “I know.” She sighed again. “It’s only that Preston worried so much that . . . people wouldn’t believe we loved each other.” She held something back in those words, but Prince did not press her about it.

“Anyone looking at your face can see how much you loved him. Your eyes are awfully swollen, my dear.” He turned toward her. “You shouldn’t have to face them so soon.” He couldn’t help the irritation in his tone. The ill manners of

spectators gawking over Preston's death! Though, in truth, how it upset Isabella and made her worry annoyed him far more than their presence.

She patted his arm and rested her head against it for a brief moment that he wished lasted longer. "I believe some of them came to wish felicitations and were caught by surprise."

"It's curious they didn't notice the black crepe on the door." Prince raised an eyebrow.

"They only want to help," Isabella said softly. They stood in silence for a moment. "I'm so glad you came. I was up here wishing it, thinking I couldn't bear any of this without you."

"You should take care not to inflate my ego. I may come to believe you mean something quite different than you do." He tried for the same lighthearted tone he'd always used when trying to relieve her burdens, but it fell short. He couldn't even summon a full smile to accompany it and give her a reprieve from the grief that must be swallowing her.

She turned her face up to him, an eyebrow raised, but her smile was forced as well. "Stop it, Mr. Baxter. You'll make the servants talk." But her teasing words, no longer holding any real worry like they had before, fell flat.

He studied her again, long enough that pink rose and deepened in her cheeks. "Please tell me this somber thing was not your wedding dress," he said.

"No. Aunt Cassandra insisted my wedding dress must be white. It was quite plain though. I didn't think it right to wear anything too fancy, especially when I feared I may be marrying him at his bedside." She gave a small shake of her head. "Margie thinks we might dye it darker; it may be morose, but I rather like the idea of wearing it to mourn him."

"How very practical—though, I would venture a guess you won't have any reason to be practical with things like that anymore." Preston would want nothing more than for Isabella to be all that was practical with the large sum of money he'd left her.

"Prince?"

He pulled himself from his thoughts to see Isabella staring up at him, her eyebrows furrowed and her expression worried. "I don't wish to inherit any of his money if it makes you unhappy," she said. "I won't have it be the pony all over again." She put her other hand on his arm, holding tight as though she could force him to believe her by her strength.

"I assure you Preston has plenty to go around." He put a hand over hers. "Maybe you can make up for my brother's behavior by buying me a pony." He tilted his head at her, trying to look like the innocent ten-year-old who had begged Preston for one.

She gave a light laugh, then stifled it. "You must not make me laugh."

"Above anything, Preston wished for your happiness." Prince prayed that, at least in this, she could feel his deep sincerity. He couldn't explain how he'd come to love her as he did. It had stolen upon him moment by moment as she'd fought for his friendship. Though he could find faults aplenty in his brother, Preston's desire to care for Isabella was one thing they could agree on. He stepped closer than he should, unable to resist the pull she had on him.

Her eyes brightened with tears at his words, and she swallowed. "A fact he liked to remind me of quite frequently." She shook her head. "What a strange courtship."

They made their way downstairs finally, standing outside the drawing room, where they must go in and allow Preston's friends to try to comfort them.

Prince reached inside his coat for his handkerchief. Isabella smiled at him, lifting a wrinkled handkerchief for him to see. The one he'd given her the night they'd sat outside Preston's room together. She dabbed at her eyes and turned back toward the drawing room.

"Shall we?" Prince said.

She nodded, and with reluctance, Prince led her inside. He left Isabella at a chair next to her aunt's and retreated to one nearby as the roomful of strangers descended to offer their

condolences. But his only comfort was the smallest hope that someday he might persuade Isabella to feel for him as he did for her. Perhaps they could turn this tragedy into happiness for them both.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WHEN ISABELLA STEPPED INSIDE DAVENLEIGH on the day of Preston's funeral, she nearly turned around. His ghost seemed to linger in the quiet hallways. But she pushed herself forward, walking quietly through the house in search of Mrs. Phillips.

A footman directed her tersely toward the dining room, where the housekeeper was overseeing the final preparations to serve a luncheon after Preston was buried on the Davenleigh property. Isabella took a deep breath as she stepped inside the room. Her actions toward Mrs. Phillips, Ida, and every other servant she'd doubted while staying here had weighed heavily on her. Prince had spoken about their unflinching support of her, and she didn't deserve it.

"Mrs. Phillips?" she said, drawing the woman's attention.

Mrs. Phillips straightened and moved toward her. "Yes, Miss De Vries?" Her voice held a chill.

Isabella deserved that. "I owe you an apology," she said. She drew in another fortifying breath, forcing her attention to stay on Mrs. Phillips and not stray to the floor, which was much less intimidating.

Mrs. Phillips tipped her head, her expression softening slightly.

"I did you a disservice in my assumptions. It was unkind of me to think that you would believe . . . *that* of me when you've been nothing but loyal to Preston. And to me." She swallowed.

Mrs. Phillips didn't smile, but the rigidity to her stance relaxed, and Isabella saw the welcoming woman who had helped her at every turn as she'd prepared to become mistress of this house. "Thank you, Miss De Vries." A slight smile appeared on her lips. "I look forward to your residence here, whenever that may be."

Everything in Isabella relaxed at this acceptance of her apology. "Thank you, Mrs. Phillips."

Mrs. Phillips nodded. "Keep your chin up, dear," she said in a quiet voice before returning to her task.

Isabella did just that. Knowing that the Davenleigh staff would be watching over her on this difficult day bolstered her more than she could say.

* * *

Isabella remembered little of her father's service, just sitting with Uncle Benjamin and Aunt Cassandra in a cold, vast church. For Preston's, they'd done the same, this time Aunt Cassandra clutching Isabella's hand through the service at the small chapel Preston's father had built on Davenleigh grounds decades before. Once it was over, her uncle had taken her arm and guided her to the carriage that took the small party to the hill overlooking Davenleigh, where Preston had wished to be buried next to his father and mother and Prince's mother. Isabella knew little of the circumstances around Ellen Baxter's death. That hadn't been a topic the brothers took up often in Isabella's presence. Preston had spoken of going to Paris as quickly as he could and arranging for Ellen Baxter to be brought home to be buried next to her husband, as she'd always wished, but he'd not elaborated on it more than that.

Isabella had wished to go to Prince when he'd lingered near his mother's grave at the end of the interment service for Preston; she'd wished to offer him what little condolence she could and understood a portion of how alone in the world he must feel.

Instead she'd had very little time in his company. He'd spoken to her for a moment at the luncheon, but she'd had to attend to guests who'd come to Davenleigh for the service.

Two weeks had passed since that day, and instead of taking up residence at Davenleigh, she'd retreated to Wynhall, where she now sat in the window seat of her bedroom, watching the sun sparkle off the snow for a moment before letting her eyes fall closed.

How peaceful it was to be here. Despite the fact that it was a quarter of the size of Davenleigh, she was grateful not to be there alone. Helping arrange Preston's funeral had kept her busy and unthinking for several days after his death. Here she had happy memories. Here she could think of joyful times

with Preston when she was younger. This was where the pony he'd bought her had been delivered and where he'd personally guided her as she learned to ride it. Here her grief was more poignant, but she also had her family.

She missed Prince now more than she'd expected. She longed for his company, his friendship. His stories of Preston. Moments to remember him together.

A knock sounded on the door, interrupting her reverie. When she called for the visitor to come in, expecting her aunt, a footman entered, bearing a tray with a card—Prince's card. She'd been hoping for days that he would come, and she smiled to think he'd somehow answered her silent summons. She hurried downstairs, pausing for only a moment to make sure her hair wasn't in disarray.

Prince stood when she came into the drawing room. "Hello," he said, taking her hand. "Are you well today?"

Better now that he was here. She tried to quash the thought, but it was difficult to manage, considering how relieved she'd felt upon seeing his card and the happiness that had spread through her at seeing his face.

"Well enough." She gestured for him to retake his seat, but he gave a slight shake of his head.

"It's quite warm, nearly spring," he teased.

She couldn't help a laugh. It felt like it had been a long time since one had escaped her. "It's only the beginning of March, Prince. We have weeks yet."

"Nonsense. Shall we stroll in the garden? It's nothing to Preston's greenhouse, but we'll make do." He nodded toward the window.

"That sounds wonderful. Let me go put on my coat."

Several minutes later, she had her arm through Prince's as they walked slowly along the shoveled paths of the garden of Wynhall. Bess liked to bring the boys out on nice days, even in the winter, so the staff kept it clear for them.

"It's very good to see you," she said when they'd walked for

a few minutes in silence. “I know you think it’s silly for me to rely on you when I have my aunt and uncle and cousins, but I’ve gotten used to having you around, you know.”

Prince looked down at her, his eyes twinkling briefly, though his expression remained sober. She wished he’d come sooner. She supposed he was still insisting he didn’t much mind that his brother had passed away, tucking his grief away like he had his sadness over his mother’s death. She’d been fortunate that he’d spoken of it to her a time or two.

“Do not tease me, Isabella,” he said, his tone a shade jovial. “I shall continue hoping you truly mean you missed me.”

“Of course I missed you. How could you ever think otherwise?”

Prince paused on the path, putting a hand over where she let hers rest on his arm. He stared down at her, his gaze intent and serious. “Did you really?”

Her breath caught, the warmth from his hand spreading through her and into her cheeks. “Yes,” she breathed, feeling her body lean in to his. She straightened. “Yes, of course. I told you I would.”

Disappointment flicked through his expression, and the earnest way he’d stared at her gave way to a teasing smile. “Then, perhaps,” he said, tilting his head, “we should find a way to never be apart.” He brought her hand up to his lips, kissing it in a debonair way he didn’t mean but that thrilled her all the same.

She’d loved Preston. He’d been her dearest friend for as long as she could remember. But she couldn’t decide whether or not her growing feelings for Prince were a betrayal to Preston. He’d doubted Prince’s motives almost to the end, though that would have changed had Preston lived a few weeks longer, she felt sure.

But she couldn’t deny that her time with Prince made her suspect that resisting her feelings was fruitless, no matter how she scolded herself for them.

“Prince,” she said, her voice stern, but even she could hear

the amusement in it. “Now is hardly the time to suggest such things. Even in jest.” She couldn’t help that her eyes darted to his lips.

His eyes had darkened when she met his gaze again. He turned to face her more fully and stepped closer to her. “May I suggest such things someday?” he asked.

She swallowed, wishing she could throw her arms around him. “I . . .”

He reached toward her, grazing a finger along her jawline, and she tilted her head toward him. His touch set her on fire and stopped the words in her throat. It took all her self-control not to reach for him, to pull his head down to hers. For the first time, she really cared little for what people would say.

They stayed there, the air around them so heated that Isabella couldn’t fathom how the snow hadn’t melted at their feet. She held still, knowing any movement would be her undoing. She drew in a long, slow breath. “We shall see,” she whispered.

It was several more moments before she turned away from him and continued down the path, both of them silent, and Isabella was grateful for the time to allow her heart to resume its normal pace.

“Yet another evidence that mourning is very inconvenient,” Prince said drolly, breaking the silence.

Isabella blinked—then blinked again and looked up at him. She’d been so disoriented, his words seemed meaningless. “Oh?”

“Had you not been compelled to mourn, I would have kissed you very thoroughly just now.”

“Prince!” she gasped, but laughter bubbled through her. The roguish grin he gave her had her almost willing to throw caution to the wind. He always knew the moments when his lightheartedness was most needed. “You’re scandalous. If I weren’t mourning, I would be married.” She didn’t look at him as they walked on, not that it would stop him from seeing how red her cheeks must be. Perhaps she could blame it on the chill

in the air.

“I would have been forced to protest that.”

“You’re preposterous, Mr. Baxter.”

“I find I’m all the more enchanted when you say my name that way, Miss De Vries.”

She stared resolutely ahead, but mirth threatened all the same. Prince had often declared himself useless at consoling, but his teasing did her soul good.

He turned to look at her as they strolled. “I repeat what I told you the day Preston died. He would want you to be happy. To smile. And to laugh.”

She closed her eyes, allowing Prince to lead her. “I know.” When she opened them again, she smiled at him. “Thank you so much for coming.”

The smile he returned lit his face. “The pleasure, my dear, is all mine.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE NEXT TWO WEEKS PASSED SO slowly for Isabella. She missed Prince even more since their moment in the garden, but it was for the best that he stay away. Heaven help her, she'd almost kissed him. She shouldn't seek him out, nor he her. Especially as the will worked its way through being proved in the surrogate court. Preston wasn't around to worry over what people would think of it all, and she'd learned to trust more, but she wanted to honor his wishes all the same—even if his concerns about Prince challenging the will were unfounded.

She often tried to talk herself into believing that Preston would eventually have approved of her attachment. She ached for Prince. She shared with him the same ease, the friendship she'd always found with Preston, but with an attraction that ignited her entire being. Since that day two weeks ago in the garden, unsigned flowers had come from Davenleigh on a regular basis. The Wynhall household assumed Preston had arranged for this to happen after his death, but Isabella knew they were from Prince. Pink camellias—longing. Daisies—hope. Red roses—passion. Her cheeks burned as she thought of those lovely roses, the gentle way Prince had stroked her face that day. If he were here now, she would rest against him and beg him to talk in that calming voice of his. The one that had chased away the aching sadness that lingered in her heart for Preston.

She did hope that someday Prince could speak to her of courting. She'd never felt for any man the way she did for him.

She pushed away those thoughts. It wouldn't do to daydream over him. It wasn't proper. She took in a long breath and relaxed into the pillows on her bed. The stark relief she felt to be away from the city and from talking to everyone, it seemed, about Preston's "shocking" passing had ebbed, leaving her tired now. She hadn't realized the toll those weeks of caring for him had taken on her. It was no wonder that Aunt Cassandra had struggled to comfort Isabella in the days after her father's death. She must have been emotionally exhausted herself.

Isabella was of no use to anyone now. Preston's staff had looked to her concerning the Fifth Avenue mansion and Davenleigh, and she could summon the strength only to tell them to keep the houses running as usual for now. That was one "official" reason to see Prince—to discuss what was to be done with the houses.

The only visit that had comforted her was Miss Darlington's. She'd given her condolences and inquired sincerely after Isabella's well-being but had then directly proceeded to discuss the progress of their housing plans, something that brought a genuine hope to Isabella's heart.

"You must do as much or as little as you wish, dear," Miss Darlington had said. "I know these things can be a distraction, or it may all be too much."

Isabella had thanked her genuinely, looking forward to the friendship that might grow between them as they worked together. Preston's money would give her not only the means but the freedom to work on charitable projects. Miss Darlington would expertly provide the opportunities when Isabella didn't yet have the strength to find them on her own.

"Isabella?" Her aunt's quiet voice interrupted her thoughts, and Isabella opened her eyes and turned to see her aunt hovering near the door.

"Yes, Aunt?" She sat up, straightening the skirts of her black day dress. Aunt Cassandra had been very gentle with Isabella since Preston's death, hugging her at every opportunity and constantly offering to fetch tea or cookies or a shawl to warm her. It was much different from the days and weeks following her father's death.

Aunt Cassandra's brow furrowed as she came into the room. "I'm sorry to have to disturb you, but Mr. Barnes says you must come down and see him at once."

"Mr. Barnes?" Isabella stood. It was only after Aunt Cassandra glanced at her hair that Isabella wondered what a wreck it must be. Her maid had done a simple bun this morning at the nape of Isabella's neck. Come to think of it, it did feel rather loose now.

“Preston’s lawyer,” Aunt Cassandra said.

Isabella nodded, remembering their brief introduction the day Preston had died. “I’ll come down now. I’m sure he waited as long as he could before coming. There must be some business to attend to.”

Aunt Cassandra gave another glance at Isabella’s hair and then nodded before leaving the room. Isabella had no wish to appear disheveled before the lawyer, so she sat down at her mirror for a moment to straighten the knot that had fallen and the pieces of hair that had worked themselves loose and lay across her shoulders.

Her aunt and uncle were sitting in the drawing room with Mr. Barnes when Isabella came down. Uncle Benjamin and Mr. Barnes stood as she entered, Mr. Barnes coming forward to take the hand she offered to him.

“Good day, Miss De Vries. I’m sorry to disturb you.”

Isabella sat and waved to the seat next to her, which Mr. Barnes took rather than returning to the one he’d been in when she came into the room. “Don’t apologize, Mr. Barnes. It is perfectly understandable.”

“Do you mind if I speak of this business in front of your aunt and uncle?” he asked, glancing at them.

Aunt Cassandra shifted, as though ready to depart if Isabella wished it.

Isabella suspected her aunt didn’t feel it appropriate that she discuss matters of money that were not her own. “My aunt may go if she wishes, but I would like my uncle to stay, if he would.” He could provide wisdom, should she need it. He was one of the few who knew the true nature of her engagement to Preston since Preston had been honest about that with Uncle Benjamin from the beginning, feeling it was only right. She would appreciate his support now.

Aunt Cassandra popped out of her seat. “I’ll let you talk business.” She nodded to Isabella and the men and hurried from the room.

Once the door had closed behind Aunt Cassandra, Isabella

pressed her hands together in the folds of her dress, trying to shove away her unease over a discussion about the money Preston had left her. He'd wanted desperately to take care of her; it had been heavy on his mind even on the day he died. Honoring his memory would also mean honoring his desires in this matter, even if they did make her uncomfortable, especially since she'd assumed that when she faced this conversation, she would be Mrs. Baxter. Unbidden, Prince's face flashed before her eyes, but she chased it away.

Mr. Barnes turned to Isabella. "As you may have guessed, I've come to discuss Preston's will. Everything has been found to be in order, and the surrogate court has proved it. I've come to notify you that you're Preston's sole beneficiary." Mr. Barnes's mouth went into a tight line.

Isabella stared at him, certain she did not quite understand. "Sole beneficiary?" Beside her, Uncle Benjamin sucked in a sharp breath but remained silent.

"Yes. He's left everything to you. I'm sure I don't need to impress upon you that it's quite a sum."

Isabella stiffened, sitting up straighter as she scowled at Mr. Barnes. "You must be mistaken. Preston meant to leave me only a portion. There is his brother to think about."

Mr. Barnes let out a long sigh. "You remember, Miss DeVries, meeting me on the day Preston died?" She nodded slowly, her confusion increasing. "Just previous to your engagement, when Preston first came to me to restructure his will to include you, he asked me to make a contingency to his brother's inheritance. The morning Preston died, he instructed me to enact that contingency to remove his brother from the will."

Tears filled Isabella's eyes as she shook her head. "Mr. Barnes, there must be a mistake. They were . . . they had resolved most of their differences. I can't believe Preston meant—he was in a great deal of pain. He couldn't have meant it; he was not in his right mind." She turned to Uncle Benjamin, seeking confirmation from him that Preston wouldn't have done such a thing. He frowned, his jaw tight,

and she hoped the uncertainty in his expression meant he agreed with her assessment of the situation.

Mr. Barnes sighed deeply. “Given the events of that day, I’ve questioned his decision as well. It was clear to me that he was not himself that morning.”

Some relief trickled through Isabella that Mr. Barnes agreed with her as well. “Then, I must advise Mr. Baxter to challenge it. It should be quite easy. I’m sure Preston confided in you his worries about Mr. Baxter’s connections and being able to overturn the will. It was his sole reason for marrying me, for making it look as though we were madly in love.” Uncle Benjamin met her eye, nodding in affirmation to the plan Preston had informed him of when he first asked for Isabella’s hand.

Mr. Barnes nodded as the words spilled out of her. “Yes, I advised Preston to great lengths on the subject.”

She felt a little more relief. Preston wouldn’t be happy for her and Prince to use the very thing he’d worried about to make sure Prince inherited, but she could not—could *not*—send Prince away the same way Preston had. “We’ll allow some rumors to spread of my intentions and assist Prince in any way we can to challenge the will. I myself can attest to Preston’s uneasy state of mind the night before he died.”

Mr. Barnes studied her, shared a look with her uncle, and then turned back. Isabella couldn’t help but look to her uncle as well, silently seeking once again his opinion.

His expression was grave. “It’s a credit to your generous character that you seek to rectify things with Mr. Baxter,” he said softly.

“Thank you,” she murmured on a sigh.

But Mr. Barnes’s expression remained tense. “Prince will not challenge it. I’ve already been to see him.” He drew in a long breath. “Preston gave me leave to conduct all his business with you after his passing. When he created the contingency to the will, when he was in relatively good health and of sound mind, he instructed that his younger brother was not to court

or marry Rosalind Darlington.”

The statement momentarily stunned Isabella into silence. She *had* seen some possessiveness in Miss Darlington’s interaction with them at the opera, and her ease with Prince and his project said that they were good friends, at the least. But Isabella had not been aware of any relationship beyond that. Discovering that Preston suspected much more than friendship between them sent jealousy flinging through her.

She shook it away. That was not the matter at hand. And Isabella liked Miss Darlington. She’d swept in and included Isabella in her circle of friends without a second thought. She was determined to do good in the city, and for the life of her, Isabella couldn’t understand what Preston could have against her. Mr. Barnes had said the contingency had been created when Preston was well, which meant at least four months ago, before he’d proposed to Isabella. Perhaps there had been something between Prince and Miss Darlington before Isabella had met him.

“I don’t understand. Why would Preston disapprove of her so strongly?” She leaned forward, twisting her skirt in her hands to release some of the worry descending on her. She looked again to Uncle Benjamin, wondering if he knew more, but his expression echoed the confusion she felt.

Mr. Barnes stared down at his hands. “He seemed to believe Miss Darlington and her family were an irresponsible monetary influence on Prince. He had already accrued several foolish expenses in an effort to impress her and her parents.”

Isabella shook her head, even as the lawyer spoke. This was not the Miss Darlington she knew. “Preston must have been wrong about her. Perhaps her parents . . . but not Miss Darlington,” she said firmly.

Mr. Barnes shrugged. “Perhaps,” he agreed. “Nonetheless, Prince did continue his association with Miss Darlington, despite his brother’s wishes. And because that can be proved and was an initial contingency to the will, without Prince’s cooperation, there is nothing I can do to break it. Nothing you can do either.”

Isabella retrieved a handkerchief from a pocket she'd had Margie sew into her mourning dress, careful to conceal the initials *PB* on the handkerchief, even though her uncle and Mr. Barnes might logically assume it was one of Preston's, rather than Prince's. She took several deep breaths as she dabbed at her eyes and the tears threatening there.

Mr. Barnes had assailed her with more information than she knew what to do with—Preston's surprising final actions and the information that Prince may have pursued Miss Darlington. She couldn't even begin to understand how she felt on that score, given the weight of the rest of the discussion.

And could she understand Preston's actions? She wanted to dismiss the anger at him that threatened. He'd been so very sick in his final days. But he'd also admitted that he'd hoped his marriage would spur Prince into better behavior. He'd held on to petty suspicions that Prince would try to steal her inheritance and had insisted on the ritual of their courting to counteract him.

She wanted to believe he hadn't known what he was doing . . . but had he? Had she misjudged someone she'd admired her entire life? Shame trickled through her. She'd believed everything he'd said about Prince and supported his suspicions, even when Prince's actions and her heart had told her differently. How could Preston do such a thing?

In any case, she must fix it. It was her duty. She laid her hands back in her lap. "Very well. I'll simply give Mr. Baxter his rightful portion."

Mr. Barnes shook his head. "For the foreseeable future, that is not an option. Preston made provisions there as well, when the will was originally drafted."

Meaning when he was of sound mind—that was the point Mr. Barnes wished to convey. That these provisions had not been made on his deathbed, with his body racked with pain and suffering. She clenched her jaw in frustration. Uncle Benjamin laid a calming hand on her arm, and she forced in a deep breath.

“You’re not to disperse money to Prince,” Mr. Barnes said. “Preston felt that if his younger brother didn’t meet his requests, it would be best for him to learn economy in this way. I’m sorry, Miss De Vries. My hands are tied, and I hesitate to assist you in circumventing Preston’s wishes. He was a dear friend, and though we may disagree with his actions, I feel he must have believed they were right.”

Isabella shook her head. “I don’t understand. Preston told me of his regrets in dealing with his disapproval of Mrs. Baxter’s lifestyle. I cannot believe he would do this to her son.”

Mr. Barnes frowned. “Had he not instructed me in these matters months ago, I wouldn’t believe it either.”

Isabella sat back. “I’ll go see Mr. Baxter. I must convince him to challenge the will.”

“If you wish to challenge it, I do believe that only Prince will be able to shake the court’s decision.”

Isabella nodded absently. Preston had believed Prince had the connections to do just that. Despite Preston’s care in making sure his brother had no proof that his engagement to her was out of anything but love, she and Prince could drum up something. Especially considering Preston’s death on their wedding day. People could easily be made to believe Isabella had sought to marry him for his money. She and Prince could make a case. It was difficult to imagine that her ideas on gossip could be so suddenly and thoroughly changed, but Prince had been right all along. What other people thought didn’t matter when it came to doing what was right.

Mr. Barnes stood. “Do you have any instructions about what you would like done with the Fifth Avenue home and Davenleigh?” he asked.

Isabella shook her head as she stood as well. “Not before I confer with Mr. Baxter.”

“Very well.” Mr. Barnes took her hand again, gripping it briefly before he turned and shook Uncle Benjamin’s hand in farewell.

Aunt Cassandra returned with tea, but her conversation with Uncle Benjamin, him recounting what had just taken place, fell into the background of Isabella's thoughts as she mindlessly sipped her tea and stared out the window. There was much she didn't understand about Preston, Prince, and even Miss Darlington, but of one thing she was certain.

She must make this right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

PRINCE PINCHED THE BRIDGE OF his nose, his headache sharpening as Davies stared questioningly at him.

“You must go back to Barnes,” Davies said. “You said your brother had told you the transaction was approved.”

“No.” Prince would never again touch a dime of Preston’s money—Isabella’s money now. “The details had been sent over for Preston to review, but there was no decision from my brother.” Preston had spoken of it as if it had been done, but it was also no surprise to Prince to find out that it hadn’t been finalized. His brother had likely been waiting until the last minute, waiting for Prince to fail him in some way. A niggling guilt reminded him that he now had a duty to the tenants. That if it had been a possibility for him and Preston to reconcile, he should have swallowed his pride and tried harder to work out their differences.

“If we don’t want the deal to fall through, we must find another investor as quickly as possible,” Davies said.

“Yes, I know.” Prince knew all too well. “I can’t bear to think of backing out now,” he said. “Not when we’ve already talked to the tenants, begun finding places for them for during the renovation.”

Just days before, Miss Darlington had sent him a note that had included an account of the Wright family. The mother and the oldest daughter would be working in the household of friends of Miss Darlington’s, the Bensons—valuable training for the daughter—in exchange for their family’s stay in some empty servants’ quarters. If all went well, the daughter would gain a good reference for steady employment to continue helping the family after they removed back to the tenement building. And Mary Egan’s family—as soon as Isabella had heard of her, she’d insisted the Egans be given accommodations under her care. Isabella wanted to tutor Mary a little if she could.

Prince squeezed his eyes shut at the thought of Isabella. With thoughts of her came the hopes he’d carried of a future

with her. Preston dying before he and Isabella could make their vows, tragic as it was, had paved the way for Prince to be able to pursue her. But that was all dashed now, and there was no use in trying to get around it. Preston had made certain Prince would get none of his money, and he would deprive Isabella of it as well if she married Prince.

He forced the thoughts from his head. He'd gone round and round and found no happily ever after possible. So he focused instead on the immediate problem. If no renovations began at the building, alternate accommodations wouldn't be necessary. Would the Bensons honor the commitment they'd given to Miss Darlington to allow the Wright girl to work for them?

The small inheritance remaining from his father, money Preston had refused to touch when settling Mother's debts, would be enough for Prince to live on until he could find some kind of employment. There would be no more frivolities, and with little money to spare, he'd have to restrict his attendance in Society. He would need to dismiss Thompson, though he'd been dragging his feet at doing it.

Truth be told, those concerns hardly troubled him now. He'd found so much fulfillment in working with the tenement building and its occupants that it discouraged him far more to think of spending his days in an office building doing mindless work when something that truly inspired him had been within his grasp. The friendships he had found the past months—the Egans, Isabella, the other tenants—all but Davies had been whisked away by the money Prince had thought he couldn't live without.

He didn't know whether Preston's will included Prince not benefiting from a position at Preston's office, but he had better start looking elsewhere. In any case, the money from his father or any wages he made wouldn't be enough to invest in the building.

"Mr. Baxter?" Thompson stepped into the room and handed a note to Prince. Frowning, Prince reached for it. He opened the envelope, his name written in a feminine hand. His eyes jumped to the bottom of the letter, his heart thumping when he read Isabella's name.

It had been painful not to see her these last weeks, but once Barnes had left after delivering the news of Prince's lost inheritance, Prince had been glad for the distance. He couldn't give in to the feelings that had grown since he'd essentially admitted them to Isabella in the garden at Wynhall. He couldn't benefit from Preston's money. The will was ironclad. It would be best for him to stay away. They couldn't spend a lifetime avoiding talk of his brother. Ending their friendship now would be best for them both. Even one glimpse of her would undo all the work he'd done to push his feelings for her aside.

Yet he still told Thompson to retrieve his coat when he read her words. *I must see you immediately*. How could he resist when the note looked like it had been written with a trembling hand and was smudged?

"Miss De Vries," Davies guessed. "That stricken expression says it must be." He raised his eyebrows. "She could approve the transaction."

Prince shook his head. "Barnes made it clear that the will says she cannot disperse any money to me. I won't put her in the awkward position of reminding me."

Davies clenched his jaw but said only, "I'll leave you to your errand, then." He reached out and clasped Prince's hand before taking his leave.

He'd made his arguments for Prince challenging the last-minute change—but whether or not Preston had been in his right mind the day he'd enacted the provision, he'd been of very sound mind the day he'd warned Prince this would be the consequence if he did not live up to every expectation Preston held.

Even in death Prince's brother stood in the way of his happiness.

* * *

Prince frowned at the snow piled high at the entrance of Preston's Fifth Avenue home, an inordinate amount for mid-March. It reminded him that not long ago, he'd claimed that

spring was just around the corner. The snowfall of the last few days seemed fitting to convey how much had changed in Prince's life in only a few weeks. This was not the spring he'd expected, in more ways than one.

When he entered the drawing room, Isabella stood but didn't come to him. Her face was as pale as it had been the day of the funeral, when he'd watched her clutch her uncle's arm atop the hill at Davenleigh. It certainly wasn't filled with color as it had been the last time he'd seen her, when her skin had been silky to his touch and warm with her blush.

Her hair was plain and her simple black dress depressing, adding to the pallor of her skin. It was he who had to cross the room to her, brace himself as he took her hand, resist placing a kiss on her palm, her wrist, her lips.

"Prince," she said softly.

He dropped her hand, stepping back. Making a joke out of her begging him to come to her and his immediate response, like a knight coming to his queen, he said, "You summoned me, my lady?" He made his tone light, as debonair as those first days, when he'd tried to enchant her to secure his inheritance. What a cad he'd been to think of such a plan.

She blinked at him. No amusement graced her expression at his remark. "You must do something," she said instead.

Prince turned from her, his shoulders slumping. She would not allow him to make this visit easy in any way. Just as she'd demanded his friendship from the beginning, she would demand this now, having no idea what havoc it wreaked on his heart. He lowered himself into a chair—unpardonable behavior, given that she remained standing, but she hurriedly took her seat as well, sitting torturously close.

"There is nothing to do," he said, his voice devoid of emotion. He'd long since accepted Preston's final judgment of him. The initial shock had worn off. Prince should have expected this all along.

"Yes, there is." She leaned forward, scowling at him. He turned away from her intense stare, looking instead at his

hands in his lap. “You must challenge it. Preston was delirious.”

Prince had very much wished to avoid this conversation. He didn't care to ruin the esteem she'd always held Preston in. He would skirt around the truth of Preston's feelings for him as long as he could. “As Barnes has surely told you, Preston made these decisions months ago.”

“Before you had reconciled,” she insisted. She twisted her hands in her lap, her jaw working before she spoke again. “I confess to you that Preston seemed very sure you had the connections to challenge him leaving me anything. That you *would* challenge it unless we made sure you had no grounds.” The confession pained her; it was clear she'd expected it to shock him. He didn't even raise his eyebrows. “Surely you must have ways.”

He did, but he ground his teeth together to keep from lashing out. Prince would last this interview, allow her to bid him goodbye with civil memories of him and Preston. Their future was not to be. Though Preston's dying had made it seem possible for a short time, and Prince had no notion of pleasing his brother one way or the other, he couldn't surmount this obstacle. He didn't dare question Barnes about the consequences of him marrying Isabella, but Preston had been clear the money could not benefit him and so had made it equally clear what he would have thought of Prince marrying Isabella. She would likely lose her inheritance as well, and if Preston and Prince could agree on one thing, it was that Isabella's future must be secure.

“This isn't right, Prince,” she insisted when he didn't respond.

“It's not a pony, Bella,” he snapped, regretting the heat to his words as soon as Isabella jerked backward, as though he'd laid hands on her.

“Of course not.” She tilted her head at him, frowning. “This is much more important.”

She wouldn't give it up. He must make her do so. He stood, stalking toward the fire. “Preston long intended to wield you

as a weapon to bring me into line,” he said, not daring to look at her. “To prove to me that he could allocate his money however he pleased.”

“Prince.” Her voice held warning and censure. She’d also drawn closer. Close enough that if he turned, he could reach out to her.

“The night he told me of your engagement, he threatened me with an heir to force his wishes on me.” Prince reached out to the mantel, gripping the cold marble to steady himself.

“That’s not true,” she said in a hushed voice. “Our marriage . . .” She didn’t finish the sentence.

“Whatever the case, Barnes has assured me that Preston made certain I couldn’t access his money, that he never intended for me to do so.” He shook his head, angry at himself for letting Preston fool him, make him believe their relationship could be as it was when he was a boy. But he supposed that was what Preston had wanted—to control him as he had then.

He heard Isabella draw in a breath. “You’re angry,” she said, her voice nearer and yet softer than before.

Prince squeezed his eyes shut. She had a habit of doing that—excusing the Baxter brothers’ behavior. Preston was in pain, ill, could not have been thinking right. Prince was angry, hurt, couldn’t mean what he said. How little she knew of either of them.

She laid a hand on his arm. The moments in the garden came flooding back to Prince. He’d nearly kissed her. He’d hoped for a future with her. “Perhaps . . . we may find a way around the will.”

The hesitation in her tone made him turn to her. Scarlet flooded her cheeks, and her blush explained to Prince what she meant. He pulled away from her, squaring his shoulders for what he must convey to her. “I do not intend to ever take another penny of my brother’s money,” he said.

The color rushed from her cheeks as she stared at him, taking in *his* meaning. Her lips trembled. He took another step

away from her, moving toward the door. The weeks away from her would not keep him from crumbling at her feet if she began to cry. He thought of Preston's pallid face as he'd railed about Isabella's security. He forced himself to picture his brother's anger, if only to protect himself from her anguish.

"What do you wish me to do with Davenleigh?" she asked, her tone holding a hint of huskiness, her emotions not entirely under control. "With this home?"

At the door, a safe distance away, he turned toward her. "They are yours now, Miss De Vries. You may do with them what you wish."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ISABELLA COULDN'T HAVE MANAGED THE closing of Preston's Fifth Avenue home without the constant directions of her aunt. It was an exhausting venture, one she knew precious little about. She'd offered it as a residence for her aunt and uncle and herself. She'd half hoped they would accept, allowing her to wallow in the memories here—memories she insisted to herself were of Preston only—but as she had suspected they would, her aunt and uncle wished to return to Wynhall for the rest of the Season. In mourning, and more importantly, an independent heiress, Isabella had no need to finish the Season in the city, and her aunt and uncle would much rather spend their time with their grandchildren than attend the sparse, quiet entertainments that would be appropriate for them to accept. Their mourning could be done much more comfortably in their own home. But although Isabella would be with family, her own mourning had only magnified now to include both Baxter brothers.

She'd deluded herself into believing that Prince's charm, his flirting, his ridiculous behavior had meant anything at all. But the cold way he'd called her Miss De Vries upon their last meeting, with none of the sparkle in his eyes or the delight to his voice at his teasing, told her it had all been an illusion. Perhaps a diversion until he could pursue Miss Darlington again.

He'd also insisted that Preston's courtship of Isabella was to wield power over him, and his words had forced her to consider again the parts of her engagement to Preston that she didn't want to think about. Preston had promised her, been so very insistent that he would expect nothing from her as concerned a true marriage. It would be, he'd assured her, a marriage between friends. A business partnership of sorts. To threaten Prince that she might produce an heir—surely that had only been part of the act. Something, in the beginning, to impede any efforts Prince might make after Preston's death to challenge her inheritance.

That was what she wanted to believe, but Prince's words had forced her to consider that her beloved friend Preston may

have wielded his power exactly as Prince thought. Demanding that Prince not pursue any kind of relationship with Miss Darlington, judging her with shallow evidence, even using Isabella to threaten his brother—it all rubbed uncomfortably. She had struggled since that argument to come to terms with the sides of Preston that she must admit she hadn't known. She'd idolized him too much. Ignored or excused how he'd clung to his suspicions about Prince's motives. Trusted him above all else.

And did Prince even realize that his own actions had been in tandem? Rejecting Isabella and her help to spite his dead brother one last time?

"Miss De Vries?" Mrs. Stanley, the housekeeper of the Fifth Avenue home, said.

Her voice brought Isabella from her reverie, and Mrs. Stanley and Aunt Cassandra shared a look. They had been very forgiving of her constant inattention. Mrs. Stanley looked across the small sitting room they were using to discuss the last of the details before the house was closed up and prepared for sale, and Isabella followed her gaze to see a footman standing there.

"Miss Darlington has asked if you're at home to see her," he said, presenting a platter with the young woman's card on it.

Isabella picked it up at the same time she stood. "Yes, absolutely. I'll be right there." Miss Darlington's company would be a welcome distraction.

Miss Darlington was standing next to the fireplace when Isabella entered the drawing room, and for a few moments, Isabella could not help but remember the dejected way Prince had stood there just over a week ago. She shook the memory from her head, blinking back unwelcome tears of both anger and longing as Miss Darlington strode across the room toward her, hands out. What would Isabella do if Prince pursued Miss Darlington again? Miss Darlington was one of her only friends.

She shooed the thoughts away. Preston had been wrong about so much; perhaps the extent of Prince and Miss

Darlington's relationship was one of them. Besides, thinking ill of anyone else was too exhausting.

She grasped Miss Darlington's hands when they met. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Are you?" Miss Darlington arched a brow. "Forgive me, but you look wrung out."

"I feel that way, I assure you." She let Miss Darlington take her arm, and they walked across the room together to sit in the chairs by the fire. Isabella would rather not, but in the chill of the day, it was ridiculous not to sit as near as they could to the warmth, even if this spot held painful memories of Prince. "But I'm still glad you're here. I'm in need of a distraction, Miss Darlington."

"First off, you must leave off calling me that. Rosalind. Remember, we're going to be the best of friends."

That brought something of a smile to Isabella's face. "Of course."

Rosalind pursed her lips as she leaned back. "Second of all, the news I bring may not be the distraction you wish."

Isabella couldn't begin to tell her friend how there could be no worse news than what she'd suffered so far. "What is it?"

"It will come as no surprise to you, I'm sure, that the younger Mr. Baxter no longer has the funding to invest in the tenement building." Rosalind leaned forward, her expression intense.

Come to think of it, Isabella couldn't recall a time when she'd seen the woman relax. She seemed . . . intent. Always.

Isabella furrowed her brow. "It does come as a surprise. I assumed Preston approved the transaction weeks ago. He was quite proud of Prince about it."

She could have sworn he'd even said as much. Unwelcome thoughts of her mentor and friend returned. First, Preston had left Prince out of his will, and now this?

Rosalind shook her head. "According to Mr. Davies, Mr. Baxter's lawyer never received his brother's approval."

“Preston was so very ill.” Isabella sighed. “I’m sure—I’m sure he meant to.” But she wasn’t. She desperately wished it was Preston’s illness that had prevented him from speaking to Mr. Barnes about the building, but she kept holding on to his illness as an excuse, and that was wearing thin.

“I’m sorry to broach such an awkward subject, but surely you could approve the investment now, couldn’t you?” Rosalind eyed her expectantly.

Isabella hoped her friendship with Rosalind would someday grow to include confidences, but she didn’t know the woman well enough yet to lay bare Preston and Prince’s feud, especially since she feared she understood far less about it than she’d thought.

“I’m afraid I can’t. My inheritance is somewhat . . . complicated.” She clenched her jaw and stared into the fire. “I don’t believe Prince would accept my contribution in any case.”

Rosalind sat back, displeasure evident in the brief slump of her shoulders. She scowled. “I must admit I’m very disappointed, Isabella. This is the first large project the society has begun work on, and I’m afraid it will all fall through now. We must find an investor.” She chewed on her lip.

Isabella nearly laughed at the way Rosalind’s determination dogged the heels of her disappointment. Then she sat up straighter. “Rosalind.” The woman’s eyes snapped to Isabella. “Perhaps the new investor should be the Ladies Society of Benefactresses and Philanthropists.”

Rosalind leaned forward again. “Oh?”

“There is nothing to prevent me from donating money to the society. Preston was well aware that I intended to use my inheritance for charitable projects.” The small smile Isabella had found upon seeing Rosalind grew, leaving her with the first warm feelings she’d had since Prince had walked out of this room with his harsh words echoing in his wake.

Rosalind grinned. “Mr. Baxter was correct. You’re quite brilliant.” She sat back, all satisfaction now, her grin like a

pleased cat that had snatched a mouse. “He went on and on about your inventions,” she said. “I’m dying to know what you’re working on now.”

Isabella sat back herself, pleased over the plan, but her exhaustion started climbing back in. “I confess I haven’t put a thought to anything of the sort in the last several weeks.”

Rosalind nodded. “Understandable, given everything that has happened. But you have the means now for something quite spectacular. Have you something in mind?”

The idea that her inheritance now made it easier for her to change the world as she’d always dreamed of sparked some anxiety, rather than excitement. She couldn’t help that her thoughts turned to the teething necklace she’d made for Tommy, the wheeled chair she’d fashioned for Preston, and even the toy she’d intended to make that a small child could sit in and bounce up and down to entertain them. That idea had come after Prince had told her about Mary Egan and the children she looked after while her parents worked.

“I don’t know that I have anything spectacular in mind,” she said, musing. “But I don’t think I need to be spectacular.” Her aunt had been right about how the little things she made, the ways she paid attention, were spectacular in their own right. She thought about the bouncing toy again. “But I do have something in mind that would be a welcome distraction.”

“Excellent.” Rosalind’s grin widened, her satisfaction even greater, it seemed, than when they had solved their problem with the money. As though her visit to Isabella had not really been about the money but about finding something to pull Isabella from her melancholy. “I can’t wait to find out what it is,” she said. “Something ingenious, I’m sure.”

It wouldn’t be novel or world changing, but perhaps . . . Isabella nodded in agreement. “Something helpful. That’s all I need.”

* * *

When they had taken care of the last items at Preston’s Fifth Avenue home and returned to the De Vries home on Madison

Avenue, Isabella went up to her room and took out her notebook. She hadn't even opened it since before Preston's death, let alone leafed through the pages. She found the sketches she'd made to help Preston turn on the lamp at his bedside and ran her fingers softly over the pencil lines. Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them back.

As she turned the page, several papers fluttered to the ground. Frowning, Isabella bent to pick them up. Perhaps the list she'd made of supplies for the pull she'd made? One of the papers was the list, which Prince had returned when he'd brought back the supplies for her, but underneath it was a letter in Preston's hand.

A lump immediately formed in Isabella's throat, and she hesitated before reading it. She wasn't surprised her friend would leave one final missive for her to find, perhaps even suspecting she wouldn't come across it for some time.

She steeled herself and began reading.

Barnes,

I've sent instructions that the details of Prince's purchase of the building at—

Isabella gasped. It wasn't a letter to her at all. She quickly read the rest of the letter and then read it again. It contained Preston's approval of the purchase and asked that confirmation of the details of the transaction be sent to Mr. Barnes.

I had thought it a scheme at first, Preston wrote near the end. Something to make me believe his habits had changed in a blink. But I must admit that watching him throw himself into this work has been gratifying. I will say to you, Alex, that I'm quite proud of him. He is very eager over the entire project, and I have no doubt this is only the beginning.

She clapped a hand over her mouth, her tears already falling. She'd hoped so much that it was illness that had kept Preston from authorizing Prince's venture. She'd worried just as much that she hadn't really known the man she'd been about to marry.

Her mind flew back to the day she'd found him searching through his papers, how he'd said something about already sending something to the office. He must have meant this letter. It had been important for him. "Oh, Preston," she said softly, reading again the words about how proud he was of Prince. She could almost picture the twinkle in his eyes whenever Prince had spoken of the building and its residents. She remembered the questions he'd asked during their conversations, from the details of the improvements to the lives of the residents.

Preston Baxter hadn't been the perfect hero she'd made him out to be in her girlhood and perhaps had never seen past even when she'd grown. But perhaps now she could rest easier knowing that neither was he a villain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A THREAD OF GUILT HAD hounded Prince during most of the dinner he was attending at Davies's mother's home. It had all been arranged to include the Darlington. Though a few weeks ago Prince had thought his pursuit of Miss Darlington a thing of the past, his current circumstance had forced him to change his opinion. He assured himself that in time his feelings for Isabella would temper, and he suspected that once he could convince Miss Darlington to lay down her guard, they would get on very well together. She needed a husband, and he needed a fortune. Considering that was how they had begun their initial acquaintance, Prince should hardly pay mind to the pricks of conscience bothering him now.

But his reasons for pursuing Miss Darlington would be apparent to her father now that Preston had disinherited him, and given how little Mr. Darlington had spoken to Prince all evening, Prince could not help but doubt gaining Mr. Darlington's approval of his intention to court her in earnest.

Though he wouldn't enjoy the time between the end of dinner and the men rejoining the ladies, he had to make full use of it this evening. After sharing a glance with Davies, he picked up the glass of brandy he'd poured for himself for appearances and made his way around the table to where Mr. Darlington sat.

"Something of a surprise to see you at a gathering like this one so soon," Mr. Darlington said as Prince sat down.

The idea that anyone would expect him to mourn Preston drew an involuntary bark of hard laughter from Prince. The rumors about his brother's deathbed actions had reached every ear by now. They'd been swirling for months before he died, everyone—even Mr. Darlington—commenting upon the state of the brothers' relationship after Prince's return from Europe.

"A surprise?" Prince asked with a slight raise of his brows. "Hardly."

Mr. Darlington studied Prince as he drew on his cigar and then tapped the ashes into a nearby ashtray. "I've heard some

unsettling things about your inheritance,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

Prince swallowed. Already this interview wasn't going well. “I didn't think you concerned yourself with that sort of talk.” The Darlingtones were among the wealthiest families in New York, and Miss Darlington was an only child.

“Let me be plain with you, boy.” Mr. Darlington put down the cigar. “I don't intend to hand my daughter off to someone who is unprepared to support the lifestyle I've been insistent she have—the one she deserves.” With a steely gaze, he challenged Prince to contradict him, which Prince was tempted to do. The idea that the fortune Darlington would settle on Miss Darlington wasn't more than enough to support the lifestyle he insinuated was laughable. She could have a dozen houses up and down the Hudson River Valley without blinking an eye. Well—in her case, tenement buildings, hospitals, and playgrounds to her heart's content.

Prince swirled the brandy in his glass, staring down into it. He hadn't bothered to drink any of it, only to play a part he hoped would soften Mr. Darlington. “I see,” he murmured. If he hadn't been desperate, his pride would have kept him from one last try. “You're quite set on that?”

Mr. Darlington gave him a firm nod. “Unmovable.”

Prince stood and nodded before walking away from Mr. Darlington. There were other heiresses in New York, ones whose fathers wouldn't snub the good name that came with a marriage to Prince. Ones he could convince to fall head over heels for him. They were all set on imitating England's high Society. A good name meant something to most of the obscenely wealthy in New York—or Pittsburg or Kansas City or some other place where a girl with a rich father was looking for an in in Society. America had enough dollar princesses eager to wed dilapidated earldoms in England that he could certainly find one who would be happy to ride on his coattails.

But none he could wed in time to save his interest in the tenement building. Another sharp pang to his heart said none of them would capture his heart the way Isabella had. That a

woman with enough money to house a hundred puppies with diamond-studded collars was no longer enough.

He made his way over to Davies, who eyed him. Prince answered his unspoken inquiry with a quick shake of his head. They didn't speak in the few minutes that remained before the other men stood to rejoin the ladies.

Prince found a seat in the drawing room by himself. He must stay at least a little while for propriety's sake. He started when Miss Darlington sat down in the chair next to his, eyeing him earnestly with the first look of genuine interest in him that he'd ever seen from her.

"Mr. Baxter, given the glare my father is bestowing upon me, I cannot help but think he suddenly disapproves of you." Her lips twitched in a smile that had Prince tilting his head. Her demeanor was entirely different from that of the proper—if not somewhat stiff—young woman he'd pursued before, though he'd seen glimpses of this woman from time to time.

"Wholeheartedly, Miss Darlington." He swept his cheerful smile across his face, though he hadn't felt any inclination to be charming for quite some time. It was a chore even now. "Please accept my fondest apologies."

She pinched her lips together, eyeing him with a narrowed gaze. "I have half a mind to elope."

For the second time that night, laughter got the better of Prince, though this bout was far warmer. He settled a real smile upon her. "Miss Darlington, I must make sure you're aware of how very little money I have to my name."

She waved dismissively. "It wouldn't be long before I convinced my father I was madly in love with you and couldn't do otherwise. Mr. Baxter, when it comes to me, my father withholds very little." Then she gave a soft sigh. "It's the perfect plan—well, if it weren't for the fact that *you* are madly in love with Isabella De Vries."

Prince blinked at her. "You mustn't pay heed to rumors like that," he drawled, doing his best to keep from swallowing hard at the thought of Isabella.

“Oh, no one at all is talking about this. But it’s been plainly written in your face every time I’ve seen you with her.” Miss Darlington smiled as though this news brought her immense satisfaction. It was the first time Prince had felt any ire toward her. Her smile widened. “But no matter, Mr. Baxter. I’ve found an investor for your building.”

For the second time in the conversation, Miss Darlington had left Prince flummoxed. “You’ve . . . what?”

She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “A charitable society I know of. They’re quite eager to aid your effort in helping your tenants.”

This time Prince narrowed his eyes at Miss Darlington. “A charitable society?” He lowered his own voice. “I feel I must be blunt in warning you that certain . . . benefactors aren’t at liberty to expend their funds to my benefit.” He gave her a pointed look.

She feigned confusion. “The donation to the charitable society I speak of was an anonymous one, and since I’ve made no secret of my efforts to aid you and Mr. Davies in this endeavor, the directors asked me to mention the subject to you. They don’t want to see this project fail, and frankly, Mr. Baxter, neither do I.”

The solution seemed too easy, and that left Prince suspicious, especially given the innocence Miss Darlington was intent on portraying, even though she’d made her own philanthropic tendencies obvious in the conversation. “And what charitable organization might this be?”

She gave a shrug, the old, indifferent mask—at least a part of it—returning. “Mr. Baxter, I hardly concern myself with such things. You know I don’t have the time. But I trust you’re agreeable.”

Perhaps she was finagling the money from her father somehow, or perhaps she had another suitor Prince knew nothing about. He hesitated, but he was in no position to turn down this offer, despite not knowing where the money came from. “Yes, of course.” He sat back against his chair, continuing to study Miss Darlington. “I’m not in love with

Isabella De Vries,” he added.

Miss Darlington arched her brows, and he thought she might have turned her head and laughed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE LAST FEW WEEKS HAD left Prince with little time to ponder Miss Darlington's declaration that she believed him in love with Isabella. A trust had been set up for the anonymous charitable organization to donate to in order to benefit Prince and Davies's project, and when the investment was once again secure, the business of finalizing the purchase took up most of his thoughts.

Miss Darlington retook it upon herself to head up a handful of women who found the tenants temporary housing during the renovations. He never glimpsed Isabella while working on the tenement project, which was both a relief and a source of guilt. It had been her idea to find host homes for those unable to secure other places to stay. They would have had to turn out dozens of families if not for her, and thanks to Preston, the inheritance, and the rift it had caused, she was no longer involved. It almost made Prince glad he would never see Baxter money again unless he made it himself. The fortune left to Isabella had a knack for tearing families apart.

He didn't see her socially either. Though he suspected he could venture out more into Society and not risk seeing her, he didn't have time for many entertainments, nor the inclination. The unseasonably warm April weather, as though making up for the dreary, snowy March, had many families escaping to country homes and inviting friends to them. Prince was needed in the city and declined more than a few invitations.

Of course, Isabella was staying home anyway, in mourning for her fiancé. Still, Prince's thoughts turned to her more than he cared to admit: to the memories of strolling through the greenhouse with her, the delightful pink that rose to her cheeks with every flirtatious comment he made, sitting in Preston's room with her and recounting his childhood with laughter. Those last memories stung more than the others, considering how Preston had turned on him in the end. Prince had allowed Isabella and his brother to convince him that their relationship had changed.

He tried to shake the memories from his mind as he finished

his latest inspection of the building and the initial work that was being done, glad to at least have work to distract him. And Davies had introduced Prince to a Mr. Winslow, who'd been quite interested in Prince and Davies's venture and had offered Prince a position in his business. Once the tenant project was more in hand, Prince intended to accept the offer. Perhaps the man could find more work like this building project for Prince. He would enjoy that.

When he returned home he found a small brown package among some letters on the table. He opened it carefully, startling when a bundle of letters slipped out, the directions written in his mother's hand. He pressed his lips together, beating back emotion.

Another look inside the package revealed a folded note in another hand.

*Mrs. Stanley found these tucked inside Preston's desk.
I thought you may want to keep them.*

—*Bella*

He drew in a long breath, the sight of her name—the fact that she'd signed the note in *that* way—upending him more than even seeing his mother's writing. He stared at Isabella's note, rereading the simple words, his gaze lingering on her name. He thought of the day in the greenhouse when he'd first heard Preston calling her Bella. In spite of himself, he'd found it delightful. He'd found her even more so, and though he'd teased her that day and then fled from her when she pressed him to truly feel, he thought it might have been when she'd first begun stealing his heart.

He sank into a chair near the fire, the letters from his mother clutched in one hand, the note from Isabella gripped in the other. How could so much time pass and he still felt the weight of losing Isabella so heavily? Finally, he set the note on a nearby table, taking up the first of the letters from his mother.

He'd known she and Preston had corresponded. When he was young, Preston's letters had included notes for him. When he was old enough to resent his brother, he'd stopped responding and Preston had stopped writing. His mother

would sometimes read a line or two to him, but Prince had made his displeasure more and more known as he grew, refusing to stay in the room if he knew a letter from his older brother had arrived.

Opening one of the letters now made him think of the story Preston had told him about his letter to Prince's mother asking about her relationship with Marquis d'Allais and how Isabella had gasped in pleasure over it.

Dearest Preston, this one began. It made Prince smile. His mother was seventeen years Preston's senior, only *just* old enough to be his mother, really, but she'd mothered him from the moment she'd married their father. Preston had often remarked on it, alternately teasing her or showing his annoyance for being fussed over when he was a grown man.

This letter contained news of Prince and the day-to-day things of her life. The descriptions made him glance again at the date listed, and he blinked to realize it was a few months before her death. His chest tightened with the thought.

He hadn't gotten the long goodbye with his mother that Isabella had with Preston. His mother's first symptoms had simply been flagging energy and then a mild fever she'd passed off as something she would recover from quickly. Then she'd taken a turn for the worst, and before he'd known what was happening, she was gone. These letters were unexpected gifts, last words from her that he hadn't anticipated to be her last.

He immersed himself in them, smiling over them, enjoying hearing her voice in his mind, and thanking Isabella for sending them to him. Of course, she wouldn't have done any differently. He couldn't imagine her throwing them away. She'd known how much these would mean, and even though his treatment of her had been awful—even if it had been for a good reason—he could never think she would treat him anything other than kindly.

It made him wish for her more fiercely than ever. He sighed, the longing sharper as he reached for the second to last letter.

Dearest Preston,

Your last letter was something of a surprise to receive. Though you've hinted in the past of wishing for Prince and me to return, I hadn't realized you felt so strongly about it. My son. (Yes, I've called you my son always in my heart, despite your protests. A stepmother can love her stepson as much as if he were hers by blood. I promise not to chide you for loving your first mother more.) My son, I haven't felt the ill will toward you that you've come to believe I have. Though I cannot deny that I've been hurt by our separation, I've enjoyed my life in Paris. I only regret that Prince does not know you as the brother of his youth. It's for him that I'm moved to tears by your letter and your invitation. I forgave you long ago, son. You may rest easy on that score. I'll begin making arrangements to return to New York as soon as I'm able.

I cannot close this letter without admitting my own part in our quarrel. I should have made more efforts than I did to see your worries. Can we put it all behind us?

I know my letter is not a long one. Forgive me. There are many things to tell, but I shall tell you them all when we meet again. I have some little illness and am too fatigued to continue, but I've said what is most important.

All my love,

Ellen

Prince stared at the words, stunned. The date was mere days before his mother had lapsed into unconsciousness, no more than a week before she'd died. He furrowed his brows, feeling the surprise that his mother had professed and then some at learning of Preston's invitation for them to return. How could it be possible that Preston and his mother had reconciled before her death?

Prince went back through her letters, noticing this time how his mother's words had gradually softened toward Preston.

He stared at the letters for a long time, trying to hang on to the anger that had clung to him since learning of Preston's will. But if Preston had been willing to apologize long before he had learned of his cancer, perhaps his attempts to reconcile with Prince were more than the regrets of a dying man. And Prince couldn't push away the thought that Isabella might have been right about his final act being one of a man ravaged by sickness.

He stood, the final letter fluttering to the floor, unread. In his shock he'd forgotten it. He picked it up, hoping this one contained more answers, more to explain his brother's actions and help put the past months back into the box Prince had packed them away in.

But this one wasn't in his mother's handwriting; it was in Preston's. Prince unfolded it, expecting that one of Preston's responses had somehow gotten mixed in with Mother's letters, perhaps one he hadn't sent before her passing. Folded in with the letter from Preston was a smaller sheet with another note from Isabella.

I found this with my own papers. He didn't sign it—I think I may have interrupted him the day he was working on it—but it's unmistakably Preston's handwriting. I don't know if it will be any use in your business transaction now. I've been told the purchase has gone through.

Thoroughly intrigued, Prince scanned the paper. It was a letter to Barnes authorizing the purchase of the building Prince had thrown his heart into.

Prince began to pace in the small quarters of his rooms at the hotel, holding the final letter from his mother in one hand and the letter from Preston in the other, imagining what his mother would have said to him now. *"He was not a perfect man, Prince—neither are you."*

He'd criticized Preston in his mother's presence shortly before her death, hovering over her bed, certain that if they were in New York, his brother could have brought the best doctors. But she wouldn't allow Prince to blame him. She

hadn't denied that his actions had hurt her, hurt them. But, as her letter had said, as Prince hadn't seen then, she'd long ago forgiven him and lived her life with joy.

Prince was living only half a life—he felt sure of that—and even that half was due to Preston's insistence that Prince could do more. He'd found a passion in the project of the tenement building, a happiness that did not require puppies with diamond-studded collars and expensive parties. It was something he may not have discovered if Preston hadn't insisted he learn economy. What kind of man would Prince be right now, this day, if his older brother hadn't demanded he do something worthwhile with the fortune he'd meant to give Prince?

The other half of his life had been brought to him by Preston too, and in the adversity of Preston's last act, Prince had discarded her as easily as he would have one of those puppies. He slumped into the chair, the heaviness of the day he'd pushed Isabella away returning to weigh him down.

But what could he do? Barnes had been clear about the details of Preston's provisions. Prince could not benefit from Isabella's money. He'd cut her off for her own benefit, fulfilling Preston's dearest wish despite himself, to safeguard Isabella's security.

Prince thought harder on it now. He'd never asked Barnes outright what would happen if he married Isabella. And this letter may change things as well. It threw suspicion on Preston's actions on the day he died since he'd obviously been planning to approve the purchase of the building.

The day Barnes had told Prince about the change to the will, Prince had been angry and prideful. Hearing that not only had his brother cut him off but that Isabella couldn't give him his share without losing her own had been enough for him to turn his back on all the money, no matter the cost. But Preston had had no idea of Prince's feelings for Isabella, so there were likely no specific instructions on what would happen with the money in that case. She wouldn't be giving it to him, so surely her inheritance couldn't be taken from her. Was there a way around it after all?

The more he considered it, the more ashamed he was. From his height on the moral high ground, it was difficult to see whether protecting Isabella's independence and her inheritance was really the reason he'd pushed her away or whether he, like Preston, had become so wrapped up in the principle of the issue that he'd disregarded what mattered. Prince had vowed never to take another penny of his brother's money, but despite how carelessly—at least, Prince had always assumed it was careless—Preston had turned him and his mother away, with only a letter of apology, his mother had been willing to let it all go. Ellen Baxter had been frivolous, yes—Prince could not look past that—but she'd also been kindhearted, enough so to rival even Isabella.

And she would advise him to follow his heart without delay.

He couldn't help a small laugh. His mother had also been impetuous and perhaps not the best choice for seeking advice of the heart from in this instance. Then he chided himself. Though she'd entertained many suitors over the years, none of them had ever claimed a serious place in her heart. That had always been taken by his father.

Prince thought back to the day Preston had told him and Isabella about the letter Mother had written about the Marquis d'Allais. A whisper of a smile had remained on Preston's lips as he'd told them of her more serious response in a later letter—how she couldn't forget her husband, though she'd tried, if just to shed a bit of the pain of missing him.

Prince missed Isabella with that same ache.

He gave a sigh and looked back down at the letters in his hands. His mother's forgiving words. His brother's long-sought-after praise of Prince. He thought of the truly happy moments he'd spent with Preston in those weeks before his death. His brother hadn't been perfect, but neither had Prince. He'd spent far too long seeing his brother through bitterness and had wasted time together that they could have reclaimed. But even worse, he'd driven Isabella away. He had pushed thoughts of her away so frequently that he'd never considered how foolish he'd been.

He stood, wanting to go to her at that exact moment, but worry over the will brought him to a standstill. There may not be specific instructions in the case of Isabella marrying Prince, but there would be instructions to direct her money if she should marry again. Preston would have thought of that. His guiding determination those final days had been concern for Isabella, even if it had been misdirected.

Prince straightened as he realized what he should do. He must see Barnes and sort out what could be done. And if he had to challenge the will to marry the woman he loved, then so be it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ISABELLA SWAYED SIDE TO SIDE as she walked around the sitting room at Wynhall with Tommy in her arms. She'd seen the nanny come in to retrieve him for his nap, but with his sweet head on her shoulder, she'd sent Bess a pleading look, and her cousin-in-law had shooed the nanny away. Now the baby slept soundly, and gently meandering around the room was doing good for Isabella's anxious soul.

Robert and Bess and their family had been such a distraction these last weeks. Her grieving heart had settled quicker than she'd expected it would, but Isabella supposed that was due to her being able to say goodbye to Preston. Every so often she would think of something she must hurry upstairs to tell him before remembering that he was gone. It was in those moments that she wished for Prince all the more. She might have told *him*.

He might not have cared.

She'd wondered what might have happened if she'd pushed aside all thoughts of rumors and gossip and told Prince that day in the garden how much she cared for him. That no matter what people said, he may court her as soon as he wished. These weeks had given her time to ponder the truth in Prince's advice that she couldn't worry so much about what others thought. Those first anxious steps of trusting the people around her and dismissing the ones who did not matter had turned into a firm resolution. "*You and I know the truth.*" That would have been all that mattered.

Aunt Cassandra and Bess spoke in low voices on the other side of the room, both ever conscious of the sleeping baby. The softest of knocks sounded on the door, and Isabella made her way farther across the room, away from any possible conversation louder than the one Bess and Aunt Cassandra had been holding.

"There is a delivery for Miss De Vries," she heard the butler say.

She looked to the door where a footman entered, carrying a

vase full of small purple flowers. Aunt Cassandra directed him to set it on a table and sent a glance toward Isabella. Isabella nodded her permission for her aunt to inspect the arrangement while Isabella slowly swayed that direction.

“No card,” Aunt Cassandra whispered, her brows furrowing.

Heat rushed to Isabella’s face as she thought of who she suspected would send flowers with no card.

“Bluebells,” Bess said quietly with a pinch to her lips. She turned to the footman. “Please fetch *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* from the library.” The footman nodded, hurrying off with soft steps.

Isabella tried to shake herself from thoughts of Prince as they awaited the footman’s return. Aunt Cassandra glanced at her again, then at Bess, her lips turned down in a thoughtful frown. Isabella had confessed little of what had happened between her and Prince to her aunt and cousin, only that she’d hoped for Prince’s continued friendship and had been disappointed. She’d blamed the will and hadn’t admitted any of the silly feelings she’d mistakenly developed for him.

Once Bess had the flower reference in hand, she skimmed through the pages, stopping with a soft “Hmm.” She looked up at Isabella. “Humility.”

Isabella put a free hand to her heart as she once again looked over the flowers. “How strange,” she said, giving a little shake of her head and turning away. Did he mean to ask her forgiveness for his harsh words the day she had asked him to challenge the will? Or did he mean more? Could she allow him to mean more? She’d fallen once for Prince Baxter’s practiced charms and gotten her heart thoroughly broken because of it.

Aunt Cassandra and Bess didn’t comment further on the flowers, and Isabella had them sent up to her room.

The next day a fern arrived for her.

She was sitting at the desk in the library, only half of her brain on the letters in front of her. Since she had no desire to risk going to the tenement building and seeing Prince,

Rosalind had Isabella reviewing letters from tenants who needed alternate places to stay and matching them with the growing list of families Rosalind had convinced to open their homes.

“Isabella.” Aunt Cassandra’s voice called her attention to the butler and footman at the door, the footman holding the potted plant.

Isabella stood and looked over at Bess, who was crossing the room to retrieve the book they had consulted the day before. Isabella walked to the footman, taking the small potted plant from him and stroking the soft, spindly leaves as she looked at it.

“Sincerity,” Bess said in a soft voice. “And humility again.”

Emotion welled in Isabella’s throat, and she sat in the nearest chair, staring at the plant. She searched for a note, but like the day before, nothing accompanied it.

“So thoughtful,” Aunt Cassandra murmured, bringing Isabella’s attention back to her. She sat back in the chair near the fire that she’d been in before the interruption, opening the book of poetry she and Bess had been reading from.

Bess walked over and handed the book on flowers to Isabella, smiling at her before she went back to join Aunt Cassandra.

Isabella sat in her chair, staring at the fern, for quite some time.

The next day was a bouquet of handmade paper camellias in a bright pink. They were exquisite and almost lifelike, the petals colored by hand to resemble the ombré hues of the real flowers. The paper had even been crumpled and softened so that she almost thought they were real. The artistry took her breath away.

The day before, she’d taken the small book on flowers to her room, but though she took the camellias to her room to admire, she didn’t need the reference book. Prince had sent camellias before.

Longing for you.

Isabella ran her fingers gently over the soft petals, lifting them to her face, surprised when a sweet fragrance drifted up from them.

The next day brought red and pink carnations. *My heart aches* and *I'll never forget you*, respectively. Isabella's heart ached as well. It was quite a thorough apology, so much so that she was beginning to hope that the bearer of the apology would present one of these gifts himself.

Then came violets that *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* reference said meant devotion.

Next, roses—a proclamation of love.

And when Isabella thought she could bear it no more, bright-red orchids arrived. Heat rushed into her cheeks at the same time a swell of emotion burst within her, and she thanked her stars she was sitting alone in the library today. It seemed so long ago that Prince had taken her for a walk in the greenhouse so that she could choose her wedding bouquet. She had thought then that she would ignite with the warmth from his gaze and how her thoughts had lingered on the red orchids.

She'd agreed to marry Preston to help him, to take care of him in his final days. To repay him for the friendship he'd always shown her. And while engaged to him, she'd fallen in love with his brother. So much so that the red orchids, of all things, brought sobs clawing up her throat.

She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth, trying to keep the ridiculous emotion locked inside her as she stood and paced toward the desk. Heavens, losing Preston still stung at times, even now, as she thought of the brothers, but she longed to have Prince as her respite.

“Bella,” a voice said, making her whirl from where she stood next to the desk. “I have no right for relief from you, but I pray those tears are not in continued anger at me and my foolish, horrible actions.” Prince hovered in the doorway, and her breath caught, shuddering through her.

Her emotion kept her from speaking for so long that Prince dared a step into the room.

“They are in anger,” she finally managed. “But only because it has taken you so long to appear here yourself to beg my forgiveness.”

He strode forward, snatching up her hands the moment he was close enough. She leaned in to him, resting her head against his chest as she’d longed to do since the day he’d rejected her in the drawing room at Preston’s home. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close.

“I’m deeply sorry for the things I said that day, Bella.” She felt his head lean against hers. “May I still call you that?” he asked in a softer voice.

She smiled against his chest, though he couldn’t see. “It would be hardly fair for me to say no, wouldn’t it?”

“You did torture me with that simple signature,” he murmured. He leaned back, tilting his head so he could look at her. “Please forgive me.”

She nodded. “You were angry, for good reason.”

“Perhaps. Preston was imperfect, like all men, and he was ill.” He gazed at her intensely—not blazing like the day in the greenhouse or even with the longing the day he’d nearly kissed her in the garden, but with hope, she thought. And that warmed her heart so much she thought it might spill out of her.

“Have you forgiven him, then?” she asked softly. She’d wanted so badly to see the two brothers reconciled. Knowing it wasn’t so had broken her heart almost as much as losing Prince had.

He drew in a deep breath. “I’ve begun to. We had a misunderstanding just before he died, and I’ve now come to believe that had he not been as sick as he was, he would have allowed me to explain.”

“I’m so glad.” She stared up at him, so grateful to have him standing before her. It made the past weeks seem like nothing more than an unpleasant dream, her heart-wrenching grief fading to a memory of the past with Prince’s arms around her. “Please, do tell me you’ll challenge the will.”

He chuckled. “Only if Barnes tells me that marrying you

would be considered a violation of the will and you'll lose your inheritance.”

She could not help but gasp. “Marry you? Goodness, how people will talk.” But she made sure Prince heard the tease in her voice.

He leaned closer to her. “I care only what one person has to say about it, Bella.”

He didn't wait for an answer about what she thought of that, but she supposed that when she leaned in to his kiss, he likely understood that her feelings were quite positive on the issue. She slid her hands up to the back of his neck, holding herself to him as she experienced a thrill distinctly different from anything she'd experienced while engaged to Preston. Her heart pounded so hard she thought Prince must be able to feel it as he pulled her closer, his hand pressing against the small of her back.

“Well, Mr. Baxter,” she said in a breathless voice when he pulled away. “You've made a very good argument.”

“If you're not entirely convinced . . .” He brushed his lips over hers.

She giggled. “I would like nothing more than to hear your arguments very thoroughly, but perhaps not in the library where anyone may come upon us. I have not thrown *all* common sense to the wind.”

He grinned but leaned way from her, pulling her hand up to his lips—a poor substitution for his lips on hers. When he lowered it, he kept his hand in hers and led her to the nearby sofa, waiting for her to sit before he lowered himself next to her.

“Now,” he said and raised her hand to kiss it once more, “will you please tell me more about Preston and the tea parties you claim he attended?”

She sighed, smiling at him with so much fondness that she thought she might explode. “I would much rather hear about the many pirate adventures you had. But first you must tell me what you know so far from Barnes about the will.”

Prince's eyebrows rose slowly and in a way that made Isabella blush at the insinuation in that simple gesture. "Are you eager to secure yourself to me, Bella?"

Preston had always used the nickname with affection. Prince had made it into a caress. She fought the temptation to allow him to continue convincing her to marry him, though she was already fully convinced. "Quite," she said instead.

Prince laughed in a husky way that made Isabella a bit senseless. "I guessed that Preston had made provisions for your money if you should marry again, which I was right about. He directed that you remain in complete control of the fortune, which I happily agree with. I wouldn't have it otherwise, so there is no obstacle."

"You know that even if it meant losing it all, it wouldn't change my answer." She gripped his hand. Preston's money had been such a source of pain to Prince over the years. She could live without it.

"It's not as dire as all that." Prince laughed again. "If you were to make attempts to give me money, the only consequence would be that Barnes would take control of distributing money to you and would have to approve all transactions per instructions left by Preston. Barnes believes that so long as you simply support your own household as you wish, he would be doing no wrong in letting us be. The letter you found from Preston made Barnes question Preston's last decisions as well."

"But you must know," she insisted, "that you're worth it all to me."

His gaze turned serious, and he stroked her cheek with his fingers before stealing a brief, sweet kiss. "I was prideful and blind, darling. You're worth every penny of that fortune to me and more, and I was a fool for allowing it to come between us, no matter the provisions."

Isabella sighed at the declaration. "You have come to your senses. That's enough."

He closed his eyes. "You would have loved my mother," he

said, his voice full of emotion.

Isabella answered with a quiet “Yes.” He’d shared so much in those words that she didn’t want to intrude on the moment. So they sat in silence for several minutes before she asked softly, “Did you and Preston ever find any treasure?”

Prince grinned and opened his eyes. “He did arrange once for us to ‘capture’ a friend’s yacht and discover a small chest with some coins he let me keep.”

She couldn’t help but laugh, imagining Preston and Prince rushing the boat, pretend swords aloft.

He bit his lip, staring down at where he held her hand in his. “My mother once tried to re-create something similar shortly after we moved to Paris. I think she knew how much I missed him.”

Isabella stilled. His words before had been a gift. His trust in giving her these memories was a revelation. She leaned closer. “Tell me about her?” she asked in a quiet voice.

He nodded. “Of course,” he said, reaching up to graze her chin with his fingers. “You are all I have left, my dear.”

She took his hand and kissed his knuckles. “And you, I believe, are all I need.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

PRINCE COULDN'T STOP GRINNING AS he stared up at the building before him. The smell was much the same as it had been the first day he'd visited, but even that didn't dampen his mood. The cheerful noises of children and families coming in and out of the doors made his heart soar almost as much as when he looked over at the woman on his arm. Standing here, seeing the realization of all he and Davies had worked for was even more satisfying than he'd imagined, and having Isabella beside him on the day the families returned to their homes made it that much more rewarding.

"Oh, everyone looks so happy." She sighed, and he caught her gaze following a young mother, a baby in her arms as she directed an older child inside the building.

Prince's grin widened. Isabella's pregnancy was early, but he found immense joy in watching the way her attention was always taken by any babies nearby. When her cousin Bess had given birth to a little girl a few months before, he'd thought his wife might faint with the jealousy of it. But she had, of course, thrown her energies into constructing an ingenious object that when placed under the baby's cradle, rocked it automatically. He suspected that once their own baby came, Isabella would follow in her cousin's footsteps, eager to stay at Davenleigh, where she could be with her little family and be close to her cousins and aunt and uncle at Wynchall. It was only Prince and his work on the tenement building that kept her in the city in the home on Madison Avenue that they'd purchased from her uncle.

She turned to him, her cheeks pinkening when she caught him staring. "Well, Mr. Baxter," she said. "What will be your next project?"

He swallowed back a laugh and glanced down the street. "I think we'd better ask Miss Darlington that."

Isabella arched an eyebrow. "Rosalind says she must turn her energies over to finding a husband now so that she can access her money as soon as possible."

“Your fortune is not enough?” Prince teased.

“She says she is tired of watching everyone else have all the fun with their money.” Isabella giggled. “You know, I think Preston must be looking down and shaking his head at how poorly he misjudged her.”

Prince leaned over, kissed the top of Isabella’s head, and chuckled. “He wasn’t the only one.”

She turned to him, staring at him intently. “He would be so proud of you. I’m sure of it.”

“The night Preston told me he was dying, he made certain I knew he expected me to make a wise match. And, Bella, darling, I think that is what he would be most proud of.”

“Such a charmer,” she said, as though dismissing him, but she buried her face in his shoulder, and he thought he might have heard a sniff.

“No, dear,” he corrected. “Only very much in love.”

She turned her head so that she faced the building again. “The feeling, Mr. Baxter, is quite mutual.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



IN A HOUSE OVERRUN BY boys, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Raneé loves football and enjoys watching and playing other sports as well, like basketball and baseball. When she's not chauffeuring three busy boys to various activities (and sometimes while she is!), Raneé is either writing, reading (usually romance), obsessing over clothes in the form of her online boutique, or figuring out how to get a Crumbl cookie in rural Wyoming. When her real-life love interest can drag her away from imaginary worlds, she doesn't mind spending some time with him in the great outdoors that he loves.

Visit Raneé's website at raneesclark.com to learn more and follow her on social media.

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