

BELLES OF THE BALL



BOOK 4

ESTHER
AT THE
BALLROOM
ABBY AYLES

ESTHER AT THE BALLROOM

HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BELLES OF THE BALL

BOOK FOUR

ABBY AYLES



CONTENTS

[Also by Abby Ayles](#)

[Scandals and Seduction in Regency England](#)

[Praise for Abby Ayles](#)

[Esther at the Ballroom](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Agnes at the Ballroom](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Get Abby's Exclusive Material](#)

[Also by Abby Ayles](#)

[Scandals and Seduction in Regency England](#)

[A Message from Abby](#)

[About Starfall Publications](#)

[About Abby Ayles](#)

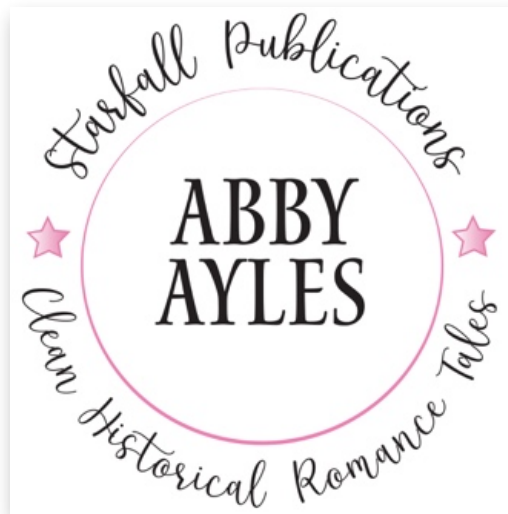
This is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual person, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 by Abby Ayles

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.



ALSO BY ABBY AYLES

The Keys to a Lockridge Heart

Melting a Duke's Winter Heart

A Loving Duke for the Shy Duchess

Freed by the Love of an Earl

The Earl's Wager for a Lady's Heart

The Lady in the Gilded Cage

A Reluctant Bride for the Baron

A Christmas Worth Remembering

A Guiding Light for the Lost Earl

The Earl Behind the Mask



Tales of Magnificent Ladies

The Odd Mystery of the Cursed Duke

A Second Chance for the Tormented Lady

Capturing the Viscount's Heart

The Lady's Patient

A Broken Heart's Redemption

The Lady The Duke And the Gentleman

Desire and Fear

[A Tale of Two Sisters](#)
[What the Governess is Hiding](#)



Betrayal and Redemption

[Inconveniently Betrothed to an Earl](#)
[A Muse for the Lonely Marquess](#)
[Reforming the Rigid Duke](#)
[Stealing Away the Governess](#)
[A Healer for the Marquess's Heart](#)
[How to Train a Duke in the Ways of Love](#)
[Betrayal and Redemption](#)
[The Secret of a Lady's Heart](#)
[The Lady's Right Option](#)



Forbidden Loves and Dashing Lords

[The Lady of the Lighthouse](#)
[A Forbidden Gamble for the Duke's Heart](#)
[A Forbidden Bid for a Lady's Heart](#)
[A Forbidden Love for the Rebellious Baron](#)
[Saving His Lady from Scandal](#)
[A Lady's Forgiveness](#)
[Viscount's Hidden Truths](#)
[A Poisonous Flower for the Lady](#)



Marriages by Mistake

The Lady's Gamble

Engaging Love

Caught in the Storm of a Duke's Heart

Marriage by Mistake

The Language of a Lady's Heart

The Governess and the Duke

Saving the Imprisoned Earl

Portrait of Love

From Denial to Desire

The Duke's Christmas Ball



The Dukes' Ladies

Entangled with the Duke

A Mysterious Governess for the Reluctant Earl

A Cinderella for the Duke

Falling for the Governess

Saving Lady Abigail

The Duke's Rebellious Daughter

The Duke's Juliet

Secret Dreams of a Fearless Governess

A Daring Captain for Her Loyal Heart

Loving A Lady.

Unlocking the Secrets of a Duke's Heart

SCANDALS AND
SEDUCTION IN REGENCY
ENGLAND

ALSO IN THIS SERIES

Last Chance for the Charming Ladies
Redeeming Love for the Haunted Ladies
Broken Hearts and Doting Earls
The Keys to a Lockridge Heart
Regency Tales of Love and Mystery
Chronicles of Regency Love
Broken Dukes and Charming Ladies
The Ladies, The Dukes and Their Secrets
Regency Tales of Graceful Roses
The Secret to the Ladies' Hearts
The Return of the Courageous Ladies
Falling for the Hartfield Ladies
Extraordinary Tales of Regency Love
Dukes' Burning Hearts
Escaping a Scandal
Regency Loves of Secrecy and Redemption
Forbidden Loves and Dashing Lords
Fateful Romances in the Most Unexpected Places
The Mysteries of a Lady's Heart
Regency Widows Redemption

The Secrets of Their Heart
Lovely Dreams of Regency Ladies
Second Chances for Broken Hearts
Trapped Ladies
Light to the Marquesses' Hearts
Falling for the Mysterious Ladies
Tales of Secrecy and Enduring Love
Fateful Twists and Unexpected Loves
Regency Wallflowers
Regency Confessions
Ladies Laced with Grace
Journals of Regency Love
A Lady's Scarred Pride
How to Survive Love
Destined Hearts in Troubled Times
Ladies Loyal to their Hearts
The Mysteries of a Lady's Heart
Secrets and Scandals
A Lady's Secret Love
Falling for the Wrong Duke
Dukes and Duchesses of Love
Regency Rakes and Radiant Brides
Dukes' Bridal
Dukes Duchesses and Scandals
Dukes and Hidden Truths
Secrets Scandals and Society.

PRAISE FOR ABBY AYLES

Abby Ayles has been such an inspiration for me! I haven't missed any of her novels and she has never failed my expectations!

-Edith Byrd

The characters in this novel have surely touched my heart.

Linda C - "Melting a Duke's Winter Heart" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on December 21, 2019

This book kept me on the edge of my seat and I could not put it down.

Wendy Ferreira - "The Odd Mystery of the Cursed Duke" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on April 13, 2019

Oh this was a wonderful story and Abby has done it again! This storyline was perfect and the characters were developed and just had you reading to see if they get their happily ever after!

- Marilyn Smith - "Inconveniently Betrothed to an Earl" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on April 8, 2020

The sweetest story, with we rest abounding! I especially liked the bonus scene - totally unexpected engagements. Well written with realistic characters. Thank you!

Janet Tonole - "The Lady Of the Lighthouse" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on December 27, 2022

I just finished reading Abby Ayles' The Lady's Gamble and its bonus scene, and I wanted to tell other readers about this great story. I love regency romances and I believe Abby is one of the best regency writers out there!

Carolynn Padgett - "The Lady's Gamble" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on March 16, 2018

Such a great Book! So enjoyed the characters...they felt so "real"...and loved the "deleted" scene. Thanks Abby, for your gift of writing the best stories!

Marcia Reckard - "Entangled with the Duke" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on May 22, 2021

I loved this story. It took you through all of the exciting ups and downs. The characters were so honest. I could read it again and again.

Peggy Murphy - "The Duke's Rebellious Daughter" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on December 3, 2022

I am never disappointed when reading one of Ms. Ayles stories. They have strong characters, engaging storylines, and all-around wonderful stories.

Donna L - "A Loving Duke for the Shy Duchess" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on December 23, 2019

A thoroughly enjoyable read! Love the complexity of the intelligent characters! They have the ability to feel emotions deeply! Their backstories help to explain why they behave as they do! The subplots and various interactions between characters add to the wonderful richness of the story! Well done!

Terry Rose Bailey - "A Cinderella for the Duke"
5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on
October 8, 2022

ESTHER AT THE
BALLROOM

CHAPTER I

Esther

Esther's tears traced silent lines down her cheeks, falling with a splatter on the disturbed earth that was her parent's freshly covered graves. A river of grief, longing, and anger ebbed and flowed inside of her as she stared unblinkingly at their final resting place. She wanted to yell, wanted to sob, wanted to scream at the heavens for taking her family from her.

A brief memory of a servant filled her mind. The woman had lost her child, and she had cried out with her grief. The sound of her pain had wrenched through the world so violently it had shredded the hearts of everyone who could hear it. Esther had been sixteen at the time, and she hadn't been able to understand the woman's agony. She had sympathized with her but was unable to fathom the ways in which a soul could break to cause that level of anguish. Now, at two and twenty, she understood.

She was well aware that weeping and screaming the way her heart desired wouldn't be proper for a young woman of her station. No matter how much peace it might bring her soul. So instead, she bottled that anger, loss, and grief back inside her. Esther imagined it was a string of yarn that she could turn and spool within her chest, winding it tight and tucking it away neatly.

When the messenger had arrived with the news of the carriage accident that had taken her parents' lives, she had been so filled with rage and despair. Her torment had torn through her so fiercely, it had taken her typically pleasant demeanor and twisted it into something violent and ugly. Esther had wanted to lash out at everyone around her, had wanted to break the furniture scattered throughout the home, had wanted to do anything to help abate the storm that had formed within her. But she had done none of those things. Instead, she had nodded her head, allowed a few, silent and solemn tears to fall, and accepted that everything about her life was about to change.

The fact that her father's laugh would never echo through the halls of their manor again, or that her mother's beautiful singing and piano playing would forever be silent, had made her sick to her stomach at the unfairness of it all. She hated the quiet halls those first few days, or at least she thought she had.

When the hustle and bustle of the preparations took over the manor, she found she hated that even more. The cacophonous noise that came with preparing her families funeral felt like a disgusting imitation of the sound that used to fill the halls. And it made Esther seethe. That seething and that rage had done nothing but build up for the last few days. Leading her to now, where she stood over her parent's graves, not knowing whether to curse the heavens or plead with them for mercy.

A hand rested on Esther's shoulder, ripping her mind violently from her spiraling worry about the future to her abysmal present. She cast a wary glance around, following the hand to its owner. Her Aunt Dorothy stood just a few steps away, her black, beady eyes regarding Esther with barely concealed contempt.

"Esther," Dorothy said in greeting, her voice cold and unfeeling.

Esther had only met her Aunt Dorothy a handful of times, and the woman had always shown a casual disinterest toward her niece. She was only a couple years younger than Esther's father had been, but the two had not been close. When Esther's

father would tell her stories of their childhood, he'd said that Dorothy had been cold and distant even then, her only genuine concern securing a beneficial marriage. She had gotten her wish, marrying the Earl of Surrey, who had an untimely passing just a few years ago.

Dorothy produced a white handkerchief and handed it delicately to Esther, who dabbed at her cheeks at the errant tears that had continued to flow during her lament. A shiver ran through Esther as her aunt's cool and uncaring gaze roved over her, making her want to squirm. When she handed the delicate cloth back to Dorothy, the woman plucked it forcefully from Esther's hand and eyed it as if it were now tainted.

"There. No sense in crying and causing a fuss." Dorothy's monotone voice and uncaring manner as she tucked the handkerchief into the small purse she hid in the sleeve of her gown. "What happened was terrible, yes. When my Edward passed, I thought I would pass out from the grief and tears I had shed. But it will not bring them back, so there really is no point."

Dorothy glanced back toward the graves, allowing Esther a small moment to collect herself and not react poorly to her aunt's harsh words.

"I appreciate you sharing your wisdom, Aunt Dorothy," Esther clipped out, keeping her tone controlled.

Dorothy did not turn to look at her, continuing on as if Esther had not spoken. "Of course, you will come live with us now. Seeing as how my dear brother left you with no one else."

Esther ground her jaw against the jab, swallowing the retort that wanted to escape her. Instead, she inclined her head toward her aunt in an attempt at placation.

"Thank you for your generosity," Esther muttered, trying to keep any sarcasm or doubt from leaking into her voice.

She knew that her father would tell her to remain positive, his eternal optimism always on full display for anyone within

earshot. Jessup Elkins had been a large man, both in size and demeanor. You would usually hear him before he entered a room, and as she thought of what he'd say to her in that moment, another lump rose in Esther's throat and she had to swallow past it.

Dorothy turned her dark eyes back toward Esther, gaze roving from head to toe before she pursed her lips. The moisture in the air had caused strands of Dorothy's dull, lifeless hair to come loose from where it had been pinned beneath her hat. It stuck to the sides of her fleshy face, drawing attention to her swollen, round features.

There was no kindness in her eyes as she took in her niece, no warmth to be found anywhere within her, and it made shivers dance across Esther's skin. Esther racked her brain, trying to recall any story or explanation for her aunt's incessantly cruel demeanor, which seemed more pointed now than it had before. Dorothy had not remarried since being widowed, and she had poured all effort since then into securing a suitable match for her daughter, Agnes.

Everything that Esther could recall about her cousin was that she was aloof, seemingly unaffected by most of the comings and goings of the world around her. The only time Esther could recall Agnes showing any real passion was when she had been discussing her music lessons, and her daydreams of securing a suitor. So, she was sure she would not find an ally within her cousin.

A despair that Esther wasn't aware she could feel bloomed within her, bringing with it the urge to spill the contents of her stomach upon the grass. Another bout of tears pricked at the corner of her eyes as she stared at her aunt, and Esther tried to blink past them, bidding them not to fall. But, fall they did.

Dorothy watched with barely concealed disdain, her callous gaze following the tracks of the tears, doing nothing to ease her niece's discomfort.

"I despaired as well when my Edward passed." Dorothy clutched at the brooch secured on her gown, toying with it absentmindedly as she spoke, "It tore me open, in fact. I

thought I would pass out from the pain of losing him, thought I would die from the longing.”

Dorothy sighed dramatically, her dark eyes swimming as her thoughts turned to the past, and Esther didn't dare speak. She wondered if this was a moment that she could use to her benefit. Perhaps she would be able to bond with her aunt over their shared grief, and the heartbreak they had both experienced. But, if her father's stories and Esther's own brief interactions with her aunt had taught her anything, it was that her moods were often mercurial, turning with break neck speed at a moment's notice. And she did not want to risk her aunt's potential wrath by interjecting too soon.

“But, no matter how much it hurt,” Dorothy continued as she turned her gaze back to Esther, and it hardened once more. “And no amount of crying or lament changed the fact that he was gone and I was alone. And your time would be better served packing your things for our travels. We leave first thing in the morning.”

Esther dipped her head in acknowledgement, a hushed “yes, Aunt Dorothy” falling from her lips. She fought against the urge to show her disappointment as she turned and walked toward the carriage that would lead her away from Sussex Cemetery, and ultimately away from her parents.

Esther could feel Dorothy's steely and unapproving gaze on her as she walked through the headstones that marked the graves of those long and newly deceased. There was a small urge inside of her to stop and glance at a few of them as she passed. She wanted to commit some of their names to memory, especially the ones that had withered with age. Esther felt as if reading their names and remembering them would help them live on in some manner, if only by their names echoing in a stranger's thoughts.

She didn't stop though, afraid that her aunt would chastise her if she did. Esther kept her gaze focused straight ahead, and her steps sure and steady as she approached the carriage. She sent a brief prayer into the ether hoping that someone, someday would do what she could not. That they would stop and read the names amongst the stones, her parents included,

and commit them to memory, allowing them to not be forgotten for a moment longer.

A footman pulled open the door of the carriage, offering her a hand to help her step up. As she arranged her stiff skirts and plopped onto the cushioned bench, Esther kept her gaze on the still open door. Dorothy had lingered for only a moment longer at the gravesite before following the path that Esther had taken.

Esther watched as Dorothy attempted to step delicately across the rolling, grassy graves of the cemetery. But when she watched her aunt stumble on a bit of uneven ground, she had to avert her gaze to hide the grin that tugged at the corners of her lips. Her parents would have chastised her for that brief display of unkindness, but Esther also knew her father would have followed it up with a wink. The thought brought with it another wave of sadness, and she worked to keep her features impassive as Dorothy climbed into the carriage and took the seat opposite of her.

As the carriage began its bumpy and uneven journey to the Sussex manor house, Esther turned her gaze toward the window. As the moments passed, dread begun to spool low in her belly. She wasn't sure how long it would be before she would be able to return to this place, and she tried with reckless abandon to commit every tree, every stone, every leaf that danced in the rain to memory.

The ride was over far too soon, and when they turned onto the drive that would lead to her family's estate, Esther began taking deep, measured breaths. The carriage rolled to a stop in front of the only home she had ever known, and as she crossed the gravel road that led to the stairs, she allowed herself to stare up at the extravagant house. She took in the grand architecture, remembering all the times she had spent in the varying rooms that overlooked the front of the property. With a heavy heart, she steeled her spine and strode forward through the doors for what felt like the last time.



The ride to her Aunt Dorothy's residence in Surrey the following day was a bumpy and tumultuous one. The rain had not let up since the morning before, and Esther was unable to separate herself from the feeling of melancholy that had gripped her as she stared out the window and watched the landscape pass her by.

The time from Sussex to Surrey went by with a creep and crawl that only allowed her to withdraw even further into her grief and fury. Her Aunt Dorothy sat across from her in the carriage, barely glancing or speaking to her through the duration of the ride. Esther was sure she had spied more than a few soured glances thrown her way from the corner of her vision. She knew she mustn't feed into it, forcing herself, instead, to take up what would have been her father's approach and focus on the positives, little though they may be.

For starters, she would not be destitute. It had been a worry of hers the moment the accident had been announced. As a young, unmarried woman, she had had no claim to her family's titles or land. Had her aunt not stepped up to take Esther in as her ward, she would have had to hope and prey on the kindness of another noble family. Her options would have been to act as a governess and help them with their children, or as a handmaiden for another high-born woman. Neither of those options appealed to her in the slightest. At least with her Aunt Dorothy and her cousin Agnes, she would still have access to some type of family, and maybe with enough time, they might develop some level of affection for one another.

Unfortunately, that was where Esther's list ended. She had no hope that living with her aunt and cousin would afford her any luxuries or kindness. But she would have a roof over her head, and she would do everything she could to make the best out of it.

Esther watched the terrain through the window, taking in the dismal landscape as they rode in utter silence. When the carriage finally turned off the main road and down the sweeping drive that would lead to the Surrey Estate, Esther had to stave off a sigh of relief. They bounced and toddled

through the covered pathway until it finally opened up to a sprawling, rolling landscape.

The estate would be pretty once the sun was shining on it, and Esther added that to her list of positives, bringing the total up to two. A few servants exited the large front doors of the manor, walking down the grand stairs to the drive that curved in front of it, preparing for their Lady's arrival.

Amongst the people waiting for them, she spied a finely dressed young woman, her raven hair pinned with precision at the top of her head. Even at a distance Esther could tell Agnes had grown into a beautiful woman since the last time she'd seen her. She glanced down at her own skirts, running a nervous hand over the black fabric of her mourning gown to smoot the already pristine edges.

The carriage rolled to a stop, at the front of the house and the door was pulled open a moment later by one of the servants. Dorothy rose from her seat without a word or a backward glance before exiting and approaching her daughter. Esther stole a moment for herself, using a deep breath to help steel her nerves before following Dorothy out into the open air.

A parasol held by one of the few servants that had come to greet them was thrust over her head, blocking the rain that was still falling. Esther glanced around her, hearing the raindrops splatter against the cloth, and was struck by the feeling that the heavens were weeping just for her. Staring at the house that leered down at her, beautiful and yet wholly uninviting, she wondered if maybe God saw her heartbreak and was allowing the sky to shed a tear on her behalf. Even if the notion was ridiculous, it made her feel a little less alone, if only for a moment.

Agnes rushed forward, a clearly forced smile plastered across her beautiful lips and bringing Esther out of her morose thoughts. She had only a split second to take in her cousin's face before she was wrapped in her stiff, rigid arms. But that didn't stop Esther from noticing that despite her dark hair and fair features, Agnes shared the same black, indifferent eyes of her mother.

“My sincerest apologies, dear Cousin,” Agnes said in Esther’s ear, and Esther was not surprised to find her voice absent of any warmth or true welcome. “I wanted so badly to make the trip, but Mother said it wouldn’t be proper. Do accept my condolences.”

“It’s quite alright,” Esther replied softly before stepping out of Agnes’ arms. Esther studied the other woman’s face, finding not an ounce of sincerity despite the kind words she had spoken.

“That’s enough, girls.” Dorothy’s monotone voice drawled from behind them. “Esther, the servants will show you to your room. Agnes, come.”

Agnes and Dorothy did not spare Esther so much as a glance before turning away from her and beginning their ascent up the stairs. Their heads leaned toward each other as they whispered furiously together before disappearing into the house. Esther turned a confused gaze to the remaining people around her, not knowing who would be assisting her or who she should greet first.

“Miss,” a quiet voice sounded behind her, and she turned to find another girl that appeared to be around Esther’s age. “I’ll show you to your rooms.”

“Oh, thank you,” Esther answered, following the girl as she turned to approach the manor.

She led her through hallways lined with paintings and portraits, rooms filled with stuffed chairs and bookcases, even passing an opulent ballroom. Farther and farther into the sprawling home they went, and with each step she took the more her heart sank. When they took a turn just before the kitchens, leading down a short, dim hallway, her suspicions were confirmed.

The girl who had been leading her disappeared through an open doorway, and Esther quickly followed. It was small and drab, with a straw-stuffed bed in one corner and a writing desk. An armoire occupied the opposite wall, and the various pieces of furniture in the limited space made the room feel crowded. It was just far enough away from the servants’

chambers to not be a complete insult, but disconnected enough from the primary living and sleeping quarters that her place in this family and this home was made completely clear.

The servant turned and gave a slight bow before she made her retreat, leaving Esther alone in the claustrophobic space. She blinked her eyes wearily, taking in the bleak furnishings and the unwelcome aura of everything around her. Overwhelmed, she stalked forward and shut the door the servant girl had just exited.

A heavy weight descended upon Esther's shoulders, making her steps lethargic and dragging as she made her way to the bed. Her black skirts swished around her ankles and tangled her legs as she crawled onto the mattress. The straw shifting underneath her, and the creak of the old, wooden bedframe were the only sounds to reach her ears.

The pillow was scratchy and stiff against her cheeks, but the hollowness in her soul weighed her down enough that she still melted into it all. Her tears began to fall, unbidden and wild. They traced lines from her eyes to the pillow in hurried, uncaring streaks. With a fist pressed to her mouth, she bit back against the sobs that threatened to spill out of her, adamant that her grief should remain silent.

A dam broke within her, and as Esther was carried away on the tidal wave of her emotions, she was forced to mourn not only the loss of her family, but the loss of her very life as she had known it.

CHAPTER 2

11 months later

Laurence

A rush of nerves flowed through Laurence as he rubbed his palms along the fabric of his breeches and stepped out of the hackney cab and down into the gravel. He'd arrived at Surrey Manor only a few moments prior, and he allowed himself a moment to inhale deeply to calm his anxiousness. Looking around him, he took in the grounds that surrounded the extravagant building. They weren't as grand as he remembered, the flowerbeds and gardens having seen better days. But perhaps that was just the rose-colored glasses of youth tinting his memories.

Laurence turned and reached back into the carriage, grabbing the bouquet of fresh flowers from the seat where he had left them. He had persuaded his valet, Charles, to stop at one of the small shops in Surrey as they'd passed through. When he'd walked in and saw an entire wall of beautiful blooms and tantalizing options, he'd begun to dismay. But the florist had come to his rescue, asking about the woman he was buying them for and expertly creating the perfect bouquet. It smelled heavenly, and he could only hope that Agnes would like it as much as he'd come to.

At the mere thought of her, another bout of anxiety floods his system. He couldn't believe that in a few short moments, he would see her again after all this time. Their fathers had

been close friends prior to the Earl of Surrey's passing, and they had often summered together while their parents were away at court. They had played together as children, squealing through the halls of whichever manor they had been deposited in, causing Agnes' governess a fright. He'd fallen in love with her then, back when they were rosy-cheeked and ornery. In fact, Laurence found it difficult to recall a time when he had not loved her.

As they'd gotten older, and seen each other less frequently, Agnes still plagued his thoughts and desires. She'd grown graver and more aloof in his presence, especially as the time between their visits lengthened and the pressure from her mother began to weigh upon her. But that never stopped him from dreaming of the day when he'd finish with his schooling and his travels, and be able to finally attempt to court her. Now that the day had come, however, Laurence was having an incredibly difficult time unraveling the knots that had formed in his belly.

He shook his shoulders, trying to imagine the bundle of nerves coiling within him rolling off his skin as he stalked across the gravel drive and up the elaborate staircase to the large door at the top. As he approached, something in the back of his mind noted the molding surrounding the front door had small cracks running through it, and there was a bit of brick at the top of the stairs that had begun to crumble. But the thoughts were quickly chased from his mind as he raised his hand, grabbed the metal knocker affixed to the large, wooden door in front of him, and gave it three swift, hard rasps.

Laurence waited patiently, listening tentatively for any sound coming from the other side of the door. He waited long enough that he began to wonder if he should knock again. Just as he was about to raise his hand once more, the door was yanked open with a flourish.

He expected it to be a servant who had come to greet him, but was shocked when he found Countess Dorothy Jarvis standing in the threshold instead. He tried not to let his shock play across his face, working to affix his features in a kind, open smile.

“Lady Jarvis,” Laurence said, sweeping into a low and gracious bow.

“Mr. Bolton,” Lady Dorothy’s voice raised slightly in surprise. Her eyebrows dashed toward her hairline before she remembered herself and schooled her expression back into one of mild amusement. “What a pleasure to see you.”

“The pleasure is all mine, I assure you.” Laurence grinned at the woman again, hoping to charm her before asking after her daughter.

“Come in, please,” Lady Dorothy stepped aside, waving a pudgy hand to welcome him through the threshold.

Laurence did as she indicated, stepping past her into the greeting hall. Now on the other side of the door, Laurence could hear the sound of a pianoforte being played in a far-off room. Once again, he was struck by the lack of finery that had decorated the place in his memories. There were gaps on the walls where he could have sworn previously held grand paintings. The carpeting that swept up the stairs was fraying at the edges, and there was sparsely any furniture or decoration to be seen in the wide, open room.

He pulled his gaze away from the furnishings or lack thereof, and brought his attention back to Dorothy. She stood watching him, her black eyes not unkind, but not wholly welcoming either.

“How have you been? Last I heard, you were away at Cambridge.” Lady Dorothy asked him.

“I’ve been very well, thank you. And yes, university was quite the adventure.” He gave her a broad grin.

Her eyes moved from his face down to the bouquet that he held in his hand. Laurence could have sworn that the corner of her mouth twitched with the hint of a smile as she spied the delicate blooms.

“I assume you’re here to call after Agnes?” The woman gave him a knowing look, causing heat to rise in his cheeks.

“I was in Surrey on business, and thought I would stop by to see an old family friend.”

“Family friend, absolutely.” Lady Dorothy’s voice dripped in sarcasm. “She’s this way.”

She turned away from him, gesturing for Laurence to follow, and began making her way deeper into the house. The longer they walked, the louder the sound of the music he had noticed earlier grew. Whoever was playing had quite a talent for it, their delicate and lilting notes drifting on the air throughout the manor.

After a few moments of walking, Lady Dorothy turned into the family’s music room. When they were children, he and Agnes had been strictly forbidden from that room, unless Agnes was attending one of her lessons. Which, of course, meant they had snuck into it every chance they had gotten.

As Laurence turned from the hallway and walked through the threshold, he once again was struck by how much the place had changed. But perhaps what had changed most of all was the woman sitting inside it.

Agnes was perched on a chair, straight-backed in a gown of his favorite, pale blue, and delicately plucking at the keys of the pianoforte. Laurence watched for a moment in awe of the woman before him, letting the gorgeous sounds that she produced drift to him in a fantastical melody. Lady Dorothy didn’t comment on his observing her as she strode into the room and spoke loudly, getting Agnes’ attention.

The music stopped, and Agnes blinked rapidly before her eyes landed on him. Laurence’s heart jumped at her gaze, her dark eyes shining with something he couldn’t place as she took him in from head to toe. Time had been kind to her.

The roundness that had once filled her cheeks in her youth had now been transformed into proud, regal features. The raven hair that he had been so enamored with in his younger years was pinned gracefully at the top of her head. As Agnes pushed herself up from the bench and crossed the room, he noticed the fit of her fine clothes, and how they only served to enhance her beauty. Everything about Agnes Jarvis was art made in flesh.

Agnes dropped into a curtsy when she reached him, and he watched as her lithe limbs moved.

“That’s quite unnecessary,” Laurence advised with a smile, while also offering his own bow in return. “Old friends need not preoccupy themselves with such formalities.”

She brought her gaze back to his as she stood, and she returned his grin. Laurence couldn’t help but notice that it did not entirely reach her eyes. As she studied him, he got the distinct feeling that while she was not bothered by his appearance at her home, she also was not entirely enthused with it either. With that notion, the balloon of hope that had been building within his chest since his arrival began to deflate.

“How nice it is to see you,” Agnes said. Her gaze dipped to the flowers he still cradled.

“Ah, yes. I saw these at the florist earlier and thought you might enjoy them,” Laurence extended the bouquet to her.

Agnes extended a delicate hand, plucking the vase from him and studying it.

“They’re lovely, thank you.”

Her tone was light and pleasant on the surface, but Laurence did not miss the glance of longing she cast back to the bench she had just vacated. Not wanting to take her from something she so clearly enjoyed, he opened his mouth to tell her not to stop on his account when the sound of a bell being rang halted him.

Laurence glanced in the direction of the sound, spying Dorothy with a delicate bell held aloft in her round fingers. A girl appeared within the room a second later, bringing with her a tray of tea, biscuits, and scones. Upon spying him, her mouth popped open in surprise before rearranging itself into a warm, but confused smile.

“Lord Bolton,” Lady Dorothy drawled, gesturing at the girl. “This is my niece, Esther Elkins. She is now living with us. Esther, this is Lord Laurence Bolton, second son to Baron Rippon.”

The girl, Esther, placed the tray on a small table in the center of the seating area and curtsied to him. Laurence greeted her in turn, taking in her fair appearance. Her hair was golden red, shining when struck by the light. Her pale features were delicate and soft, and her light grey eyes regarded him with cautious optimism.

Her clothes were not as fine as those worn by Agnes or her mother, but he noted the color of her dress was not far off from the one worn by Agnes. And they were pressed to perfection and well maintained, and the soft blue complimented the pale grey of her eyes.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Esther said, her voice like the tinkling of chimes.

“I’ll be taking my tea in the drawing room,” Lady Dorothy’s voice interjected, cutting Laurence off as he began to return Esther’s kindness.

Esther’s eyes darted from Laurence, an anxious look playing across her elegant features as they spied her aunt striding from the room. Esther bustled forward, her skirts swishing merrily around her ankles as she did. She began moving items from the tray to the table, leaving only enough on the silver platter for Dorothy’s tea. Satisfied with how she had divvied up the treats, she turned on her heel and rushed out of the room without another word.

He watched her as she went, struck by how odd it was that the Countess’ niece would be serving them and taking on duties that would typically be performed by a maid. The sounds of soft music began drifting over the air once more, and Laurence turned to find Agnes seated at the pianoforte, picking at the ivory keys, the flowers placed on the mantle beside the instrument.

Not wanting to disturb her, he took a seat next to the small table Esther had arranged the food and tea on, and began to relax. Laurence closed his eyes as he listened to the music, drifting away on the lilting notes.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” A high, melodic voice asked, making Laurence’s eyes fly open with a start.

Esther was standing before him, having stepped back into the room on silent feet. A soft laugh pulled itself from her as she spied his startled expression, and she brought a hand to her mouth to hide it.

“I apologize for scaring you,” she said, her eyes sparkling with humor. “I thought you had heard me approach.”

“I didn’t, I’m so sorry.” Laurence replied as he brought a hand to his chest, resting calmly above his wildly beating heart.

Esther gestured to the teapot resting on the table, and raised an eyebrow in question.

“Oh, yes.” Laurence shook himself wearily, clearing the fog that had drifted into his brain as the music had filled it.

Esther nodded at him, a small smile playing once more at the corner of her lips. She began pouring a cup of tea, and asked if he’d like cream or sugar, which he declined both. She passed Laurence the small cup of warm liquid, and he took an appreciative sip.

“Please, help yourself to a biscuit or a scone.” Esther continued, pointing to the serving plates she had laid out on the table.

She fussed over him for a moment more, and her flurry of movements began to make him a bit nervous.

“Please sit,” he said, gesturing to the chair across from him.

Her brow furrowed with worry for only a moment as she glanced from Laurence to where Agnes sat, paying them no mind at all. She seemed to decide that there wouldn’t be any harm in it before taking her seat.

“How do you know Agnes?” she asked as she arranged her plain skirts around her feet, crossing her ankles gracefully.

“My father was good friends with Earl Jarvis before his passing.” Laurence answered. “We’ve been friends since we were children. When our parents were at balls, or gone for

parts of the Season, we used to stay together and be watched by her governess. We were quite close in those days.”

Laurence observed Esther as he spoke, noting her facial expressions as he explained the connection that he had with her cousin. As he recalled them being close, surprise flitted across her face before she rearranged it back into a mask of friendly interest. She hadn't been quick enough to evade his notice, however.

“You're surprised to hear that,” Laurence observed, raising an eyebrow at her.

“I just haven't seen you around before, that's all” Esther explained quickly, her words tumbling over one another.

“Were you and Agnes close when you were children as well?” Laurence asked her.

“No.” She shook her head slightly.

“Well, there you have it.”

Esther's cheeks flushed slightly, and her eyes dipped to where her hands rested in her lap. She didn't speak for a moment, and Laurence got the distinct impression that what he'd said had made her somehow uncomfortable. Not wanting them to sit in an awkward silence, he spoke again.

“Lady Dorothy mentioned that you are living with them now. May I inquire as to why?”

Esther's brow furrowed as she brought her eyes back to his face, studying him hesitantly. She let out a shaky breath before answering.

“My parents passed away almost a year ago in a carriage accident.” Her words were so soft, he almost didn't hear it over the tinkling of the music Agnes was still playing.

Laurence's heart hammered in his chest and he bashed himself internally for having been so dense in asking that personal of a question. *Of course it was something tragic, you dunce*, Laurence thought, *most people don't go living with their aunts and cousins for no good reason.*

“I am incredibly sorry for your loss,” Laurence said, keeping his voice low. “You must miss them terribly.”

“Thank you,” Esther swallowed hard, and when she looked at him, she saw that her eyes were rimmed in silver. “I do miss them, every day.”

Esther’s eyes left his, flitting anxiously to Agnes, and then down to her tea. She was blinking rapidly, and he assumed she was trying to clear the tears that danced along her lashes.

“May I get you anything else?” She asked, gesturing to the plate of treats laid out before them, and it hit him anew how odd it was that she was serving them, and he hadn’t yet seen a single maid or servant.

“No, thank you. But, shouldn’t a maid be handling all of this?” Laurence quipped, speaking his thoughts aloud.

“I do this to show my gratitude,” Esther’s voice left her in a rush, her tone rehearsed as if she’d prepared an answer to that very question. “My Aunt Dorothy and Cousin Agnes have been so gracious and kind in taking me in after my parent’s passed. So, I try to lessen the burden and be of use.”

A smile was plastered on Esther’s fair face, and Laurence regarded it for a moment. The statement itself seemed harmless enough, and it would make sense. But there was something about how swiftly the words had left her and the way her smile didn’t entirely reach her eyes that made him think it wasn’t the full story.

“How long has it been since you last saw Agnes?” Esther asked, and Laurence recognized it as an attempt to change the subject.

“It’s been a few years now, at least. I’ve been away at University.”

“Oh?” Esther’s eyebrows shot up. “I’m sure you have loads of stories.”

Laurence smiled at her, and she smiled back. He was pleased to find it was a genuine one that time. He began by telling her of his time at Cambridge University, spinning tales of the men he met, the absurdities they got into – the ones that

were appropriate, of course. Esther gasped and laughed as he spoke, her movements and tone animated as he recounted all the things he'd experienced.

By the time they began discussing his subsequent travels throughout France and Spain, he wasn't able to stop himself from comparing the way Esther was reacting to how he imagined Agnes would in the same scenario. She had been pleasant enough when he'd arrived, but her demeanor and tone had been cool and withdrawn. It was nothing compared to the warmth and openness he was experiencing with Esther.

Memories of their childhood flitted through his mind once more, and he wondered what it would take for him to get back to that reckless abandon. Would he ever be able to remind her that he was still the same person she had known all those years ago? If he did, would she open up to him once more?

As his stories came to an end, they both paused taking sips of their tea. His had gone cold, and if Esther's wince was any indication, hers had as well.

"Have you attended a Season in London before? Or will this be your first?" Laurence asked, swallowing past the now cooled liquid.

"It will be my first," she explained. "I was still in mourning last year when the season came about, so it wouldn't have been proper for me to attend."

"How do you feel about it?"

Esther glanced down at her lap, her slender fingers nervously fondling the texture of her skirts. "A bit nervous, if I'm honest."

"Nervous?" Laurence's eyebrows shot up. "Whatever for?"

Esther looked at him through her lashes, but she didn't answer right away. When she began speaking, her voice was low and unsure.

"It will be my first big event without my parents, and to think that it's the entire Season. I will be completely alone, and

the point of it all is to secure a good match. But, what if I can't?"

Laurence studied her, taking in the lines of worry that had formed at the sides of her mouth and across her brow.

"You won't be alone," he reassured her. "Agnes will be there. And so will I."

He could have sworn that at the mention of Agnes' name her eyes dulled a little, and a look of worry flashed across her features. It disappeared as quickly as it arrived though, so he couldn't be entirely sure. He could sense the doubt rolling off of her, so he continued.

"Plus, someone as fair as you? Every eligible suitor at court will be lining up to claim a line on your dance card."

A faint blush rose in her cheeks, and she glanced away nervously.

"That was very kind, thank you." Her tone was hushed and she seemed unable to bring her eyes to meet his.

Before Laurence could answer, the music coming from the pianoforte cut off, causing both he and Esther to divert their attention to Agnes. She had a curious look on her face. It didn't quite appear to be jealousy, but she definitely did not look pleased. A small tingle ran through Laurence at the thought.

"Laurence," Agnes said in her cool, aloof tone. "I apologize, but Esther and I must get going." She smoothed down her skirts as she stood, shooting her cousin a pointed look. "We have an appointment with the modiste."

A bite of disappointment rushed through him, but he swallowed past it and rose to his feet as well. He inclined his head to the two women, wishing them well with their modiste appointment, and telling Esther it was a pleasure to meet her. They offered to escort him out of the manor, but he waved them off and said it wouldn't be necessary. He turned on his heel, striding from the room.

As he situated himself back in the carriage, the wheels began rolling down the bumpy, gravel pathway. Laurence

stared out the window, watching Surrey manor shrink into the distance as he thought about everything that had happened during his visit. Before arriving, he had been filled with such hope. He had known that Agnes had changed over the years, that as time wore on, she had become more serious and aloof. He couldn't stave off the hope that the girl he once knew still remained within her depths.

He felt sure that if he could just get her to relax in his presence and find a way to reassure her that he was the same person she had known all those years ago that it would be enough.

The carriage rumbled along the uneven ground, bouncing him to and fro on the seat. As his body jostled, so did his mind, bouncing from thought to thought on how to win Agnes' affections. He was sure that it would not be an easy task, but feats of love rarely were. An idea began forming in the corner of his mind, and as it started to take shape, Laurence could not stop the smile that pulled at his lips.

CHAPTER 3

Laurence

The front of the building was exactly as Laurence remembered it – brick, with trim around the windows and doors that had been painted with care. The large windows on the front of it jutted forward, and bodices were displayed within them, showcasing the incredible talents of the woman that resided within.

He pushed open the door, a bell above it chiming out merrily with his arrival.

“One moment, one moment,” a frail, joyful voice rang out from somewhere in the back of the shop, the sound slightly muffled by the swatches of fabric.

“Sarah?” Laurence called, hoping that the woman would recognize his voice.

He heard a faint “is that” followed by ruffling, and then a form began to take shape through the forest of textiles. It seemed she had gotten smaller since he’d last seen her, but that happened as one aged. Her hair, once a shining blonde, was now almost entirely silver. But, a wide, affectionate smile tugged up the corner of Sarah’s lips and her familiar, blue eyes sparkled with joy, letting Laurence know that some things, at least, had not changed. She spread her arms wide as she approached him, wrapping him in a warm embrace. Her frame was small, and his own body encompassed hers as he returned

her hug, but that did not stop it from feeling comforting in a way he hadn't experienced in quite some time.

She pulled back from him, taking his face in her hands and studying it. Her eyes roved back and forth over his features as if committing them to memory and searching for any sign of change or injury.

"Laurence," Sarah breathed. "How have you been, dear boy?"

"I don't know if I'm a boy anymore," Laurence chuckled. "But I have been very well."

Sarah released him, stepping back to take in the rest of his appearance. He allowed her, understanding that this was her process. He'd gotten used to it long ago.

"Your breeches are too loose," she quipped, tugging slightly on the leg of his pant. "Not by much, whoever you went to for them did a fine job. Just not as fine as I would have."

"I will remember that for the next time," he said, giving her a mirthful smile.

"It's been a long time since you've been at my shop." She pulled away from him, walking toward the door and locking it. That was her custom, wanting to be wholly present with whoever was with her. It was one of the things that made her so special.

"I was in school in Cambridge the last few years, as well as travelling every moment that I could." Laurence explained, and Sarah lit up with interest.

She began peppering him with questions about his education and travels, and he regaled her with tales of both. Granted, he did provide her with a condensed and redacted version of some of the wild antics he'd gotten into with his university companions. He did not think she would appreciate it as much as Esther had.

"So, since you're here, should I assume that you have stopped by Surrey Manor?" Sarah asked, cocking an eyebrow at him as his stories of his adventures began to dwindle.

Laurence let out a harsh breath, running a hand nervously through his hair.

“I did,” he kept his reply short, suddenly feeling insecure about asking the woman for help.

“And? How did things go? Was the young Lady Jarvis there?” She fought to keep her tone and expression neutral, but that didn’t stop Laurence from noting the glimmer in her eye when she asked.

“She was.” Laurence paused for a moment, and Sarah regarded him. A rush of nervous energy coursed through him, and he wondered how to continue forward.

His thoughts began to spiral, wondering if he’d be able to do this on his own. Why did he need to bring in other people on his journey to love?

“How did that go?” Sarah prompted, breaking through his whirring thoughts and bringing him back to the moment.

“Not well, Sarah,” he said with a huff. “When we were younger, she was so care free, and happy. But, now? She is aloof, even cold. I do not mean that she was rude, no. She was perfectly polite and proper. But she seemed so withdrawn. I had seen bits of that the last few times I saw her. But it appears the responsibility that has been placed upon her shoulders has turned her callous.”

“And your feelings have not changed?”

“Not at all,” he shook his head, and then looked at her with pleading eyes. “I need your help, Sarah. I wish to woo her, to find some way to convince her that I’m still the same man she used to consider a friend. I just don’t know how. She can be so mercurial, and didn’t really pay any mind to me at all. She greeted me, we shared a few pleasantries, and then she ignored me for the pianoforte while I spoke to her cousin.”

“Ah, so you’ve met Esther as well then?”

Laurence nodded, and Sarah “hmm’ed” as she stood and thought. He didn’t speak, prepared to afford her all the time she needed to help him in this endeavor to secure Agnes’s affections. Laurence watched her face as she thought, and he

took note of the emotions that flitted across them. It started with confusion, but as the seconds passed, that began to fade and turn into something else entirely. The creases by her eyes started to soften, and the expression in the depths of her gaze took on a faraway quality.

“I believe I’ve told you about my John?” Sarah asked, her voice was whimsical, filled with the promise of memory. He had never heard her sound like this.

He nodded, indicating to her that she had mentioned her late husband in the past.

“I thought so. Did I ever tell you how we fell in love?” Sarah asked.

Laurence shook his head, and Sarah paused again as if considering how to best tell the story. She walked to a nearby dress and began trailing her fingers absentmindedly over the fine, rich fabric.

“We were very young, when we met. My mother was also a modiste, and she taught me everything she knew,” she began, her voice hushed as she lost herself in the haze of her own memories. “I spent so much of my childhood in her shop. I would pass the time by hiding between the bolts of fabric, hiding and playing and pretending that I was in some far-off world.

“I grew up there. And as I grew, my mother began to teach me her craft as well. I believe I was fourteen, the first time John’s mother came into the shop with him in tow. She needed a dress made, and he needed a jacket tailored.

“While my mother worked on the dress, I was sent to work on John’s waistcoat. His father was a wealthy merchant, and John had travelled with him all over the world. That day, while he stood in front of me and I measured him, working him over with my tape and my pins, he tried to impress me with stories of distant lands and riches.

“It was entertaining, but it didn’t have his desired effect. While I liked hearing about lands that I would never see, I did not put much stock in the type of fanciful life that I would

never live. You see, I already knew that I wanted to continue in my mother's footsteps. So, my life would never be one of the ones that he described.

Sarah sighed, pressing a hand delicately to her chest, right over her heart before she continued.

"When he left that day, my mother joked with me about my flirting, and I figured I would likely never see him again. His jacket would be delivered to his home, and he would slowly fade into my memories as the handsome young man for whom I'd once created a waist coat.

"But a few days later, a letter arrived that was addressed to me. It was quite a shock, as I'm sure you could imagine. And, when I broke that wax seal and discovered it was from him?"

Sarah paused, looking at Laurence with a small smile filled with all the love and warmth this recollection had stirred within her.

"So, he called for you?" Laurence asked, wanting to hear the rest of Sarah's story.

Sarah shook her head.

"No, he didn't. Instead, he began by talking about me. About the things that he noticed when he met me, and how he understood why I wouldn't be wooed by adventure or travel or even finery. So, instead, he would win my affection slowly, by us getting to know each other exactly as we were. Just two young people, baring their souls on parchment. And that's exactly what we did. We fell in love through our letters. He wrote me when he traveled with his father, wrote me when he was home before he finally came calling...and the rest is history."

"So...what exactly are you proposing?" Laurence asked. "Letter writing?"

"Yes, exactly that. Because when you write a letter, it's so much easier to be honest with the parchment than when the object of your desire is sitting right in front of you. You have much less to fear. You want to show her the truth of who you

are? Want her to see that you are the man for her? Show her your soul.”

A grin pulled at the corners of Sarah’s lips, and Laurence easily returned it. When he’d first arrived at the shop, he had been nervous that this wouldn’t be the correct choice. But he could see now how foolish that notion had been. Laurence thanked Sarah, and stayed for a while to speak with her about her own life while he had been gone.

When he had finally left her shop, the bell above the door jingling merrily as it shut behind him, Laurence tilted back his head. He let the late afternoon sun touch his skin, feeling its warmth trickle out of him.

He spoke to Charles before climbing back into the carriage, advising him of their change of plans. After all, he needed to ensure he had plenty of parchment on hand for what he had in store.

CHAPTER 4

Esther

Esther shifted uncomfortably on the chair, watching wearily as Agnes stood stalk still and Aunt Dorothy berated the modiste that kneeled by Agnes' feet.

"No, no, you're doing it all wrong," Aunt Dorothy's voice demanded, ringing out loudly through the cluttered space.

Esther was unsure how long they had been at the shop. They'd arrived in the early afternoon. But, when she glanced out the window, and noted the angle of the sun against the cobblestones, she could tell it was getting well into the evening. She had a feeling they were encroaching upon supper time. As if on cue, her stomach gave a loud growl that, thankfully, no one else heard over the din of her aunt's complaints.

"The drapery should only be one inch from the hem," Aunt Dorothy commanded, her typically cold and uncaring voice raised in agitation.

"I understand, Madam," the modiste, who Esther believed was named Sarah, said. The woman bowed her silver capped head in acknowledgement, her wrinkled brow furrowed with concentration as her nimble fingers adjusted the fabric.

"Then do it," Dorothy growled.

"Mother," Agnes shot a warning glance the woman's way, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

Esther watched the entire exchange with equal parts fascination and worry. She knew from her time at Surrey Manor that both Agnes and Dorothy's moods were mercurial at the best of times. But, when they were both in particularly foul moods, usually brought about by them griping with each other, their anger and frustrations would soon turn toward Esther tenfold.

Esther stood from her chair and began walking in small, unhurried steps through the confined space of the shop. It helped her to not focus on the sound of the two women bickering and the modiste's murmurs of placation.

She ran her fingertips over the fine fabrics of the gowns on display, and a pang of envy ran through her. In one corner, there was a partially finished gown of a bright, beautiful blue. The bodice was cinched with gold ribbon, a poof to the sleeve that then cascaded in a swath of blue and gold fabric. It was stunning.

She walked from gown to gown, taking in the beautiful emerald, the dashing crimson, and the purest of purples as she did. When her parents had been alive, going to the modiste with her mother had been one of her favorite pastimes. When she had moved, she'd had a few fine gowns that her mother had commissioned for her. They had been among her most prized possessions.

However, when she arrived at Surrey Manor, her Aunt Dorothy had advised the dresses had been left accidentally at her home in Sussex, and she had been unable to send a courier to retrieve them. As the months trickled by and the dresses were never brought to Surrey, she was forced to give up on the hope that they would ever be delivered. Her gowns that she had treasured so much, a reminder of much happier times, had been lost along with the rest of her old life.

They had visited Sarah's shop once before, and Esther had sat through hours of Agnes' fittings then as well. The older woman was incredibly talented, and Esther was struck anew by the richness of the fabrics that hung from wire bodices and adorned the walls in bolts. She didn't dare hope that any of these gowns or delicate fabrics would be used on her. Esther

knew that allowing herself to live in that fantasy would just be asking to be disappointed.

Over the course of the past year, she had noticed that while Aunt Dorothy spared no expense where Agnes was concerned, she was rather tight with her purse strings when it came to Esther's own needs. At the beginning, Esther had hoped that would not be the case when it came to the modiste. After all, when they went to social events it would not reflect well on her Aunt Dorothy if Esther was dressed poorly. Those hopes had been quickly dashed, however, after their very first visit to Sarah's shop.

"Esther, where did you go?" Dorothy's voice rang out through the jungle of fabric Esther had lost herself in, rousing her from her thoughts.

"I am here," Esther explained calmly, traipsing back to the chair she felt like she had only just vacated. "I simply needed to stretch my legs."

"Well, don't." Dorothy snapped, eyeing her niece with hardly concealed disdain when she came back into full view.

"Yes, Aunt Dorothy," Esther inclined her head in a show of respect before returning to her uncomfortable chair.

Esther began her ritual of listing the positives. It had begun that day all those months ago, when she had been in the carriage on her way from Sussex to Surrey. The thought that it was what her father would have told her to do allowed her to feel closer to him in some small way. So, over time she'd adopted it when she was having a bad moment and needed to feel like she was doing something that would have made her parents proud.

One, she had been able to leave the manor that day. Since she had come to live with her aunt and cousin, her days had transitioned to serving them. She helped the few servants keep up with the house, and when she thought, she wasn't going to get caught, she practiced on the pianoforte.

Her mother had begun teaching her before her passing, and they had spent many hours in their parlor pouring over the

ivory keys. Initially, Dorothy had refused to allow her to practice, stating that it would not be proper to take part in entertainment while in mourning. But, as that came to an end, Dorothy had then advised they could not afford an instructor for both Esther and Agnes, and Esther had been too busy with her household duties to press the issue much further. So, in the night after her chores were done, or when Agnes and her Aunt Dorothy were gone, she stole away as long as she could to practice what her mother had taught her. But even that wasn't enough to make up for the fact that she rarely saw anyone else or left the manor. So, getting to leave the grounds had been a very good thing indeed.

Two, she was surrounded by beautiful materials. Surrey Manor, while beautiful on the outside, was not as finely decorated as it had once been. Many of the things that surrounded Esther constantly were worn, and sometimes more than a bit drab. The room in which she slept had little to no color. So, to be surrounded by the rich, lustrous fabrics was a treat.

Three, the modiste was kind. It hadn't gone unnoticed to Esther that each time Aunt Dorothy barked at her, the older woman would shoot her a sympathetic glance. She had sweet, bright blue eyes that despite the constant berating from her aunt still sparkled with humor. And Esther suspected that if she and the woman would be able to have a conversation, she would end up being quite fond of her.

Listing the good things in her day had already begun to calm her nerves that had frayed under the watchful and hateful attention of her aunt. She recited them to herself, going over her list of three again and again until a new feeling of calm rushed through her. Esther returned to eyeing the gowns that decorated the shop, studying them as best as she could from her ill-placed seat.

She hadn't been sitting there long when her aunt's voice barked through the space once again, pulling her out of her wistful thoughts.

“Alright, Esther, it is your turn.”

Esther's heart leapt. She had given up any and all hope that she would be getting something new, especially something as fine as what Sarah was able to craft. But maybe her aunt had realized the importance of Esther also being dressed well. After all, the sooner she secured a proper match, the sooner she would no longer be a burden to her Aunt Dorothy.

"Oh, yes. I adored..." Esther began, pushing herself out from her corner. She started to walk across the space, pointing over her shoulder to one of the fabrics she had spotted earlier, but she was quickly cut off by Dorothy's command to the modiste.

"That one will do." Dorothy gestured toward the back of the shop, to a corner that Esther had not paid much attention to.

It was beyond where they had all been standing, and Esther had been making it a point not to look in that direction too often, lest her aunt perceive it as a slight. Esther followed the direction of Dorothy's finger, finding it pointing directly at a pink gown that had been stuffed into a far corner.

The color would have been beautiful once, but it appeared to have been lost to time. There was outdated lace bolted along the edges, the color slightly yellowed from dust.

"That dress?" The modiste asked, eyebrows shooting up. "That was one I was going to scrap and find some way to reuse the fabric after a good washing."

"Well, perhaps you'll be able to give it a good washing once we purchase it." Dorothy bit out, jaw clenching in aggravation. "Now, step up, girl."

Esther navigated her way through the cramped space, her own, drab skirts swishing dully as she advanced. She stepped onto the raised platform as the modiste took the lackluster gown from the bodice it had been displayed on.

The modiste helped her out of her current, plain attire. And then when the new dress was on, it hung slightly limp on her petite frame. Sarah shot her another sympathetic look, her eyes alight with apologies and compassion. Esther gave her a small

smile of reassurance as she fought against the disappointment that filled her when she looked down at the gown.

It was too large, and did nothing to accentuate her already small frame. Against the pale, pink tone of her skin, the drab fabric appeared to almost blend in with her flesh, washing her out entirely. A lump formed in Esther's throat as she turned her attention to the looking glass. She had hoped it would look better if she could see it in full, but as she took in her reflection, she found that was not the case in the slightest.

"There," Dorothy said, her tone once more lowered to its standard aloofness. "See, that will work fine."

"It is a little ill fitting," Esther said hesitantly, hoping that her aunt did not find the statement to be ungrateful.

"I'm sure that Sarah can fix it up for you, can't you?" She shot a pointed look at the modiste, and the woman quickly nodded.

"I absolutely can," Sarah said, glancing at Esther with promise in her eyes.

Tides of emotions were washing through Esther, everything from disappointment over the gown, to surprise that she would be getting anything at all, and then to gratitude that the modiste would do what she could. She fought to control her features, not allowing a single one of the conflicting feelings that were coursing through her to show on her face.

"Thank you, ma'am," Esther said to Sarah, giving her a nod of appreciation before turning to her aunt. "And, thank you, Aunt Dorothy. Your generosity is greatly appreciated."

She stepped out of the gown with Sarah's help, and stood still as the woman's nimble and expert hands began taking her measurements. While she was still on the pedestal, Dorothy and Agnes begin walking around the store, briefly disappearing around the corner to look at a few of the same gowns that Esther had been so struck by earlier.

As soon as they were out of eyesight, Esther felt someone squeeze her hand. She looked down, finding Sarah looking up

at her with wide eyes.

“I will do my very best for you, dear.” Sarah whispered.

Esther just nodded, swallowing past the lump in her throat to thank the woman. Her kindness struck a chord deep within her. Sarah went back to her work, neither of them wanting to be caught chatting if Dorothy were to return. But, as the woman’s hands roved her body, Esther allowed the feeling of the woman’s kindness wash over her in comfort.

CHAPTER 5

Sarah

The bell above her door chimed merrily as the three women exited and made their way to the hackney cab waiting on the cobbles out front. Sarah watched them as they went, a pang of sorrow in her heart when Esther climbed in last and the door was shut behind her. She may not have met the girl many times, but she was already incredibly fond of her.

Esther had a sweet and quiet demeanor that Sarah was quite taken with. Just like everyone else in Surrey, she'd heard of the girls' arrival and the reason for it. When the news had spread, Sarah's heart had squeezed in sympathy for the girl. To endure such a loss at such a young age? It was truly unthinkable.

Sarah was not one to speak poorly of others, and she prided herself that true unkindness had never really been in her nature. But Dorothy Jarvis had never been known to be a warm or caring woman. For as long as Sarah could remember, the Countess had had an uncaring nature. And that had only been exacerbated by her husband's death.

When the Earl had passed away, and with no male members of his family that were willing to step in and help with their holdings, the estates had begun falling into disrepair. Recently, rumors had begun dancing through town that furniture once housed at the Surrey Manor had found their

way into the hands of pawnbroker. But Sarah had never been able to confirm it as truth.

It was a lot for a woman to bear alone, which was something Sarah knew all too well. She wished the Countess could find it within her to be kinder to her niece. In the two times that Sarah had interacted with the girl, she had found her pleasant, and unfailingly kind. Esther had a sweetness about her that one did not often find, especially not in someone that had been through so much.

Dorothy Jarvis was a perfect example of allowing grief to make you hard, or in Dorothy's case, *harder*. And Sarah, while not knowing Esther well, was proud of the young woman for not following in her aunt's footsteps.

Sarah crossed her shop, walking to where the swaths of fabric that she'd been using for Agnes' gown lay draped over a chair. Directly next to it was the gown that had been picked for Esther. Sarah wrinkled her nose as she regarded the garment, wishing that she had tossed it in the back like she'd intended to do weeks ago. Maybe then Dorothy wouldn't have picked it out for darling Esther.

She recalled how the dress had looked on the poor girl. Esther was typically so fair, with hair that glowed golden red, and shrewd grey eyes that seemed far more perceptive than her years would dictate. But the dingy fabric had made her look sickly. It had clashed with the color of her hair, had made her pink cheeks look pallid and lifeless, and had otherwise been entirely unbecoming. Which was an utter shame, considering the girl would need this dress during the season to assist her in securing a suitor.

The longer Sarah regarded the frock, the more the lace and the dull, lifeless pink of the gown seemed to offend her. With a huff, she turned on her heel and stalked to her wall of fabrics. If only Dorothy would have allowed Esther to pick something, anything, else. Sarah was sure she could have worked magic for her.

A thought struck Sarah. Just an inkling at first, and her mind struggled to latch onto it. But ever so slowly it began to

take shape. She could see it now, the way that she could lay the fabric and begin to drape it so that it would complement the girl's slight frame. With a good washing, and maybe even a slight dye, she might be able to rework the color into one that would suit Esther.

The more Sarah thought about it, the more excited she became. This young girl who had been through so very much, and who despite all of that still remained so dear, deserved something pretty. So, *something pretty* Sarah would give her.

As the ideas wound themselves through Sarah's mind, a jolt ran through her. As long as things went according to plan, the dress that she would make for Esther might end up being the most beautiful dress she had ever made.

CHAPTER 6

Laurence

Laurence shifted uncomfortably, trying to rearrange his limbs in the chair he'd been occupying for quite some time. He flipped a page in the book that rested on his lap, trying to lose himself once more. But as his eyes roved over the words, his mind refused to stay focused and take in their meaning. Instead, it strayed back to Agnes once more, where it had been since he had seen her the day before.

In the hours since he saw her, and then his subsequent meeting with Sarah, he had pondered over his first letter to her. He had considered every angle, how he would address it, what he would say, and so on. He had decided that he didn't want her to know at first that it was him, for he wanted her to fall for the man he was now, without the influence of their past. But how exactly he would be able to accomplish that, he was still unsure.

"Excuse me, my Lord," a voice broke through the space, forcing Laurence away from his ever-spiraling thoughts.

His head snapped up and his eyes followed the sound of the voice. Jonas, his family's steward, was standing in the doorway to the reading room. He was a small man, with a slight stoop to his back and had been working for the family for as long as Laurence could remember. Jonas' brown eyes were kind, and the man had a quick wit that Laurence had always appreciated.

At that moment, though, Jonas' hands were wringing nervously in front of him.

"Your father is asking for you to come to his study," Jonas explained when Laurence met his eyes.

Laurence furrowed his brow in confusion but nodded at the man in front of him before pushing himself up from his chair. Jonas turned and strode from the room, with Laurence following closely behind. As he walked, his mind considered all the possibilities for why his father would want to speak with him, but he continuously came up blank.

They arrived at the oak door of his father's study, Jonas giving a light knock and announcing Laurence's arrival before bowing and taking his leave. As Laurence stepped into the room, the smell of brandy and cigar smoke that was permanently imbedded in the rug and walls floated up to greet him.

His father sat in a straight-backed chair behind the expansive, heavy wooden desk he used to conduct business. Baron Rippon Bolton was not a large man, in that manner Laurence himself had much more of a presence than his father. But his forceful personality more than made up for it, and commanded the attention of anyone who was in a room with him.

"Laurence, sit, please," his father said, gesturing to a chair opposite his desk.

Laurence did as he was asked, placing himself into the uncomfortable seat and rearranging his features to hide the rampant curiosity that was coursing through him. His father was not someone Laurence would ever consider cruel, but he was impatient and had never suffered fools lightly. And Laurence knew that where his father was concerned, it was best to let him say his piece as bluntly as he pleased and then be on your way. Curiosity and confusion did not have a place within the halls of Rippon Bolton.

"I received a letter today," his father said, placing his elbows on the desk before him and pressing his fingertips together. "It was in regard to your Uncle Thomas."

His father paused, but Laurence sensed it was not a pause that warranted a response, but rather one that his father was using to make Laurence sweat. So, he remained silent.

“He passed away.”

His father’s words were brusque, and Laurence could not stop himself from being shaken. He knew that his father, who was considerably older than all four of his siblings, had not been close with Thomas. But the matter-of-fact tone in which he announced his brother’s passing still caught Laurence off guard. He would have expected at least some level of mourning or loss, but there was none to be found.

“You have my condolences, Father,” Laurence said after a pause, bowing his head in respect.

“Yes, well,” his father waved off Laurence’s words with a slender hand before continuing. “These things do happen. But that brings me to the matter of why I called you here. Thomas hadn’t yet married, and thus he had no heirs. So, his estate and title shall pass to me.”

Lord Rippon gave Laurence a pointed look as if he expected his son to know where he was headed with that bit of information, but for the life of him Laurence was not able to figure it out. The expectant look on his father’s face eventually fell, and he gave an exasperated sigh.

“I’ll be frank with you, boy,” his father continued, “I have my hands full with my current holdings. Your brother is set to inherit my title, but I wish for you to take over in Thomas’ stead, as baronet.”

Laurence’s heart was hammering as his mind whirred trying to make sense of the information his father had just hurled at him. Laurence had reconciled himself to the life of “the spare”. His father had never shown much interest in him, not in a way that had ever felt cold or uncaring. But he already had Laurence’s brother, William, and he was an incredibly busy man. So, Lord Rippon’s energy had always gone into ensuring that William was prepared to inherit the title and responsibilities of a baron when the time came. Laurence had

never once considered that eventually a title, any title, would pass on to him.

“It’s serious business,” his father droned on, not noticing the anxiety that had begun wracking his son. “But with your schooling and the level head I know you have, I’m sure you’ll make a fine job of it.”

A pointed look was shot at Laurence, and he fought the urge to flinch under the weight of his father’s gaze.

“Yes, Father.” Laurence said, dipping his head once in acknowledgement and then kept his gaze focused on where his hands rested in his lap.

“That also means you’ll be expected to marry.”

Laurence’s head shot up, and his father studied him. Their identical light brown eyes met, and his thoughts begin to whirl. Immediately his mind went to Agnes and of his plans to win her affection.

He noticed a peculiar look upon his face, and Laurence’s heart plummeted. Did his father already have someone in mind that he wished for him to wed?

“Marriage is already something I have set my sights on,” Laurence explained in a rush. “I know who it is I wish to court.”

His father’s gaze continued to rove over Laurence’s face, taking in every small shift in his sons’ expression. Laurence was sure his father had caught on to his affections for Lady Agnes Jarvis. To be honest, it was quite perplexing that more people, particularly Agnes herself, hadn’t pieced it together yet.

There was a glimmer of something in his father’s eyes that he was having difficulty placing.

“Mhmm...” his father grunted, “and you’re confident the woman will be...amenable...to your advances?” Lord Rippon raised an eyebrow in question and Laurence nodded in answer.

“With time.”

“Not too much, I hope. The season should be sufficient.”

His father leaned back in his chair, crossing his lithe arms across his chest. Laurence wanted to object, not sure if only a few months would be adequate to see his plan through to fruition. Would it be ample time for the letters to make their way to her, and for them to have enough of a correspondence for her to begin to reciprocate his feelings? He knew there was a possibility it might not be.

Laurence opened his mouth to say just that, but a stern look flitted across his father's features and it halted what he was about to say.

"Yes Father," Laurence said instead, dipping his head once more, "the season will suffice."

His father regarded him for only a moment more before waving his hand and dismissing Laurence from his study. Laurence turned and strode from the room, heart hammering so hard he was partly surprised that it was not echoing off the walls around him. He wound his way through his family home, not paying any attention to any of the rooms that he passed, operating solely on memory to navigate through the winding passages.

The farther he got from his father's office, the more he felt as if the walls were pushing in on him. The leering faces in the paintings he passed grinned down at him, casting their judgements upon him. Laurence wanted to shrink away from their scrutiny.

As he finally pushed the large front doors of the manor open, the fresh air rushed past the threshold to greet him, bringing with it the smell of calming lilac from the flowerbeds on either side of the stairs. He pushed himself forward, focusing on the path in front of him as he strode across the grounds with only one destination in mind.

He made his way to the stables, hoping to find solace among the horses. Throughout his childhood, when William had been harsh or he had experienced any kind of stress that would weigh heavy on a young heart, the stables was where he had found peace. There was something about the smell of the straw, the soft whinnying of the large, gentle beasts that

dwelled there, and the act of running a brush over a horse's smooth coat until it gleamed that brought peace to his addled mind.

As he reached the building, he heaved open the large wooden door and strode forward. Once he had secured the door behind him, he turned and basked in the ambiance of his surroundings. His thoughts drifted to his own horse, Brimmer. A fine, chestnut steed that he'd had since it was a colt and had broken in himself. Laurence knew Brimmer should be in the stable at this time, and navigated through the stalls to where Brimmer typically rested.

He turned the corner and gasped in shock when he found someone else inside. Charles, his valet, stood before Brimmer's stall, the beast's massive head thrown over the short wall and nuzzling into his hand. The sound of Laurence's sharp inhale caused Charles to turn wildly, his own face contorting into a mask of fright. But as his eyes beheld who had entered the stables with him, Charles' gaze relaxed. Laurence's own shoulders began to fall with relief, and he strode forward to stand next to his friend.

"My Lord," Charles said, dipping his head once in greeting and giving Laurence a sarcastic smile.

"Knock it off," Laurence laughed as he shot him a pointed glance.

Laurence and Charles were not far apart in age, with Charles only a couple years older. Laurence's father had hired him when Laurence had been eighteen, and Charles had accompanied him on many of his travels. The two had formed a close bond almost immediately upon meeting, and Charles was someone that Laurence was proud to call a friend.

In front of others, Charles was always sure to greet him in a formal manner, to give Laurence the title and the deference befitting his station. But they had long since evolved past all that when it was just the two of them. However, that didn't stop Charles from taking small, playful jabs at him from time to time. And knowing how much his titles made Laurence

uncomfortable, it was a frequent tool in Charles's arsenal that he was more than happy to deploy.

"I jest," Charles said, raising his hands in mock surrender and chuckling.

Laurence shook his head at Charles before reaching forward and stroking the nose of the horse he had come to see.

"Brimmer," Laurence said in greeting as the beast pressed his snout fondly into Laurence's hand.

Brimmer blew out an excited breath and nuzzled him. The warm puff of air ruffled Laurence's dark curls and he chuckled. He cast around a hurried glance, spying an open bag filled with white cubes at Charles's feet.

"How many have you already given him?" Laurence asked, bending to retrieve the small parcel.

"Only one so far."

Laurence nodded and pulled out one of the sugar cubes, holding it in a flattened palm for the horse to eat. Its large, meaty lips smacked together in excitement before coming down to take the sweet treat from his hand.

"What brings you out here?" Charles asked with an attempt to keep his voice nonchalant.

Laurence was well-aware that Charles understood the type of thoughts that brought him to the stables, and he was appreciative that his friend was trying to approach the subject delicately. He took only a moment to gather his thoughts and figure out how he wanted to broach all that had happened with the man in front of him.

"There has been some rather...interesting news," Laurence explained and Charles shot him a questioning look. "My Uncle Thomas, the baronet, passed away. He hadn't married and had no heirs, so his title and land have apparently transferred to my father. I was informed that instead of accepting them himself, I will be expected to take them on."

Laurence stared at Charles, holding the mans gazed as the words fell into the air between them. His friend studied his

face, and Charles's brows furrowed with question.

"And? How do you feel about all of that?" Charles prompted.

His question cut right to the quick of Laurence's issue. Because the truth was, he wasn't sure. With William being set to take over everything with their family, he had never put much thought into anything past that. He had always assumed he would just figure things out as he went.

Outside of marrying Agnes, he hadn't much thought about what the rest of his life would look like. Because of this, the discussion with his father had shaken him, and his entire future was now cast in a different light.

At twenty-four, he was a man grown. He felt silly, now, that he hadn't considered his future seriously prior to that moment. But then again, he had never really had a reason to. Now that a burden of responsibility that he had never expected was being placed upon his shoulders, he wasn't entirely sure how to process it.

Laurence shook his head, "I don't know."

"This will be a good thing, will it not?" Charles asked optimistically. "Especially in your efforts to court Lady Jarvis? I mean, she is titled herself. So should she be worried that suitors will only be interested in her rank, that should alleviate a bit of that for you."

Laurence considered that momentarily, thinking of how this would play into his plans. While he didn't believe that Agnes was particularly concerned with suitors only pursuing her to obtain her dowry, or because of her status, Laurence couldn't deny that being titled himself would help in that regard.

Laurence nodded slightly, letting this information soak into him and feeling a small bit of his spirit begin to lift. It dawned on him, then, that he hadn't told Charles of his discussion with Sarah. He had been so excited to begin his letters to Agnes when he'd left Sarah's shop, that he hadn't been able to focus long enough to tell Charles the story.

But then, later that night when Laurence had finally sat down to begin said letters, turmoil over what to say had rushed through him. And somewhere within all of that, he had never actually taken the chance to talk it all over with his closest friend.

“I forgot to tell you...” Laurence began before recounting the details of what he’d discovered to Charles.

As Laurence talked, Charles’s expressions grew more and more animated. When Laurence finally got to the part about the letters and how he intended to begin sending them to Agnes, a wide grin had planted itself across Charles’ features.

“So, have you written it yet?” Charles asked with enthusiasm.

“No,” Laurence confirmed, “it feels like I’ve sat down to write it a million times. But I can’t seem to conjure up the right words.”

“She is your friend, is she not?” Charles inquired, cocking his head to the side.

“She is.” Laurence answered quickly.

“Then just write to her as your friend.” Charles raised and then dropped a shoulder.

Laurence pondered his companion’s words, wondering if it could really be that simple. Would it be possible to keep his identity a secret and still talk to her as he normally would?

As he continued down that path of thinking, he began to envision the words that he would put on parchment. Everything that he wanted to say started to take shape and Laurence felt excitement leap in his chest. Not wanting to waste any bit of the inspiration that was coursing through him, he turned to his friend with a wide grin.

“Charles, I’m going to need your help.”

CHAPTER 7

Esther

Esther stared out the window of the carriage, trying to tune out Agnes' words, but failing.

“Wouldn't it be grand?” Agnes murmured to her mother, “to be the diamond of the season?”

“And you will be,” Dorothy said, patting Agnes' hand where it rested on her lap. “After the dress we are having designed for you, it will be impossible for anyone to look more beautiful than you will, my darling.”

Some form of this same conversation had been playing out for the entirety of the drive from Surrey Manor to the modiste's shop. Esther tried to allow her mind to wander, doing anything she could to not pay attention to the words filling the air around her. She had tried thinking of the eligible suitors whom she knew would be at the first ball of the season. She had tried recalling all of her favorite books. And even her tried and true method of focusing on silver linings had been unable to hold her attention for long.

It wasn't that she was bothered by the idea of Agnes being the diamond of the season. Truthfully, if that came to pass, she would be happy for her cousin. But Esther couldn't help but feel that she'd also find the experience hurtful if the topic of everyone's desires was a woman in her own household.

She had tried to mentally prepare herself for what it would feel like to see Agnes get countless suitors while knowing she herself would be lucky to get even one. Esther knew she would try her hardest not to be jealous, and in the end, it was only one suitor that she needed, especially if it was the *right* one. But Esther wasn't sure if she'd be able to stop herself from that entirely.

The carriage rolled to a stop as they approached the modiste's shop, and Esther had to refrain from exhaling with relief. Her aunt and cousin exited the carriage first, and Esther followed after them quietly, as she had grown accustomed. The gravel crunched under her supple boots as they walked from the carriage to the store.

A bell chimed merrily when they opened the door, announcing their arrival. Esther could hear Sarah bustling about in the confines of the store, and she had to fight off a smile at the thought of seeing the older woman once again. She had become quite fond of Sarah in what felt like a very small amount of time, and she had reminisced on the woman's kindness the last time she had been at the shop quite often.

Dorothy and Agnes pushed their way through the forest of fabric and Esther followed after them. As they approached, Esther caught the sound of the old woman humming to herself as she worked, and a grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. They turned the corner and Esther laid eyes on the woman. Sarah was kneeling on the ground, spine bent as she put the final touches on an emerald green gown affixed to a wire bodice before her.

"Uh-hem," Dorothy cleared her throat loudly, and Sarah's head shot up in surprise.

The woman blinked rapidly as if to clear her thoughts, and she stared at them with what seemed like confusion. Sarah finally glanced at the small clock that rested on a spindly table in her work area, and her face lit with realization.

"Is it noon already?" She murmured to herself as she pushed up off the ground and stood.

Sarah smoothed down her gown before turning to face them, a smile tugging at her lips when her eyes landed on Esther. She bowed low to both Dorothy and Agnes, greeting them formally. When the woman's gaze returned to Esther, she dipped her head in a show of respect and welcome. The women greeted Sarah with varying levels of enthusiasm, Esther the most eager among them.

After all pleasantries were out of the way, Sarah said she would bring out their dresses and began to turn. As she did, her eyes locked on Esther, and the woman gave her a quick wink. Esther wasn't quite sure of what to make of it as she watched the woman disappear further into the back of the shop, her small body swallowed within the swaths of fabric. But she thought maybe it was the woman's attempt at kindness, knowing the drab gown she was about to be presented with. Her eyes darted around the room, stopping once on her Cousin Agnes who had a strange expression on her face, before continuing to rove over the new fabrics that had come into the shop since their last visit.

"First, we will have Lady Agnes," Sarah said as she entered the space once more, holding a stunning pale blue gown aloft.

Agnes stepped onto the platform in the center of the space and Esther helped her with the process of undoing the laces of her dress. As Agnes stepped out of her gown, Esther bundled the fabric and took it with her to hang it while Agnes tried on the dress that Sarah had crafted for her.

By the time Esther had turned back toward the center of the room, Agnes had stepped into the blue gown and Sarah was in the process of securing the laces in the back. Esther had to fight back a gasp as she spied the beautifully draped fabric and how it complimented Agnes.

The soft blue played beautifully against her pale skin, bringing out a stunning undertone in her ebony hair. Once Sarah finished, she stepped off the platform and allowed Agnes to turn and face the looking glass. The girls' eyes lit up as she appraised herself, her fingertips roving appreciatively over the fine fabric and eyes dancing with wonder.

“It’s beautiful,” Agnes whispered, low enough that Esther barely heard her.

“Beautiful enough for a diamond,” Dorothy amended, and for once there was not a hint of malice or sarcasm in her tone.

And Esther had to agree. Everything from the color to the fit was absolutely perfect on her cousin. Esther felt a pang as she thought of the gown that had been picked for her. As she stared at Agnes’ dress, which was such a clear showcase at Sarah’s mastery, she knew that there was some hope that the gown wouldn’t be as horrid as when she’d last seen it. But the fabric had been so drab, and the cut of the gown so abysmal, she wasn’t sure if even Sarah would have been able to spin it into something that could be considered pretty.

Esther watched as Sarah walked around Agnes, making final adjustments to the gown, and placing pins. She watched the woman’s deft fingers as they hefted over the piece, finding faults within the fabric that Esther had been completely blind to.

After a bit of fussing, Sarah began unlacing the gown and had Agnes step out of it. Esther extracted Agnes’ previous dress and rushed over to help her back into it.

“Once you’re done with that, Esther,” Sarah said, her voice high and excited for a reason that Esther couldn’t quite place, “I’ll have you step up as well and undress, if you please.”

Esther nodded as she finished tying off Agnes’ gown. Agnes shot Esther a suspicious look before stepping down without offering to assist Esther with her own laces. Esther reached an arm behind her back, her fingers fumbling with the taught string. She was well used to dressing and undressing on her own, having endured it now for almost a year. But with others watching her, it was like her hands just would not cooperate.

After a few moments, nimble fingers replaced hers and she heard Sarah fussing behind her. Esther turned her head slightly, spying Agnes and Dorothy where they stood off to the side of the room. The look on their faces were both strange,

and she couldn't quite figure out what emotion they displayed. Shock, perhaps?

Her dress fell away from her body, hitting the ground with a soft whoosh and Esther stepped out of it. She felt Sarah bend behind her to pick it up, and bustle away to lay it on a chair. Esther turned, spying her own dress draped across a table. She had to stop her mouth from popping open in surprise.

The fabric, while most assuredly the same one that had made up the drab dress she had seen the week prior, looked almost nothing like it did in her memories. It had been cleaned to perfection. The dull pink it had once been was now so pristine and vibrant Esther had a hard time making sense of it. As Sarah pulled the dress from where it lay and Esther gained a full view of it, her face broke out in a stunned smile.

Esther heard a small gasp from the corner of the room that Agnes and Dorothy stood in, but Esther did not turn to glance at them. She was unable to take her eyes from the gown.

Sarah held it delicately as she approached her before stooping to allow Esther to step into it. She watched in awe as the fabric shifted over her body and it was pulled into place. As the laces at the back were arranged and the fit of it tightened, the form began to take shape. And as it did, a lump began to form in Esther's throat.

Somehow, over the course of the last week, Sarah had entirely transformed the gown. What had once been dull and dreary now shown with vibrancy, where the lace had once been, the dress now ruched delicately. As Sarah finished lacing her into it, Esther turned to the looking glass and inhaled in fascination at what she saw.

When she had first tried on the dress, the color had washed her out, making her look pallid and almost sickly. But now? Now the gown complimented her in every way, accentuating the gentle blush of her cheeks, making her hair color stand out, and the grey of her eyes almost glow. Tears pricked her eyes as she thought over how much work Sarah would have had to pour into the gown to turn it into something so beautiful.

Esther could not remember the last time she had been shown such kindness.

She turned to tell the woman as much, but at the same moment she spied her Aunt Dorothy stepping forward, and Esther glanced in her direction. The woman's face was contorted with menace, her cheeks having flushed crimson in her rage and her beady eyes narrowed angrily.

“What is the meaning of this?” Dorothy's voice cut through every ounce of joy Esther had been feeling, making her deflate.

“What do you mean?” Sarah asked as her brow furrowed in confusion.

“This is not the gown we purchased.”

Sarah looked at Esther, her eyes staring at the dress she now wore and then turned back to Dorothy.

“I apologize, Lady Jarvis, but it is the same dress. I simply reworked the fabric and washed and dyed it, as we discussed.”

“You did this on purpose,” Agnes muttered from behind her mother. Her voice wavered, but her expression was contorted with petulance. Her dark eyes flitted from Sarah to Esther, where they stayed. “I saw her wink at you when we walked in. You knew. You heard me talking about being the diamond of the season and how pretty my gown would be, and I bet you were laughing all the while. What did you do? Sneak back to the shop after our last visit and conspire with her in the hope to get every suitor for yourself?”

Esther's heart sank as Agnes' spoke, her cousins voice rising with indignation with each passing word.

“I assure you; I had no idea. There was no collusion or...” Esther began, but was quickly overpowered by her aunt's interjection.

“You deliberately made sure my daughter got the less beautiful gown,” Dorothy advanced a step toward the woman, her finger pointing at her accusingly.

“My Lady,” Sarah said, her voice cracking a bit with fear. “I sincerely apologize. But it would have been bad for my business to send her out into the world with the way the dress originally looked. My name is attached to these designs, and I couldn’t send anyone out in that monstrosity. I did not mean to cause offense.”

Esther watched the two women, eyes darting between them. Her Aunt Dorothy’s chest was rising and falling rapidly with her panting breaths.

“Did you trick her into this?” Agnes asked again.

Esther noticed her voice sounded not just confused but... hurt as well. And it caught her off guard. She stared at her cousin, praying that she would hear the sincerity in her voice when she spoke again.

“I did not. I swear it.” Esther held her cousin’s gaze.

Agnes’ beautiful face was flushed, and she scrutinized Esther’s expression, her eyes roving from Esther’s chin to her brow. Esther stepped down from the podium, coming closer to her cousin. For some reason, it wasn’t Dorothy’s rage that was filling her with foreboding, but the idea of hurting or disappointing Agnes. Dorothy was cruel, but Agnes, she was just a product of her environment. She’d had as little control over their circumstance as Esther herself.

While aloof and sometimes uncaring, Agnes had never gone out of her way to be unkind to Esther in the way her aunt so often had. And Esther was hoping she could use that moment to forge some kind of bridge to friendship between herself and the other young woman.

“I was not sure why Sarah winked at me when she did. I had just assumed she was trying to make me feel less nervous about the state of the dress that I thought I was getting. Merely a gesture of kindness.”

Esther kept her voice flat, hoping that its placating tone would smooth some of Agnes’ worries. But the other woman’s face remained impassive, her eyes hesitant.

“Just a matter of your reputation, you say?” Dorothy’s voice drawled, and Esther turned her attention toward her aunt.

“Yes, Lady Jarvis,” Sarah said, dipping her head in acknowledgement.

A mean smile that Esther didn’t trust tugged up the corners of Dorothy’s thin lips.

“Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind if Agnes wore this dress instead,” Dorothy glared at both Esther and Sarah meanly, waiting for their protests that did not come.

Esther felt a tearing deep within her chest. She had had so many things taken away from her. When she’d spied this gown, it had been the first good thing she had truly felt since the day her parents died. And now it was just another thing getting brutally ripped away from her.

She knew she couldn’t object, couldn’t do anything to upset her Aunt Dorothy further. And as Esther cast a look back at Agnes, she spied a conspiring look playing across her cousin’s beautiful features.

“If you wish, Madam,” Sarah acquiesced, stepping forward to help Esther out of the gown she had so beautifully crafted. Esther had to fight back tears as she felt the smooth fabric slip from her body. It pooled at her feet as something else within her broke.

As Sarah bundled the fabric at her feet and moved to take it away, she caught Esther’s eye. The woman gave her a sympathetic look, pouring out all the apologies she couldn’t yet utter before she stole away to the back of the shop to stow both dresses for their final alterations.

“I don’t know, Mother. I’m rather partial to the blue.” Agnes’ voice floated across the air, back to its cool and unaffected manner.

Esther didn’t dare look in their direction, didn’t dare give either Agnes or Dorothy an inkling of the hope that had sparked within her at those words. She didn’t so much as move her eyes from the spot on the floor they had been affixed

as she stepped into the gown she had worn to the shop and began working on the laces.

“We will decide later,” Dorothy said, appeasing her daughter with a pat on her arm.

The hope in Esther’s chest fluttered, but it did not extinguish. Perhaps she would get to wear that beautiful gown, yet.

As she stepped down from the podium, she once again began looking for the positives in her situation, her little silver linings. At the very top of her list was that even if Agnes did claim the pink gown, the blue was still heavenly, and would complement the grey of her eyes.

She tried to focus on that fact as they said their goodbyes to Sarah, and Dorothy made the arrangements for the finished gowns to be delivered. As they exited the shop and climbed into the carriage, however, the lump had relodged itself in Esther’s throat.

She tried swallowing it down, tried forcing it deep within her where her aunt and cousin could not notice her hurt. But as the wheels of the carriage began to move and the cab began to jostle over the rocky road, her eyes began to burn with the presence of unshed tears.

The farther they got from Sarah’s shop, the more her chest tightened with the effort of holding in her sobs. She blinked rapidly to chase away the water that had started to line her lashes, bidding them not to fall. Agnes began speaking to her mother, and she and Dorothy prattled on about the benefits of choosing between the two dresses.

Once again Esther did not look at them, staring instead out the window as the landscape passed them by. The conversation occurring in the carriage before her felt particularly cruel, but she held her tongue, suffering through their words. By the end of the ride, a decision still had not been made on what dress Agnes would be wearing to the opening ball of the season.

They jostled to a stop in front of Surrey Manor, and Esther waited as Agnes and Dorothy climbed down from the carriage.

She took the brief moment where she was alone to take a deep, steadying breath before following after them. She watched as they disappeared through the large front doors of the house without a backward glance. And, as Esther walked through the threshold, the shade and shadow of the house washing over her, she finally allowed a few of her tears to fall.

CHAPTER 8

Sarah

Sarah stared at the final gowns in front of her, eyes roving between the two wire bodices she had brought into her workspace. She had moved on with her alterations as planned, hoping that Agnes would still be wearing the blue gown and Esther the pink. Her mind flitted back to the moment it had all gone awry, recalling the way that Esther's face had fallen.

She could tell the sweet girl had been trying as hard as she could not to show her disappointment. Sarah had felt so incredibly bad about everything that happened. When she'd decided to craft Esther's dress the way she had, she had only wanted to help the girl have something beautiful after a year of so much heartache and loss. But all she'd served to do was give the girl something else to potentially lose.

Since the visit the day prior, Sarah had worked tirelessly on the alterations. She had tried to add a few final frills to the blue dress as well, to put it on the same level of artistry as the pink dress. She was hoping this would sway Agnes' decision back toward the blue gown. And, if not it would at least ensure that Esther would be able to feel beautiful in whatever dress she wore.

The bell over the shop door chimed loudly, announcing the arrival of an unscheduled visitor. Sarah's head snapped up from her work and she blinked in befuddlement. She turned from the dresses and began walking around the corner that led

to the front of the shop. When she approached, she spied a familiar face, and her mouth pulled into a wide, affectionate grin.

“Charles,” she said in greeting as she approached the man.

Laurence’s valet grinned in return, greeting Sarah with equal enthusiasm. She hadn’t seen Charles in almost as long as it had been since she’d seen Laurence. He’d delivered a few parcels to her over the years, Laurence having sent him in between their travels and adventures. But it hadn’t been often.

She’d watched the friendship form between the two men from the moment Charles had been hired, and she’d adored the loyalty and comradery that had blossomed between the two. Thinking of Laurence, she looked behind Charles through the windows and out to the street, expecting to see him striding toward the door. But he was nowhere to be found.

“He was unable to make it,” Charles explained, following the line of Sarah’s gaze, and making the connection of who she was looking for. “Laurence had to go out to the country to look at his new lands.”

“Lands?” Sarah exclaimed, bringing her eyes back to Charles’s face as her brows shot up in question.

“His Uncle Thomas, the baronet, died suddenly and was unwed. His father gave Laurence his title and lands,” Charles explained. He held up a piece of parchment that had been sealed with a wax stamp. “He sent me to you with this.”

Sarah took the parchment delicately, turning it over in her hands.

“Is this what I think it is?” she asked.

“If by that you mean a letter for Lady Agnes, then yes.”

Sarah looked at him, a thousand thoughts racing through her mind.

“Why did he not just send you directly to her? Why use me as the messenger?” Sarah asked, not trying to disguise the skepticism in her voice.

“Because he wants to approach Lady Agnes as just a man. He wants her to fall for him without any pre-conceived notion. Not because of their history together, or their family ties, or anything other than the contents of his soul.”

Charles’s eyes were glimmering with pride for his friend, and Sarah’s heart swelled with the sentiment. She nodded her acknowledgement, turning to face her work room where she knew the dresses were waiting to be packed up and delivered.

“I think I know just the way to get this to Surrey Manor,” she said, low enough that Charles had to lean forward to hear her.

Charles nodded, and they stood for a few minutes longer and chatted. They caught up on how the last few years had been for each of them, sharing a laugh here and there. But not much time passed before Charles indicated that he had to be off to run a few other errands for Laurence as well.

They said their goodbyes, and Sarah sent him on his way. She watched through the windows as Charles drove away, holding the letter she had been given to her chest. She walked back to her work room, eyes darting from the blue gown and then to the pink.

She set the letter on the table before starting to pack the dresses into the boxes they would be delivered in. When complete, she grabbed the letter and tucked it into the fabric of one of the gowns. She recalled the way Agnes had reacted to the dress, and she felt safe in her assumption of which one the girl would choose.

Sarah let out a deep breath as she sealed them, and then exited the shop to hire a courier to take them to the manor. As she walked, she sent up a quick prayer that she had chosen correctly and that the letter would make its way to the woman that Laurence was destined for.

CHAPTER 9

Esther

Esther gave a grunt of effort as she hoisted the bucket she had been carrying up to the wash basin. Cleaning the dishes from her aunt and cousin's teatime was the last of her chores for that afternoon, and she was looking forward to an hour or two of quiet following a morning that had been filled with work.

She stuck her hands into the lukewarm water and began to scrub at the delicate china soaking within it. Her mind began to wander, as it so often did when she was performing her duties around the home. Esther recalled her first night at Surrey Manor, when she had immediately gone to her room to cry. She had only been there for about an hour when her Aunt Dorothy strode in and began telling her what her role would be within the home.

It had given Esther quite a shock. When she had lived with her parents, she had never been expected to do chores. That had all been handled by the servants, and she had expected that it would be the same in Surrey. Esther hadn't even been sure how to perform many of the tasks that her aunt had begun listing.

She had had no choice but to learn. Originally, she had hoped that the servants would be a place for her to seek refuge, to find some level of kindness and friendship within the walls

of Surrey Manor. But she had soon found that would not be the case.

The servants had seen the way that Dorothy treated Esther, and they knew as well as Esther did that her aunt's mood was often unpredictable. Not wanting to potentially provoke the Lady of the house, they treated Esther with a self-preserving distance during the best of times. During the worst of times, she had been met by outright hostility.

Esther found that she could not blame them for this, thinking that she might do the same if she found herself in their position. But it didn't stop from making her existence within the manor a lonely one.

Esther continued her scrubbing silently, the creaks and groans of the house her only company. When she finished, she dried her hands on her apron before hanging it on a hook in the kitchen. Esther looked around her, taking in the clean space with pride before turning and striding through the house to steal a little bit of time for relaxation.

When Esther crossed the threshold to the reading room, she let out a sigh of relief when she found it empty. It was one of her favorite rooms in the large house, none of its finery or comforts having yet been squirreled away for a few extra pounds to help Dorothy keep the estate afloat.

She crossed the lushly decorated space before coming to a stop in front of the bookshelf. She selected one of her favorites before curling up in a stuffed reading chair. She placed the book in her lap and allowed herself to escape into the pages.

Esther was unsure of how much time had passed, but when gravel crunched loudly outside the manor it pulled her from the world within her book. She blinked rapidly, bringing her mind back to reality before turning toward the window. A courier driving a wagon rolled up to the house and Esther watched, perplexed.

The portly man hopped down from his seat as the horse pulling the buggy came to a stop. He walked around to the back of the wagon where he began struggling to remove two rather large boxes.

Having seen the deliveries that Agnes received from Sarah's shop previously, she marked them immediately for what they were, and Esther's heart began to flutter wildly. She wondered if Agnes had decided yet which gown she would prefer, and sent out a silent hope that it would be the blue.

Esther checked the clock that resided on the mantle and realized she was running late on assisting with the supper preparations. She rushed through the halls to the back of the house and spied the steward just as a knock resounded from the front door.

"It's a delivery from the modiste," Esther whispered as she passed, and he gave her a brief nod before rushing to greet the courier.

She fell into step easily, taking over her typical duties as she tried to keep her thoughts from lingering on the dress that sat in one of those boxes. But her efforts would prove to be futile as time and time again she kept picturing the way she had looked when she gazed upon herself in the looking glass, surrounded by delicate pink fabric.

Esther eventually gave in and began filling her head with fantasies of what it would be like to attend the ball. She pictured herself once more in the pink gown, dancing with suitors in the work of art that Sarah had crafted for her. She imagined her dance card so filled it could not hold another name.

She gave herself permission to bring forth images of the following day, where she imagined lines of suitors coming to Surrey Manor just for her, each one more suitable than the last. Each one was handsome and kind, and they were all funny, but there was one that stood out amongst the rest. And this nameless, handsome man of her fantasies promised to whisk her away from this place and its loneliness, and that her life would be filled with joy and laughter once again.

The sound of a plate shattering on the floor snapped Esther out of her daydreams, bringing her back to her reality and causing disappointment to flood her. She pushed her dreams to

the side, chiding herself for being so foolish as to dream of such things, knowing they would never come to pass.

She made it through supper preparations, as well as eating at the table with Aunt Dorothy and Cousin Agnes without incident. During dinner, Dorothy and Agnes had chatted about the receipt of the dresses. Esther was able to gather that a decision had been made on which gown would be going to which girl, but neither made a mention of the actual one that had been chosen.

“Your dress is in your room,” Dorothy shot at Esther, her only acknowledgement of the other girl during the entirety of the meal.

Esther had merely bowed her head in a show of gratitude and thanked her aunt for letting her know. She tried and failed to not dwell on it as she ate, wondering what her fate would be when she walked into the room.

As supper was finished and she cleared away the dishes, taking them to the kitchen for the remaining maid to clean, she walked toward her bedroom with a pounding heart. As Esther pushed open the door, she instantly spotted the large white box on the center of her bed that had been tied with a red ribbon.

She crossed the floor in quick, hurried steps and she reached with a shaking hand to tug the ribbon loose. It fell away easily, and Esther let out a quivering breath as she reached for the lid.

Both dresses are beautiful, she reminded herself, and no matter which one lies within this box it will be expertly crafted and more than suitable for the ball.

She pulled away the lid, and tears of disappointment tickled the corners of her eyes as she spotted the pale blue fabric. Esther had thought she had stifled any hope so as to be disenchanted by which garment had been given to her. But it appeared she had not done as good of a job as she had wished.

Esther allowed herself just a moment to be sad, giving a few tears permission to fall before wiping them away. She knew that the gown within the box was more beautiful than

anything she had worn in the past year. She knew in her heart that had she not seen the perfection of the pink dress Sarah had crafted for her, she would have been elated to have been given such a fine gown. The problem was she *had* seen the pink dress, and now it too had been ripped away from her, just like everything else.

She swallowed past her disappointment, deciding instead to hang the blue gown and begin picturing herself wearing it. There was nothing that she could do but accept the gown she had been given and lean to appreciate its beauty for what it was.

Esther tugged on the swaths of fabric as she pulled it from the box. She brought it over to her bed, laying it out flat and examining it. She stepped back to take in the fullness of it and she heard something crinkle beneath her boot.

Looking down, there was a piece of parchment on the floor that hadn't been there before, a wax seal keeping the two ends folded together neatly. Confusion furrowed Esther's brow as she bent to pick it up.

She examined it carefully, stepping across her room toward one of the candles that burned brightly to better take it all in. Other than the wax seal, there were no markings on it that would indicate who it was from or who it was too. She glanced around her room, wondering where it could have come from before her eyes landed on the box. Had it been tucked into the fabric of her gown?

Unable to curb her curiosity, she broke through the seal and unfurled the paper. An elegant scrawl filled it, and Esther read hungrily.

CHAPTER 10

Esther

To the honorable lady at Surrey Manor,

I am sure this letter will prove to be quite a shock, and I do apologize should it cause you any distress or confusion. But you see, I am quite the admirer of you. On the day I spotted you, in a gown of the softest blue blending in with the sky above, you simply stole my breath. The way you carry yourself and interact with the world around you has left me besotted, and I absolutely had to make my affections known.

I imagine by now you are wondering at my identity, and I assure you that will be revealed in due time. I promise to you that I am a man who is well titled, and who, should you so wish it, would be able to provide a life of ease, comfort, and dare I say it...love. But for now, I wish for us to get to know each other simply as we are – just a man and just a woman, without the expectations of the world we were born into watching us. And I believe letters will allow us to do just that.

Should you wish to respond, leave your letter by the yellow fence post behind the stable. I will ensure it is retrieved.

Most sincerely,

Yours.

Esther stared at the letter, reading through it over and over again for any hint as to who this “Yours” might be, but she

came up blank. Her heart fluttered with excitement as the words began to sink in.

She had a secret admirer. She thought of the light blue dress she often wore during her infrequent trips to town. It was one of the nicer items that Dorothy had had Sarah craft for her upon her arrival to Surrey Manor, stating that she would need to look presentable when they were away from the estate.

It was not as grand as anything Agnes wore, but it was respectable enough. But the fact that a man had seen her in it, and despite its plainness still found her beautiful made her heart stir with joy. If his words were to be believed, then he was also of nobility, meaning he would likely be at the upcoming ball to begin the season.

She wondered if he would approach her, wondered if perhaps he would even ask for her to dance with him. As Esther read the letter again, she looked back at the blue gown. If he noticed her on that day wearing blue and found it flattering, perhaps it was fate that she would be wearing blue when he would lay eyes on her again.

She began to imagine him, and what he might look like. She pictured the men she had seen during her trips to town, or that had come to visit at the manor. For a brief moment, her mind conjured an image of Lord Bolton, the handsome man who had brought Agnes flowers the week prior. He had been so kind, and their conversation had flowed so naturally, could it perhaps be him?

Esther dismissed that thought with a chuckle and quick shake of her head. Lord Bolton had been so clearly there to see Agnes. The look in his eyes alone was enough to tell Esther that he harbored much affection for her cousin, a sentiment she wasn't entirely sure was reciprocated. But it still warmed Esther to imagine that it was someone like him - someone handsome, and witty, and kind.

With excitement flooding through her, Esther hung the new dress up with care. Where just minutes ago there had been disappointment over the swaths of sky colored fabric, she now found fondness rushing through her. She allowed her fingertips

to brush over the texture of the gown as she began to concoct a plan as to how she would respond.

She crossed the small space of her room to the writing desk that inhabited one corner. She took out a piece of parchment that had been in the desk since she took up her residence in Surrey. She cast around a furtive look, hoping to spy a quill and a vial of ink but there were none to be found.

Esther pushed to her feet and left her room, padding softly as she went. She could hear Agnes playing the pianoforte in the music room, and a pang went through her. She wanted to practice soon, and she hoped that when her cousin went to bed and after Esther finished her letter, she would be able to steal away a little bit of time at the ivory keys.

Making sure to stay well out of sight, Esther crept toward the study. Once inside, she went immediately to the desk and spotted what she was looking for. She stuffed the quill and the well secured vial of ink in her pocket before turning and attempting to make it back to her room.

She had not sent or received a letter since she had come to live with her aunt and cousin. So, if she was caught by either of them, she knew it would raise suspicions. She doubted her Aunt Dorothy would like it if she found Esther corresponding with a well titled man that could be a potential suitor for her daughter, and she did not want to risk her aunt finding some way to stop her from sending her reply to her admirer.

Thankfully, she made it back to her room without incident. Closing the door softly, she situated herself back at her writing desk. Esther inhaled deeply, trying to steady the nerves that had been sparked by her excitement. As she exhaled, the edges of the parchment rustled, and she imagined that it was impatient to see what Esther had to say. As she dipped the quill in the ink and brought the tip to the paper, for the first time since before her parents had passed away, she began to think that maybe her future would be able to take a turn for the better.

The following morning, Esther woke and stretched her arms above her head with a yawn. She blinked her eyes

blearily in the dim room, glaring up at the small window letting in the faint glow of the rising sun. As she glanced about her room, she spied the piece of parchment on her desk and scowled. She had been up half the night trying to think of how to reply, and had finally given up when the wick of her candle had begun to burn too low.

Throwing back the covers, Esther threw herself out of bed and stalked across the room, before picking up the letter her admirer had sent and holding it to her chest. She had pondered over it time and time again the night before, imagining it's writer a thousand different times as she tried to craft her own response. But it was the thoughts of him that had hindered her progress.

Not wanting to dwell on it any further, she tucked the letter neatly into one of the drawers of her desk and began getting herself ready for her day. She stepped into one of her plain gowns, lacing up the back with deft and practiced fingers. Once finished, she smoothed her hands over the soft pleats before rushing forward from the room.

Esther began her morning chores, still thinking about the letter and exactly what she wanted to say. She grabbed a bucket and began making her way out to the well to fetch some water to boil. As she walked, her boots shuffling over the soft grass and breathing in the fresh morning air, she hummed to herself absentmindedly in an attempt to lift her soured spirits.

She sat the bucket upon the ground with a flop beneath the spicket and began pumping the large, iron handle. As water slushed through the metal, her arms began to burn in protest, but she used her frustrations as fuel to pump harder. Esther finished her job quickly, her mind constantly preoccupied with her admirer, or "Yours", as she had begun to think of him.

As she stalked back toward the house, carrying the now full bucket, a peculiar sound cut through the air, bringing her steps to a halt. Esther blinked around her, trying to place it before identifying that it was coming from a large pile of wood to the side of the manor. Following the sound, Esther cocked

her head in confusion, but as she got closer, she identified it as a meow.

Reaching the pile of wood, she stopped to listen again before peaking around the stacked logs. There, caught between the wood and the wall, was a small, grey kitten with bright blue eyes.

It blinked at her fearfully, its mouth opening once more to let out a frantic *meeeeooooowww*, its whole body shaking with the effort of the noise.

“Hello little one,” Esther cooed, trying to keep her voice low and unthreatening.

The small cat ceased its crying, blinking up at her again with wide eyes. Esther looked around, hoping to find a sign of another cat that could be this tiny thing’s mother. But the grounds were entirely empty except for the birds playing in one of the baths set into a flower bed.

Not knowing what else to do but being entirely unable to leave the kitten out to fend for itself, she reached forward and wrapped her hand around its small body. It gave one more pitiful meow, but it quickly calmed when she cradled it to her chest.

“There, there,” she said, using her finger to scratch gingerly behind the small beast’s ear.

It leaned into her touch, and she felt it begin to vibrate with a deep appreciative purr. The kitten nuzzled into her chest, and she looked down at it with wonder. Esther let it rest there, and with effort she used one hand to pick up the bucket while the other cupped the kitten’s small body. Walking through the house, she deposited the bucket by the sink before heading to her room.

She placed the kitten on the bed, where it curled up into a ball amongst the warmth of her blanket and began immediately purring. Esther smiled at it fondly, its small chest rising and falling with a measured beat as it drifted off into a contented sleep. She began to think that now, not only did she

have an admirer, but she had finally found herself a friend as well, and her day no longer felt bad.

CHAPTER II

Laurence

Laurence ran his hands over his waistcoat and breeches, smoothing out any potential wrinkles or creases that may have formed on his ride to Surrey Manor. Blowing out a breath through pursed lips, he tried, and failed, to calm his riotous nerves. As his boots crunched across the gravel, he couldn't help but wonder if Agnes has received his letter. And if she had, had she figured out that it was he who wrote it?

He brought his hand up to the iron knocker and gave it three, quick raps, hearing it echo deep into the home beyond. Thankfully, he did not have to wait for long. A few moments later, the door was pulled open with the Jarvis' steward, Frederick, standing on the other side. Frederick had worked for the Jarvis' for as long as Laurence could remember. The man had always had a frazzled look about him; as if there was too much to do and not enough time for him to do it. But then again, Laurence did not know much about Frederick or how the Jarvis' estates were run, so perhaps that was truly how he felt.

"Sir Laurence," Frederick said, dipping his head into a low bow to greet him.

"Hello Frederick," Laurence returned the greeting, "I came to call on Lady Agnes. May I speak with her?"

The steward nodded his head and stepped aside for Laurence to pass him. He stopped in the receiving hall,

noticing once again the lack of finery throughout the space. Were there more blank spots on the wall than there had been previously?

“I shall go retrieve her,” Frederick said, his shaky and anxious voice pulling Laurence from his own thoughts.

“Thank you,” Laurence called to the man’s retreating form.

Unsure of what to do with his pent-up energy, Laurence stuffed his hands in his pockets and began pacing the length of the atrium. As he did, he took in a few of the sparse paintings that lined the walls. Upon closer inspection, he noted that some of the spaces had a difference in color, making him sure that those spaces had once been filled.

As he examined those that were still hung, he noticed that they were only portraits that had been done of the Jarvis ancestors. Any other painting that would not have held sentimental value were no longer present. Laurence’s mind then began to recall the lack of servants he had seen upon his last visit.

Had it not been Lady Dorothy herself that had answered the door? And, it had been her own niece that had served them tea instead of a maid as was accustomed? He began to wonder if perhaps the Jarvis’ finances were not doing well. Laurence felt terribly at that thought, but it also gave him a small spark of hope. Because if he and Agnes were to wed, he would be able to assist them with any troubles they might have – financial or otherwise.

The sound of a soft, delicate voice began to echo through one of the corridors. Laurence looked around, following the sound of the voice before spying the young woman he had met during his last visit, Esther.

Once again, she was dressed simply, with a basket of laundry propped against her hip, which Laurence immediately found odd. A small, grey kitten trailed at her heels, and Esther appeared to be talking to it as she walked. A smile of amusement tugged at the corner of Laurence’s lips as the words that Esther was saying began to make sense.

“You silly little thing, of course we can’t do that,” Esther’s musical voice carried throughout the house.

She looked at the cat that was twining itself between her ankles, never once looking up to spot Laurence waiting at the other end of the hallway. The small beast meowed loudly in response, and Esther clicked her tongue at it.

“If you say so, you nosy little thing.” Esther chuckled and looked back up.

When she did, her eyes landed on Laurence and she gasped with a start.

“Lord Bolton!” she exclaimed, her eyebrows darting up in surprise. “I apologize, I didn’t see you there.”

Esther dropped the basket to the ground and dipped into a curtsy before Laurence had a chance to protest.

“No apologies necessary,” Laurence assured her as she brought herself back up to standing, leaving the laundry basket on the ground by her feet.

She met his gaze, and Laurence noticed that her cheeks were flushed. A small thrill ran through him as his eyes raked over her face, and he was reminded all over again by how pretty Esther was. His memories of her had not done the young woman justice.

He immediately banished those musings from his head. He reminding himself that it would not be proper to have those types of thoughts or feelings about the cousin of the woman whom he wished to wed.

“Who is this?” Laurence asked as he gestured to the small kitten, forcing himself to not notice the beautiful red-gold of her hair, or the way her grey eyes shone.

The cat meowed forcefully, blinking up at him with bright blue eyes and Laurence chuckled. Esther bent to pick it up, wrapping her slender hands around it and holding it delicately to her chest.

“This is Abbey,” she explained, scratching the small creature behind its ear. It purred, leaning into her touch and

clearly fond of its new companion. “I found her just yesterday morning behind a pile of logs.”

“May I?” Laurence asked, reaching his hand toward the grey puff of fur.

Esther nodded her approval and Laurence began to pet the cat. It nuzzled into his hand, and he could feel the vibrations of it throughout the kitten’s entire body.

“She’s an affectionate little thing,” he chuckled, and Esther voiced her agreement. “And you...talk to her?”

“Oh yes,” Esther answered confidently. “I know it seems strange, but she truly does understand.”

Laurence tried to hide his skepticism. But when her cheeks flushed crimson in embarrassment, he could tell he had not succeeded.

“Here, I can show you.” Esther took a step away from Laurence, kicking the laundry basket out of the way and placing the kitten on the floor once again.

“Abbey, stretch,” Esther commanded, her voice clear and precise.

The cat stared at her for a moment, tilting its head in consideration. At first, Laurence doubted that anything was going to happen. But then, miraculously, the cat arched its back and stretched its front legs out in front of it, clearly following Esther’s command.

“Abbey, weave,” Esther threw out another command.

Once again, the cat looked at her. It appeared as if it was weighing her words before finally beginning to wind its small body in and out between Esther’s ankles.

“Abbey, up,” Esther commanded, stooping over, and holding out both hands.

The cat did not falter again, instead taking two large bounds to close the distance between them and leaping into Esther’s embrace. Esther stood up straight, holding the kitten close and kissing the top of its head.

“Do you believe me now?” Esther asked, looking at Laurence with wide, honest eyes.

Laurence was astounded, and he knew that was written plainly across his face. He nodded at Esther, glancing from her and then back to the cat.

“You two have quite the special bond,” he surmised, observing at the way she gazed at the small animal.

“Oh yes, we’re quite similar, Abbey and I.” Esther’s voice took on a far-away quality, and Laurence cocked his head in interest.

“What do you mean?” Laurence inquired.

Affection rolled off of her as she continued to stare at the small beast cradled in her hands.

“We’re both alone in the world, you see.” She scratched the top of the cat’s head. “And as such, we’ve decided to be our own little family. I am hers, and she is mine. She’s the first real friend that I’ve made since coming to live in Surrey.”

Esther turned her gaze back to Laurence, and concern flickered across her face, as if she revealed something she shouldn’t have.

“Outside of Agnes and Aunt Dorothy, of course.” She amended quickly, her breath leaving her in a rush.

There had been a wistfulness in her voice as she mentioned Abbey being her first friend, and it filled Laurence with an odd kind of sadness. It was clear that Esther and Abbey did have a very special bond. But her words told of a loneliness that he couldn’t quite comprehend.

Her statement about Agnes and Lady Dorothy being counted amongst her friends had rung false, despite the careful tone in which she had delivered it. And, if Esther was stating that Abbey was her only friend, that would also mean that she did not consider Agnes to be a companion. Laurence wanted to ask about that, consumed with the desire to know more. But as soon as the urge struck him, he pushed it aside. It was not his place to conduct such interrogations.

Also, Laurence was well aware that it was Agnes' nature to often be lost in her own world. So, he couldn't exactly be surprised if she hadn't gotten close to the other girl living within the walls of Surrey Manor.

The thought of Agnes sent a jolt through Laurence. He had been so caught up in enjoying the company of Esther and Abbey, that he had almost entirely forgotten why he'd come to Surrey Manor in the first place.

Laurence's mouth popped open as he prepared to ask Esther if he knew where Agnes was, but the sound of scuffling filled the room. Frederick rushed through, his frazzled look still firmly in place, and Laurence's inquiry was stopped before he even had a chance to voice it.

"Lord Bolton, I apologize for your wait," Frederick said as he came to a stop in front of Laurence. "But the Lady Agnes is unwell and is refusing visitors."

"Perhaps you could return tomorrow, with her favorite flowers?" Esther offered in a clear attempt to lessen the blow. "I'm certain Cousin Agnes will be better by then."

"Perhaps I will," Laurence answered with a bow of his head.

He thanked both Esther and Frederick, and then said that he should be taking his leave. Giving Abbey a quick scratch on the ear in goodbye, he turned and strode from the house.

Charles, his valet, hadn't travelled with him to Surrey. So, when he climbed into the carriage and settled himself, Laurence found he was unable to pull his mind away from Esther and her beautiful, kind smile. It wasn't until sometime after, when he was almost all the way home, that he realized he hadn't been entirely disappointed that Agnes hadn't been able to see him.

Shaking that feeling from his mind, he thought that maybe it just had something to do with the spectacular show that Esther and Abbey had put on for him. Anyone would have been enamored and amazed by a cat performing tricks as easily as a dog. Yes, that had to be it.

When the carriage rolled to a stop in front of his own home, he climbed the steps two at a time. He hoped that maybe there would be a return letter waiting for him upon his arrival, and he immediately began fantasizing about what he would say in return. He tried as hard as he could to keep his mind focused on Agnes and the letter that he was expecting, wishing that it would wash the thoughts of Esther from his mind.

CHAPTER 12

Esther

Esther stared at the pieces of crumpled parchment that lay around her desk, glaring at each one. After Sir Laurence had left the manor earlier that day, Esther had felt inspired to sit down and finally craft her response. Now here she was, hours later, with nothing to show for her efforts.

No matter how hard she tried, the words just continued to not come to her. Esther let out a puff of frustrated breath, sending some of the pieces scattering to the floor. Resting her face in her hands, she pondered, for what felt like the thousandth time, exactly what it was she wanted to say.

For the life of her, Esther could not figure out why she was having such a hard time putting words on paper. When she had lived with her parents, she had loved writing. She had written letters to her friends, letters to her governess, letters to anyone who she thought might enjoy receiving them. So, she had no idea why she was having so much difficulty now.

She thought of her admirer again and couldn't help but wonder if he was beginning to get anxious. It had been three days since she had received the letter. Three days of her imagining the man who had written those words, and three days of her toiling and agonizing over how to respond. She wasn't sure if she could handle it much longer.

"Esther, you silly girl. What are you so afraid of?" She said out loud to her empty room.

A meow sounded behind her, reminding her that the room was not entirely empty. She turned from her writing desk, spying Abbey curled up on the bed behind her in a small ball. The cat's wide blue eyes scrutinized her.

“You think I'm being a coward, don't you?” she asked the kitten.

Esther pushed herself up from the chair and crossed the room, coming to rest on the side of the bed. She began petting Abbey, the feline's soft, warm body a comfort to her as she tried to process her thoughts.

Every time Esther picked up the quill, the words that came out of her felt so insufficient. She couldn't help but think that perhaps it would help to know who her suitor was. Maybe if she could just picture who she was talking to then it would be easier for her to organize her thoughts.

Her mind flitted back to Lord Bolton. She recalled the easy way in which they had spoken; the calm, familiar presence that he provided. She wanted the same kind of ease when she was writing her admirer. But no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't make that happen.

Abbey stretched before padding across the bed and climbing into Esther's lap. Esther could feel and hear her purring, the low sound of it calming some of her nerves.

At the heart of it, Esther guessed she was just afraid that she would not live up to her suitors' expectations. The man had seen her and declared himself besotted. But what would happen if when she wrote him, he did not find her clever or entertaining at all. What if once he began getting to know her – he was left wanting? What would happen then?

Esther had not felt or experienced love since her parents died. So, when his letter had arrived, she had been overjoyed at the prospect of finding love again, even if it was of a different kind. But what if she went through all of this, what if she got her hopes up, just for this to be another thing that got ripped away from her? She didn't think she could live through that kind of pain again.

“What kind of fool am I?” she asked Abbey, who did nothing but purr and snuggle deeper into Esther’s lap.

Esther continued her pondering, going over her many fears and anxieties about the entire situation. The more she thought about it, the deeper she spiraled. As her heartbeat began to rise and she started to focus her breathing to calm herself, a voice sounded within her mind.

‘And what if the flower blooms into a beautiful, wonderful garden that lasts forever? Before anything can grow, it must first be planted. So, try.’

It was her mother’s voice. She could remember the day she said it. Esther had been quite young, only about ten years old. She had spotted a servant working in one of the flower gardens that had been decimated by a summer storm and rodents. She’d asked her mother why the servant was replanting it if there was the possibility that it would all happen again. And that had been her mother’s response.

Her young mind hadn’t understood the gravity of those words, of the message that her mother was bestowing upon her with her calm wisdom. But, over the years Esther had heard those words in her mind more than once, whenever she was fearful over something she could not control.

She was not surprised that they came to her now, and their familiar message sank into her, calming her fraught nerves. Esther repeated them out loud, letting them become a balm to her soul.

Her mother was right. Even from beyond the grave the woman was somehow right. Was Esther going to allow herself to be so afraid of hurt and loss that she would close herself off entirely to any kind of love? If she did that – why, she would end up no better off than her Aunt Dorothy. And Esther couldn’t allow that.

Her heart began to race, for an entirely different reason this time. She picked Abbey up, the kitten giving a meow of protest before Esther sat her on her pillow to get comfortable. She crossed the small space, continuing to take deep,

measured breaths and reminding herself of her mother's words all the while.

Sitting at her writing desk, she cleared away the other bits of parchment she had previously discarded before taking out a new one. Its blank surface peered up at her invitingly, waiting for her to make her mark upon it. She dipped her quill into the ink, brought it to the piece of paper, and allowed the words to flow from her in a rush.

She wrote swiftly, pausing here and there to read what she had written back to herself to make sure she was effectively saying what she intended to. After quite some time, the final word left her and she stared at the letter with satisfaction.

Esther took out the wax and the stamp she had taken from the study earlier that day. She thought it might be one of Agnes' but seeing as how she had never witnessed Agnes send any correspondence, she couldn't be entirely sure. Either way, Esther did not believe the stamp would be missed.

She sealed the letter and pressed it to her chest, feeling good now that it had finally been finished. Esther glanced toward her window, marking the darkness outside. The letter from her admirer had told her to leave her response by the yellow post behind the stable. She knew the one it was referencing and could see it in her mind's eye. But she didn't like the idea of navigating out to the stables in the dark.

"I'll do it first thing in the morning, before I get the water from the well." She said aloud, leaving her place at the desk to cross the room back to her bed.

Esther scooted Abbey out of the way as she pulled back her covers and climbed in next to the kitten. Abbey mewed sleepily before curling up beside Esther and immediately began purring. Esther blew out the candle by her bedside, casting the room in darkness. With the letter finally written and her soul free of some of the burdens it had been carrying the last couple days, she allowed the sounds of the kitten purring to carry her off to sleep.

CHAPTER 13

Laurence

Laurence ran his finger along the lines of text that had been scrawled upon the paper, pouring over every figure and number to ensure all was accounted for. He'd been couped up in the study for hours, devouring ledgers to ensure everything in the estate that his father had given to him was in good order. He was glad to report that so far, it appeared as if his Uncle Thomas had managed his affairs well. But there was still plenty more to review and a lot of room for things to go wrong.

He had gone out to visit the home he would soon be moving into and the estate that he would be overseeing. While being a baronet did not typically come with lands, his uncle had been gifted a sizeable estate when the title had been bestowed upon him. Laurence had been pleased to find out that it was not far from Surrey Manor, which he was sure Agnes would prefer, should they marry.

He pulled his thoughts away from Agnes, knowing that if he began entertaining the thought of her, he would once again begin to spiral about why he had not yet received a response letter. Turning his attention back to the matter at hand, he began going over the numbers for his estate once more. But it wasn't long before a knock sounded on his study door.

Laurence glanced up, finding Charles standing in the threshold, an excited look painted across his face.

“Come in,” Laurence said, gesturing to one of the chairs on the opposite side of his desk.

“It came,” Charles gushed, crossing the floor in a few quick steps. “I was beginning to have my doubts, you know. And yet today? There it was!”

He pulled out the chair and plopped into it with a satisfied sigh. Laurence studied his friend, wondering what on earth he was blabbering on about. But Charles didn’t elaborate. Instead, he just continued to prattle excitedly, completely unaware that Laurence was unable to follow along with what he was saying. Laurence allowed him to continue for a few additional moments. Charles’s words flying out so quickly that Laurence was now entirely unable to understand him, and Laurence was forced to interject.

“Good god, man,” Laurence exclaimed, “calm down. What are you going on about?”

Charles’s mouth snapped shut, his eyes roving over Laurence’s face with confusion.

“Why, the letter?” Charles answered as his brow furrowed. “What else would I be talking about?”

“The letter?!” Laurence repeated, and as Charles nodded his confirmation, Laurence’s heart began to beat with elation. “Why the hell didn’t you say as much?”

“I tried!” Charles argued as he pulled a bit of parchment from one of the pockets on the inside of his waistcoat. “You weren’t listening.”

Charles placed the letter on the table between them and then slid it closer to Laurence. Laurence reached a shaky hand across the wooden expanse and he felt a jolt as his fingers brushed the paper. There was a wax seal holding the ends of the document together, bearing the mark of the Jarvis family crest.

“I’ve been checking frequently,” Charles began explaining. “Any time you sent me on an errand, especially one that would run close to Surrey Manor, I’ve made it a point to stop by the post. I was beginning to think that she’d never write back.”

Laurence rolled his eyes at his friend but didn't let him know that his own thoughts had begun to echo the same sentiment. He glanced from the letter back up to Charles and raised his brow.

"I'll leave you to it," Charles said, reading the eagerness on Laurence's face.

Laurence watched as Charles left the room, his heart thumping loudly and a lump forming in his throat. He had dreamt of this moment for days, imagining what it would feel like to finally hold Agnes' response in his hands. But now that he had it, he wasn't sure if he could actually stomach reading the words.

What if she'd figured out who had written the letter and had rejected him? What if Agnes hadn't figured it out but had no interest in being pursued by a man she didn't know? What if she found the gesture unseemly instead of romantic? Laurence stopped his spiraling thoughts, not allowing them to carry on any further. There was only one way to find out what Agnes had written, and that was by reading it.

He lifted the edges of the parchment, breaking through the seal of the wax and beheld the delicate scrawl that graced the page. The handwriting was dainty, and he closed his eyes to imagine Agnes' slender fingers as they wrote. He took in a deep, steadying breath, preparing himself for what he may read before opening his eyes and starting to rake them over the graceful scrawl.

Dearest 'Yours',

I was very surprised to receive your letter, but I must admit the surprise was a delightful one. Your kind words and affections have been one of the few things to make me smile in quite some time. My sincerest apologies if the delay in my response caused you any strife, it was not my intention. The truth of the matter was your words left me stunned and I simply did not know how to appropriately express my gratitude.

I particularly liked what you had to say surrounding getting to know each other as just a man and a woman, with

no titles, history, or preconceived notions to stand in our way. I feel as if that is one of the best ways to form a connection with another and get to know their truest soul, a sentiment which I believe you share.

I feel as if I'm at a disadvantage, since you know who I am, but you have not given me your name. However, I am willing to persist in this manner if it means we get to continue our letters – at least for a little while.

Since the intent is to get to know one another, I would love to hear of your passions. Mine are poetry, books, and music. There is not much that I love more than stealing away a few hours at the pianoforte, when I can find the time for it. I find that music often explains the emotions that we feel when words cannot.

You mentioned that you were titled, and I want to assure you that my affections, should they begin to develop, would not be dependent on status. I have no concerns other than being able to have a happy life that is filled with love and laughter.

I will wait eagerly for your reply, and should one come, I assure you it will not take as long for me to respond.

Sincerely,

The Lady at Surrey Manor

Laurence read the letter a second time, smiling as he reached the way she signed it. He wondered if Agnes recalled the game they used to play as children. Agnes had declared herself the “Lady at Surrey Manor”, thrown a sheet over her head and had pretended to be a ghost and haunt the halls while Laurence ran from her. That was, until they had been caught by the governess and chastised for playing a game that could call in evil. They had played a few times after that, but always sure to remain quiet as to not incur the governess’ wrath.

Laurence had wondered if he should have put that in his first letter, not wanting to fully tip his hand and tell her who he was. But he figured it couldn’t hurt. For if Agnes remembered that small moment from their childhood, then perhaps the memories were as fond for her as they were for Laurence.

Laurence scanned the letter again, but this time, as his eyes moved over the words, a different voice began to echo through his mind. This one was a little higher pitch and filled with warmth and humor. He identified it immediately as Esther's, and he had to shake himself.

Why was he thinking of Esther when he had just received the letter he had been waiting on from Agnes? He forced himself to place the letter down, thinking that perhaps it just had to do with the fact that Laurence was tired. He had been pouring himself into his work and readying his new estates for hours, after all. Or perhaps it had something to do with the tone.

The letter contained none of Agnes' typical coolness. Within the words on that page there was no sign of the aloof manner in which she so often behaved these days. Instead, it had been filled with warmth and an honesty that he had not expected. When Laurence had written his first letter, he had prided himself on the vulnerability he had showed in his words, and it had caused him to be anxious if that vulnerability would be returned. Now that it had, he found it a bit hard to wrap his mind around.

He focused himself on Agnes, trying to imagine what it had been like for her to receive his letter and begin reading what he had said. He had always suspected the cold way she carried herself as she had gotten older had been due to Lady Dorothy, and he felt as if the letter proved the truth of that belief.

Laurence picked up the parchment, allowing himself to read it for a fourth time, and then began thinking of his own response. The ball that would open the season was coming up the following week, and while he knew he wanted to write her another letter, perhaps the ball would be the perfect time to reveal his identity. His father had only given him the season to make Agnes his wife, after all.

As he thought this over, another plan began to take shape. With excitement filling him, he pulled a piece of paper from within his desk, moved aside the ledgers he had been so

painstakingly analyzing before Charles came in, and allowed himself to spill himself out upon the parchment once more.

CHAPTER 14

Letters

To *The Lady at Surrey Manor*,

I am so glad to have received your correspondence. I do share the sentiment of wanting to truly know the person whom I admire. It is my deepest desire for the woman I court to also become my greatest friend, and how can that be accomplished if you do not know one's soul?

You asked about my passions, and it appears we have a few that are shared. I must admit, I am abysmal at playing any sort of instrument, but listening to the tunes of others often fills me with a peace that is hard for me to find elsewhere. I, too, find solace in poetry and in the words of great men. They so often put names to the feelings about the world that I struggle to define. And as we're being honest, I must also tell you that I am quite a romantic.

I believe that God spins our fate and brings people together when they are meant to be. How divine is it when fairytales are made real? Is that not a miracle in and of itself?

It is a beautiful thing, when you can share what you love with the people you love. Unfortunately, my family prides title and accomplishment highly, so my adoration for music and the arts is not something I have been able to share with them. I dream of one day to be able to share that side of myself with the family I create with my wife. I hope you wish that, too.

I hope that you are well, and that I will receive your response soon. But should you require more time for your response again, I swear not to hold it against you.

Fondly,

Yours

Laurence read and re-read the letter, ensuring that he captured everything he wanted to say. Once he was satisfied, he sealed it with wax, and his heart leapt in his chest as he handed it to Charles for delivery.

Dearest Yours,

I hope this time my response arrived in a sufficient manner, and you did not have to wait too long. But alas, I know not your methods of retrieving these letters, nor your identity. So, I cannot be sure. I find myself, however, checking the post for your response quite often with bated breath. I assume you must be close, for the timing of your deliveries of the letters shows you do not have to travel far. But then again, the heart has been known to defy time and space where love is concerned if the novels are to be believed. So perhaps that notion is misplaced.

I, too, understand not being able to share all sides of yourself with those you are close to. My family is quite strict in the ways they interact with each other, and the way I am required to behave in the world. It makes me feel as if there are parts of myself that I must hide, and that to get close to others would be improper, no matter how much I may crave it. So your wish to carve out a place of safety in the family you build is one that I share.

I must admit, I have caught myself daydreaming about who you might be and trying to imagine the man behind these beautiful words. Perhaps that makes me quite a romantic as well, as I constantly get lost in the fairytales my mind creates about you. But I have been left to wonder if it will be fate that draws us together? Or will we have to create our own destinies? As the season approaches, I must know if we will finally get the chance to meet?

Affectionately,

The Lady at Surrey Manor

Dearest Lady,

I assure you I am much closer than you think. Your observations on the arrival of the letters and their subsequent retrieval are quite astute, and I admire your attention to detail.

It hurts me to know that you understand not being able to show your true self to those that surround you. And it is my wish that when we do finally meet, that will no longer be the case for you. I know that I have an advantage in knowing who you are, but for now I find I quite like it.

I must be honest, there is a part of me that is afraid that when you find out who I am, you will be disappointed. It is the reason why I chose this way to communicate my intentions first, so that you may get to know the man that I am before the judgement of the world comes in. But I would be remiss if I did not admit that I have found myself also dreaming of the moment you look upon my face and know that it is me. And I feel that time is fast approaching.

I will be at the first ball of the season, and there I will seek you out. I'd imagine that you will be quite sought after, so to identify myself, I will flash a handkerchief of deepest blue, with the insignia of a stag. The ball is only a few days away, and I will wait for that moment with a racing, hope filled heart.

Always,

Yours

CHAPTER 15

Esther

Esther stood before the looking glass, her fingers touching the delicate blue fabric that encased her body. She hadn't dared try on the gown prior to the night of the ball, she had been too afraid that she would be awash with disappointment all over again, or that she would end up accidentally ruining it. However, now that she was able to take in its full splendor, she could see that she had been foolish. At least to have worried that the gown would disappoint her.

As she compared the way it hung on her frame to how it had looked on Agnes, she did have to admit to herself that it had flattered the other girl more. But the contrast of the pale blue against the flashing grey of her eyes and the pink of her flushed skin had proven to be quite striking.

Now that she had it on, she could see that Sarah had made a few, final adjustments since she had last been in her shop. And the end result had made the gown even more beautiful than it had been before.

Esther twirled once, watching her reflection as she did and admiring the way the skirt flared around her ankles and the fabric moved. A slight giggle poured itself out as she began to imagine what it would be like to dance in something so fine.

"Esther," her Aunt Dorothy's voice rang out with impatience, bringing Esther's attention back to the present.

Esther smoothed her gown and cast one final glance in the looking glass before striding out into the hallway. She forced herself to take deep, measured breaths as she walked, not wanting her aunt to sense her nerves.

As she stepped into the atrium, her eyes immediately fell on her aunt. Clad in a deep, gaudy purple, Dorothy was swallowed up within the swaths of fabric. Sarah had crafted the dress beautifully, and on anyone else it would have been stunning. But Dorothy was overwhelmed by it.

Esther then swept her gaze to Agnes, and her breath hitched. Her cousin's raven hair was in beautiful pin curls tucked artfully onto her head, with graceful tendrils spiraling by her cheeks. The pink of the gown that had been designed for Esther complemented Agnes, making her cheeks appear delicately flushed. Esther had to admit she thought the blue had suited Agnes slightly better – but it wasn't by much. And her cousin still looked stunning.

Agnes was regarding Esther with weary eyes as she crossed the space, coming to a stop before both Agnes and Dorothy. Esther curtsied daintily to them, before looking up and locking eyes with Agnes.

“You look beautiful, Cousin,” Esther said with a sincere smile.

Agnes' eyes softened marginally at Esther's words, and hope flared through her. But Dorothy had watched the entire exchange and narrowed her eyes at the two young women before her.

“Agnes,” Dorothy hissed under her breath, and Agnes straightened her spine, her expression returning to one of disinterest.

Dorothy turned her attention back to Esther, and her aunt's eyes raked her over from heel to head. Esther fought the urge to wilt underneath the woman's scrutinizing gaze.

“You look...sufficient.” Dorothy said, and Esther let out a breath of relief. “What do you think, Agnes?”

Agnes studied Esther, pausing, and taking all of her in before answering. Esther's heart beat wildly in her chest as she imagined the moment as it was about to play out, hoping that her cousin would extend a hand of friendship, perhaps even an olive branch. But that hope was quickly dashed when Agnes began to speak.

“You do not look like a maid, for once. So, it is an improvement.”

Agnes' eyes hadn't remained on Esther as she spoke, instead they rested on her mother, watching for her reaction. Dorothy's face flushed with approval and Esther noticed Agnes' shoulders relax a bit. Dorothy turned on her heel and strode toward the door, motioning for the two young women to follow. Agnes paused for a moment when her mother's back was turned and shot a glance at Esther.

Esther struggled to read the expression in the other woman's gaze, and the moment didn't last long enough for her to fully analyze it, as Agnes turned a second later and strode after Dorothy. But Esther could have sworn that an apology had flickered within the depths of Agnes' dark eyes.

Esther trailed a few feet behind them. The swishing of their skirts and the sound of gravel crunching between their boots were the only sounds that rose to greet her. Esther was the last to climb into the carriage, and she struggled to rearrange the full bottom of her gown in a way that would allow her to sit.

Dorothy watched her impatiently as she tried to situate herself, but thankfully she did not interject. As Esther finally got settled, her aunt indicated to the coachman that they were ready, and the carriage jostled to life. It bumped as the wheels rolled over the rocks, and all three women were jostled about.

As the ride smoothed a bit, Dorothy turned to Agnes and the two began discussing the varying suitors they expected to claim lines on Agnes' dance card. Esther tried not to listen too intently, instead deciding to focus on the most recent letter she had received from 'Yours'.

He had indicated to her that at the ball he would be carrying a blue handkerchief with a stag embroidered on it. 'Yours' had said he'd ensure the color was the same as the gown he'd mentioned in his very first letter. Esther looked down at the gown she now wore and reveled once more in the striking resemblance to that original color. At the comparison, she couldn't help but feel as if the hand of fate were hovering over her.

Her mind turned briefly to her parents, and a pang of longing danced through her. It seemed unfair that they would not be here for this moment, not get to witness the first time that she was presented to the ton. She thought of how her mother would have fussed over her gown, and how her father would have cracked jokes about all of the hearts she would soon break. Esther missed them dearly, but she knew in that moment that they would have been proud of her.

As they travelled to Durham Manor where the ball would be held, Esther's thoughts and excitement bounced wildly between the man she was set to meet, and thoughts of how her parents would have handled this night with her. It felt as if the journey was over in the blink of an eye, and Esther's heart swelled as they pulled into a line of carriages waiting at the front of the building.

She leaned forward to get a better view of the house in front of them. Esther watched with reckless abandon as lords and ladies clad in opulent dresses and perfectly trimmed waist coats climbed delicately from their own carriages. Her eyes widened with excitement as she watched them deftly make their way up the stairs to the large front doors that had been thrown open in welcome. The glow of a thousand torches and sconces flickered in the night, casting everything in a warm and magical hue.

Esther tried to hide the excitement, tried to ensure her face was rearranged in a mask of indifference that her aunt would approve of, but her efforts were in vain.

"Esther," Dorothy snapped, "compose yourself."

Esther sat back in the cushioned bench seat, schooling her features into one of contrition. But her nerves were bound too tight to fully sit still. Placing her hands in her lap, Esther began to pick nervously at the sides of her nails as they waited for their carriage to make it through the line.

As fast as the journey to Durham Manor had gone, that was how slow their progression to the front of the house seemed to be going. With each slow roll of the carriage wheel, her heart began to pound with more excitement as she grew closer to finally uncovering the identity of her admirer.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of waiting, their carriage finally came to a rest at the front of the line. Servants rushed forward to pull open the door, and a hand was extended to assist Dorothy as she climbed down the steps. Agnes followed after, gracefully stepping onto the gravel before Esther raised from the seat and did the same.

The steward extended a hand to her, and she placed her gloved fingers in his. She did not even glance at the man's face as she took in the splendor and finery around her. Her family's own manor in Sussex had been beautiful, and they had vacationed all throughout the countryside in glamorous homes. But Durham Manor was something else entirely.

"Do not embarrass me tonight," Dorothy's hissed voice pulled Esther from her reverie, "you look the part. But I do not want your behavior tonight to reflect upon me poorly, do you understand?"

Esther held her skirts as they climbed the large staircase that led to the manor entrance, not allowing her dismay at her aunt's whispered words to show on her face.

"Yes, Aunt Dorothy," Esther answered, keeping her voice equally as low.

Dorothy did not respond further as they stepped through the home and made their way, with the help of the servants, to the grand ballroom. All the while, Esther's heart was in her throat. With each step she took, she felt as if there was an invisible string pulling her toward the throng of people within

the ballroom, toward the man who had written her so many infinitely kind words.

She scrutinized the attire of everyone she passed, analyzing them for any sign of the kerchief that her admirer had described. She caught a few flashes of blue, but they were all either not the correct shade, or did not bare the insignia of the stag.

Esther descended the steps into the ballroom on the heels of Dorothy and Agnes. Dorothy was immediately approached by some of the other women of nobility. They fawned over Agnes' gown and went on in droves about how beautiful the young woman looked. A few of them threw in kind words for Esther, which she graciously returned.

As time wore on, suitors began to approach, only ever asking Agnes for a line on her dance card. Before long, she was swept away onto the dance floor, twirling masterfully with suitor after suitor. Not a one of the men who approached had so much as cast a glance in Esther's direction.

Esther's attention flickered between Agnes, as she moved gracefully across the dance floor, to the other men who were milling about, trying as hard as she could to find 'Yours'. But, with each new person she surveyed, none of them carrying the items that had been described to her, her stomach began to sink. What if this had all been a ruse?

She started at the idea, all of a sudden feeling quite silly. Since receiving the letter, Esther had not stopped to consider that perhaps it was all a cruel joke. But, in hindsight it seemed more than plausible. She didn't believe that Agnes would have had any part of it, but her Aunt Dorothy? She wouldn't have thought her aunt capable of that kind of cruelty, but she had been plenty surprised by people before.

Esther could feel herself beginning to spiral, and she commanded herself to take calm, measured breaths. She knew she could not fall apart in front of all these watching eyes. Not only would it serve to anger her aunt, but it would stop any suitors who were currently interested from approaching her.

As she focused on her breathing, her eyes went once more out to the dance floor. Agnes had stopped dancing with the partner Esther had just spotted her with, and instead was now talking to Lord Laurence Bolton. Agnes was shaking her head, and gesturing to her dance card, and Esther felt a pang of sympathy for the man. Could Agnes not see that he was so clearly in love with her? He was good, and kind, and handsome, and she would be lucky to have a husband such as him.

Esther pulled her attention away from the two, turning instead to sweep her eyes over the crowd in one more final attempt, when a flash of sky blue caught her eye. Her heart leapt as she took in the man that held the delicate, blue fabric. He was tall, blonde haired and slim figured, but even at a distance she could tell he was handsome. He was speaking to another man and taking a sip from the glass he held in his hand. As he lowered his drink, he brought the kerchief up to dab at the corners of his lips, and Esther's hope soared.

There appeared to be an insignia sown in white thread in one corner. Esther could not be entirely certain, but at her current distance she thought that it might be the effigy of a stag. She glanced excitedly toward her aunt and noted that the woman was not paying any attention to her at all and would likely not notice if Esther slipped away.

She stepped forward into the crowd, heart pounding and she half expected for her aunt to call her back. But when she did not, Esther pushed forward, each step coming more quickly than the last. The man glanced around the room, and his eyes landed on hers. She thought a bit of confusion flashed through his eyes, but it was gone as quickly as it had come and was replaced, instead, by an amused smile.

Esther was still too far to speak, still trying with all her might to push her way through the swaths of finely clad bodies. She raised her foot again, in preparation for her next step when all of a sudden, the back of her gown grew taught as someone stepped on it. The pressure sent her wheeling, and her feet slipped on the heavily polished floor.

As her balance left her, she began careening toward the ground. All she had time for was the thought that she had now surely ruined everything. She tried to prepare herself for the impact, but instead she felt herself suddenly wrapped in the warm embrace of two large arms. She blinked rapidly, clearing the panic from her mind as she righted herself, now at eye level with a broad chest.

“I am so sorry,” she muttered, fanning herself, but her voice cut off when she looked up and became entirely mesmerized by a pair of soft brown eyes.

CHAPTER 16

Laurence

Laurence cursed himself as he pushed through the crowd toward where he could see Agnes standing at the edge of the dance floor. He had gotten held up with business surrounding the move to his new estate, and by the time he had finished he was well and truly late to the ball. Laurence had been aware that Agnes' dance card would be a sought-after commodity, but he could only hope that there was still at least one line left for him.

He took a moment to really take her in as he approached her. She was standing with one of the ladies he knew to be the daughter of a baron, though he couldn't remember which one, and Agnes was locked in an enraptured conversation. She was wearing a gown made of vibrant pink fabric that complimented her pale coloring and dark hair. She laughed prettily as he approached, before her companion noticed him pushing his way through the crowd in their direction. The woman inclined her head toward Laurence, and Agnes turned to look.

Her mouth broke into a smile as he came near, and she dipped her head graciously in greeting.

"Lady Agnes," Laurence said once he was within earshot, bowing to her.

"Hello, Lord Bolton," she said before casting a glance at her companion.

The woman seemed to understand the meaning behind her gaze, and she bowed her head slightly before taking her leave.

“I hope you are enjoying the ball,” he said, his heart hammering as he fished out the handkerchief from a pocket within his waistcoat while he spoke.

“It’s been quite lovely,” Agnes replied.

“I don’t suppose you have a line available on your dance card?” Laurence finally freed the blue piece of fabric and dabbed pointedly at his wrist.

Agnes eyes dipped down, and he expected them to light with recognition. But her cool and unflinching gaze merely returned to his face and her brow furrowed with concern.

“I am so sorry, Laurence. But all of my dances are spoken for.” She indicated to her dance card, which indeed had the line for each dance full.

Laurence opened his mouth to assure her that it was quite alright, and to try to hide his disappointment. But a voice sounded behind them.

“Pardon, Lady Jarvis?”

Laurence turned, finding a servant standing not far off.

“Lord Danbury sent me,” the man continued once Agnes’ gaze fell on him. “He’s afraid he has been called away on an urgent matter and wanted to alert you since he had spoken for one of your dances. He would, however, still like permission to call upon you tomorrow afternoon.”

Laurence’s heart leapt at his luck that one of her slots would open up just as he was standing before her. Agnes assured the steward that the Lord Danbury was more than welcome to come calling before sending the servant on his way.

Agnes turned her attention back to Laurence, and he swallowed past his currently wounded pride and spoke again.

“May I claim the now open line on your card?” he asked, trying to hide the hope in his voice.

“Oh, Laurence,” she began, and he could already tell in which direction her answer was headed. “I am truly sorry, but Viscount Grant had already inquired earlier should space become available. And I would wish to dance with him.”

To Agnes’ credit, she did sound genuinely apologetic to be rejecting him. And Laurence bowed his head in acknowledgement, disappointment unspooling within him. He assured her that it was alright, and turned to leave when her voice brought him up short.

“Perhaps my cousin, Esther? You two seemed to get on well when you visited the manor.”

Agnes dipped her head toward the opposite end of the room, where Esther was moving away from Lady Jarvis and making her way through the crowd. He told Agnes that was an excellent idea, thinking that perhaps this may be some plan of hers.

He made his way across the crowded room, and as he grew closer to Esther who was also delicately pushing her way through the throng of bodies, he noticed how beautiful she looked. Clad in a sky-blue gown, reminiscent of the plain one she had worn the day he met her, it brought her pale features to life.

As he crept closer to her, he noticed just how the contrast of the blue made the pink of her cheeks seem to glow, and brought out more of the red in her golden hued hair. He hoped that her dance card had not also been fully claimed as he advanced the final few steps.

She had not yet spotted him, but he had a clear view as a woman behind Esther stepped on the hem of her gown, drawing it taut. The wood of the floor had been finely polished, and thus making parts of it slick. Laurence closed the last few feet between them as Esther lost her footing and pitched forward.

He reached out his arms to catch her, glad that he was not too late. Laurence felt the weight of her land in his arms, and the warmth of her petite body as he fought to help her regain her footing.

“I am so sorry,” Esther said as she ran her hands nervously over her gown.

She turned her attention up to him, and he gazed down into her lovely face. Up close, he could see that her cheeks were flushed, with exertion or embarrassment he could not tell. The blue of her dress turned her usually slate grey eyes into molten pools of silver fire, and his breath drew quick. She was stunning.

“Oh, Sir Laurence,” she said in surprise as recognition dawned on her.

He helped her to stand straight and felt a twinge of regret when she took a step back out of his arms.

“A pleasure to see you, Ms. Esther,” he said in greeting.

He noticed that her eyes darted over his shoulder, and then her expression showed the briefest flash of disappointment before her gaze settled back on his face.

“Were you looking for someone?” he asked, following the path her eyes had taken.

“I simply thought I saw someone I knew,” she said, waving away his inquiry, “but he is no longer standing there.”

Laurence nodded, suddenly unsure of how to move forward. His conversations with the Lady Esther had always flowed so easily. But now with her in front of him, his skin still burning with the memory of her touch, he felt unsteady in a way he had not felt in quite some time. Even when approaching Agnes, he had their history of childhood friendship to draw upon when his nerves began to overtake him. But in that moment, he was afraid that he was about to make a fool out of himself again and had no way to stop it.

“I suppose your dance card is already claimed?” he asked, thinking there was no way it wasn’t with how lovely she looked.

She blinked up at him in surprise, before answering.

“No, it isn’t,” she extended her slender wrist to him, and his eyes roved over the card where line after line was empty.

He could not hide his shock as his eyes met her face.

“Then surely these men are fools and do not deserve you,” he said quickly.

Her cheeks flushed prettily, and her eyes dipped to the floor. He got the sense that his words had embarrassed her, and that was the last thing he wanted.

“May I have one of your dances?” he asked, and her eyes flitted back to his.

She studied his face for a moment, and he wasn't sure why, but he felt as if she was trying to determine if the offer was genuine. A small bolt of anger rushed through him at the thought that anyone would have made her feel that way, and he had to fight to quell the feeling.

“I would be delighted,” she said, producing a small purse from the sleeve of her gown and extracting a tiny pencil.

He scrawled his name on the first open slot on her card, and then extended his own dance card so she could do the same. Just as his hand dropped from folding his card back within his pocket, the quartet in the corner struck up a melody. He quickly identified it as the one that he had just spoken for with Esther, and he gave her a sly smile.

“Shall we?” He asked, extending his hand.

“We shall,” she grinned at him, reaching out a delicate, gloved hand and placing it in his.

He could feel the warmth of her skin through the fabric, and he realized that he quite liked the feeling of her slender fingers being incased within his own. Lines of lords, ladies, and nobility formed in the center of the dance floor, waiting for the note that would indicate the dance was to begin.

As it did, he and Esther began to twirl and turn across the space. He smiled at her, and her face was transformed by a grin of her own.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the pink of Agnes' gown and his mind once more returned to thoughts of her. He had told her in his letter that she could identify him by

his kerchief, which contained the effigy of the stag. The stag was on his family crest, and he had hoped that the little bit of information combined with the use of their childhood game would tip her off as to who he was.

But there had been no recognition in her eyes earlier that night. Laurence couldn't help but feel slightly jilted. But, as he turned his attention back toward Esther, toward the bright silver of her gaze and the beautiful ringlets that now framed her face, that melancholy was washed away from him.

"You are beautiful," he said before he could stop himself.

Esther's mouth popped open in surprise, and she flushed once more.

"I do not mean to cause offense," he tried to correct, but she shook her head immediately.

"You caused no offense, I assure you," she said, and he let out a breath of relief.

The conversation between them died out once more, but their silence was not an awkward one. Instead, they stared into each other's eyes as they moved across the dance floor. And no matter how hard he tried, Laurence could not let go of how truly affected he was by her nearness or her beauty.

CHAPTER 17

Esther

Esther could feel the blush rising in her cheeks as Laurence's soft brown eyes raked over her face while they danced. The pair swayed seamlessly between the other bodies gliding across the floor, each one moving in perfect synchronicity with the music. A tinge of melancholy glanced through Esther as her thoughts turned to the blonde man with the blue handkerchief who she now believed to be her admirer. She regretted that she was not able to make it to him in time.

However, her dance with Laurence was going splendidly. Esther had always prided herself on being a fine dancer, but dancing with Laurence had proven to be spectacular. The way they flowed together, with Esther able to predict his movements and react to them with perfect accuracy, it was as if they had been made to dance together all along.

"You are a lovely dancer," Esther said to him, a smile tugging up the corner of her lips as she continued to hold his gaze.

"Thank you," Laurence answered, a mirroring grin flitting across his own face. "I have been dancing for as long as I can remember."

A brief chuckle pulled itself out of him as he recalled a memory, and he shook his head trying to clear it. Esther's curiosity had been peaked.

“What are you laughing about?” she asked, her eyebrows raising.

“Nothing of importance, simply a memory of the dancing lessons my mother had subjected me to as a child.”

“Well,” Esther prompted him to continue. “What were they like?”

“A disaster if I’m to be quite honest,” Laurence responded with a chuckle and a slight shake of his head. “I had grown too quickly; my frame had been too broad, and it had made me clumsy. So, when my lessons started, I made a true mess of things. The servant that acted as my dance partner had a broken toe every fortnight from me stepping on her.”

A delicate laugh pulled itself from between Esther’s lips as she imagined what that would have looked like. She had to admit, she quite liked the image her mind conjured up of a young Laurence.

“I wish I could have seen that,” she gave him a sweet smile, which he returned.

The music continued its lilting, and Laurence spun Esther in a circle.

“Regardless of your humble beginnings,” Esther joked, “it appears your dancing lessons paid off. Broken toes and all.”

Laurence chuckled at that, staring intently into Esther’s eyes. She found she quite liked the look of him. Not that she hadn’t noticed that he was handsome before, but up close it was easier for her to spot the fine details of his face. His eyes, which were a soft, earthen brown at a distance, revealed small flecks of gold once you got close to him. Her eyes dipped down and she also noticed a dark freckle at the corner of his lips.

“Are you staring at my mouth?” Laurence asked, bringing Esther out of her own thoughts.

She flushed crimson and began stammering as she tried to backpedal and come up with an excuse.

“I...it... I was just... You have a freckle!” She finally choked out in a rush.

Laurence laughed, and the sound was deep and rich. It made Esther want to lean into him more closely than they already were.

That realization drew her up short. What on earth was she thinking? And why was she thinking it about Sir Laurence Bolton? He had been so clearly interested in Agnes, so it would be silly of her to entertain any kind of fanciful ideas. The last thing she needed to do was notice freckles upon the man’s lips. No, her time would be much better spent focusing her efforts on finding and speaking to ‘Yours’.

“I would have thought you’d want to dance with Agnes,” Esther said, working to keep her voice low and even.

A pained look flitted across Laurence’s face, and for a moment it made her regret bringing it up. But when he spoke, he did so candidly.

“I did try,” he explained. “But unfortunately, I arrived late to the ball tonight. And by the time I was able to ask her, the lines on her dance card had already been claimed.”

“I’m very sorry about that,” Esther said genuinely. “Why were you late?”

He spun her once more, and the room whirled by in a rush of color. When she was back to facing him, she saw his jaw working back and forth as if weighing how much he wished to divulge to her. Esther opened her mouth to tell him that he did not need to answer her if he did not want to, but he began speaking before she did, effectively silencing her.

“If I tell you,” he said, bringing his face closer to hers so his words could not be overheard by those close to them. “You have to promise to keep it between us until the formal announcement is made. Do you swear it?”

Esther studied his face and she found it quite solemn. There had been a part of her that had thought perhaps he had been joking, but his serious expression told her that he wasn’t.

“I swear it,” Esther promised, nodding her head quickly.

“My Uncle Thomas was a baronet. He passed recently, and I have inherited his title and a small holding of land. Some of the paperwork arrived today to complete my move to the estate, and I had to take care of it before I could leave.” The words left Laurence on a rush, as if he was afraid if he stopped or slowed while he was talking that he would no longer be able to continue.

“Laurence,” Esther said, eyes lighting with glee. “That’s wonderful news, truly! You will make a fine baronet.”

Laurence’s gaze roved over her face, and she got the distinct impression that he was trying to determine if she was being facetious. She did her best to convey her honesty, unsure of why he would think that she was lying. Eventually, he just nodded, accepting her answer.

“We are still finalizing the transfer,” Laurence continued his explanation. “But that should all be wrapped up within the week. I hope so, anyway.”

“Well, I hope it goes quickly for you.”

“Thank you, Esther. You are very kind. I hope you know that.”

Esther’s cheeks flushed slightly at his praise, and she dipped her head in acknowledgement. She was honored that Laurence trusted her enough to tell her this information, and something within her swelled with pride as she thought about it.

The final notes of the song rung out through the space, and all of the dancers, including Laurence and Esther, came to a stop in a final bow. Esther glanced around the room, wondering if she should make her way back to her aunt. Not that she particularly wanted to, but she also did not want to risk angering Dorothy by being away for too long.

“Would you like to go to the buffet with me?” Laurence’s voice chimed behind her, and she turned to eye him. “I am both hungry and quite parched.”

Esther considered that for a moment, casting a quick glance through the finely clad crowd in a brief search for

Agnes and Dorothy. The vibrant pink of Agnes' gown immediately caught her eye, and she spotted her cousin standing at the edge of the ballroom floor saying goodbye to a duke who had asked to dance with her earlier. The other woman's eyes darted up for a moment, and she and Esther shared a glance. Esther could have sworn that there was something like approval written within the place of Agnes' face as she saw Esther standing with Laurence. Her aunt, however, was still nowhere to be found.

"I would quite like that," Esther answered, giving Laurence a small smile. "I also could use food and a drink."

He extended his arm to her, and she looped hers through it delicately. They made their way through the crowd, which was a slow endeavor due to the tightly packed bodies. But eventually they arrived at a table that had been laden with all sorts of treats and drinks.

Esther eyed it excitedly, eyes moving appreciatively over the cakes, delicate sandwiches, and colorful offerings laid out upon it. Laurence turned, grabbing two small glasses that appeared to be filled with champagne. As he pivoted back to Esther, a passing steward bumped his elbow sending the liquid spilling over the side of the glass.

Esther watched with abject horror as the golden drops tumbled through the air, almost as if in slow motion before landing with a splatter on the soft blue fabric of her gown.

"Esther!" Laurence exclaimed, setting the glasses quickly on the table beside her.

Esther dabbed at the fabric with her hand, trying to get the liquid seeping into it to disperse but it was no use.

"One moment," Laurence said, and Esther glanced up.

She watched as he reached into his waistcoat and began fishing in one of the pockets that lined the inner walls. When he extracted his hand from the confines of the fabric, he held a handkerchief in his grasp and Esther suddenly felt as if she couldn't breathe.

The kerchief was a bright, vibrant, sky blue. And as Laurence extended his hand to her, offering her the beautiful piece of cloth, she caught a glimpse of white thread in the corner of it. Her heart began to pound as the effigy of a stag came into stunning clarity.

Her eyes darted from the kerchief to his face. Thankfully, Laurence's eyes were on the fabric of her gown and not on Esther herself, because she was sure he would be able to read her like a book if he glanced up in that moment. Every one of their interactions began to play out in her mind. She could have sworn that he had been consumed with trying to court Agnes. Would have bet on it if she could have. But now?

Was it possible that his return to the manor the day he met Abbey, his kind words, all of the things that had occurred was due to affections that he harbored for her? And if so, what on earth was she to do now?

CHAPTER 18

Esther

The cool night air rushed out to greet her as she pushed through the large doors at the edge of the ballroom. Esther had not been able to stay with Laurence, her mind had been racing too much as she had tried to make sense of what she had just discovered. So, she had lied, making up an excuse of spying someone she knew before turning on her heel and disappearing into the crowd. As she had turned, she had caught a brief glimpse of the confused expression on his face, and it had sent a pang through her to know she had been the one to place it there.

Esther did not regret it, however. And as she had pushed herself through the throngs of women clad in fine dresses and men in beautiful waist coats, her movements had become more frantic with her desire for fresh air.

And now, there she stood. The doors had slammed shut behind her, muting the din from the revelers in the room beyond and allowing her to find a momentary semblance of peace. Esther drew in deep, ragged breaths as she walked further onto the patio. She spied steps off to the side that led into a beautifully curated hedge maze, and she followed them.

While she walked, she allowed her mind to turn over the fact that Laurence was her admirer. On some level, she guessed it made sense. His father's manor house was not far from Surrey Manor at all. The Jarvis' and the Bolton's were

practically neighbors. So, he would have been able to easily have her response letters retrieved from the post behind the stable.

Her mind then focused on the initial letter, the one that had been tucked into the folds of her gown. How had he pulled that off? Her thoughts whirred and turned, trying to think of any explanation for how a letter from Laurence had found itself wrapped within the fabric of a dress delivered by Sarah.

With a jolt, a memory flashed before her eyes. The very first day that Laurence had come to the manor to visit Agnes, when Esther had met him, and they had talked while Agnes had played the pianoforte – they had gone to the modiste after Laurence had left.

In her mind's eye, she replayed the moment she, Agnes and Dorothy had arrived at Sarah's shop. There had been a carriage slowly pulling away as theirs had rolled to a stop. She had looked at it then, thinking it looked familiar. And now she knew why...it had been Laurence's carriage. The one that, just an hour or so before, had been parked before Surrey Manor. *Laurence knew Sarah.*

Esther did not know how, or what history Laurence had with the woman, but she was now positive that he had somehow worked with her to get the letter to Esther. Looking down at her own gown, and how beautifully Sarah had crafted it, she recalled the perfection that was the pink dress. Sarah had not been required to put in the work that she had on transforming that gown from the drab and dowdy affair it had been when Dorothy had first selected it. But she had anyways.

When Esther had first seen the pink gown, she had thought that Sarah had done it as merely nothing more than a kind gesture. But now? She couldn't help but wonder if Laurence had had a hand in that as well. With everything she knew now, she had to admit that it was not outside of the realm of possibility.

Esther heaved a sigh as she walked among the hedges, focusing on her movements as she tried as hard as she could to clear her mind. There was no one around her, no other soul out

amongst the greenery, and she reveled in her few moments of solitude.

Esther was not entirely sure how long she remained out there, hiding amongst the foliage, and trying but failing to sort through her thoughts. But as the chill of the air deepened and she found herself shivering, she determined that it was time to head back inside.

As she made her way back to the manor, the glow from the windows and the flickering sconces that line the path lighting her way, she focused on her breathing and trying to steel her mind. Esther was unsure of what she would do if she ran into Laurence when she walked back into the ballroom.

Before arriving to the ball that night, Esther had believed she was prepared to meet her admirer. But she hadn't stopped to consider what would occur if it was someone that she knew. The thought that while her admirer had seen her, she might have also seen him had never once crossed her mind. And when she found

out that it was Laurence, it had brought her up short. And Esther was unsure if she was ready to face him just yet.

However, as she pulled open the doors that led from the garden to the ballroom and the final notes of the last song of the evening danced across the air to greet her, she realized that she needn't worry. Dorothy was standing at the edge of the dance floor, watching as Agnes made her final bows to the man she had been dancing with before walking over to her mother. The two cast glances around the crowd before Dorothy's beady gaze landed on Esther making her way in from the courtyard. Dorothy raised her meaty hand and motioned Esther over impatiently.

The throngs of people were milling about, saying their final goodbyes as Esther made her way through them hurriedly.

"Where were you?" Dorothy demanded when Esther arrived in front of them.

“I required a bit of fresh air, Aunt. I am sorry if it caused any delay.” Esther answered with a demure bow of her head.

Dorothy narrowed her gaze at Esther but did not press the issue further. Instead, she gestured for Agnes and Esther to follow her without a word and began making an exit from the ballroom. Esther followed closely, as did Agnes, and Esther couldn't help but shoot the other girl a questioning stare.

She wanted to ask her how her evening had been, inquire about if any suitors had struck her eye, and press her about turning Laurence down for a dance. When Esther's parents had been alive, she had discussed everything with her mother. Spending evenings gossiping and fantasizing and laughing, they had been wonderful. And there was a part of Esther that truly missed that sort of female companionship.

Esther had no delusions about finding that within her aunt, but perhaps within Agnes? Esther had not been blind to the apologetic looks that Agnes has given her and had noticed more than once that whenever Agnes was actually cruel or cold to her, it always occurred in front of her mother, as if Dorothy were pressuring her to do so.

Esther, of course, did not have the courage to approach Agnes about this. Too afraid was she that the girl would turn out to be crueler than Esther had thought. But it still felt nice for her to dream about it.

As they walked, Esther kept an eye out for Laurence, certain every time they turned a corner that the man in question would appear. But as they crossed the threshold of the front door to the manor and made their way down the steps, the carriage waiting patiently for them atop the gravel drive, Esther let that fear fall away.

The women situated themselves upon the bench seats in the carriage and it began to roll away as Dorothy and Agnes started speaking about the evening. They recounted Agnes' full dance card and the many potential suitors that she had had to turn away. They stated they expected a long line of callers the following morning and were excited to discover who expressed interest.

Esther tried to tune out the conversation as best she could as she stared out the window to watch the dark landscape pass them by. But there was one part of Agnes' and Dorothy's words that she could not quite shake from her mind, and it was regarding the suitors that Agnes had had to say no to.

One of those had been Laurence, he had told Esther as much. She wondered briefly why he had asked Agnes to dance first and did not immediately come to find Esther if his intent had been to meet her at the ball. But the more Esther thought about it the more she was sure that he'd have an explanation. Perhaps he just wanted to keep up appearances and had thought it would seem strange for him to not first greet his childhood friend?

Esther stewed on these thoughts as they made the journey home. And by the time they had finally arrived, she was no closer to sorting out her feelings on the matter.

Esther turned once more, disturbing Abbey from where she was curled up, nestled into the crook of Esther's body. The kitten stood, giving her a petulant meow before padding to the foot of the bed, curling up, and immediately falling back asleep. Esther glared at the feline through the dim light of her room, wishing that she could fall asleep as easily. But sadly, slumber had evaded her.

She had hoped that her thoughts of Laurence and her discovery of who he was would die out after the initial shock had worn off. But so far, they had not. Instead, they had stopped her from being able to rest and had led to a night of her tossing and turning while sleep refused to come.

Esther was unsure of why she was plagued by the discovery. Had she not thought her cousin lucky to be pursued by such a man? Had she not thought on countless occasions of how kind, witty, and handsome Laurence was?

It was not that Esther was disappointed with the fact that her admirer was Laurence, quite the contrary, in fact. In the dark of her room, she was able to be honest with herself and admit that she was thrilled with the prospect. Laurence was everything all women dreamed of for their husband.

But she couldn't help feeling that perhaps she had made a mess of things by running away earlier that night. Would he believe that she was displeased when her admirer had been revealed? Laurence was aware of what the handkerchief had meant, and what it would expose to her. And by running, had she accidentally portrayed to him that she was not interested in who he really was?

It was that thought, the one that whispered that her reaction would have caused Laurence pain, that spurred her into action. Knowing that she would not be able to sleep until she did something, she threw the covers from her body, eliciting another meow of protest from Abbey. She lit a candle and took it to her writing desk, where she sat and retrieved a piece of parchment, her quill, and her ink.

Esther brought the quill to the paper and began writing furiously. She poured herself out upon the parchment, apologizing that she did not respond to him exposing the handkerchief to her in a sufficient manner. She explained that the reveal had caught her off guard and she had just needed a moment to process, and she was delighted that he was her admirer.

When she was finally satisfied, Esther signed the letter and sealed it. Not able to wait until morning, she grabbed her boots from beside the door and padded through the house. Pausing just long enough to slide her feet into the soft, supple leather of her shoes, before she stepped outside into the darkness of beyond.

As she crossed the grounds, she cast a furtive glance back at the windows of the house, hoping that no one would look out and spy her slinking across the yard at that unseemly hour. But thankfully, all appeared to be dark. She made it to the stables quickly, the horses snorting uncomfortably when they heard the noise of her hurried footsteps approach.

Esther left the letter in the designated spot and then sent out a prayer to the universe that it was well received. Then, she turned and strode back toward the house, hoping that now she would finally be able to get some sleep.

She did not pay much attention as she walked, did not glance again at the house or the windows that faced that portion of the grounds. If she had, she might have noticed the stirring of the curtains in the far-left window, the ones that belonged to her cousin's bedroom. She might have stopped and wondered why they had drifted and what might have been seen. But she did not look, and thus she did not notice. Oblivious to everything except the rushing of her own thoughts.

CHAPTER 19

Laurence

Laurence paced the length of his chambers as he shrugged on a waist coat over his broad shoulders. Charles sat across the room, in a plush chair by the fireplace as he picked at his cuticles while he listened to Laurence's rant.

"I do not understand," Laurence fumed. "In her letters she had been so warm and so kind. Why would she be that way only to reject me and not react when my identity is revealed? Do you believe she was disappointed to find out it was me?"

Charles met his gaze, holding it as he said very deliberately, "if she is disappointed that you have affections for her, then she is a fool."

Laurence studied his friend, reading the sincerity in his face, and he appreciated it – even if he did not share that particular belief.

"It is all so confusing," Laurence said as he crossed the room and collapsed into the chair across from Charles. "I had hoped that last night would be the start of something for us, but instead it has just left me feeling awful."

"The night was not a total waste, though," Charles answered, giving Laurence a pointed look.

He knew that Charles was referencing the time that he had spent with the lovely Miss Esther. Laurence couldn't argue that fact. He had thoroughly enjoyed the time that he had spent

dancing with her, and he had appreciated her belief in him making a good baronet more than he could articulate. But his thoughts of Esther left him feeling even more conflicted.

Esther was lovely and had been so easy to talk to, easy in a way that Agnes often wasn't. And he had caught himself multiple times throughout the night admiring her beauty and getting lost in thoughts of how much he enjoyed her company. Laurence knew that he should not be having thoughts of that manner about anyone who was not Agnes. If she were to find out, he was sure that Agnes would well and truly reject him. And he would not be able to blame her.

Laurence placed his head in his hands and then rested his elbows on his knees. He stared at the floor as his mind tried to work through the mess that his thoughts had become.

"Perhaps she wrote you again last night?" Charles offered, but there was no real conviction in his voice.

Laurence knew that the man was just trying to placate him. But he couldn't stop the hope from swelling in his chest. Had she written him back? If she had, would she perhaps have provided an explanation. Laurence had always known there was a possibility that Agnes would not return his affections. And he felt he could accept her refusal, if only he could understand why.

Laurence turned his gaze back to Charles, and the other man read the longing in his eyes and blew out a heavy sigh.

"I'll go check," Charles said, his tone resigned as he crossed the room and disappeared out the door.

Laurence tried to wait patiently for his friend's return, but he found that he could not. The longer he sat, the more anxious he became until eventually he could not continue to sit in the chair and wait to find if Agnes had written him or not.

Pushing himself up from the chair, Laurence began to pace the length of his rooms. Each time he passed a window, he would look out of it, hoping to catch a glimpse of Charles returning with a letter in hand. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Laurence caught a flash of Charles' black shirt

coming up the lane before the man himself came fully into view.

Laurence crossed the room in a few quick steps, grabbing a book and sitting back in the seat he had occupied earlier, pretending as if he hadn't been waiting anxiously for Charles' return. Once again, time seemed to move at a crawl as he waited for his valet to enter his rooms, and he fought the urge to resume his pacing.

When Charles burst back through the door, Laurence turned his head and did his best to act nonchalant as his eyes took in his friend. Charles was grinning ear to ear as he reached into his jacket pocket and extracted a folded and sealed piece of parchment. Laurence's heart jumped excitedly as he held his hand out and Charles gave him the letter.

He forced himself to remain in the chair as he removed the wax seal and peeled open the paper, finding the same delicate, elegant script within it that had come on his last few letters. His eyes roved over the paper, devouring each word, and savoring them.

Agnes explained that she was sorry for not reacting well when she saw his handkerchief. She confessed that she had been afraid of what this would mean for them, and confused on how to move forward, and thus she had needed time to process. But now that she had, she realized that he perhaps had been hurt by her reaction, and that was never her intent.

As he read, he couldn't help but hear Esther's voice in his mind as he took in the words. He tried to shake the thought, but no matter how hard or valiant his attempt, it was her voice that he heard. Deciding to focus instead on the content of the letter, he re-read it and focused on how Agnes claimed that she had been a coward. He could understand that sentiment, as he himself had spent many a night worried that what he was doing would ruin the friendship that they had built.

But it was the part about Agnes being concerned about his feelings that had kept his attention the most. The truth was that he had been hurt when she had rejected him the night prior, there was no way that he could deny that. And he had focused

that hurt into Esther, allowing the beautiful young woman to help him feel better. In doing such, he had to admit that he had begun developing a certain fondness for her.

Laurence refused to think any deeper into it than that, not wanting to look at his appreciation of Esther too closely, in fear of what he might find. But he could not deny the fact that she had made him feel so much better after the sting of Agnes' rejection. He understood it now, could see her reaction to the handkerchief and what it revealed through her eyes. But it did not negate the hurt he had felt the night prior, and the solace he had found within Esther. His mind was in shambles as he tried to refocus his thoughts solely on Agnes.

Laurence glanced at the clock above the fireplace, noting the early afternoon hour. His mind wandered to Surrey Manor, and the suitors that he thought for sure would be lined up there by now. The letter had ended with Agnes signing off that she was hoping to see him again. Did that mean that she wanted him to come calling officially?

His mind latched onto that thought, and he realized that he had to find out. Glancing at Charles, he gave his friend a wild, open grin.

“I think we’re going to need the carriage.”

CHAPTER 20

Esther

Agnes' delicate laugh peeled through the room, and Esther glanced at her hands, unable to stand much more. Since early that morning, almost immediately after breakfast, it had been a near constant stream of suitors arriving at the property with a request to speak to Agnes.

When the first two had arrived, Dorothy had had the few remaining servants prepare the drawing room so that Agnes could begin to receive them. As the servants had rushed off, Agnes had been told to go ready herself. Dorothy had then turned her beady eyed stare toward Esther.

“You go too, girl,” she had said, her voice flat. “You’ll be in the drawing room with Agnes. Not that I expect a suitor to call for you, but should one show up, we will not be caught unawares.”

Esther had done as she was told, rushing to her rooms, and pulling on the finest gown that she had. Well, aside from the gown that Sarah had made her for the ball, that was. It just so happened to be the delicate blue gown that she had been wearing when she had first met Laurence, and she wondered if that was a sign.

A thrill had gone through Esther when she had thought of the possibility that Laurence would call on her that day. And as she had sat in the drawing room, hour after hour, watching

as Agnes entertained all the men who had shown up for her, she tried her best to keep that hope afloat.

About an hour prior, however, she had been forced to start imagining that Laurence would not come. There was every possibility that he had not yet received her letter and did not know that she was sorry for the way she had behaved the night before. And if that were the case, she could not blame him for not calling upon her yet.

Esther pulled her mind away from Laurence and the slight pang of regret that thoughts of him elicited within her, and brought her attention back to what was occurring with Agnes once more. Esther plastered a gentle, graceful smile upon her face as a steward entered the room to announce Agnes' next suitor.

“Earl Hampton of Sussex,” the man announced in a clear, strong voice before bowing to Agnes and retreating back through the doors.

In walked a man with gleaming blonde hair, and Esther had to stop herself from gasping. It was the man that she had spotted with the blue handkerchief at the ball. The one that she had thought was her admirer, before she had discovered the truth. His eyes landed momentarily on Esther, and she thought she caught a gleam of curiosity before he pulled them away and turned his attention to Agnes.

The Earl bowed low to Agnes, who inclined her head delicately in greeting. Her cool and collected mask had been firmly in place all morning. If Esther's cousin had favored any of the men over the other, her responses to them had not betrayed it.

Dorothy was another matter entirely. As the Earl crossed the room and took up residence on a settee across from Agnes and the two launched into conversation, Esther's eyes roamed to her aunt. The woman had been sitting in a chair close to Agnes for the entirety of the day. And while Agnes had been cool but at least kind, Dorothy had had no qualms with making dismissive or approving noises at the varying suitors. She made it very clear to her daughter, through her grunts or her

sighs, which men she thought would be sufficient for Agnes to pursue. And Esther could not believe that none of the men had not yet reacted to them in any way.

To their credit, they had all been nothing but polite to her Aunt Dorothy, whether she had acted in a manner deserving of it or not. Esther had been impressed.

As the time ticked on, she couldn't help but notice that the Earl Hampton had remained talking to Agnes longer than any of the others. She pulled her attention back to her cousin and was shocked to find a genuine smile tugging at her lips. Esther had been lost in her own thoughts, so she did not have the slightest inclination at what the man had said to illicit such a response. But Esther couldn't help but think that it must have been very impressive indeed.

She watched as her cousin laughed prettily at whatever it is the man said, and she had to admire the way that it transforms the girls' face. It wasn't often that Esther got to see this type of emotion from Agnes, and she was slightly in awe of it.

A grunt came from the chair next to where Agnes was perched, and Esther glanced back to Dorothy at the same time Agnes did. Dorothy gave a marginal shake of her head, and Esther watched as her cousin's face fell slightly, her impassive mask slipping back over her beautiful features. She cleared her throat, turning her attention back to the Earl, but she did not engage with him like she had been.

To the man's credit, he seemed unphased by the blatant dismissal that Dorothy displayed, and he said a few more kind things to Agnes before taking his leave. His eyes dipped to Esther as he went, and he gave her a kind smile which she quickly returned. He may not have been the suitor for Esther, but she wondered if he might just be the right man for her cousin.

Then came another steward, announcing another suitor, and Esther had to fight the way that it began to grate on her nerves. She had tried to be optimistic, but as suitor after suitor arrived for Agnes and no one had shown up for her, it had begun to wear on her. Esther tried to keep reminding herself

that Laurence was the only suitor that mattered, and that eventually he would arrive for her.

Maybe not that day, but she could not imagine that once he got her letter that he would dismiss her so easily. She kept focusing on that fact, repeating it to herself like a mantra as the minutes ticked by.

When the next suitor left, Dorothy deemed that she, Agnes and Esther were to take a break from receiving visitors for a moment. Glad for an excuse to leave the room, Esther pushed herself to her feet. Her legs had grown stiff from sitting for so long, and she was grateful for the chance to stretch them.

Once the doors the drawing room were closed, Dorothy approached Agnes and began talking to her about the admirers they had met thus far. Esther, not wanting to overhear their conversation, walked over to the windows that overlooked the front of the home. As she did, she spotted quite a few carriages parked on the gravel drive, belonging to the suitors still waiting to entertain Agnes.

Something in the distance caught her eye, and Esther diverted her attention toward it. As she did, it slowly came into focus and her heart began to pound. It was another carriage, but that time, it was one that she recognized.

“Laurence,” she whispered to herself as her pulse continued to rise with excitement.

Looking down at her gown, she realized that she could use a bit of freshening up before she greeted the man. Turning to her Aunt Dorothy, Esther asked if she might be excused. The woman scrunched up her face, but ultimately gave her permission. Esther rushed from the drawing room and did not stop on her way to her chambers.

Once inside, she shut the door and went over to her wash basin to splash water on her face. Glancing in the looking glass, she pinched at her cheeks and lips to flush them with color. She quickly unbraided and then re-braided her hair, twisting it around her head like a crown and securing it with a pin.

Checking herself once more, she determined she was satisfied with the results. She strode from her room, her heart pounding wildly with anticipation as she approached the drawing room. She pushed open the door and stepped inside, finding Dorothy and Agnes still where she had left them. Her aunt and cousin turned to look at her, and Dorothy's eyes went wide.

“What did you do?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at Esther in suspicion.

“What do you mean?” Esther responded, brow furrowing in confusion.

“Why do you look so...nice?” Dorothy quarreled.

Esther looked down at her simple dress and then back up to her aunt.

“This is the same dress I've had on all day.” Esther explained.

“Your face. What did you do to it?”

Esther blinked at her aunt, trying to understand what she was asking.

“I simply pinched my cheeks for a little color and fixed...” she began to explain, but Dorothy quickly cut her off.

“You little sneak,” she hissed, advancing a step toward Esther. “You ran to your room to fix yourself up. You want to draw attention away from Agnes.”

The accusation flew through the air, knocking the wind out of Esther. She gaped at her aunt, unsure of where this was all coming from. Esther glanced at Agnes, hoping the other girl would be able to provide a sense of reason. But she realized quickly that that hope was futile. Agnes remained sitting in the same spot and had diverted her attention to her hands.

She refused to look at Esther as she said in a low voice, “you do look quite a bit nicer than you did before.”

Esther wasn't sure why, but Agnes not defending her and instead deciding to back up her mother in this bit of delirium hurt her more deeply than she could explain.

“Exactly,” Dorothy accused. “You are doing this on purpose. Leave this room, now. Go work on your chores, and you are not in *any* circumstance to interact with any of our guests. Do you understand me?”

Esther wanted to argue back, wanted to say that all she cared about was one suitor in particular, and Agnes could have all the rest. She wanted to throw herself to the floor and beg for her aunt to allow her to stay. But with the furious look in her aunt’s gaze and the cruel smile that was pulling at the woman’s lips, Esther was well aware that it would get her nowhere.

With shattering hope and a breaking heart, Esther dipped her head and nodded, acquiescing to her aunt’s demands. She turned on her feet and strode from the room just as the other door opened and a steward stepped in. She closed the door behind her and stood just long enough to hear the steward announce the new arrival.

“Sir Laurence Bolton,” the man’s voice rang out, and Esther was surprised the people on the other side of the door could not hear the shattering of her hopes.

CHAPTER 21

Laurence

Laurence cursed as the carriage rolled to a stop in front of Surrey Manor and he spotted all the other carriages in front of the home. As the wheels stopped moving, he pushed open the door and stepped down into the gravel. Laurence turned to Charles where the valet sat in the driver's seat of the carriage and gave him an admonishing look.

"Well," Charles said with a grin, "what are you waiting for? Go confess your love!"

Laurence laughed at his friend, his spirit lifting a little as he climbed the stairs. The servants had apparently been expecting additional suitors and noticed the new carriage approaching the home, because the doors swung open before Laurence had a chance to knock.

Frederick, the frazzled-looking steward, stood in the doorway, blinking wildly at Laurence. Just over Frederick's shoulder, Laurence caught a glimpse of a line of men milling in the atrium, and he assumed they were all waiting on their turn to call on Agnes.

"Sir Laurence," Frederick said with a deep bow. "A pleasure. Are you here for Lady Agnes?"

"Yes, Frederick, thank you."

Frederick stepped back, waving Laurence through the door, and shutting it behind him. Laurence glanced around the

space, eyeing the suitors that had come to call upon the woman that he loved. There were some faces that he knew, and he gave them all a nod in greeting. But there were many that he was not familiar with, and the thought made him nervous.

Frederick leaned in close to Laurence, so that only he could hear him, "I will speak with Lady Jarvis, I am sure she would wish you to be moved to the front of the line."

"It is much appreciated, Frederick," Laurence said, and then watched as the man turned and disappeared down the hallway that led to the drawing room.

Laurence glanced around the quiet space, awkwardly placing his hands in his pockets while he waited. None of the other men were speaking to each other, and Laurence had a feeling it was due to a sense of competition. Laurence took the time waiting to study the walls of the atrium again. He noticed that at least one more painting was no longer hanging. But he also noticed that everything had been cleaned and polished to perfection. So, Dorothy had ensured that the manor was prepared for the arrival of the suitors, even if a bit of the family's finery was now gone.

It did not take long for Laurence to spot Frederick rushing down the hallway once more. When the man stopped in front of him, he grinned at Laurence. Laurence wasn't sure when the last time he'd seen the steward smile was, and it caught him quite off guard.

"Right this way, Sir Laurence," Frederick advised with a slight bow of his head.

Laurence followed after the man as he turned and strode through the room. He did not miss the fact that a few of the men he passed shot him quite a few looks of jealousy or contempt. Frederick stopped before the doors to the drawing room and turned to Laurence, advising him to wait for just a moment while Frederick announced him.

He did as he was told, and in no time at all Laurence was being ushered into the room by a frantically bowing Frederick. Agnes was seated on a settee by the window, clad in a sage

green gown that made her dark features come to life. She looked absolutely lovely. On any other day, he was positive that she would have stolen his breath. But there was a small part of him that recalled Esther, and how pretty she had looked the night before. And that small part was refusing to let him be as affected by Agnes as he should have been.

Laurence tried to quiet the part of his mind that was determined to focus on Esther as he approached Agnes. She looked at him with her standard, aloof gaze and smiled prettily at him as he stepped closer.

“Sir Laurence,” the Countess said in greeting as Laurence bowed to both she and Agnes in turn. “It is a pleasure to see you here.”

“It is a pleasure for me as well, I assure you,” he gave Lady Dorothy a smile.

His heart pounded nervously as he prepared himself for the request that he was about to make. Laurence’s gaze roved from Agnes to Lady Dorothy and then back to Agnes, and he steeled his spine before speaking.

“I do understand that this is quite out of the ordinary,” he said, glad to find that his voice did not shake with his nervousness. “But I was hoping, given our history, Agnes and I might be able to take a small walk in the garden to speak in private.”

Lady Dorothy regarded him, he could feel her eyes on him, but he was struggling to take his eyes from Agnes. Her brow furrowed in confusion at his request, and he did not understand why. She should have known that he would not be able to talk about their letters in front of her mother. So of course he would ask for privacy. He could only hope that his request was granted.

Lady Dorothy glanced at Agnes, and either she did not notice, or she did not care about her daughter’s apparent ambivalence.

“I will allow it,” Lady Dorothy advised, and Laurence let out a sigh of relief. “It will do good for her to step into the

fresh air for a spell, anyway. I will sit on the patio while you peruse the gardens, as a chaperone. I'm sure you understand."

"Quite right," Laurence said, trying to hide his excitement.

He had expected for Lady Dorothy to act as a chaperone, it would have been unseemly for Agnes to be cavorting with a man unattended. But if they went far enough into the garden, they should not be overheard.

Agnes, for what it was worth, did not speak as she pushed herself up from the couch. He offered her his arm, and she tucked hers within it daintily. In the past, the contact would have made heat rush to his cheeks and would have been the only thing that he could think about. Now, however, he couldn't help but contrast the way that her touch felt in comparison to how Esther's had felt the night prior when he had been dancing with her.

Once more he struggled to push the thought of Esther from his mind and tried to focus on Agnes as they walked.

"You look lovely," he said as they stepped through the rear door of the home.

"Thank you very much, Laurence," she responded with a dip of her head.

He hoped that she would open up the farther they got from her mother. Lady Dorothy had followed only a few steps behind them, but when they walked outside, she traveled to one of the tables adorning the patio. Laurence and Agnes continued their trek into the garden, and still their awkward silence remained.

"How are you today, with everything going on?" Laurence asked her, hoping to warm up the conversation.

"I am doing quite well. The gentlemen have all been very kind." Her voice retained its coolness and try as he might he was unable to reconcile it with the same tone that had been encapsulated within the letters.

"I do have to admit," Agnes said, and Laurence's heart began to race with hope. Was she going to bring up their letters? "I am a little surprised to see you here."

The hope that had momentarily risen within him deflated.

“I had thought that you would want me here?” Laurence asked, turning to glance at her sidelong.

Laurence studied her features, hoping to find the slightest bit of affection deep within her eyes. But there was nothing. Just her pleasant and unaffected gaze that she always wore so carefully.

“It is not that I do not wish to see you,” Agnes corrected. “You are a very dear friend to me. But I had not thought that you would have been amongst my suitors.”

Laurence furrowed his brow. That could not be right. If she had figured out that he was her admirer, then it should not be a shock that he was here now.

“I thought that perhaps, after the ball, you and Esther...” her voice faded off and she shot him a pointed look.

Laurence was not sure why, but at the mention of Esther’s name falling from Agnes’ lips something clicked within him. Agnes had not reacted to the handkerchief at all last night. But *Esther had*. It was only after Laurence had retrieved the kerchief from the pocket of his waistcoat and she had laid eyes upon it that she had rushed into the crowd.

He had known her claims of spotting someone she knew had been false, but he had not questioned why she had felt the need to lie to him. But when Laurence compared it to the words that had been in the letter he had read that very morning, where the writer had admitted that they had not responded in a way that they found seemly. It all began to make sense.

The words within the letters had worked for Agnes. There was no doubt about that. But they had also worked for Esther. Had she not been wearing a blue gown close to the color of Agnes’ the day he had met her? Was she not a *Lady at Surrey Manor*?

It is no wonder that if she had read the letter, she would have assumed that it was meant for her. And then her words to

him, they easily could have come from either woman. Except for the tone.

Laurence had struggled to ever, even once, read the letters in Agnes' voice. The warmth, the friendliness, and the passion had been so unlike the person that she had become in womanhood. But Esther? It all matched her perfectly.

Laurence's mind rushed as he realized that somewhere along the way there had been a mix up and the letter that he had written for Agnes had found its way to Esther instead.

Laurence would have expected to be disappointed at the news, to find that Agnes had not been the one that had written him. Instead, it filled him with a sense of calm. Now that he knew, he was able to admit to himself that slowly, over every small interaction that he had had with Esther, he had been falling for her.

Laurence turned to Agnes, and she was watching him with a softened, sweet gaze. He had thought that if she ever fully rejected him, he would be heartbroken. But instead, he merely felt excited.

He knew that Agnes was waiting for a response to her comment about Esther. But it was not something that he felt able to give. Not until he had a chance to talk to Esther himself. So instead, he just dipped his head to Agnes.

"Thank you very much for receiving me," he said, giving her what he hoped was a genuine smile that conveyed that he held no ill will toward her. She returned it, and for a moment it felt like he was looking at the girl he once knew. Not the woman that he had loved, but his friend.

"Would you like me to escort you back to the house?" Laurence offered, but Agnes shook her head.

"I think I would like to stay in the garden a few more moments, it is quite lovely."

Laurence nodded at her and dropped her arm. Striding across the garden, Lady Dorothy stood with a thunderous expression.

"Why are you leaving her?" she demanded.

He was a bit taken aback by her brusque tone, but he only offered an explanation in what he hoped would be a placating manner.

“Agnes wishes for a bit of fresh air and privacy. Thank you for allowing me to see her.”

Laurence did not wait for Lady Dorothy’s reply, and instead strode back through the house, to the front door, and back to his carriage. He had wanted so badly to ask about Esther, but he had known he would not be able to do so without arousing suspicion. And Laurence knew by Lady Dorothy’s response to him leaving Agnes in the garden, that suspicion would not serve him well.

Charles shot him a questioning glance when Laurence exited the manor, but Laurence just shook his head in response before climbing into the carriage. There would be plenty of time for him to tell his friend everything. But for now, he needed to focus on how he would get Esther alone so that he could ask her to tell him the truth.

CHAPTER 22

Agnes

Agnes toed across the yard, the grass shuffling under the soles of her soft, supple boots. She had spotted Esther roaming about the grounds at an incredibly unseemly hour the night prior, and with how she had behaved while Agnes' suitors were at the manor – it had caused her to grow extremely suspicious.

Agnes wished that she could ask Esther about it, had wanted nothing more, in fact, to be able to befriend the other young woman. However, she knew her mother would put a stop to that immediately. And she also knew both her and Esther would end up worse for it. So, Agnes had not even tried.

She hoped that Esther had noticed her apologetic glances, or that she did not want to say the things she had said. Agnes had tried everything she could think of to assure the other girl that she did not want to partake in her mother's poor treatment of Esther. But there was never any way to know for sure if she got the message.

Agnes knew that she likely should not be skulking about in this manner. If someone spotted her the way that Agnes had spotted Esther, she was sure that it would cause a stir. But her curiosity over the past day had won out. And now, with Esther working diligently on her chores, Agnes' curiosity over what her cousin had been hiding behind the stables won out.

The horses whinnied as she crept along the side of the wooden structure, their sensitive ears still picking up her carefully placed footfalls. Agnes threw a hurried glance around her once more, ensuring for one final time that no one was spying on her. Satisfied that she was not being watched, Agnes walked around the corner to the back of the stable and looked around.

She had no idea where Esther would have potentially hidden something, but she hoped that it would be obvious. She looked under overturned buckets, lifted a hay bale that rested against the wooden planks of the building. Finding nothing, she placed her hands on her hips and glanced anxiously around her once more.

Her eyes fell on a yellow post along the fence line. She vaguely recalled the servants talking about a break in the fence, and the fit her mother had thrown when the posts they had repaired it with hadn't matched. Curious, Agnes walked over to the post, placed her hand upon it, and gave it a minor push, wondering if perhaps it was loose enough to hide something underneath. But alas, it did not budge.

Not finding any other reason to stay where she was, she turned and strode back the way she had come. As she crossed the grounds, Agnes pondered all of the reasons why Esther could have been out here that late at night. But outside of hiding something that she didn't want anyone else to find, Agnes came up with nothing.

She approached the rear entrance of the manor, the one closest to the servants' quarters. *And also*, said a sly voice in her head, *the closest to Esther's room*. The thought brought Agnes up short. It made her uncomfortable, to think about doing something so untoward as creeping into her cousin's room without her permission. But her curiosity was eating away at her so fiercely that she couldn't banish the idea entirely.

Her heart began hammering as she imagined herself dashing down the corridor and into Esther's bedchamber. If she got caught, there would be a lot of questions. But would Agnes be able to sate the need to know what her cousin is up

to without taking such extreme measures? She didn't think she could.

Agnes pulled open the door that led into the kitchens, and she let out a sigh of relief when she realized they were empty. The passageway to Esther's room was directly to Agnes' left, and with her pulse racing she turned and strode down it.

The thought glanced through her mind that if Esther ever found out what she was doing, her cousin would never forgive her. Not that they were close, and it wouldn't be as if Agnes was losing an actual friend. But she still did not like the idea of other girls thinking of her with any kind of ire, despite how deserved Agnes knew those thoughts might be.

Ever since Esther had arrived at Surrey Manor, she had been nothing but kind to Agnes, and she had envied Esther for that. Kindness was not something that came easily to Agnes, not after a lifetime under the watchful eye of Countess Dorothy Jarvis. Agnes knew she had been kind once, and carefree in the way that children so often are.

Her father had nourished that part of her. He had laughed at her and loved to hear her running through the halls with reckless abandon, but always careful to remind her to watch out for her mother. Dorothy had been adamant that Agnes' behave with decorum and propriety for as long as Agnes could remember. And Agnes had always had to hide the more carefree parts of herself from her mother. And had been proud to have someone to share them with, between her father and Laurence.

When her father had passed, however, she had lost that spark and her mother had become even more strict about her expectations of Agnes. And as time wore on, and she felt herself change and harden under the care of her mother, she began to not be able to tolerate her friendship with Laurence. He was a constant reminder of what she had lost – not only her father, but herself as well.

Agnes breathed a heavy sigh as she came upon the door to Esther's room. She knew that this was it, the point of no return. She could turn around now, and no one would ever

know the duplicitous nature of her thoughts. Agnes knew that the moment she walked across the threshold before her, there was no going back.

Almost as if acting on their own accord, Agnes' feet took a few steps forward into Esther's room. She looked around at the drab furnishings, noticing the lack of color in the small, confined space. She could see the little ways in which Esther had tried to make the room her own. There was a yellow ribbon tied around her bed post, adding a pop of color. A small bundle of dried flowers hung upside down on the wall, tied together with string and dangling off of a nail.

But it did little to provide any brightness. Agnes had never been to Esther's room, and to be honest she hadn't given it much thought, either. She had always assumed that her mother had afforded her at least some form of luxury and comfort, the girl was family, after all. It had been easier for Agnes to believe that Esther was only in this section of the house to afford her some privacy, but that she still remained relatively comfortable. But Agnes could see now that she had been a fool.

The furniture was drab. The carpet and the blanket, threadbare. The candle holders were scuffed and had little shine or luster left in them. And atop a writing desk was a piece of a broken looking glass. Agnes' heart gave a pang as she looked around at it all.

She shook herself, trying to remember why she had come here in the first place. Agnes cast a glance around the room, realizing there weren't many places for her to search. She dropped to her knees, glancing under the bed. But she found nothing aside from a small ball of lint.

Turning to the dingy armoire, she grabbed the handles and tugged. Another twinge of regret and sympathy washed through her as she spotted just how few gowns Esther had, especially not ones of quality. It was another thing Agnes had tried not to think about, and it made her uncomfortable to now be faced with the grim reality of her cousin's life.

Agnes reached out and thumbed through the dresses, checking the bottom of the armoire and the top. She ran her hands along the edges, looking for any place that something might be hidden, but still found nothing.

Turning around the cramped room looking for where else Esther's secrets might lie, Agnes' eyes finally fell on the writing desk. She walked over to it slowly, with apprehension growing low in her belly. Her hand was shaking with nerves as she reached out to pull open the top drawer of the desk.

Inside, there were multiple pieces of parchment, all with a broken wax seal that had been tucked in neatly. Beside it was a stamp, and Agnes eyed it, recognizing it as one of her own that was typically kept in the study. In all the time that Esther had lived at Surrey Manor, Agnes had not once spotted the girl writing or sending a letter. She had wondered about it often, why she did not send any correspondence to friends or acquaintances from her old life. But now, it would seem, that Esther had been a busy woman indeed.

Agnes reached into the drawer, graceful fingers wrapping around one of the letters and extracting it. She opened it up and held it in the dim evening light streaming in from the one window. It was filled with a script that was vaguely familiar, and Agnes furrowed her brow.

The first thing that Agnes noticed was that it was addressed to "The Lady at Surrey Manor". She cocked her head at that. That was the name of the game that she and Laurence used to play as children. Her eyes continued to skim the page, and as she got to the end, she noticed the words "a blue handkerchief with a white stag" and she froze.

Laurence had written these letters. She took out another one, and another, and another. Her eyes raking over each one in turn, realizing that Esther and Laurence had been corresponding for quite some time. With dread growing inside of her, she began to piece together that Laurence had thought he was writing to *her*.

"Oh no," Agnes whispered to herself, wondering how things had gotten so terribly and utterly mixed up.

She had thought that Esther and Laurence would hit it off. Had hoped that by continuing her cool disposition with him, that both Laurence and her mother would put to rest any notion of a future between the two of them. It was not uncommon for the children of family friends to be wed, especially if they formed an advantageous match.

Agnes had seen the way that Laurence had interacted with Esther the first time they'd met. They hadn't saw her watching while she sat at the pianoforte, but she had been. And she had thought that maybe she could push them together, somehow. They were similar in so many ways. And then, if his affections turned to Esther then perhaps, they would never affix themselves to Agnes. But she had been so inconceivably wrong.

A loud bang sounded from the kitchen, making Agnes jump. She realized how long she had been standing in Esther's room and did not want to dawdle any longer and risk being caught. Agnes stuffed the letters back in the writing desk but stopped when she went to put away the final one. Based off the words it contained, she believed it was the first letter that had been sent.

Agnes wasn't sure why, but she thought that within it might lay the key for her to fix this. She couldn't stand the idea of leaving it behind and not being able to read it again while she tried to brainstorm to find a way out of the mess she could sense coming for them all.

She had no pockets, so instead she clutched it to her chest and hoped that no one would look too closely as she rushed to her rooms to hide it. Agnes padded across the Esther's bedchamber, glad for the softness of the soles of her boots as they hid the noise of her steps. The racket of the kitchen grew louder as she crept down the corridor, her heart pounding so loudly Agnes was sure that it would give her away.

As she approached the end of the hallway, she spotted Esther. Her back was to Agnes, and she was bent over the sink helping to scrub the dishes being dirtied while dinner was prepared. The other ladies around her chattered easily with one

another, but they paid no mind to Esther. Agnes found that odd.

She had assumed that at the very least Esther had found friendship amongst the servants, since she spent so much time with them. But based off the scene in front of Agnes, that did not appear to be the truth.

She was thankful that no one turned around or so much as noticed her as she crept along the wall and out of the kitchen. Agnes sighed with relief but did not risk further delay as she clutched the letter more tightly and quickened her pace in a rush to her rooms. Her feet fell silent on the carpeted stairs, and she glanced down as she hurried, trying to ensure she did not trip over the hem of her skirt.

Had she been paying attention; she would have noticed a woman's large frame turning around the corner. But, since her focus was entirely on her feet, Agnes instead ran directly into her mother.

Agnes sputtered and stammered as her eyes darted from her feet to the countess' face. Her mother's cruel gaze roved over her, stopping when they spotted the letter clutched tightly to Agnes' chest.

“What is that?” Her mother drawled slowly.

“Oh,” Agnes answered, attempting to keep her voice light and unassuming. “Nothing. Just a bit of...”

Her voice cut off when her mother's hand darted forward and yanked the letter out of her grasp. Agnes fought back the protest that threatened to spill from her lips. As her mother's eyes roved over the paper, Agnes watched in abject horror as she put together who the letter was from. She had been well-aware of the game Agnes and Laurence had played as children, since she had had to admonish them for it on more than one occasion. Especially after one governess insisted their games would invite the devil in.

“You've been corresponding with Laurence Bolton?” her mother asked, and Agnes' cheeks flushed.

“Well, not exactly.” She admitted, hoping that her mother would drop it. But she should have known better.

“What do you mean? Tell me everything this instant.”

Agnes’ brain scrambled as she tried to come up with a plausible lie. She knew that her mother would not approve of Esther corresponding with one of Agnes’ potential suitors, no matter how uninterested Agnes herself may be. But as excuse after excuse glanced through her mind, each one refused to form on her lips. She knew her mother would see right through them, and she did not want to risk her wrath.

“Don’t you dare lie to me,” her mother commanded, the woman’s voice sharp and unyielding.

With a heavy heart, Agnes began to speak. The truth poured out of her. And while she spoke, her mother’s flinty stare grew more and more excited. By the end, Dorothy was practically beaming, and it made a pit form in Agnes’ stomach.

“Dear girl,” her mother said. “What a bounty you have found. I have a feeling we just might be able to use this in our favor.”

In that moment, Agnes had never understood the phrase “curiosity killed the cat” more.

CHAPTER 23

Laurence

Laurence stared at the sheet of parchment in front of him as he tried to focus on the final ledger he needed to review from his new accounts. According to his father, he was set to be announced as the baronet the following day. And Laurence wanted to ensure that he had a sufficient understanding of the land, its holdings, and the resources required to run it prior to anyone finding out.

Anyone besides Esther, that is, said a voice in the back of his mind. He tried to shoo the thought away, knowing that if he allowed his thoughts to wander in that direction, he might never be able to wrangle them back.

Laurence had agonized since the day prior, when he finally put together the pieces that the woman that he'd been falling in love with had actually been Esther. He had sent Charles out to check the post behind the stable so many times that they'd both lost count, and each time his valet came back empty handed. Laurence tried not to dwell on it, had fought tooth and nail to not imagine every negative reason that could exist for Esther's silence. But he had not been entirely successful.

He knew that he had to find a way to call on her or see her again. Laurence understood that everything he wanted to say to her would be best done in person. He wanted to explain himself, explain exactly what occurred and how after all of

that, he had somehow fallen hopelessly and irrevocably in love with her.

Laurence still had no idea how the original letter had gotten to Esther. He had tried and tried to work it over in his mind, but he always came up blank.

Shaking those thoughts from his head, he focused once more on the numbers in front of him. He only had to get through one more, and then he would be free to wallow in his own turmoil.

It was with a concentrated effort that he finally reached the end of the ledger. As he balanced the final sum, he leaned back in his high-backed wooden chair and let out a sigh of relief. Laurence stared around his study, reveling in the fact that for just a moment, his work was entirely finished.

He took the pieces of parchment from his desktop and put them in a neat pile, before opening a drawer to tuck them away. He should have known better, but alas, he did not. When he pulled open the drawer, there, nestled neatly inside, was the stack of letters he had received from Esther.

Laurence's thoughts ran rampant once more, going into a spiral about why she had not reached out and exactly how this all occurred in the first place. He glanced at the clock above the fireplace mantle and noticed that it was still early afternoon. Plagued as he was by the questions still whirring loudly through his mind, he knew that he would not be able to rest until he did something.

Laurence pushed back his chair and strode from his office, on a hunt to find Charles. On a hunch, he went out to the stables, and was not surprised when he found the man in question in the stall with Brimmer.

"Charles," Laurence called out as he approached, "Are you up for a ride to town?"

Charles blinked at him slowly, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"Right now? We hadn't anything planned." Charles questioned.

“I need to see Sarah,” Laurence explained.

Recognition dawned on Charles’s face and the man chuckled.

“Ah, it’s about the letters.”

Laurence bobbed his head in acknowledgement as Charles sat down the brush he had been running along Brimmer’s shining brown coat.

“Just give me a few moments and I will have the carriage pulled around,” Charles explained.

Laurence thanked him before turning and striding back to the front of his family’s manor. As his boots crunched across the gravel, the heavy wooden doors of the house swung open. Laurence glanced up to see Jonas, his father’s steward, standing anxiously within the doorway.

“Lord Laurence,” Jonas’ voice rang loud and clear. “Pardon the interruption.”

“No pardons necessary Jonas,” Laurence waved away the man’s placations. “What is the matter?”

“It’s your father, Sir,” Jonas explained. “He demands your presence in his office immediately.”

Laurence shot the steward a questioning look, wondering for what reason his father would be calling for him unexpectedly. Laurence had told his father that he’d be working all day trying to get his affairs in order for the up-and-coming move. And his father had seemed pleased with the progress that his son had made and stated that he would leave him alone. Laurence was unsure of what had changed since early that morning.

He sent a weary glance toward the stables, wondering how long the conversation with his father would take and how long Charles would have to wait. Laurence was anxious to get to the bottom of what had gone wrong with Sarah delivering the letter. He knew that Esther would ask, and he wanted to be able to answer any question that she might have. And he also felt as if the truth would help him wrap his mind around the

events that had played out over the course of the past few days.

He turned back to Jonas, resigned in knowing that there was no way to postpone his father's request.

"Lead the way," Laurence advised, gesturing for Jonas to walk ahead of him.

The man did, his hurried steps making it hard for Laurence to keep up. As they wound their ways through the corridors, he worked hard to keep his impatience from showing on his face. If his father sensed that he was eager to leave, the man was just self-important enough to deliberately drawl the conversation out if he was in a mercurial enough mood.

Jonas walked into his father's study first, announcing Laurence's arrival before Laurence himself strode in behind him. His father was staring at a piece of parchment in his hand, and there was an odd look on his face. Something like triumph danced along the edges of his father's eyes, and Laurence was unsure why, but it sent a shiver down his spine.

"Son," his father began, his brown eyes darting from the parchment to Laurence. "Please have a seat."

Laurence did as he was asked and took the chair opposite his father. He placed his hands on the wooden armrests on either side, fighting the urge to dig his fingers into them with his impatience. His father just studied Laurence, not speaking for several moments. Laurence could hear the ticking of the clock on the far side of the room, and with each passing second, he could feel his control on his annoyance slipping.

"You called for me, Father?" Laurence asked, working diligently to keep his tone even and unassuming.

"I did," his father dipped his head in acknowledgement before setting the piece of parchment he'd been holding face down on the table.

Laurence spotted a red wax seal on the back of it, and as some of the swirls and designs came into focus his heart began to pound. It was the Jarvis family crest. The same wax seal

that Esther had used to send her correspondence to him. Had his father gotten ahold of a letter intended for him?

Laurence struggled to keep his face impassive, not allowing his fear or trepidation to come to the surface. He brought his hands to the leg of his breeches and wiped them anxiously, trying to clear away the cold sweat that had just broken out along his palms.

“I have received some rather promising correspondence,” his father’s eyes dip from Laurence’s face and then back down to the parchment.

Laurence swallowed hard, wishing that his father would just get on with it. He bit his tongue to keep from asking him what this was all about and why he was dragging this all out. But instead, he just watched his father as he kept his gaze steady.

“Lady Dorothy Jarvis has sent a letter that just arrived about an hour ago,” his father continued, and relief flooded through Laurence. So, he hadn’t gotten ahold of his letters from Esther. “She has made a proposition, and it is one that I plan to uphold. I have written a reply inviting Lady Dorothy, Lady Agnes, and their ward to dinner tomorrow so that we can finalize the details.”

Laurence’s heart leapt while his mind spiraled with confusion. A proposition? What could his father possibly be referencing?

Lord Rippon, however, was content to allow Laurence to sit and mull over his words. Finally, Laurence’s impatience got the better of him.

“Proposition?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

“Yes. You and Agnes are to be betrothed.” His father explained, and Laurence’s stomach bottomed out. “Lady Dorothy believes that you and her daughter will make a fine match, and I have to say I agree. I’ve long since known about your affections for the girl, any fool with eyes could have seen that.”

His father continued talking, explaining about the dinner preparations and what was to be expected of him. But Laurence could no longer focus on his father's words due to the pounding in his head. The other man's voice sounded like it was far off, coming through a tunnel and Laurence's head swam with panic. How had things gone so utterly and terribly wrong?

Merely a week ago this news would have overjoyed Laurence. He would have immediately jumped up and thanked his father for advocating for this match. But now? His father's words did nothing but fill him with dread.

"Laurence?" Lord Rippon's voice broke through Laurence's thoughts like the slamming of a gavel.

Laurence's father was staring at him with consternation, and Laurence could tell by the look on the man's face that he'd been trying to get his attention for some time. Giving himself a slight shake to clear his mind, he focused his attention back on his father and quelched his rising panic.

"I'm sorry Father, go on."

"I said that you should count yourself lucky. The girl had been highly sought after during the ball, and if rumors are to be believed her line of suitors was a mile long." His father chuckled gleefully, and Laurence felt as if he would throw up.

Unable to stop himself any longer, he began to talk.

"Father," Laurence said, grateful that his voice was steady and did not betray the storm of emotions welling inside him. "I'm unsure if this is a good idea."

Lord Rippon's mouth popped open in surprise as he studied his son.

"What do you mean?" he asked Laurence, brow furrowing.

"I mean," Laurence began, trying to think of a way to buy himself more time. "I had hoped to woo Agnes on my own. I told you merely a fortnight ago that I had a plan in place to win her affections. And I wish we could have done so without your interference or that of her mother. I want our marriage to be filled with love and..."

His father scoffed, cutting off the end of Laurence's sentence. Lord Rippon's cheeks had begun to redden, telling Laurence of the man's growing agitation.

"Nonsense," his father bit out. "You will marry the Jarvis girl. It will be final as of tomorrow. You will join our families and you will produce heirs. Do you know why you received the inheritance that you did?"

His father's voice was rising in pitch, and he did not pause to give Laurence time to answer.

"Because your uncle died without siring a child. You will not do the same. And if you wait much longer, Agnes Jarvis will be betrothed to someone else, and you will have lost your chance. Which I will not allow. You've had long enough to woo the girl. Now I have taken matters into my own hands and secured the marriage for you. Be grateful."

His father bit off the last command and then eyed Laurence wearily. Laurence opened his mouth to object, but his father immediately cut him off.

"I will hear no arguments about it, do you understand me. I don't care if you want to marry her now or three years from now. But you will be betrothed to the girl, and you will do as you are told. Or Heaven help me, I will strip you of your titles and your lands. The announcement has not yet been made, so it will be very easy for me to do. Do you understand?"

Laurence gulped as a lump began to form in his throat. He studied his father's face, knowing the stubborn look that Lord Rippon now bore. His father was a proud man, one who did not appreciate his decisions being questioned. And if history had taught Laurence anything, it was that when his father got that look on his face, there was no argument in the world that could sway him from his decision.

Laurence nodded at his father, and the man sat back further in his seat, now satisfied that the issue had been resolved. His father began talking again about the preparations for the upcoming dinner, but all Laurence could really hear was the breaking of his own heart.

CHAPTER 24

Esther

Esther smoothed her skirts as the carriage jostled her about. When her Aunt Dorothy had announced earlier that day that they would all be joining the Boltons at their manor for dinner, Esther's heart had leapt with anticipation. Esther had contemplated writing Laurence again, hoping to find some way to explain her absence when he arrived the day after the ball. But her aunt had kept her busy with chores, and requests almost nonstop.

By the time Esther had gotten to her room the past two nights, she had been too tired to formulate a thought, let alone write one out on paper. Then, when Dorothy had told them at tea that they would be attending supper with the Bolton's, she had wanted to cry out with joy.

She knew that this would be her moment. Some time that night she would find a way to get Laurence alone. She knew that then she would be able to talk to him about their letters and apologize to his face for reacting so poorly at the ball. Esther knew within her very soul that after that night, everything was going to get better.

Since the Bolton's estate was so close, they arrived in no time at all. Esther ran her hands over her skirts once more, before smoothing down her hair where it was pinned in coils. She glanced around the carriage to where Dorothy and Agnes sat.

Her aunt was staring out the window, not speaking to either of the young women, while Agnes studied her hands. Esther found it odd that neither of them had spoken the entirety of the trip. She could not recall a single time during a carriage ride that the two had not dipped their heads together to discuss some matter or another.

Esther had tried to catch her cousin's eye multiple times during the short journey, wondering if the other young lady was alright. But if Esther hadn't known better, she would have sworn that Agnes was deliberately ignoring her. She couldn't think of any reason why that would be the case, so Esther just dismissed it.

As the carriage rolled to a stop and the footman pulled the door open, Esther waited for Dorothy and Agnes to climb from the carriage as was her custom. When it was her turn, she exited daintily, holding the emerald, green skirt aloft as she walked.

Her Aunt Dorothy had brought the dress into Esther's rooms following the announcement of the dinner. Esther had immediately recognized it as one of Agnes'. She had originally thought that perhaps her aunt was going to ask her to clean it. But when Dorothy had commanded Esther that she was to wear it to the Bolton's, she had been unable to hide the shock from her face.

Esther had had the fleeting idea that perhaps Laurence had approached his father and asked if he could inquire about courting Esther. She had fought valiantly not to get her hopes up about that as the hours had ticked past. But now, as they arrived at the Bolton's estate and the hope rushed through her anew, she realized she had failed in her efforts.

She followed after Dorothy and Agnes; the trio of women being led into the home by a small group of servants. Esther glanced around her as they walked, taking in the finery of the house and the grounds surrounding them.

The manor was exquisite, with perfectly curated flower gardens, expertly manicured grounds, and the torches that

lined the drive flickering merrily. Esther worked to keep a smile from tugging at her lips as they climbed the steps.

The doors were pulled open to reveal the Bolton family standing in the atrium. It only dawned on Esther then that she had never seen Laurence's family. She had heard Dorothy and Agnes talk about them enough but had failed to spot them at the ball.

Lord Rippon was much smaller in stature than Laurence, with a lithe frame but the same brown eyes. Lady Bolton was statuesque, blonde, and beautiful. There was another man standing with them who favored Lady Bolton so much, Esther was forced to assume that he was Laurence's eldest brother, William. And there, right in the middle, was Laurence.

Esther's heart beat wildly at the sight of him. He looked handsome in a white and blue waist coat and matching blue breeches. His hands were behind his back, and his beautiful face was impassive as he watched the three women approach.

Esther dropped into a bow on her cue, along with Dorothy and Agnes. Since the Countess and Agnes were obviously already familiar with the Bolton family, they did not require introductions. As such, Dorothy turned to Esther and introduced her to each of the family members in turn. It was confirmed that the blonde man was William, and while Lord Rippon just gave her a passing nod at her introduction, Lady Bolton had smiled at her with warmth. She knew that smile, had seen it on Laurence's face more than once. While Laurence's appearance might favor his father, she could already tell that he had inherited his demeanor from his mother.

They were led into the dining room, and once again Esther was enamored by everything around her. Until the ball, she had not realized how used to the rather meager furnishings of Surrey Manor she had become. She now took the opportunity to admire beautiful things whenever she could, and this home appeared to be filled with them.

The table was set beautifully, with tall, regal candles and springs of greenery placed artfully in the middle. Esther

walked to the seat that a servant indicated for her, and once they pulled it out, she folded her skirts and sat delicately. Agnes sat to her right, and William was to her left. And directly across from her, sat Laurence.

She tried to grab his attention, hoping to share a glance with him to try to convey that all was well, but he would not look at her. His head was down and studying his plate, his jaw working back and forth. Esther glanced to her right, to her cousin. Agnes was beautiful as always, her standard mask of general disinterest affixed firmly in place. But Esther got the strange sense that something else was simmering below the depths of her gaze.

Agnes' posture was straight and rigid. There was a stiffness in her shoulders that betrayed the tension she was holding there. Despite the unaffected look upon her face, Esther did not miss the way her cousins' cheeks would randomly flush right as her jaw clenched, before she fought to recompose herself.

Suspicion began to wash through Esther as she glanced between Laurence and Agnes. The hope that had filled her about what the night might bring began to fade as she read them both. Emboldened, she reached under the table to tap on Agnes' hand, which rested on her lap.

Agnes turned her gaze to Esther, who gave her a questioning look. The woman's eyes softened a bit when they found Esther. And she couldn't be sure, but something like pity and an apology lingered in the depths of Agnes' dark gaze. Esther furrowed her brow in question, hoping beyond all reason that her cousin would be able to find some way to tell her what was going on.

Because it was so clear now that something was afoot. And Esther was sure that Agnes and Laurence knew exactly what it was. Agnes, however, did not answer Esther, opting instead to just give a slight shake of her head before affixing her aloof mask and turning back to stare at the empty plate before her once more.

Lord Rippon, Lady Bolton, and Dorothy were all in rapt conversation, but Esther was having a hard time following. She looked to her left at William, but the man just looked bored. Whether he knew what was to happen that evening or not, his face betrayed nothing.

There was a bustle of noise as servants rushed into the room, each one carefully carrying a delicate bowl. As Esther's was sat in front of her, she stared into the soup. Moments before she had been ravenous, excited for the first course to arrive. But now, with the weight of whatever was to happen that night falling all around her and pooling anxiously in her belly, she found that she did not want to eat at all.

CHAPTER 25

Laurence

Laurence could not bear to look at Esther. When she had walked into the manor, she had looked so beautiful it had almost stolen the breath from him. The emerald green of the gown she wore had brought her pale skin and red-gold hair to life. He had wanted to fall to his knees before her and beg for forgiveness for what he knew was to transpire that night.

He picked at the food in front of him, moving it around his plate but not taking a bite, just like he had done with the last two courses. Only one more plate to go before he knew his father would bring his knife to his glass, demanding the attention of the room as he made his announcements.

At some point, the energy of the table had shifted. Laurence had risked a glance to Esther, and she had been staring at her food, her prior eagerness replaced with a look of resignation. She may not have known exactly what would be revealed that night, but she had at least pieced together that it was something she would not like.

Laurence wished that he could warn her, that he could pull her aside and tell her that his affection lied with her and her alone. But to do so would risk breaking his resolve entirely. He was not sure if he could speak to her and resign himself to shatter her heart so completely. He could not imagine being the one that would make her feel as miserable as he himself felt at that moment. But he guessed that was inevitable now.

For what it was worth, Agnes had seemed unbothered. He'd caught a glimpse of a shared look between the two cousins and wondered if perhaps they had begun to bond after all. It was with regret that he realized that any fondness Esther may have found for Agnes was about to be broken upon the floor like glass.

The plate in front of him was cleared, and he resigned himself to studying the candle in front of him. He watched closely as a drop of wax raced down the side of it, making its way to the golden holder below before pooling within it. The final plate arrived and was sat in front of him, and once again Laurence began to move the food around.

He had tried earlier to take a few small bites when he had noticed his mother watching him wearily. She had shot him a questioning look, and he had felt terribly that she was worrying about him. So, he'd tried to eat. But the moment the food passed his lips it had tasted like ash in his mouth. He had had to fight against the urge to spit it back out and swallowed it with extreme difficulty. After that moment, he did not attempt to eat again.

The chatter raged on around him, and he began counting down the minutes until this plate would be cleared. His father always made large announcements just before desert.

"Good news deserves sweet food," he would always proclaim proudly.

It had been a point of amusement for most of his life, but on that night, Laurence abhorred the sentiment. He shot another look at Agnes, and she met his eyes. She gave him a soft, encouraging smile and he wished that he could return it. Agnes was as trapped in this as he was.

After he had left his father's study the previous afternoon, he'd wondered about Agnes. He had thought that perhaps she would refuse to marry him. Laurence had hoped that perhaps, his salvation would be found in his childhood friend. But that hope had been dashed when she had arrived that evening, striding in on a cloud of casual disinterest with her chin raised

high. Laurence couldn't help but wonder how far she would take the lie.

The servants returned, and as one took the plate from in front of him, he began to grow sick to his stomach. As the last maid filed from the room, his father stood. Just as Laurence had expected, he raised his glass and rapped his knife against it to garner the attention of the table, completely oblivious to the fact that almost half of the people sitting there were caught in a fit of melancholy.

"I'm sure by now you're wondering why we've invited you all here," Lord Rippon said with a grin. "And while I do enjoy the company of our dear friends, the Jarvis' and their honored guest, I assure you there is a reason for this delightful dinner."

He paused for a moment, glancing around the table at each person in turn. If he could read the mood of the people sitting in front of him, he gave no indication.

"It is with great pleasure," he continued, "that I announce my son, Laurence, has been made a baronet. And he will inherit a sizeable plot of land just south of Surrey."

Everyone at the table clapped, and Laurence tried to affix an appreciative smile on his face. He glanced at everyone around him, everyone that was, except Esther.

"And with that in mind, my son must also consider marriage."

Laurence couldn't help it. He had to watch Esther as his father spoke. At the mention of marriage, something like hope lit behind Esther's silver gaze, and Laurence hated that that light was about to be distinguished. She finally met his eyes, but with so many people around them he could not show her what he truly felt. So, he watched her with abject horror as his father continued.

"The Jarvis' family has been a friend to the Boltons' for many, many years. So, it is a great honor that our families will be joined by the marriage of our son, Sir Laurence Bolton, and their daughter, Lady Agnes Jarvis."

Lord Rippon held his glass aloft, and Laurence did the same. But he did not take his eyes off Esther. He hated himself as he watched the hope go out of her expression. A barrage of emotions flashed across her delicate, beautiful face as she too put her glass in the air. By the time everyone around had saluted the new couple, a grim resolve decorated Esther's features.

When the cheering and the congratulations were complete, the desert course was brought out and placed before them. Laurence had always been fond of sweets. In fact, he could not recall a time that a piece of cake was set in front of him, and he did not want to eat it. In that moment, however, he began to wonder if he would ever be able to enjoy anything sweet ever again.

CHAPTER 26

Agnes

Agnes smiled prettily as she looked around the room, careful as ever not to let her carefully curated mask slip. Her heart had been pounding all evening, and she had tried as best she could to keep her expression under control. She hated everything about that night. Hated the food, hated the dark blue gown her mother had forced her to wear, hated the way her stockings kept shifting over her ankles. But most of all, she hated that she was hurting Esther and being forced to marry Laurence.

She had tried her hardest to protest when her mother told her what she was going to do. Agnes had begged, in fact, for the first time she could recall, that her mother not require her to marry Laurence Bolton. But her mother had been firm.

The Boltons', while not as high ranked as some of her other suitors, were exceedingly rich. Her mother had never deigned to discuss their finances with Agnes, but she had picked up on enough to know that they were struggling. She knew that she would be lucky if Dorothy could scrounge up a sizeable dowry. But that would all be solved the moment she married a Bolton.

Agnes hated that this weight had been put on her shoulders. But after her mother had raged at her, threatening her with everything she could think of, Agnes had finally given in. Dorothy had outlined the plan carefully, letting

Agnes knew exactly what would be said at the dinner. So, when Dorothy began speaking loudly about the letters that she had “caught” Laurence and Agnes exchanging, she was not the least bit surprised.

It appeared Laurence and Esther were, though. Agnes felt Esther stiffen beside her, and Agnes wanted nothing more than to reach over to her cousin. But instead, she just clenched her fists under the table while she kept her dainty smile affixed across her lips.

Everyone at the table oohed and ahhed as her mother recounted the tale of the letters. And how when she found them, she’d asked Agnes if her heart lay with Laurence. And when she discovered it had, she’d written Lord Bolton immediately. Agnes nodded and threw affectionate glances at the man she was now betrothed to, but inside she was roiling.

After a while, her mother pushed back from the table and announced that she would like some fresh air. She turned to Agnes and Laurence; a smug smile plastered across her face.

“Perhaps you two would like a walk in the garden? A little privacy for the new couple?” Her smile stayed in place, but her eyes flashed with warning, letting Agnes know that should she object now there would be consequences.

“I would love that,” Agnes said softly before looking across the table. “Laurence?”

He nodded curtly at her before rising from his seat. Agnes walked toward the threshold of the door and met Laurence there. He offered her his arm, and she accepted. Draping her forearm through it daintily. They walked toward the back of the house, with Dorothy not far behind them.

She was reminded of just a few days prior, when Laurence had visited the manor as a potential suitor. Agnes recalled her words then, how she had rejected him as gently as she could. She had even tried to steer him back toward Esther, and she had been able to tell during dinner that it had worked.

But now, all that had done was make him miserable as well. He had found love unexpectedly, and by accident. And

now, it no longer mattered. Agnes' heart broke for him.

Agnes wished that she could tell him all of this. Wished that she could find some way to indicate to him that she was as miserable as he was. But she knew that she could not. When her mother had explained the truth of their finances to Agnes, and how low her dowry actually was, she had realized that she had no choice.

She might be fond of Esther, might even have wished at one point that they would have been able to be friends. But she would not be able to risk being unable to marry and get out from the confines of Surrey Manor.

Her mother had told her exactly how to act, what she had to say when Laurence probed her about the letters. They knew that neither he nor Esther had ever signed them with their real name, so Agnes' role was to ensure that Laurence believed it was Agnes who had been writing him. If the heartbroken way that Laurence had been glancing at Esther throughout the night was any indication, he suspected that it was she who had corresponded with him. But there was no way for him to know for sure. And Agnes knew she had to convince him otherwise.

The fresh air rushed forward to greet her as Laurence led her onto the patio. The garden had been one of her favorites parts of Bolton Manor when they were children. Any chance she had gotten, she had convinced Laurence to take her out here. Agnes wondered if he remembered that now.

She supposed he probably did. Because while she knew Laurence no longer held romantic affections for her, that did not stop him from being the kind and sentimental man she knew that he was. And as terrible as it made Agnes feel, she knew that all she could do was to move forward with the plan and hope that what she was about to do would not breed resentment in Laurence for years to come.

"It is a beautiful night," she said, keeping her tone light and upbeat.

"That it is." Laurence answered, his own voice wrought with contemplation.

“Dinner was lovely,” Agnes tried again.

“That it was.”

The words fell between them, and Agnes’ mind began to scramble for some way to make things right. Or, if not right, at the very least make them better.

“I can’t help but wonder,” Laurence began, “why you reacted the way you did at the ball?”

“I’m sorry?” Agnes furrowed her brow at him in confusion.

“When I showed you my handkerchief?” he clarified.

“Oh, that.” Agnes said, laughing prettily. “I was afraid. I did not want to react in front of all of those people, you see. And I had already promised my dances to so many. It was all quite overwhelming.”

Agnes sent out a prayer that she was convincing, that her guesses were correct. She knew that only seeing one side of the letters, the letters from Laurence, put her at a disadvantage. She had no idea what Esther had said to him. So, all Agnes could do was to answer to the best of her abilities and hope that she was able to at the very least cast doubt.

“And how about your passions? How are your pursuit of those?” he asked, his tone polite.

“What passions?” Agnes inquired, trying to keep her own voice jovial. She knew that she was treading a thin and dangerous line.

“Your books? You told me in your letters of how reading was your greatest passion.”

Agnes scrambled. She could recall seeing Esther on multiple occasions curled up in the reading room. So, it would make sense if she indicated that was something she enjoyed doing.

“Yes, it’s going so well. Why, just the other day I finished that book I told you about and then sat down to read another!”

Agnes looked at Laurence sidelong, and she watched as his face transformed. Whatever it was that Esther indicated she was passionate about, it had not been books. She could see that written plainly on Laurence's face. Agnes had lied, and they both knew that Laurence was aware of that.

He was enough of a gentleman that he didn't push the issue. Instead, he just claimed that he had had enough fresh air and wished to return to the manor. As they began their walk back to the house, Agnes' brain began spinning. She wondered if there was anything she could do to salvage the situation.

An image of the Earl who had visited on the day she received suitors flashed through her mind. A quick glimpse of his beautiful smile, his golden hair, and the memory of his beautiful laugh filled her mind. Agnes quickly shoved the thought to the side, but as she did so, she couldn't help but wonder if she should try to salvage this plan with Laurence at all.

CHAPTER 27

Esther

Esther remained seated at the table as Lord Rippon and Lady Bolton chatted excitedly together. She tried not to listen in at first, but when no one said anything to her, she had found it impossible to ignore them.

They were going on about the match between their son and Agnes. And while listening to them made her feel ill, it also made the entire evening feel real. Since the announcement Esther couldn't help but feel as if she was trapped in a nightmare. As if everything around her wasn't actually occurring. So, while the conversation between the Bolton's was tearing her heart to shreds, it was also the only thing keeping her firmly rooted in reality.

Footsteps sounded down the corridor near the formal dining room, and Esther glanced up to see Laurence and Agnes walking through the doors arm in arm, with Dorothy on their heels. Esther's heart stopped beating at the sight of the new couple.

They looked beautiful together, she had to admit. But granted, she had always thought that. Laurence was too handsome and Agnes too lovely for them to not make a striking pair. Esther fixed her expression into one of approval, or at least she hoped she did as everyone turned their attention to Laurence and Agnes.

"Back so soon?" Lady Bolton asked, smiling widely.

“It is a bit cool this evening,” Agnes explained, giving the Lady a respectful dip of her head.

Lady Bolton merely nodded before standing, “perhaps we could retire to the drawing room?”

There were nods and agreement all around, and Esther pushed herself to her feet to follow. As they walked after Lady Bolton down the hall, Esther turned to Dorothy and claimed she needed a spot of fresh air before joining.

Dorothy gave her an admonishing look but dared not reprimand Esther in front of the Boltons. So instead, she just pointed Esther in the direction of the doors. She followed the path that had been outlined by her aunt quickly, craving the feel of the cool night air against her skin.

As she finally pushed open the doors, she pulled in deep, measured breaths. Esther’s mind was spiraling in a thousand different directions as she tried to make sense of the events that unfolded that evening. She had no idea how things had gone so terribly, horribly wrong.

Esther had no doubt now that the letters had been written for Agnes and that she had somehow gotten ahold of them. Her heart broke as she thought of all the ways she had fooled herself over the last few weeks, imagining that it would be possible for her to fall in love and create a happy life for herself. She should have known better from the start than to believe in such fanciful notions.

She cursed herself out loud, glad that she had no other company but the watchful eyes of the moon.

“Esther,” a voice said behind her, and she jumped with a fright.

Clutching her hand to her chest, Esther whirled to face the intruder. But when her eyes landed on Laurence, everything came crashing down around her. She worked diligently to calm her frantically beating heart. Trying as hard as she could to school her expression into one of polite interest.

“Laurence,” she said as she forced herself to smile. “You startled me.”

“I am quite sorry,” Laurence explained.

He stepped forward closer to Esther, but she could not bear him being near. So, she retreated. He noted it with a look of dissatisfaction, but he did not try to advance again.

“I merely wanted to come and see if you were alright. Lady Dorothy stated you had required fresh air and I...” his brow furrowed as if he wasn’t sure how he wanted that sentence to end. His eyes searched her face, but Esther had no idea what he might be looking for.

She saved him the trouble of having to finish his thought and said, “it is quite alright. As am I. It was just a little stuffy, that is all.”

“Oh,” Laurence responded, and Esther could have sworn that there was a note of melancholy in his voice.

“Congratulations,” Esther said, glad when her voice did not betray her or show any hint of her dismay. “On both your betrothal and the announcement of your title. It must be a great relief to no longer have to hide it from the world.”

Laurence’s eyes continued to rake over her, scanning her face and her body language. She had to fight against the urge to shy away under his stare.

“Do you mean that?” he asked, his voice rising slightly.

It gave Esther the distinct impression that he was upset, but about what she could not fathom to guess.

“Of course I do,” she responded with a slight shake of her head. “I would always be happy for the accomplishments and milestones of a friend.”

That word, ‘friend’, she wanted to scoff at it. It did not make sense to apply it to him, to this man who she had fallen in love with for the contents of his soul. But they could never be anything more than that. It was a foolish notion from the very start. And so, the term ‘friend’ would have to do.

“Is that what we are?” His voice was low, betraying some level of hurt lying just below the surface.

Esther wanted to prod at what he was upset about but refrained from doing so. She was worried that the response would break the last bit of resolve that she was so desperately clinging to.

Laurence nodded and then glanced to the garden beyond, then to the sky, before turning his attention back to the house.

“I better be going then,” he said, hiking his thumb over his shoulder. “I’ll see you inside?”

Esther nodded her response and then watched as Laurence turned, shoulders slightly slumped, and strode back into the manner. The last bit of decorum left her as the door slammed shut, and her face crumpled as a few errant tears spilled from her eyes.

She let them fall for only a moment before swiping a hand over her cheeks and brushing them away. Esther straightened her spine, and with one final, deep breath she followed in Laurence’s footsteps and walked back into the house. And as she walked, she sent out a silent prayer that thin string of restraint that she was clinging to did not snap for the remainder of the evening.

CHAPTER 28

Laurence

“**B**reathe,” Charles’s voice broke through the din of Laurence’s roaring thoughts, making him snap to attention. “It is all going to be alright.”

“How?” Laurence raged, causing Brimmer to shift nervously.

“I don’t know,” Charles admitted, blowing out a breath. “But it has to.”

Laurence eyed his friend wearily, wondering how any of this would possibly get better. The night prior, when his betrothal to Agnes had been announced, Laurence hadn’t believed that he could possibly have felt worse than he did when he had watched Esther’s face fall at the dinner table. But then, when he had followed her into the garden, he had wanted to shatter completely.

Laurence had been able to tell by the set of Esther’s shoulders and the clench of her jaw that she was hurt. And he could not blame her for that. He had wanted to confront her there on the terrace, in fact that was what he had followed after her to do. But somewhere along the way, during his journey from the drawing room to the doors that lead to the garden and saw her standing there, he had lost his nerve.

He had realized that them knowing they were in love with each other would only make things worse. Because the horrid

truth of it all was that it did not matter. His father had been clear that he must marry Agnes. And should he and Esther voice their feelings, it would only serve to further break their hearts.

So, he had taken the coward's approach. Laurence had lied and said that he just wanted to inquire about her health. When she had looked at him and plastered that fake smile across her face, he hadn't been sure if he had wanted to vomit or to throw something. Laurence had wanted nothing more than to offer for them to run away, far into the country where no one would find them. But he could never ask that of anyone, and so when he had no longer been able to stand the formal manner between them, he had gone back inside.

The rest of the evening had been entirely abysmal. His father had gone on and on in front of everyone in the drawing room about how he had watched Laurence faun over Agnes for years, and how he was proud that his son had now won the object of his desires.

Agnes had played her part perfectly. She had laughed prettily at the entire charade, all the while watching Laurence out of the side of her eyes. Laurence had known that asking Agnes specific questions about the letters would be her downfall, and it had worked. So now they were both aware that she was lying, and he could tell that Agnes was waiting for him to use that information to his advantage.

He wouldn't, of course. Because while his childhood friend was putting on a show, and her lying and going along with their parent's schemes was hurting Laurence deeply – he knew that Agnes was hurting too. She could fake all the smiles she liked, but Laurence had known her long enough that he could tell. Agnes had not changed as much as she would have hoped.

He had been glad when the night had finally come to an end. When the Jarvis' and Esther had finally announced that it was time for them to retire, he had been hit with a fit of conflicting emotions that almost twenty-four hours later he was still having trouble processing. On the one hand, he had been overjoyed that he would no longer have to see Esther and

the pain behind her eyes. He wouldn't have to look at Agnes and think of how just weeks prior he had prayed so earnestly that he would be betrothed to her. And that now that he had gotten his wish, he could not be more miserable. So, when they left, he was glad that he would no longer have to endure the constant reminder that Agnes and Esther's presence provided.

But on the other hand, he also was terrified that he would not see Esther again. Not before the announcement of his betrothal was made public, at least. He had hoped that perhaps he could work up the courage to approach her and to bring up the letters, constantly going back and forth on if it was a bad idea or a good one. And though it brought him pain, he also found solace in being able to look upon her lovely face in his time of need.

So, when the door to the manor had shut firmly behind them, Laurence had announced that he, too, would retire and strode immediately for his rooms. He'd shut himself in tightly, and then stood before a window that overlooked the drive to their manor. He'd watched as his heart shattered and the carriage faded into the distance, taking the woman he loved and the woman he was betrothed to farther away with each passing minute.

Laurence had not been able to make sense of his feelings ever since. And now, there he stood. In the stable, bearing his soul and all of its pain to Charles. His most trusted friend had had little to say when Laurence recounted the events of the prior night to him. Charles had just listened while Laurence spoke, his eyes flashing with worry and then pain for his friend.

It had helped some, Laurence supposed, being able to purge his thoughts and feelings out to someone else. It made him feel less alone. But as Charles stood looking at him, his face stricken, Laurence found that once again, he had no idea what to do.

His breath left him in a huff as he plopped onto a bale of hay, running his hands through his hair.

“Charles, what if I never see her again?” Laurence asked, voice dejected. “Or worse, what if I do?”

“What do you mean?” Charles inquired.

“Well, we are still in the height of the season. What if I must watch her get pursued by suitors now that Agnes has been spoken for? What if I have to watch as she dances and laughs with other men? I fear that it might break me.”

Charles considered that for a moment, his jaw working back and forth before he finally spoke.

“Perhaps then you’ll be able to find time to talk to her though? It might help...finally being able to tell her the truth.”

“I don’t even know the truth myself, at least not anymore.” Laurence responded pitifully. “I thought I did. When we had planned to go to Sarah’s before my father arranged my courtship with Agnes, I was so sure that the letters were written by Esther. But Charles, what if I’m wrong?”

He looked at his friend with pain filled eyes. “If I was corresponding with Esther, how did she get my letters instead of Agnes? How did this all happen? And Agnes, while I’m sure she was lying about something...what if she wasn’t lying about being the one to write to me? It’s just all so confusing.”

“Do you think it would help if you knew?”

Laurence nodded and Charles gave him a soft laugh.

“Well then that’s an easy fix, isn’t it?” Charles said jovially.

Laurence was shocked at the sudden change in his friend’s demeanor. He brought his gaze back up to Charles, and the man was smiling at him fondly.

“We can just go to Sarah’s.” Charles offered, giving him a look that so clearly said *‘you should have figured that out’*.

Laurence considered that, his spirits rising marginally at the thought. He had not lied. It would make him feel better to know the truth. Even if it wouldn’t have changed things, it would still allow him to have a little bit of closure.

Finally, Laurence nodded, and Charles strode forward and clapped him on the shoulder.

“There you are,” Charles chimed. “I’ll bring the carriage around, just meet me on the front drive.”

Laurence smiled at his friend before turning and striding from the stables. He stood patiently on the front step, the heaviness of his emotions continuing to lift as he waited for Charles. In what felt like no time at all, he heard the rumble of the wheels along the gravel just before the cab came into sight.

Laurence climbed inside and tried to think of anything but Esther as they jostled along their way to the modiste’s shop. But his thoughts still slid to her as they drove. He began to wonder if there was any way to undo what had been done.

While technically his betrothal to Agnes had been arranged, no one else from the ton knew besides their families. So, their courtship was not yet official. He was sure that his father would wait to make a formal announcement until he could cause the largest spectacle possible. So that did buy Laurence a little bit of time. But not much.

The next ball was the following evening. Laurence could think of no time his father would approve of more than a ball to announce to the world that Laurence was now to be wed. But what would happen to Laurence if he found a way out of the engagement?

He shook his head, admonishing himself for entertaining such notions. There was little to no possibility that he would be able to break off his betrothal. And fantasizing about it would only serve to further break his heart.

The carriage rolled to a stop and Laurence exited immediately. His boots clicked across the cobblestones as he and Charles strode for the door to Sarah’s. When they pulled it open, the doorbell chimed merrily.

Sarah, who was only a few feet inside the door, working diligently on a gown that was on display in the window, looked up with a fright. Her blue eyes softened when they

landed on Lawrence and Charles, and they both gave the old woman a smile.

“Hello boys,” Sarah said with a slight bow of her head.

“Sarah, pardon the intrusion,” Laurence said, stepping forward.

She studied him as he approached, and her brow furrowed in concern.

“What is it?” she asked, her keen eyes missing nothing as she clearly picked up on his distress. “What is the matter?”

Laurence took a deep breath, steeling himself before answering.

“Do you recall the letters you told me to write to Agnes?” He asked, and Sarah nodded eagerly.

“Of course I do.”

“Right, and the letter I sent with Charles to have you deliver to Surrey Manor?”

Again, Sarah nodded.

“Well, is it possible the letter was delivered to Esther, and not Agnes?”

Sarah looked at him with confusion, her brow furrowed as she searched her mind for an answer.

“What do you mean?” she inquired.

“I mean, is it possible the letter was given to Esther, and I have been corresponding with her ever since. I had thought that I was talking to Agnes and had been shocked when her replies seemed so sweet. I had fallen in love with the words on the page and the person behind them, just as you had anticipated I would. But then, at the first ball of the season, the way Agnes reacted when I tried to reveal myself, the way she has constantly snubbed me despite the words on the page being so beautiful and affectionate. None of it makes sense, unless it’s been Esther all along.”

Sarah eyed him wearily, and he could tell that she was not entirely following the conversation. And so, he started over

again, from the beginning. He explained how he had used the name of a childhood game as a reference for Agnes, but to an outsider it could have easily applied to Esther. Laurence told her about the way the letters made him feel seen for the first time in a very long time, and how with each passing correspondence he fell more deeply for the person sending him those beautiful words.

As he talked, Sarah's face lit with joy. She did not seem at all bothered by the fact that he had been corresponding with the wrong woman. Quite the opposite, in fact. When he got to the first ball and how he had shown his handkerchief to both women, and their subsequent reactions, she had gasped.

"Could it be?" Sarah asked him eagerly, clapping her hands together. "Would you court her then? If it is true? Would you court Esther? Oh, I so hope so. She is a lovely young woman."

Laurence hated that his next words would disappoint Sarah, but he had no choice.

"I cannot." Laurence said, keeping his voice brusque and even. "I have been betrothed to Agnes."

Sarah's face fell, and she glanced around the room in confusion, which prompted Laurence to begin telling her about the day his father called him into the office and the subsequent dinner. This time as Laurence talked her face began to fall. As he finished, she looked positively distraught.

"But Sarah," Laurence said as he reached the end of the story, "I need to know... Is it possible? Could Esther have gotten the letter?"

Sarah began pacing, her head lowered, and her voice was faint, as if she was recounting events to herself.

"I put the letter in the dress, of course. The one I had made for Lady Agnes." Sarah contemplated for a moment, then her eyebrows shot up. "What color was Esther wearing the night of the ball?"

"Blue. Why?"

“The blue dress was originally made for Agnes, not Esther.” Sarah said, and then she began to fill him in on everything that had happened with the dresses.

While she spoke, Laurence’s heart began to race. It had all begun to make sense. And as she got to the end, telling Laurence and Charles how she had assumed that the young women would stick to their original dresses. But, apparently, they had not. Then, she said a few words that made Laurence’s heart drop even further.

“And then, I prayed. I prayed that the letter would make its way to the woman who was meant for you,” Sarah’s eyes shone as she looked at Laurence. “And it may not have worked the way that I intended. But it did work.”

Laurence stared at her; eyes wide as her words sunk in. Could it be true? Could fate have smiled on him so kindly as to ensure that his letter fell into Esther’s hands? And if that were true, who was he to give up on a gift that was personally delivered by God?

A plan started to take shape in Laurence’s mind, one that would hopefully get him out of the betrothal to Agnes before the announcement could be made, and one that would also end with him confessing his love to Esther.

Laurence turned, looking at Charles and Sarah in turn.

“I think I know a way out of this.”

CHAPTER 29

Esther

Agnes sat at the pianoforte, delicately picking at the white keys while Esther dusted the bookshelves. Esther tried as hard as she could to tune out the sound, to think of anything else except for the woman sitting in the room with her – the one that was now betrothed to the man that Esther loved. But it was no use.

More than a few times Esther could have sworn that she felt Agnes' eyes on her back, thought that the notes from the pianoforte came a little more slowly, as if the woman playing them had been lost in thought. But each time that Esther would turn to check, the other woman's eyes were firmly on the instrument in front of her.

She wondered if perhaps Agnes wanted to say something to her. Esther had tried as hard as she could to avoid her cousin since the announcement of her betrothal to Laurence the night before. Thankfully, that hadn't been too hard, as Esther had been tied up in her chores for most of the day.

But when Agnes had strode into the music room where Esther had been working, she had had to fight to keep her shoulders from sinking. Esther suspected that it was not Agnes' fault. She had seen the ways in which she had dismissed Laurence, had been perplexed by them, even. So, Esther felt assured that it was Dorothy who had pushed the betrothal. But that did not stop Esther from still wanting to

weep over the entire scenario. In fact, she had spent the night prior doing just that.

As Esther thought about it a lump rose in her throat. The entire carriage ride back to the manor, Dorothy had spoken to Agnes loudly about the now impending nuptials, all the while shooting daggers in Esther's direction. Esther had bit her tongue and held back her tears for as long as she could. But finally, when she had shut the door to her bedchamber, she had curled up in her bed with Abbey tucking herself into Esther's side, and Esther had wept until she no longer had tears left to cry.

Esther reached up, feeling underneath her eyes, and felt that they were still slightly swollen from the endeavor. She wished that there was something she could do. She felt so utterly helpless about the entire situation.

A knock at the front door rang out loudly through the manor, bringing Esther out of her thoughts and back into the present. She set down her duster and walked through the parlor as she made her way toward the door. The music spilling from the pianoforte followed her the entire way, taunting her.

As she pulled open the large, wooden doors at the front of the room, she spied a courier. He was standing at the top of the stairs beside a large, white box that was closed with a bright red ribbon. Esther automatically identified it as one from Sarah's shop.

She couldn't help it, her brain immediately turned to Laurence. The thought of the first letter and how it had arrived to her racing through her mind, she couldn't help but wonder if perhaps he would use Sarah again to get word to Esther. But her hopes were immediately dashed once the courier began to speak.

"A delivery for Lady Agnes Jarvis," he announced.

Esther tried to hide her disappointment as she directed the courier into the house and instructed him on where to lay the box. When it was secured and she closed the door behind the delivery man, a cruel voice rang out behind her.

“Who was at the door?”

Esther turned on her heel, finding her Aunt Dorothy standing behind her at the top of the stairs. She was glowering down at Esther, her flinty eyes narrowed.

“A delivery from Miss Sarah for Agnes,” Esther explained.

“Ah,” Dorothy said as she strode down the final few stairs and into the atrium. She walked across the tiled floor, the heels of her boots clicking with each step, until she stopped before the box that had been set upon one of the tables against the walls. “It must be the dress I ordered for her for the ball tomorrow night.”

Esther scrunched her face in consternation.

“Ball tomorrow?” she asked, unable to hide her confusion.

Neither Dorothy nor Agnes had mentioned that there was to be another ball so soon. She knew that she had nothing that she could wear, but perhaps Dorothy just wanted her to borrow one of Agnes’ old gowns?

“Yes,” Dorothy said slowly, turning her gaze to Esther.

As the woman’s eyes roved over her, the corners of her mouth pricked up in a cruel smile.

“Oh dear,” Dorothy continued, her voice low and menacing. “You didn’t think you were going, did you?”

Esther stared at her aunt, unable to keep the bewildered expression from crossing her face.

“I thought...” Esther began, but her words failed her.

Had Dorothy not said countless times that Esther was to attend the entire season? That she would be glad when Esther was finally betrothed and was then out of Dorothy’s hair when she could be released into the care of her husband? How was Esther to find a husband if she did not attend the ball?

“Foolish girl,” Dorothy tsked, taking a step toward Esther.

Esther tried as hard as she could not to shrink away under the weight of her aunt’s gaze, but when Dorothy took another step, and then another, Esther’s feet moved of her own accord.

She retreated a few steps, trying to keep as much distance between her and the advancing woman as she could.

“Did you truly think that I would buy you another gown and allow you to attend another ball after the stunt you attempted?” Dorothy’s voice had become saccharine sweet, high pitched in a way that showed it was all an act.

“I apologize, Aunt. But I do not know what you are referring to.” Esther said, keeping her voice low and contrite.

“Do not lie to me, girl,” Dorothy barked, advancing again.

Esther tried to retreat another step, but her back came in contact with the wall. Her breaths began coming in short, labored pants as her Aunt glowered at her.

“I know it was you behind those silly little letters.” Dorothy hissed as she continued to advance. “Agnes found them, and she brought them right to me.”

Esther’s heart hammered wildly as her aunt continued to speak, but she forced herself to not shrink away anymore. Instead, with each passing word Esther used it as fuel to strengthen her spine and her resolve to not cry in front of the cruel, vengeful woman in front of her.

“At first,” Dorothy continued, “I had thought that perhaps you were corresponding with a servant. But imagine my surprise when Agnes revealed that it was Laurence Bolton. A baron’s son. Really? You thought to aim so high?”

Dorothy laughed cruelly, “There’s no way he was writing to you. He has always had his eyes set on my daughter, and I’m willing to bet that you knew that. You saw the way he looked at her, and you got jealous. So when you saw one of her letters, you seized your opportunity. You lied and you schemed, and you stole a suitor from my Agnes, hoping that perhaps he would propose to you instead of her. But now you’ve been caught, you duplicitous, sniveling little child. And we used your nasty plots against you. But if you think for one moment that I will allow you to go to another ball and provide you with another chance to embarrass me, I will dare you to

think again. No, you will not be leaving this estate for quite some time.”

Tears pricked at the corners of Esther’s eyes, and she fought with all of her might to keep them from falling. She was unsure of how to respond. When Dorothy had spoken of the letters the night prior, she had not been sure if Dorothy was aware of Esther’s involvement. She had hoped not, but now she knew the truth. Esther got the feeling that whatever she said in that moment would only serve to further anger her aunt, which she would sorely like to avoid.

“Mother?” A voice rang from the back of the room.

Both Esther and Dorothy’s gaze snapped toward the direction the voice had come from and found Agnes standing in the doorway to the atrium with a look of confusion upon her face. Esther could only imagine how the scene before her looked when she had walked in on it. Dorothy was merely inches away from Esther now, glaring down at her with a viciousness that Esther had never imagined possible on another person’s face.

Dorothy took a few steps away from Esther, smoothing her hair down and looking at Agnes with a calculating but controlled expression.

“I was just informing Esther that she will not be attending the ball tomorrow and letting her know I’m aware of her tricks,” Dorothy shot Esther another scathing glare.

Esther watched Agnes, noticing the shock on the other girl’s face when Dorothy announced that Esther would be staying at the manor the following night. The shock was gone as quickly as it had come, falling from Agnes’ face, and being immediately replaced by her mask of disinterest. But that did not hinder Esther from noticing.

She did not know, Esther thought to herself. And she couldn’t help but wonder what other parts of her aunt’s plans Agnes was unaware of.

Esther scrubbed the final dish and wiped the sweat from her brow. She cast a look around the kitchen, ensuring that

everything was finished before drying her hands and striding from the room. Esther had worked tirelessly from the moment she had woken up that morning, hoping that perhaps her aunt would have a change of heart.

She tried not to get her hopes up, to only think of it as a passing fancy. A blip of possibility. But as the hours had passed and Esther completed chore after chore, her hopes had risen despite her best efforts. And now, with everything done for the evening she couldn't help the flutter in her belly as she stalked through the house in search of her aunt.

If the Countess said yes, she had no idea what she would wear. But that would have to be a bridge that she crossed when she got to it.

Esther crept through the house slowly, working all the while to steel her nerves as she got closer and closer to her aunt's chambers. Once outside the door, Esther raised her fist and rapped softly on it. She heard her aunt's voice ring out on the other side, commanding her to come in.

As she did, she spotted Dorothy in one of her reading chairs, a book propped in her lap while two maids readied a fuchsia gown. She glanced up from the page, spotting Esther and a look of annoyance flitted across the woman's pudgy face.

"What do you want?" Dorothy hissed.

Esther bowed her head, hoping that with a little contrition and flattery, she would be able to win a little bit of her aunt's favor.

"I am sorry to intrude," Esther began, but she was quickly interrupted by Dorothy's snide voice.

"Then why did you?"

Esther had to fight against a wince as she continued.

"All of my chores for today are complete." Esther said, working to keep her voice soft and demure. "I was hoping, that perhaps, you had given any additional consideration to me attending the ball."

Esther did not glance at her aunt. Instead, she kept her eyes on the floor in front of her, her head dipped in a sign of respect. She held her breath, not wanting to so much as breathe, in case it angered the woman before her.

She did not look up as she heard her aunt close her book. Nor did she look up when she heard the swishing of Dorothy's skirts or her footsteps across the rug, indicating she was advancing on Esther. Instead, Esther just stood there, eyes averted and downcast. The perfect picture of contrition.

"You hoped, did you?" Dorothy's voice was light, and almost airy. Esther couldn't help the hope that flared within her.

Dorothy's feet came into Esther's line of sight as she approached, but still Esther did not look up. She watched as the woman's round fingers reached out and took Esther by the chin, raising her gaze to meet Dorothy's.

As Esther beheld the cruel satisfaction lingering within her aunt's gaze, her hope wilted. She would not let Esther go; she was sure of it now. It had been foolish of her to allow fanciful notions to run away with her, childish even.

"What part of you will not be leaving this estate did you not understand yesterday?" Dorothy's grip on Esther's chin hardened, the woman's nails began to bite into Esther's skin.

Esther fought the urge to wince, forcing herself instead to hold her aunt's gaze and not shy away.

"But I see me being stern did not stop your scheming. You thought what?" Dorothy continued. "That perhaps if you did the things you were instructed to do it would earn you special treatment? You thought that you deserved to go to the ball and steal more attention from my daughter?"

Dorothy acted quickly, dropping her hold of Esther's chin and darting forward to grip the top of her arm instead. Dorothy's nails bit into the flesh of Esther's bicep through the sleeve of her gown, and she had to swallow past a hiss of pain.

Dorothy began walking, tugging on Esther's arm to force her along with her. Esther had trouble keeping up with her

aunt as she marched with a quickened pace through the manor, not slowing as they weaved in and out of corridors, carving a path to Esther's room, Dorothy talking all the while.

“You ungrateful, loathsome little brat. I feed you, I clothe you, I do everything that I should. And yet you conspire to tarnish my daughter's future, *my* future. I will not have it.”

They arrived at the door to Esther's bedchamber, and Dorothy wrenches it open with her free hand. With all her might, she hurled Esther inside, and Esther was unable to stop her trajectory as her feet got tangled in the hem of her gown. She felt herself lose her footing, and she cried out as she began to topple toward the floor.

Throwing out her hands to catch herself, she hit the ground right as the door slammed shut behind her. Esther looked back in horror at the closed, wooden doorway. And when she heard the lock of the door slide home with a resounding *click*, tears sprang to her eyes.

“You will stay here until morning; do you hear me? I will not have you sneaking out to wreck what I have planned.” Dorothy hissed on the other side of the wooden pane. “Because you see, Agnes and Laurence's betrothal will be announced tonight. The entire ton will know by the stroke of midnight that my daughter is to wed the son of Baron Bolton. And after that, there will be nothing you can do. Do you hear me?”

Esther could not answer, her throat was thick with tears. She heard Dorothy storm away, and Esther threw her head in her hands, her body wracking with sobs. Her shoulders shook as the tears fell from her eyes.

She wasn't sure if minutes had passed, or perhaps it was hours. But, when finally, her tears began to slow, she wiped her hands over her cheeks, drying them. A small *meowww* sounded from the other side of her door, and Esther blinked as she spied a small, grey paw reaching underneath the doorframe, begging to be let in.

“Oh Abbey,” Esther said, scooting herself across the floor until she was able to lean against the door. “I'm so sorry.”

Another tear slipped from her eye, making its way down her cheek. She looked down, spotting the small paw slipping back under the door and she reached down a finger to stroke it. The kitten batted at her finger and let out another, stronger, whine.

“It’s just me and you now,” Esther said, her voice barely a whisper it was so hoarse from crying. “That’s all it ever was. And I guess now, that’s all it ever will be.”

Abbey’s paw disappeared from underneath the door, and the cat did not respond.

CHAPTER 30

Laurence

The carriage rolled to a stop before Gallagher Manor, and Laurence took a couple of deep, steadying breaths. He glanced across the carriage to Charles, who sat on the bench seat.

Lord Rippon had called Laurence into his office once more the night prior and advised him that he would be announcing both his betrothal and his new title to the ton at the upcoming ball. Laurence had suspected as much, but to have it go from being a theory to a fact had still upset his stomach.

However, Laurence had used that as an opportunity to ask his father for Charles to attend the ball with him. Not as a driver, not as a servant or someone to attend him, but as his friend. Lord Rippon had originally been opposed to the idea, claiming that it was wrought with impropriety. But when Laurence argued back that on the tail end of such major announcements, he was bound to need the ear of his most trusted friend, his father had eventually conceded.

For what it was worth, Charles also had not been too fond of the idea. For as long as Laurence had known him, Charles had never been fond of the pomp and circumstance that surrounded court life. So much so that Laurence often joked that he should have never been a valet in the first place.

“You’ve got this,” Charles said, holding Laurence’s gaze.

At Sarah's shop the day prior, Laurence had recounted an idea to both Sarah and Charles. He knew that with a ball right around the corner, it would be the perfect time to announce his feelings for Esther. He knew that she would be there, and he knew that if he could find a way to steal a few moments with her, he would admit to all of it. Laurence would pour out his heart and let all of his feelings and love for her drip onto the pavement until he was completely bare. Then, he would ask for her permission to tell the ton that he wished to marry her.

He knew his father would be furious. But as long as he could announce it, loudly and proudly, before his betrothal to Agnes became known, it would spare both her reputation and their friendship. Laurence could only hope that he had no issue finding Esther once he walked into the crowded ballroom.

The door to the carriage was wrenched open by a footman, and both Laurence and Charles stepped out from the cover of the cab. Laurence spotted Charles out of the corner of his eye fiddling with his waistcoat nervously.

"Would you knock that off, man?" Laurence hissed at his friend. "Everyone will think you've gone mad, pulling at your clothes like that."

Charles blew out a breath, but his hands dropped to his sides. Lord Rippon's carriage pulled up directly behind them, and Laurence turned to watch it approach. His father exited first, followed by his brother, William, and then his mother.

They looked resplendent, all three of them in the deep blue that decorated the background of their family crest. It was a night for announcements, a night where their family would be revered and celebrated, and they had ensured they were dressed for the occasion.

Laurence strode forward, greeting his family while they all turned as a unit and walked into the splendidly lit manor before them. Laurence's eyes scanned every person they passed, looking for any hint of someone from the Jarvis household. He hoped that he would see Esther first, that way he could immediately move forward with his plan. But he

would also settle for just a glimpse of Agnes or Lady Dorothy, if only to let him know that they had already arrived.

Laurence took in the swaths of fabric around him, eyes roving over the opulently clad men and women. But with each passing face that wasn't Esther, his hope began to falter. He refused to let it fall entirely, though. They approached the double doors that marked the entry to the ballroom, where they were welcomed by servants. Laurence's eyes immediately roved over the space.

"Looking for your betrothed," his mother's voice cooed from behind him.

He turned to look at her, and she smiled at him warmly, her green eyes crinkling at the edges. He extended his arm to her, and she took it as they descended the stairs.

"You could say that," Laurence said, keeping his tone as light as he could.

She gave Laurence's arm a light squeeze, and he worked to keep his face open and expression unconcerned as he turned his attention back to the crowd. He could hear Charles not far behind him, chatting to William as the Bolton family made their way around. Laurence had to fight off a sigh of relief when one of his mother's friends approached her, taking her attention away from Laurence.

His mother bowed her head to her friend, letting go of Laurence's arm. And when she was sufficiently distracted, Laurence locked eyes with Charles and the two faded into the crowd.

"I don't see her or anyone from the household," Charles said under his breath as they made their way through the swaths of decadently dressed bodies.

"I haven't either," Laurence responded, eyes still searching for the woman he so desperately wished to see.

His eyes darted forward, spotting a break in the crowd, his attention garnered by a swath of raven hair. He immediately recognized Agnes, her dark, pinned curls piled on top of her head, clad in a gown of deepest rouge. She turned at that

moment, her eyes meeting his through the break in the throng of bodies. Despite himself, Laurence gave her a small smile. It would not do to have her angry with him, and he did not believe any of their current situation to be her fault. So, he would not alienate her.

Plus, if Agnes was already here, that meant Esther could not be that far behind. Laurence nudged Charles in the side, dipping his head in Agnes' direction before he began walking toward her. He shouldered his way through the crowd as best he could, making apologies as he went for those that had to move to allow him passage.

He knew that he had to play his cards right that night. That he had to do everything he could to ensure that Agnes nor Dorothy caught suspicion of anything being amiss while he searched for Esther. He did not want them to grow weary and make the announcement early.

“You look lovely,” Laurence said with a dip of his head as he approached Agnes, and her cheeks flushed prettily.

It was strange for Laurence to think back to just a few weeks ago when this would have been all he wanted. Where if he would have told himself that he would look across the room on the night of the ball and he would set his eyes on his betrothed, his heart would have leapt with joy. But now, he felt nothing but apprehension and nervousness low in his belly as he smiled down into Agnes' lovely face.

“Thank you,” Agnes responded with a dainty dip of her head.

She extended her wrist to him, showing the blank dance card secured around it.

“It is blank,” he said, turning it and admiring the front and the back.

“I have advised anyone who has approached that my dances are already spoken for,” she batted her eyelashes at him.

It would have worked, once. Would have made his knees turn liquid and he would have been putty in her hands. But

now, it just made him sick to his stomach.

“That was very kind of you,” Laurence said with a dip of his head.

He glanced down to his shoes, hoping that she would not look too closely at his face and read his apprehension. He wanted to ask about Esther, but he knew that to do so would be a mistake. The quartet on the far side of the room struck up a melody, and as the music floated to them through the air, she looked at him expectantly.

“May I?” Laurence asked, extending his hand to Agnes.

He half hoped she would say no. He knew in the pit of his stomach that it was folly, she had even told him she’d denied all requests for a line on her dance card. However, he couldn’t stop the slight niggling of hope in the back of his mind. Of course, that was quickly dashed when she dipped her gaze and said, “I would love that.”

Agnes placed her hand in his and he led her onto the dance floor. As the music continued, they began to twirl and move in time with the music. Laurence couldn’t help but compare it to his last dance partner— to Esther. While Agnes was a fine dancer, a great dancer even, dancing with her did not come close to what it had felt like to dance with Esther.

Agnes talked to him as they moved to the music, laughing prettily with each swoop and turn. Laurence did his best to remain engaged, he nodded and chuckled at what he hoped was an appropriate moment. But all the while he was glancing over her shoulder, looking past her as they moved around, hoping to get a glimpse of Esther in the crowd.

He spotted Lady Dorothy easily enough, clad in a fuchsia gown that clashed with the pink of her skin and made her look ill. She was standing and talking to his parents, all of them watching as he and Agnes twirled across the dance floor, a heavy reminder of the ticking away of the time clock before the announcement was made.

“You seem so far away,” Agnes said with her voice low, pulling Laurence’s attention back to her.

When he glanced at her, she was gazing at him with a curious look upon her face. He wanted to assure her, to placate whatever concerns had to be roving through her mind with his peculiar behavior. However, he also felt that it would be cruel.

He did not want to assure her, just to profess his love publicly for Esther mere moments later. Instead, he placed an affected look upon his face.

“I apologize,” Laurence explained, “it is just so hot in the ballroom. I’m afraid I may need a little fresh air.”

Agnes nodded, “Alright, if you’d like, we can go for a walk in the gardens.”

Laurence shook his head, “I’d like to go alone, if you don’t mind.”

Her face fell marginally as he explained, and he felt badly for it. But he also realized that he could turn this into a moment where he could continue his search for Esther.

“Alright,” she said in a low voice, and they broke apart.

He tried to give her a reassuring smile before he turned and strode across the dance floor. As he walked, he resumed eyeing every passing face for Esther. As he approached the end of the crowded room, he spotted Frederick, the Jarvis’ steward, standing along the wall, and an idea struck him.

He approached the man, a friendly smile upon his face.

“Lord Bolton,” Frederick said with a bow as Laurence grew close. “A pleasure to see you this evening. And I hear congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you, Frederick,” Laurence answered, feeling heat rise to his cheeks at the mention of what the remainder of the night had in store for him. “I was wondering if you knew where Lady Esther might be?”

Frederick cocked his head at Laurence, his brow furrowing curiously.

“Lady Esther?” he asked.

Laurence's mind scrambled to find a suitable excuse as to why he would be asking about a woman who was not his betrothed. A thought glanced through his brain, and he figured it was as good an idea as any, no matter how uncomfortable the thought made him.

"Yes," Laurence began, "I have a friend who I thought would perhaps like to take a line on her dance card."

Laurence's heart hammered wildly, hoping the man did not spot his lie. But Frederick just nodded, not seeming the slightest bit suspicious.

"Ah," Frederick said, "unfortunately, Miss Esther is not here this evening."

Laurence's heart fell, "not here?"

"Yes, the Countess, she...well..." Frederick glanced around, a worried look furrowing his brow. He looked as if he had begun saying something he knew he should not, as if he feared being reprimanded if he continued his sentence, and a feeling of dread began to unwind in Laurence. What had happened with Esther?

"What is it, Frederick?" Laurence asked, voice stern and all attempt at pretense gone.

He did not care if his reaction warranted a raised brow or seemed improper. All he cared about was the growing pit in his stomach, and the concerned look on the steward's face as he spoke about the woman that Laurence loved.

"Well...you see..." Frederick leaned in closer to Laurence. And when he spoke again, his voice was barely above a whisper, as if he was terrified of being overheard. "Miss Esther has been..." there was a pause as if he was searching for the right words, "relegated to her rooms. The Countess can be quite strict when it comes to the girl. And I believe Miss Esther will not be attending a ball for the remainder of the season."

Laurence's heart began to pound so wildly he could hear it in his ears. He worked to keep his gaze unaffected as he thanked Frederick for the information before turning and

walking away. He knew what the steward had been hinting at, his loyalty to the Jarvis family not permitting him to say it outright. Something had happened, and Esther was being punished.

It took every bit of strength that Laurence possessed not to immediately run out of the building and to the carriage to go to her aid. He knew immediately that this would only cause a spectacle, and he needed to remain here to ensure that his father did not move forward with the announcement without Laurence present.

His eyes scanned the crowd frantically, searching for the one person he knew could assist him in his endeavor. He spotted Charles by a low-lying table filled with drinks, eyeing the crowd with a bored expression. Laurence crossed the space in what felt like no time at all, not taking any care to be delicate as he moved through the tightly pressed bodies of the nobility.

Charles, alerted by the movement of the people parting for Laurence, followed his friend's approach with his eyes. Noting the determined set to his stride, Charles straightened when Laurence arrived and looked at him inquisitively.

"What's happened?" he asked as soon as Laurence was within ear shot.

Laurence filled Charles in, not working too terribly hard to keep his voice low. There was a part of him that didn't particularly care if anyone overheard him. He did not care what it would do to Dorothy Jarvis' reputation to know how horridly she was treating her ward; he did not care that this would look poorly on him if anyone found out he was engaged to Agnes while pining for Esther. He simply did not care outside of getting Esther out of that home and getting her here where he could proclaim his affections. He would save her from this...he had to.

As Laurence continued to speak, he watched as Charles' face grew more and more grave. At the end, his friend met his gaze and there was a resolute expression on his face.

“Go,” Laurence commanded. “Bring her here, and I will take care of the rest.”

“What will you do?” Charles asked.

“I will proclaim in front of the ton that I am in love with Esther, and I intend to marry her. Everyone else be damned.” Laurence was caught up in emotion, and his voice had risen as he spoke.

A sound broke through the din of the crowd, the sound of someone not far behind him clearing their throat. Laurence straightened his spine, the feeling of dread that had begun unspooling in his stomach, when Frederick had informed him of what had befallen Esther, grew as he turned slowly and a figure came into view.

Agnes was standing directly behind him, her lips pursed together in a thin line, clearly having heard everything that Laurence had said.

CHAPTER 31

Agnes

Agnes glanced between Charles and Laurence, both of them wearing mirroring expressions of shock as they stared at her slack jawed. Something in the back of her mind told her that this moment would be comical if it were under any other circumstances. But as it was, she just stared at them seriously.

When Laurence had left her on the dance floor, she had watched as he'd crossed the hall. She'd spotted him as he made his way, not through the doors to the garden, but instead to Frederick. He spoke to him for only a moment, but when he turned around his face had looked riotous. Agnes had been able to figure out easily enough who Laurence had asked about and what their steward had revealed.

For a moment she had wondered if perhaps there was any way to salvage the situation. But then, as her eyes trailed Laurence crossing the crowded ballroom heading directly for Charles, her gaze had fallen on someone else.

The Earl of Hampton, the handsome blonde man who had come calling the day after the last ball, stood in a corner. His lovely face had broken into a smile when their eyes had met, and all of a sudden, she realized she didn't want to salvage the situation with Laurence at all. She didn't want to marry Laurence; she didn't want to force herself into a lifetime of pleasantness when she could have a lifetime of love instead.

So, she'd strode after Laurence, hoping that she could catch him and come clean about everything. But as she'd gotten closer, she'd been able to hear him talking to Charles. As he'd filled in his valet and then commanded him to go get Esther while Laurence attempted to stall the announcement, an idea had begun to take shape in Agnes' mind.

"You love her," Agnes said matter-of-factly as the two men stared at her.

Laurence nodded, despite it not being a question.

"And you'll treat her well?" Agnes asked, and a shocked look broke across Laurence's face.

"Of course," he answered, eyes wide and honest.

She studied him, knowing that he was telling the truth but it felt nice to hear him say it anyways. In the moment she had decided that she no longer wanted to move forward with the betrothal, she had hoped that perhaps, she could also begin to make amends with her cousin. And this was Agnes' first step toward that.

Agnes took a step forward, getting close enough to Laurence and Charles that they would not be overheard by anyone passing by.

"Laurence, you are a dear friend," she said, holding his gaze while she spoke. "But I do not want to marry you. Please do not take offense."

Laurence chuckled slightly and shook his head as he said, "that's quite alright. I do not want to marry you, either."

She nodded and smiled warmly, "I think I have a plan."

Laurence and Charles leaned in close as she outlined it. She immediately told Charles that the servants left at the house were under strict orders not to let anyone in, especially with Frederick absent. However, if he were to retrieve Sarah, the servants were familiar enough with her and what Agnes and Dorothy used her for that they would allow her access to the house. Plus, they would need Sarah if the portion of Agnes' distraction at the ball was to work.

Charles listened intently as she outlined where to send Sarah when they got in the house to retrieve Agnes another gown. And while Sarah was retrieving Agnes' gown, she told Charles exactly where he would find the key to Esther's room, and then Esther herself.

As she reached the end of her plan, Charles and Laurence eyed her wearily.

"That's all well and good," Laurence said, "but why would Sarah need to retrieve you a new gown in the first place?"

Agnes' face lit with a beautiful smile, "that part you will have to leave up to me."

Agnes and Laurence stood together, watching as Charles strode across the packed room, up the stairs and out the door. Her heart was pounding nervously as the moments ticked down until he could make it to the carriage. She did not want to risk her mother offering to send someone other than Charles, so he needed to already be gone for this portion of her plan to work.

She cast a nervous glance around the room, confirming her mother was still on the opposite end of the space lost in rapt conversation with the Bolton's and not paying any attention to her. After the sufficient amount of time had passed and Charles would be well and truly on his way to the carriage, Agnes glanced at Laurence.

"Are you ready?" she asked, arching a brow at him.

"Yes," he said with a sly smile, "but I still don't know what I'm ready for."

"All in due time, dear friend," she answered, and he laughed.

For a moment she reveled in it. It felt comfortable with him again, just like when they had been children. She might not harbor romantic feelings for him, and he might still remind her of painfully better days, but he was still her friend. And she hoped that they could be easy friends again someday, when time had healed a little more of her wounds.

“You’re about to find out,” she said, giving him a winning grin.

A look of concern darted across Laurence’s face, and Agnes’ brow furrowed. She realized he must be concerned she was attempting to fool him.

“Laurence,” she said in as reassuring a tone as she could muster, “I assure you we are on the same side in this matter. You are a dear friend, and with Esther, well, I have a lot to make up for where my cousin is concerned.”

He studied her for only a moment, before seeming to read the truth in her gaze. A small, trusting smile tugged at the corner of his lips, and Agnes’ felt a small rush of joy.

She reached for his arm as he gave it to her, and they made their way through the crowd. Agnes was careful to only indicate to him where they were going with slight tugs and pulls on his arm, not wanting anyone to notice that it was she who was leading him. Eventually they stopped before the drink table, where she studied the glasses before her.

Agnes took her time determining which of the glasses filled with the deep, burgundy wine was the fullest. Once she was satisfied with her choice, she picked it up. She grabbed another glass and transferred a little bit of its contents to Laurence before passing the less full glass to him.

He eyed it suspiciously before reaching out his hand and cupping the stem. Agnes raised her glass in the air as she held his eyes, a smile tugging up her plump lips.

“To our friendship, and to your bright and shining future,” she said loudly, ensuring that anyone paying attention would merely overhear her making a toast to her childhood friend.

Laurence’s brow was furrowed as he repeated after her, and as they clinked their glasses together, she took a step as she pretended to bring the glass to her lips. As intended, Agnes hip bumped the table – hard.

The glass in her hand tipped forward, sending the deep red liquid spilling down the front of her gown, at the same time as

one of the glasses close to the edge of the table toppled over, spilling down the length of her skirt.

Laurence's eyes widened as he caught on to exactly what she was doing. Agnes could see him fighting to hold back a laugh and a smile as she looked at him with faux horror on her face.

"Go get my mother," she whispered to him as she forced tears to rise to her eyes. "Tell her to meet me in the hall by the cloak room."

Laurence nodded before turning and rushing into the crowd, and Agnes looked around her. Eyes were becoming fixed on her, and she began to let the tears she had forced to swell fall. She recalled vaguely the players that she used to spot in the street, and how as a child she had thought their fanciful acting splendid. And as Agnes plastered an embarrassed look upon her face and rushed from the room, she knew that she was in for the performance of her life.

CHAPTER 32

Charles

The carriage rattled underneath Charles as the wheels raced over the cobbled stones. He felt glad that Gallagher Manor was not too far from Surrey proper as he spotted Sarah's shop through the window of the cab. The entire drive there he had been praying that she had not turned in for the night, and he let out a sigh of relief when he noticed the flicker of a candle still burning within the delves of the shop.

As soon as the carriage stops, he rushed to the front door and pounded on it. He knew that it would give Sarah a fright, but he had no time to waste and could not risk her not hearing his knocking.

"Sarah," he exclaimed loudly, hoping the sound of his voice would spur her on a little more quickly.

A few seconds passed, each one feeling like its own small bit of eternity, before her small form shuffled into view. When Sarah spotted who was on the other side of the glass, her brow furrowed with concern, and she rushed a little more quickly.

"Charles?" she said in question as she pushed open the door to greet him. "What is going on my boy?"

"I'll tell you on the way, we must go," he said, pointing over his shoulder to the carriage behind him.

She looked from it to him, and then seemed to accept the strangeness of the moment and just nodded.

“Let me grab my cloak and blow out the candle,” she said, dipping back inside for a second longer.

Charles waited impatiently as he saw the light inside being snuffed out moments before she appeared in the doorway once more. He helped her across the uneven road and up into the carriage before the footman snapped the reins and ushered the horses forward.

“Now tell me, boy,” Sarah said, cutting him a sharp look. “Whatever is going on?”

Charles began speaking then, his voice jittery with the bumping of the carriage and the force of his own nerves. He told her everything about Esther and how Agnes apparently had a plan that she was helping Laurence implement to stall everyone at the ball. Sarah, to her credit, didn’t seem to find any of it the least bit odd. As they turned off the main road and onto the drive that led to the Jarvis’ manor house, and Charles finished the recounting of the nights’ events, Sarah let out a low chuckle.

“I always wondered if that girl had a streak of mischief in her,” she said fondly. “I’m glad to see I was right.”

The carriage rolled to a stop before the manor, its warm light cascading from the windows and coming down to kiss the gravel in front of it. Charles couldn’t help but wonder how a home that appeared so warm and inviting on the outside could hold a secret as ugly as a girl locked in a room on the inside.

Charles shook himself, snapping his mind to attention as they climbed down from the carriage and stalked toward the stairs. Charles’s heart was pounding. Agnes had told him exactly what Sarah was to say and what she was to do when they arrived at the house. And Charles couldn’t help but feel that that part would be simple. But his part, the part of retrieving the key and racing to find Esther all before he could be found out, it had to go off without a hitch.

He brought up his fist and grabbed a hold of the large iron knocker on the front of the door. He used it to rap against the wood three, hard times, the booms ringing out into the space

beyond fiercely. As the door pulled open and a servant blinked at them in confusion, he sent out a prayer that nothing would go wrong from that point forward.



“Oh no—,” Sarah exclaimed, tossing another gown onto the bed with a wild flourish as the maid who had let them into Agnes’ rooms cast harrowed glances around the space. “These just will not do. We need bigger, we need *better*.”

Charles had to choke back a laugh as the small woman gestured erratically, drawing all the attention onto herself as Charles slowly inched his way along the wall toward the door. Agnes had told him at the ball where to locate Esther’s room, but now he had to ensure that he got there and got her out without the servants taking notice. If they feared their Mistresses’ wrath as much as he thought they might, they would indeed try to stop them from getting Esther out of the home.

As Sarah continued to rifle exaggeratedly through Agnes’ mounds of dresses, Charles finally made it to the door. Once he was able to dip through the threshold and into the corridor beyond, he turned and strode confidently through the house. He counted doorways and turns as he went, trying to recall with perfect clarity the way that Agnes had told him to go.

He had decided that the best way to go about this plan once he was moving freely about the house was not to slink about. Should he get caught, that would be a giveaway that he was up to something untoward. Instead, he would act as if he was under specific instructions from Agnes herself to retrieve something for her while Sarah grabbed her gown. That way, they would be less inclined to kick up a fuss.

Charles’ heart was racing faster with each step he took. On his final turn, he immediately knew he had recalled Agnes’ directions correctly when he spotted the small, grey kitten sitting in front of a closed door, meowing piteously. Agnes had warned him that she would likely be there.

He approached the small beast, and it whirled on him with a hiss. Holding out his hand slowly, Charles prayed that the tiny thing would not attack him. It would be a shame if his downfall was this tiny, fiery kitten, but he had to admit that its teeth looked quite sharp. The cat regarded him with raised hackles for a few seconds before it took a tentative step forward.

Charles did not dare move or breathe as it crept closer, sniffing delicately at his outstretched hand. And then, much to Charles' surprise, the kitten rubbed its face against his hand, relaxed its fur that was standing on end, and then began purring.

"Little beastie," Charles muttered, giving the ferocious, purring thing a scratch behind the ears.

Reminding himself why he came, he glanced back at the door, his adrenaline spiking once more. He strode forward, so driven with excitement and adrenaline he did not think to yell out a warning before he took off at a run and threw his shoulder into the door. The lock had either been incredibly flimsy, or Charles himself had been stronger than he thought, because the door burst open with a crack.

He blinked slowly around the room, trying to make out the sight before him and immediately had to suppress a laugh. Esther was standing in the middle of her bedchamber, brandishing a candleholder toward the door as if it were a weapon.

"Lady Esther," Charles said, amused. "I'm here to take you to the ball."

"I'm sorry," Esther responded, holding the hunk of metal aloft, poised to strike at any moment. "Who are you?"

"My apologies," Charles dipped his head, still grinning. "My name is Charles. Sir Laurence Bolton sent me to have you retrieved."

At the mention of Laurence's name, shock and awe flitted across Esther's face, and Charles was glad to see it. The arm

that was holding the metal candlestick dropped to her side. She looked from Charles, then down to her gown.

“The ball?” she asked, her voice lowered and demure. “I wouldn’t be able to show up in this.”

“We are taking care of that, I assure you.”

“We?” Esther’s brow furrowed.

As if on cue, another exaggerated exclamation from Sarah rang out through the house, and Esther pressed a small hand to her mouth to hide her chuckle. Clearly needing no further explanation, she set her makeshift weapon on a small writing desk inside her drab room, and then turned to look at Charles.

“Lead the way, then,” she said with a conspiratorial smile, gesturing for Charles to go.

“Right, well,” Charles paused.

Getting to Esther’s room had been the easy part. He had known his plan, had known how to behave. But now? If they were caught making their way through the halls, there would be no denying what they were here for. There would be no lie that he could tell that the servants would believe. So it was of the utmost importance that they proceeded with caution.

“Miss Esther,” Charles began, giving her an admonishing look. “We must be swift, and we must be quiet.”

“Yes, absolutely.” Esther agreed, her lovely face suddenly quite serious.

At a loss for what else to say, Charles just gave the young woman a quick nod before turning and slinking back out the way he had come. He could still hear Sarah on the other side of the house, causing a din about needing multiple dresses for Lady Agnes to choose from. He was thankful for how loud the woman was able to make her voice. Charles was sure that had Sarah not been screeching and causing such a fuss, the entire house would have heard him breaking Esther’s door. As it was, almost all other noises in the house were swallowed up by Sarah’s dramatics.

Esther and Charles slunk through the halls, pausing at each corner to look that it was clear before making a dash. Charles' heart was pounding wildly the entire time, and when he looked back at Esther, the flush in her cheeks let him know that she was quite nervous as well.

"Were you going to hit me with a candlestick?" Charles whispered with a chuckle as they hustled through the corridor's nearing the front entrance to the manor.

"I thought you were a thief," she explained.

Charles cast her a shocked look before darting down the next hallway, and Esther was barely able to conceal a laugh.

"All I could hear was the racket that Sarah was making, but I couldn't tell who it was or what was happening, so I thought thieves had shown up to rob the manor!" Esther further explained, keeping her voice low as they made their way.

"So, you thought to fend them off with a candlestick?" Charles exclaimed. "What a right defender you are."

"I had little else," Esther argued back, and Charles just shook his head in amusement.

Finally, the large front doors of the manor loomed before them, and Charles' heart leapt now that the end was in sight. He cast up a quick thank you to God that they had made it without getting caught. He would soon find, however, that it was God who would have the last laugh. For as soon as he put his hand to the door, a form stepped out of the darkened drawing room to their right.

"Where are you going?"

Charles and Esther stopped in their tracks, turning to face the young maid who had caught them. Charles's brain began racing, trying to come up with a lie that would stop the girl from raising the alarm. But he came up short, noticing that the girl had not once looked at him, but was instead watching Esther with wide, frantic eyes.

Esther's own gaze was alight with panic, but the other girl was not regarding her with any malice. Her face was a mask of

curiosity and, if Charles didn't know any better, one of guilt.

The maid's eyes flicked from Esther for the first time, landing on Charles for only a second before darting back to the woman before her. He got the distinct impression that for him to interrupt whatever was happening in that moment would be a grave mistake indeed.

"You're going to the ball," the girl stated, her eyes widening with recognition.

"Celeste," Esther began, taking a step toward the other girl, but she was cut off.

"Go," Celeste whispered, dashing a glance toward the stairs where Charles could only assume the other servants were now gathered because of the racket from Sarah. "Go and don't let them catch you."

Esther's cheeks flushed red, and she gaped at Celeste.

"I..." Esther began, but her words quickly failed her. Charles watched the girl actually shake herself to clear her head before she continued speaking. "Thank you."

Celeste's eyes softened as she nodded, clearly having more to say but knowing they hadn't the time to say it. A shared glance darted between the two women, one that Charles could have sworn was an apology and an acceptance all rolled into one, before both he and Esther turned to pull open the door and dart out into the night beyond.

CHAPTER 33

Esther

The carriage jostled her wildly back and forth, and she threw out her arms to brace herself as they hit a bump in the road. They were racing toward Gallagher Manor, and Esther could only send up a prayer that they were not too late.

When she and Charles had finally made it out of the Surrey estate, he had ducked his head back through the doors and sent out a whistle to alert Sarah. Minutes later, the woman had hustled out the door with two, heavy dresses in tow, waving off the offers of help the servants were hurling at her.

Sarah had stuffed the gowns into the carriage with them, and when they had gotten far away from the home, enough that they would not be spotted by anyone looking out a window, they had pulled the carriage over. Charles, and the footman that had been driving them, waited outside while Sarah helped Esther switch her gown in the cramped, covered cab of the carriage. Not wanting to dawdle any longer, Esther had been forced to try to pin and arrange her hair as best she could as the carriage raced toward the ball.

The entire time they drove, Esther could feel each frantic beat of her heart counting down the seconds until she got to lay her eyes on Laurence. When Charles had told her that he had come to the manor at Agnes' behest, and that she was assisting Laurence as they spoke in stalling their parents from making the announcement, Esther had been skeptical. But

Charles seemed confident that the other girl was not being duplicitous, and if Esther was to be honest with herself, she hoped that her cousin was to be trusted.

For so long she had wanted a friendship with Agnes. Or, at the very least for them to not be pitted against each other. And, if everything that Charles had told her was true, it seemed like that time might be upon her now.

The carriage pulled to a stop before the manor, and once more Esther was struck by how beautiful the house was. Knowing that she did not have time to stop and admire it once more, she rushed forward as soon as the footman pulled open the door. Her foot got tangled on one of the gowns crowding the carriage, whether it was her discarded one or the one that Sarah had brought for Agnes, Esther was unsure.

Either way, she fought to free her ankle when she felt Sarah's small hands wrap around her foot.

"Calm, child," Sarah said, her voice low and soothing as she helped get Esther unstuck. "It won't do you any good to fall out of this carriage and break your neck before you have a chance to run in there and stir things up."

Esther nodded as she took the few steps from the cab, down to the gravel below. She turned to look at Sarah and Charles as the valet helped the woman extract the backup gown from the delves of the carriage.

"What will you do?" Esther asked them.

Charles shrugged. "All Agnes told us to do was to bring a dress to the drawing room and that she would be there waiting. I am unsure of the rest."

Esther nodded, all of a sudden overcome with a bout of nerves as she stared up at the massive building before her. She could hear the sounds of the music inside dancing through the halls, could hear the revelry taking place. What if she was already too late? What if she walked through those doors to find Laurence, only to discover his courtship to Agnes has already been announced, and was unable to be undone? Esther was not sure if she could bear it.

“Esther,” came Charles’ voice from beside her, and she turned to glance at him. “Are you well?”

Esther blinked at the valet and then at Sarah, standing steadily beside him with the new gown for Agnes held aloft. She gulped past the lump that had formed in her throat, unsure of how to articulate exactly how she was feeling.

“I am. It’s just...” Esther’s voice trailed off as her nerves swelled within her once more.

“You are nervous?” Sarah offered and Esther nodded.

“What if it’s already done? What if I go into the manor, risk my aunt’s wrath in front of the ton, and it is all for nothing?” Esther eyed her two companions, searching their faces for an answer as they regarded her with kindness.

Charles was the first to speak.

“Esther,” he began, “I have been friends with Laurence for quite some time. I was with him as his affections for Agnes began to develop.”

Esther winced at Charles’ words, and he shot her a sympathetic look before continuing.

“But through all of that, I never once saw him as excited about her as he has been about you. He fell in love with you through your letters. He fell in love with the person that *you are*. Please believe me when I say that his affections for you have far surpassed anything he has experienced before.”

“You’re sure of it?” Esther asked hesitantly.

Charles nodded as he held her gaze, and Sarah looked between the two of them fondly. Charles’s words began to fill Esther with courage as she stole her gaze away and began walking up the steps, with her heart beating so fiercely she could hear it thundering in her ears.

She pushed open the doors to the manor, finding a few servants milling about. They blinked at her in confusion, clearly no longer expecting any new arrivals. After the shock wore off, a maid rushed forward with apologies pouring from her lips. Esther quickly waived her off, acting as if she had

been there all along, and claiming only that she had gone out for air and a moment alone and she would see herself back to the ballroom. The gathered servants cast weary glances her way, clearly not fully believing her explanation but not wanting to upset her.

Esther held her chin high as she walked past them, imagining herself like so many of the lords and ladies that she had seen, unbothered by everything around her. She hoped that by acting as if she belonged there, it would not invite any additional questions. She kept her eyes in front of her, fearful that her Aunt Dorothy would come around the corner at any moment. Esther had a vague plan in mind for if she ran into her aunt before she found Laurence, but she hoped that she did not need to use it.

She followed the sound of the music to the ballroom and stopped at the top of the stairs that lead to the colorful crowd below. Esther's eyes roved over them, searching for Laurence. She spotted his family quickly enough, the bright blue of their clothing drawing her eyes.

She looked all around them, hoping that he would not be too far off. Thankfully, that proved to be true. She spotted him quickly, and her heart leapt at the sight of him. Even with the distance between them, she could see that he looked handsome.

As if sensing her eyes on him, Laurence looked up, gaze darting over the crowd before glancing to the stairs and coming to an abrupt stop on Esther. Disbelief and awe filled his face as he gazed at her, and her lips pulled up in a smile.

Esther held her skirts as she rushed down the stairs. During her descent, she caught sight of him beginning to push his way toward her. He was swimming through the crowd, eyes locked on her the entire way. She stopped before she hit the bottom stair, keeping her vantage point above everyone's heads so she could watch him as he moved toward her.

Esther's eyes remained locked on Laurence the entire way, but out of her periphery she spotted dark blue forms also pushing their way toward her. But she could not find it in her

heart to care, could not dare to rip her eyes away from the man that she loved as he crept ever closer.

Finally, after what had felt like ages, Laurence stood before her. His chest was rising and falling rapidly with the excitement of the moment, and the smile that lit his face stole Esther's breath.

"Are you really here?" he breathed; voice filled with disbelief.

Esther laughed and nodded her head, "Yes, I am."

He stepped forward, his gaze holding hers as he extended his hands to her. She placed hers in his, allowing him to steady and support her as she took the final two steps down onto the ballroom floor.

"I am so sorry," Laurence said in a rush. "I am sorry that I allowed my father to dictate a courtship that I no longer wanted, that I allowed doubt to creep in and trick me into believing that you had not written the letters, that I did not fight for the truth harder..."

Esther held up a hand to silence him, convinced that he would never stop apologizing if she did not cut him off now.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Esther said, her throat suddenly thick with tears.

"I do," he insisted, but she shook her head at him. "I should have known, should have fought harder. But I will fight for you now. I will. I will not move forward with courting Agnes. I will do whatever it takes. Starting with tonight, I will seek to be able to officially court you, to become betrothed to you, and finally...to marry you. If you also wish for it."

Esther opened her mouth to talk, but a voice from behind Laurence drew her up short.

"What is the meaning of all of this?"

Laurence dropped Esther's hand and spun on his heel to face the voice as Esther peered around him. Lord Rippon, as well as Lady Bolton, stood at the edge of the crowd. Laurence's father's brow furrowed as he stared at his son.

Laurence gaped at his father for a moment before regaining his composure and stepping forward. He straightened his shoulder as he looked at his father, but then his eyes roved over the people behind them. Lord Rippon's booming voice had grabbed the notice of more than a few members of the ton, and they were casting them curious glances, clearly hoping to catch a bit more of what was unfolding before them.

"Let us go into the corridor," Laurence said, gesturing toward the top of the staircase and the hall beyond.

His father and mother nodded, before Laurence and Esther turned to climb the stairs. The entire time, Esther's heart was beating wildly as nerves threatened to overwhelm her. They left the cover of the ballroom, walking down a few narrow hallways to put distance between themselves and any prying eyes.

Once they had found a semblance of privacy, Laurence turned to face his parents. Esther watched with bated breath as they regarded each other for a moment, no one wanting to speak first. Finally, Laurence took a deep breath, clearly steeling his nerves before he began his explanation.

"Father, Mother," he said, his voice shaking only slightly, and Esther felt a twinge of pride toward the man. "I will not be courting Agnes."

He glanced at Esther, and she gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

"You remember the letters that Dorothy spoke of during our dinner?" Laurence asked, and his mother nodded while his father continued to look perplexed. "It was not Agnes who I had been corresponding with, it had been Esther. I do not know if Lady Dorothy knew that when she told you all about the letters. But, regardless, I have fallen quite in love with Esther, and I wish to court her, and beyond that, I wish to marry her."

Laurence's cheeks blushed as he finished, and his parents looked between both he and Esther. Esther tried not to shy

away under their gaze, worked as hard as she could to keep her chin high and appear worthy of a marriage to their son.

“Is this truly what you wish?” Lady Bolton asked, her voice kind as she regarded her son.

“It is,” Laurence answered immediately.

“And you wish it as well?” she inquired, turning her attention to Esther.

Esther wasn't sure why, but the concern on the woman's face touched her deeply. She had not expected for them to worry themselves with her feelings on the matter. It would have been quite understandable for them to only consider their son. And yet, the way that Lady Bolton was eyeing Esther indicated that her answer truly mattered to the woman.

“I do,” Esther dipped her head in acknowledgement, hoping her face did not betray her anxiety.

A loud, familiar voice boomed down the hallway, drawing all of their attention before anyone else could speak. They turned, spotting Dorothy stalking toward them in a huff, with Agnes not far behind her.

CHAPTER 34

Laurence

Lady Dorothy's face was red with agitation as she approached the small group standing in the hall. Laurence took a step forward, placing himself slightly between her and Esther. It would be quite a long time before he forgot that she had locked the woman that he loved in her room so cruelly.

"What is going on here?" the Countess demanded as she got close, her beady eyes roving between all of them before finally landing on Esther. "And what are you doing here? You are supposed to be back at the manor."

Something seemed to click for her, because her face rearranged itself from one of irritation into one of placation as she turned her attention to Lord and Lady Bolton.

"My sincerest apologies if my niece has disturbed your evening," Dorothy's voice was now honey sweet as she spoke, and the stark contrast with its tone just seconds before threatened to give Laurence whiplash. "But Agnes is prepared and ready for the announcement now, if we just want to go..."

She began to gesture behind her toward the ballroom but was interrupted.

"There will be no announcement, Mother," Agnes said, a sly grin tugging at her lips.

Laurence smiled at his childhood friend as Lady Dorothy sputtered, rounding on her daughter.

“Whatever do you mean?” Dorothy’s voice was incredulous.

“Or perhaps,” Agnes said, as her eyes landed on her cousin “there will be an announcement after all. Just not the one you were hoping for.”

The two young women held each other’s stares, smiling slightly at each other, a silent conversation occurring between the two of them.

“Perhaps,” Esther said, her cheeks flushing prettily, and Laurence felt oddly proud of her.

“What do you mean?” Dorothy demanded again, her voice dropping once more.

“Did you know?” Lord Rippon said, finally speaking.

Laurence glanced at his father and noted that his eyes were narrowed on Lady Jarvis. The woman in question sputtered, staring at Laurence’s father for a moment.

“What do you mean? Know what?” she asked incredulously.

“That the letters were not written by Agnes? The ones that you used to sway me into approving the courtship?” Rippon’s eyes narrowed on the Countess.

“You believe that I would lie to you? How dare you.” She protested, but Laurence’s mother stepped forward.

“I believe that you would do anything to secure a match for your daughter,” Lady Bolton fired back. “We have been friends for a very long time, Dorothy. Do not believe that I don’t know the lengths that you would go to. I would hate for word to get out about the duplicitous nature of the *almost* arrangement.”

It was a thinly veiled threat, and Laurence had to admire his mother’s courage to level it at the Countess. If word got out that Laurence Bolton broke off a courtship with Agnes, especially due to Dorothy’s own lies, it may not stop Agnes from securing a match. But it would definitely give more than a few suitors pause.

Laurence looked at Agnes, and her face was flushed with worry. She must have realized that fact as well. He decided in that moment that if it came to it, he would not allow things to get that far. He would step in and stop his mother and father from regaling any truths about how the events have unfolded. But he had a feeling it would not come to that; his father and mother were too fond of Agnes to sully her name. But Dorothy needn't know that.

After a tense moment, some of the air seemed to leave Dorothy. Her voice was contrite when she finally spoke again.

“So, there will be no betrothal to Agnes,” she said. “But that does not explain the presence of my niece.”

“I thought you would have worked that out for yourself,” Lady Bolton said, turning her gaze back to Laurence and Esther with a smile. “Agnes was quite right when she said there was still to be an announcement. We will be announcing our son as the baronet and making official his courtship with Lady Esther Elkins.”

Dorothy seemed to have been expected that, and she just nodded as Lady Bolton spoke. Laurence was glad that she had accepted the information relatively easily. He would have hated for this night to turn ugly.

“Now,” Lord Rippon said to the group, “should we all go back and make it official?”

Laurence turned, catching a glance of Agnes who smiled at him warmly before turning and heading back toward the ball. He extended his arm to Esther, who took it with a blush and the group stalked forward, ready to make sure the ton was well aware of his intentions for his future. A future, which was now smiling at him fondly.

EPILOGUE

Esther

The night air brushed against Esther's flushed skin as she looked up at the sky. The stars twinkled above her and Laurence as they walked through the gardens about an hour after the confrontation with Dorothy and the subsequent announcement.

Everyone had been so glad for them, as she and Laurence made their way around the room. The entire time she had felt as if she was floating, and still she was having trouble believing that this was to be her life.

Agnes followed them a few feet back, admiring the shrubs that they passed in the garden. In an odd turn of events, Esther had found that Agnes had been her closest ally in all of this. Once the announcements were made, Agnes had been the one to propose the now publicly courting couple steal a moment of chaperoned privacy in the gardens, volunteering herself to watch over them.

Esther was unsure of how to respond to her cousin's sudden kindness and allyship, but for the moment she was content to just let it make her glad. There would be time to figure out all of the rest later.

"Tonight was quite eventful," Laurence mused as they walked, the sound of the gravel crunching beneath their feet as they took in the plants and beautiful maze around them.

“That it was,” Esther said with a smile, glancing at Laurence sidelong.

She still couldn’t quite believe it. She was still having trouble reconciling the events that had unfolded, leading her to this moment and to this man. As she looked at Laurence’s face, at the kind, handsome witty human whom she had fallen in love with and that somehow also loved her, she was overcome with gratitude.

After Lord and Lady Bolton had made their rounds to the ton with Esther and Laurence in tow, proudly discussing with anyone who would listen their sons new title and his official courtship to Esther, they had all decided that they would be meeting in the following days to work out the particulars. But neither Esther nor Laurence expected the courtship to be lengthy before they became engaged.

Originally, she had worried that her Aunt Dorothy would make life hard for her after she returned to the manor. But, as she’d voiced those concerns to Laurence quietly as they walked under the fresh night air, he quickly put her fears to rest. He had assured Esther that between himself and his parents, they would be keeping a close eye on things until it was time for them to wed and for Esther to take up residence in the new estate that Laurence would be occupying.

“I cannot believe that this is real,” Laurence said, stopping their steps and turning Esther to face him.

The full moon glinted down upon them, lighting the darkened world around them in a silver hue.

“Neither can I,” Esther confirmed, her voice reverent as she gazed upon Laurence’s face. “I almost feel as if this is some sort of joke, and that you will be taken from me, too.”

A lump suddenly formed in Esther’s throat, and thoughts of her parents sprung unbidden into her mind.

“My parents would have loved you,” she whispered, tears darting up to her lashes.

“I’m sorry,” Laurence said as he studied her face. “That you are forced to miss them so terribly during a moment like

this.”

“I miss them every day,” Esther admitted, swallowing once more.

“I know. But I promise I will do my very best to make sure to give you a life that they would be happy for you to live. And the family that we create together, while it will never replace them, it is my hope that it will lessen some of your pain.”

He gazed at her with such love in his eyes that Esther felt as if she might weep. Behind them, Agnes made a show of clearing her throat. They turned to glance at her, and Esther immediately noticed a sly grin tugging at her cousin’s cheek.

“It appears my boot has become untied,” Agnes said, with a faux look of shock on her face. “There is a bench a few steps back. I will be sitting on it for a few minutes at least.”

She turned and walked away from them, making it a point to keep her gaze diverted entirely from the new couple. Esther laughed as she turned back to Laurence, realizing what Agnes was giving them – a moment of true privacy.

Laurence’s eyes roved over Esther’s face, his gaze deepening as he regarded her. Esther’s heart began to pound. She had never been kissed before and had always dreamed of what that moment would be like.

But as Laurence bent his face to hers, and she rose on her toes to greet him, she was flooded with warmth and emotion as their lips finally connected. His mouth was sweet and tender, and Esther realized that even her wildest dreams could not have done this moment any justice.

They broke apart, gazing into each other’s eyes, and for the first time in what felt like a very, very long time, Esther felt as if she had nothing left to worry about.

Esther and Laurence lived happily ever after!

Now it’s Agnes’ turn to build a future of her own, a future full of passion and true love... but will her path be an easy one?

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513488>

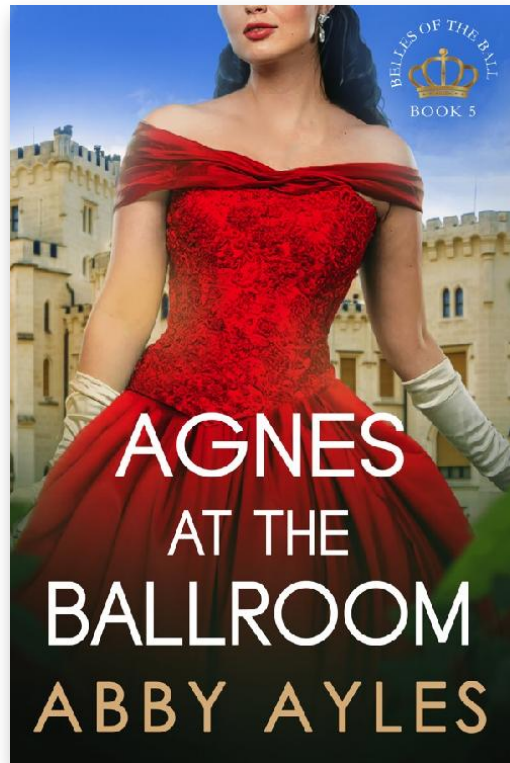
If you want a Bonus Scene of this book visit the link below (or just click it): <https://BookHip.com/JGHGCJK>

Or read the prequel of the series while Oscar and Vera were just children...

<https://BookHip.com/MDRMLCA>

AGNES AT THE
BALLROOM

PREVIEW



Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513488>

True love or a marriage of convenience? She must decide and navigate her way through a world of secrets and betrayal.

Lady Agnes Jarvis dreams of finding true love on her own terms, despite her mother's pressure to marry for status. When

charming Earl Benedict Hampton begins courting her, she can't believe her luck. But she has to keep secrets, she can barely handle...

The return of William Bolton, the nominal heir to the title, brings even more turmoil to Agnes's life. He warns her of the Earl's true intentions and convinces her to enter a marriage of convenience.

As Agnes navigates through heartbreak and deception, she discovers that her feelings for the Earl run deeper than she ever imagined. But with William in the picture, who will Agnes choose to be her true match?

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/1/3513488>

CHAPTER I

Agnes

Agnes Jarvis could hear the huffing and puffing of the maid behind her, winded as she walked arm in arm with Earl Benedict Hampton. A bit of worry flitted through her, and she turned her head to cast a glance over her shoulder to the struggling woman.

Her maid, Helena, was heavily pregnant, and wasn't getting around quite as well as she used to. Agnes' brow furrowed in worry when she realized that the woman was straining to continue walking, her hand on her round protruding belly.

"One moment, please," she said to Benedict, dropping his arm and taking a step toward her maid. "Helena, are you quite alright?"

"Just a bit of difficulty," the woman grunted.

Spotting a bench set into a break in the flower garden wall, Helena's face lit up. She wobbled over toward it, and plopped herself down, relief instantly filling the woman's face.

"I'll just have a sit here for a bit," Helena said, some of the redness fading from her face as she caught her breath and she shot Agnes an apologetic look. "I know I'm supposed to be your chaperone, but you all can go on a bit while I rest."

Agnes glanced from her maid back to Benedict, her heart pounding at the notion that she was about to spend

unchaperoned time with the man who was courting her.

“If you insist, but are you sure you’ll be alright?” Agnes asked. But, when Helena waved a dismissive hand at her mistress.

“I will be just fine, miss. Don’t you worry about me.” Helena patted her belly fondly, and Agnes gave her a swift nod and an encouraging smile before turning her attention back to Benedict.

“Is everything alright?” He asked, his handsome face creased with worry.

“She’s just going to sit for a moment. But she said that we can continue on without her.”

Benedict’s face lit up when he realized the same thing that Agnes had just moments later. A smooth, beautiful smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and he extended his arm to her again.

“Then continue we shall.”

The tone of his voice had dropped a bit, making it rasp. When Agnes placed her arm in his, she suddenly found herself unable to focus on much else than the spaces where her arm touched his.

They continued their walk down the gravel paved garden walkway, looking at the beautiful blooms and towering hedges that filled both side of the path.

“I know I told you before,” Benedict said as they turned a corner, completely obscuring them from sight of the maid. “But you truly do look lovely.”

Benedict looked at her sidelong, and Agnes felt color rise into her cheeks. She dipped her gaze, looking at where her boots stepped across the pathway through her long, dark lashes.

“Thank you, Earl Hampton.” She kept her voice low and coy.

“Please,” he argued. “When it is just you and I, call me Benedict.”

She stopped walking and Benedict came to a halt as well. She gazed up at him, eyes roving over his beautiful face. His blonde hair gleamed in the sun, and his bright blue eyes regarded her with obvious affection. As she peered up at his handsome features, one of her pin curls came loose, sending a tendril of raven hair tumbling down into her face.

Benedict reached up with a gloved hand, brushing the hair back into its place. As he did so, something stirred low within Agnes belly, and she found herself suddenly quite short of breath. Her cheeks warmed as blood rushed to her face.

“Perhaps we should continue our walk,” Agnes said, her voice breathy.

“Perhaps.” Benedicts sumptuous lips ticked up in the corner, pulling up into a small, tantalizing grin before he diverted his attention back to the path and began walking again.

Agnes focused as hard as she could on her breathing, wondering what on earth had gotten into her as she also tried to keep up with the conversation and not alert Benedict to her inner turmoil. She had been alone with men before, but not many. Only those that were close to her family, and those that she considered friends. Never with one that she had desired and had such affections for.

As such, the sensations currently running through Agnes’ body were utterly foreign to her. She had no idea what to make of her racing heart, of the sweat she could feel along the palms of her hands, nestled neatly into her white lace gloves, or of the sensation of actually noticing the fabric of her gown being pressed to her skin.

They continued on their walk, all the while the Earl seemed oblivious to the raucous thoughts and feelings waging war within Agnes. When finally, they turned another corner, spotting Helena still perched on the bench they had left her on, Agnes had to fight not to sag with relief.

“Back already?” Helena huffed, pushing herself back up to standing.

Agnes couldn't help but chuckle. Because the woman had no idea that for Agnes, the walk had felt like an eternity. Back within the company of a chaperone, she and Benedict fell into more casual conversation.

Discussing the comings and goings of the ton or of things that their respective families were working on. All the while, Agnes had one thought and one thought only twirling through the back of her mind.

She desperately needed to talk to her cousin, Esther.

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513488>

CHAPTER 2

Agnes

The carriage jolted over the cobblestones on its way to Bolton Manor, sending Agnes bouncing and flying across the bench seat. Her arm bolted out, bracing herself against the door in an attempt to keep herself from hurtling much further.

“Careful dear,” her mother, Dorothy, drawled in her perpetually bored sounding tone.

“It’s the carriage, Mother.” Agnes smoothed down her hair, making sure that everything was still firmly in its place as the carriage turned off the road and trundled down the drive.

Her cousin Esther had lived with them for a while, acting as a ward to the Jarvis family prior to her betrothal to Agnes’ childhood friend, Laurence Bolton. They had been married for about six months now, and in that time, Agnes had watched her cousin blossom into a happy, confident young woman. Every time she thought of the strained relationship, they had had the first year that Esther had resided with them, and the time that she and her cousin had lost in developing a friendship, a pang of sadness and regret washed through her.

But now, they were closer than ever. In fact, Agnes considered Esther to be her closest and most trusted friend. And that’s why she knew that her cousin would be the perfect woman to help Agnes make sense of the feelings and sensations that were plaguing her when she was around Benedict.

After what felt like ages, the carriage finally rolled to a stop in front of the house. The footmen pulled open the door and extended a hand to Agnes, helping her down the stairs. The moment that Agnes' foot touched down on the gravel, the large wooden doors to the manor were pulled open.

Agnes glanced up, dark eyes lighting with joy when she found Esther grinning at her from the threshold of the home.

"Cousin," Esther said, voice dripping with fondness as she rushed down the stairs to greet her.

Esther's golden red hair flashed in the sun the moment she stepped out from under the shadow of the house, her pale cheeks flushed with excitement. The moment they were close enough, Esther threw her arms out, wrapping them around Agnes and pulling her into a tight, affectionate hug. Agnes laughed as she squeezed her cousin back.

"It's been too long," Esther gushed when their embrace broke apart.

They held each other at arm's length, eyes roving over each other to look for any sign of harm or fatigue.

"Far too long," Agnes echoed, her own voice rampant with joy at the sight of her cousin and her friend.

"That's quite enough, Agnes." Her mother's voice snapped behind her, admonishing the blatant display of affection and what she would consider frivolity.

Quickly schooling her features into a mask of casual disinterest, Agnes dropped her arms back down to her side. Esther did the same, before shooting her cousin a wink as they turned and walked arm and arm through the door of the manor.

Laurence, Esther's husband, was standing just in the entry way to receive them. Looking resplendent in a blue waist coat and white breeches, his dark eyes lighting with love as he looked at his beautiful wife. Agnes beamed at her childhood friend, extending her hand in greeting.

"Agnes," Laurence said with a fond, friendly smile as he took her hand and bowed his head to her in greeting. "Lovely to see you, as always."

“It is quite good to see you as well.” Agnes returned his warm grin, glad to see that he was looking as well as Esther was.

“Laurence, dear,” Dorothy’s voice boomed from behind them all, and Agnes had to grit her teeth against the onslaught. “Where exactly are your parents?”

“They’re in the drawing room, Lady Jarvis.” Laurence dipped his head to her in a kind greeting. “It would be my pleasure to escort you to them.”

“Quite right,” Agnes’ mother huffed, wrapping the stole she had thrown across her shoulders a little tighter as she strode past Laurence into the hallway.

He glanced at Agnes and Esther, the latter mouthing an exaggerated ‘thank you’ as Laurence shot them both a wuthering look and followed after Dorothy.

Now that they were alone, out from underneath the prying eyes of one Dorothy Jarvis, Agnes turned to her cousin, excited grin fixed firmly back in place.

“It is so very good to see you,” Agnes gushed.

It had been a few months since she had been able to see Esther. Her and Laurence lived farther away now, residing in her childhood home in Sussex. So, Agnes did not get the chance to visit quite as often as she would have liked. But they had written to each other at least once a week, sometimes multiple if the letters were able to be delivered quickly enough.

They were back in Surrey for at least a month, deciding to stay between Bolton Manor and Laurence’s estate that he was gifted when he was named Baronet. So, for the time being, at least, Agnes was ecstatic to be able to see her cousin whenever she would like. Something that she was fully prepared to take advantage of all the way up until they returned home to Sussex.

“It truly has,” Esther said in her lovely, high-pitched voice. “Come, let’s retire to the parlor.”

Esther grabbed Agnes' hand, and Agnes allowed herself to be towed behind her cousin through the maze of rooms that was the lushly furnished Bolton Manor. Agnes tried not to gape at the ornate furnishings she passed along the way. But it was hard not to.

Ever since the passing of her father, the Jarvis' funds have been running quite dry and the estate was slowly but surely falling into disrepair. She knew that her mother had taken to selling off some of the luxuries, art, and collectibles that had previously furnished the home just to keep the property afloat. Any dowry that Agnes had once had was long since gone. A fact that weighed heavy on her the longer she courted the earl.

When they reach the parlor, she and Esther cross the room and both settle themselves into beautiful, stuffed reading chairs nestled by a large bay window that overlooked the manicured, rolling grounds. A maid hustled into the room as soon as they were situated, bowing to each of them in turn and asking if they would like tea or biscuits.

"Both, please." Esther said, giving the young girl a kind, affectionate smile. "Take your time. And take some for yourself."

The maid blushed at Esther, giving her a polite 'thank you, ma'am,' before turning and rushing from the room. Esther understood more than most what it was to act as a servant to a household such as this.

It was another fact that Agnes regrated deeply. The Jarvis' finances had already been horribly tarnished by the time that Esther had resided with them. As such, Dorothy had fired quite a bit of the staff, leaving only those absolutely necessary. Esther had been ordered to keep up the slack as payment to Dorothy for taking her in after the tragic carriage accident that had claimed the lives of the girls' parents.

Agnes wished with all her might that she could go back in time and stand up to her mother sooner when it came to her cousin. And once she had begun to mend things with the girl that now sat across from her, she had made a promise to herself to do whatever she could for the rest of her days to

make up for the unkindness that had been showed to Esther during the time when she had needed family and companionship the most.

Agnes opened her mouth to speak, ready to launch right into what had occurred between she and Benedict Hampton, but she was brought up short by a loud, demanding meow. Her eyes darted in the direction of the sound, immediately spotting a beautiful grey cat with startling blue eyes.

“Abby,” Esther cooed, her delicate features lighting with affection as they eyed the feline. “Hello you silly, demanding thing.”

Agnes watched as Esther lowered her hand, snapping her fingers together and clicking her tongue, calling for the creature to come to her. It did so excitedly, trotting over to her with another, excited meow, before jumping up into her lap.

“Is this the same kitten from when you lived with us?” Agnes asked, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

“It is,” Esther smiled down at the creature that had immediately curled itself up atop her legs. “Isn’t she gorgeous?”

The cat gave a large, lazy yawn before closing its eyes and promptly falling into a contented, restful sleep.

“She has gotten so big,” Agnes mused, astonished that the creature now snoozing atop Esther was the same, small kitten that had attached itself to Esther almost two years prior.

“Well, that’s because she eats every mouse or small creature in sight. Disgusting habit, really.” Esther’s tone held no bite as she gazed down at the feline.

She gave one final, affectionate huff before pulling her eyes away from the cat and landing them solidly back on Agnes.

“Now,” Esther said, leaning toward her cousin. “Tell me everything. In your last letter you mentioned that Earl Hampton was coming to call upon you. Did it happen?”

Agnes blushed as she nodded her head, watching as the other woman's face lit up with delight.

"It did. He came yesterday, actually." She began recounting the story. Explaining to Esther how the maid had sat down and told her and Benedict to go on, as well as the rush of feeling that she had experienced when she and the earl were alone.

"That wasn't the only time, though," Agnes explained as she finished the story. "He has come to call on me a few times. And each time, it's much of the same. The way he speaks to me, when he touches me. Once, one of my curls had come loose from where it had pinned and had fallen into my face. Benedict reached up to brush it away. It wasn't much, just a moment of his fingertips running across the skin of my cheek, but still I thought I might combust."

She dipped her eyes away from her cousin for a moment, unable to look at Esther while she was overcome with a rush of shame. Agnes may not be able to identify exactly what it was that she was feeling, but she felt certain that as an unmarried woman, what she was experiencing was not proper. And while she knew that Esther would not judge her, it did not stop her from feeling nervous about simply speaking about what had occurred with Benedict.

"In all my years," Agnes continued, working up enough courage to meet her cousin's eyes once more. "I have never experienced anything quite like this. His mere presence is enough to make my body feel too warm, and like my skin is too tight against my bones. I have fancied plenty of men before, but nothing like this. Do you know what this is?"

Her cheeks heated, and the entire time she spoke, Agnes watched her cousin's face closely. At first, Esther's beautiful features had been alight with nothing more than interest. But by the time Agnes finished, the more the sides of her cousin's pouty lips pulled up into a knowing, sly grin.

Esther chuckled, shaking her head lightly, causing Agnes to blow out a breath of frustration.

“So? What were those feelings?” Agnes demanded, hoping that her cousin could help her make sense of everything. “I know that you know what they are. How do I handle them?”

“My dear,” Esther blushed prettily, reaching up a hand to her mouth, using it to hide her smile. “What you’re feeling is true affection and dare I say it... desire.”

“Desire?” Agnes parroted, her eyebrows shooting up. “Well, that can’t be right. I am unmarried. It would not be proper for me to desire anyone.”

“Cousin, I assure you. It’s quite natural.” Esther shook her head at her cousin. “I cannot tell you everything, for that is not my duty. Your mother would have my head if she found out I took the right of preparing you for your wedding night. But I assure you, that everything you’re feeling, it is exactly what a woman who is beginning to fancy a man *should* feel. It is quite a blessing, to desire the man to which you are hoping to be betrothed. Many women are not so lucky. And I am quite happy that you seem to have found that.”

Agnes held her cousins stare, letting the words wash over her as she considered them. All her life she had been told that ladies did not desire men that they were not married to. That they can have affections for them, they can even like them. But desire? That was strictly reserved for marriage. And until now, she had believed it.

She blew out a frustrated breath, working as hard as she could to wrap her mind around everything.

“But what of the wedding night? You know my mother won’t prepare me for that, the only thing she seems to be worried about is securing an advantageous marriage to a man that will overlook my lack of a dowry.” Agnes blushed at the mention. “I assure you, she will tell me nothing.”

Esther stared hard at her cousin, seeming to weigh what she might be able to tell her. Finally, Esther blew out a breath and leaned forward, staring at Agnes intently.

“My wedding night was one of the most magical nights of my life,” Esther began. “When a man and a woman come

together as husband and wife, they perform an act to... solidify...their love.”

Esther’s words were slow and careful, and Agnes’ brow creased as she tried to work out their meeting.

“But how do they come together?” Agnes asked, shaking her head.

“Well, the man, he,” Esther’s cheeks flamed red as she stammered nervously over her words. “On the night of your wedding, you will share your love. Your body will know what to do. That’s what it’s trying to tell you now, with the way that it heats and react to Benedict. In the same way that you know how to kiss just from the desire to do it alone, you will know what to do when it comes to your wedding night. And it will be the most glorious thing that you have ever felt.”

Agnes still did not fully understand, but she felt as if she was beginning to.

“All I am saying,” Esther said when she noticed the still confused look on her cousin’s face, “is that come your wedding night, whether that be to Earl Benedict or to whomever, if you are feeling even a fraction of what you are feeling right now, you will be in for a very happy marriage, indeed.”

Agnes’ cheeks warmed again, but she was saved from having to reply when the maid from earlier returned to the parlor carrying a tray of drinks. She set up a small, spindly table between the two women, placing the tea and the biscuits down atop it.

“Did you eat?” Esther asked the girl, shooting her a kind but pointed look.

“Yes ma’am, I promise that I did.” The maid smiled at Esther, bowing her head before taking her leave.

They each picked up a teacup and filled it, before selecting one of the biscuits that the young woman had brought in. Agnes was grateful when the conversation didn’t turn back to Benedict, unsure that she could take much more of the confusion. The only thing that Agnes was sure about, in fact,

was that proper or not, Esther had been right in her assessment that Agnes desired the earl.

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513488>

CHAPTER 3

William

William could hear the birds chirping loudly from the tree outside his window, and he paused for a moment in the book that he was reading to take a deep, steadying breath. He had only just returned from traveling a few hours ago, and he was glad to finally have a moment to himself to rest and relax.

A knock sounded at the door of his chambers, and he threw his head back, barely stifling a groan. William ran his large hand through his dark brown hair, ruffling it as he blew out a frustrated breath.

“You may enter,” he called as he leaned forward to set his book on the table in front of his reading chair.

The large wooden door cracked open, and a moment later Jonas, his family’s steward, walked through the door. The man cleared his throat, eyeing William wearily.

“So sorry to bother you, my Lord,” Jonas said, his voice shaky and nervous.

William knew that he could be in quite a foul mood whenever he returned home from a long time travelling, but he didn’t think it warranted the nervousness currently rolling off the man in front of him.

“Your father is asking for you,” Jonas explained. “He is in his study, and he wishes for you to come immediately.”

Ah, William thought, that explains it.

His father, while not a cruel man by nature, was also not overtly kind. He tended to speak candidly, his voice booming out of him with commands that were best to be heeded. Both William and his brother, Laurence, towered over their father. Their large statures dwarfing the man. But what Lord Rippon Bolton lacked in size, he made up for in sheer force of will.

With a resigned sigh, William pushed himself up from his reading chair and strode across the room.

“Lead the way, please,” he said to Jonas as he approached.

The man nodded before turning and making his way through the halls of Bolton Manor. Somewhere within the depths of the house, William could hear the sound of a piano being played, and a faint bit of singing in the air.

“Are Laurence and Esther here?” He asked Jonas as they walked.

“Yes sir. They arrived just yesterday and are staying in the Eastern wing of the manor. I believe they’ll be here a month.”

The corner of Williams mouth tugged up into a smile, glad that he’d have a couple companions in the house for a little bit of time, at least.

They arrived at the door that led to his father’s study in no time at all, and while Jarvis knocked and announced William’s arrival, William took the time to take a deep, steadying breath.

“Well, send him in.”

He heard his father’s voice from the other side of the door a moment before Jonas’ worried face appeared in front of him once more. He knew his father’s mood must be quite stormy, indeed, to be affecting Jonas so much. The man had worked for the family for most of William’s life, and William knew that he was more than able to handle everything that Baron Rippon Bolton threw at him. So, for the usually unflappable Jonas to be as affected as he was, William could only guess that he was in for quite the treat indeed.

“He’s ready for you,” Jonas said unnecessarily as he stepped out of the office and gestured for William to enter.

William pushed open the door, immediately spotting his father sitting behind his large, carved oak desk.

“William,” Lord Rippon boomed the moment he laid eyes on his son. “Have a seat.”

William did as he was told, taking the time as he crossed the room to study his father. The apples of the man’s cheeks were red, as were the tips of his ears, and William had to stifle a groan. Those were the tell-tale signs that his father was balancing on the knife’s edge of anger, and was very close to teetering off of it.

Knowing better than to interrupt his father when he was in such a terrible mood, William sat in silence while Rippon’s eyes raked over him. He was sure to raise his chin and meet his father’s brown eyes, careful not to shy away in the slightest under the weight of the man’s gaze.

“I’ll be frank, boy,” Rippon began after his assessment of his son was complete.

William tried not to react to being called ‘boy’. As a man of thirty, he did not take kindly to his father speaking down to him, but he also knew that now was not the time to wage that particular battle yet again.

“I’m not pleased with you. Not pleased at all.”

“And what,” William said, unable to keep a small bit of his ire from leaking into his words as he spoke, “pray tell have I done this time? What transgression have I committed?”

Rippon’s eyes narrowed on William. “You would do well to mind your tone.”

There was a brief pause, one where he could tell his father was waiting for a retort, but William had none to provide.

“You are how old, twenty-nine now?”

“Thirty,” William corrected immediately, and again Rippon glared at him.

“As I was saying,” his father continued. “Much like your brother, you spend too much of your time galivanting around the country and not enough time focusing on your duties here

at home. Unlike your brother, however, you have no wife. Nor do you seem to have any prospects that would allow you to find one soon.”

His father paused, as if waiting for William to argue that point. But he couldn't. In that, at least, his father was correct. William did spend quite a lot of time away from the manor. Of course, most of it was to do his father's building and to help him manage the family's properties, but he did not feel like arguing that particular fact at the moment.

“I am done footing the bill while you run off to God only knows where, getting up to God only knows what, with God only knows whom. You will begin to search for a wife, and you will begin to do so seriously. I will give you until the end of the season to find someone, to court her, and to get engaged.”

William's mouth popped open in shock. “Father, the end of the season is only three months away. There is no way...”

“There is a way,” Rippon cut him off. “Your brother was able to do it, and now you will do so as well. So, help me, I will not allow what happened to my brother, Thomas, to happen to any of my sons. You will not die without an heir, leaving the rest of your family to clean up your mess and handle the transfer of your titles. So, you will find a suitable bride, or I will find some way to ensure that Laurence is named my official heir and that it is *he* who takes over the title of Baron when I am dead and gone. Do I make myself clear?”

The entire time his father was speaking the man's voice had been rising. So much in fact that the when the last sentence ended, Rippon had been yelling. William regarded his father as his mind worked overtime to process what he had been commanded to do.

He did not think it feasible for him to find a fiancé in only a few months. But as his father's hardened gaze roved over William, he was forced to accept that for right now, at least, this was a topic that Rippon did not consider up for discussion.

“Alright,” William said finally, dipping his head in reluctant acceptance.

“Now, go on and think about who you might pursue at the upcoming ball. You won’t have a lot of time, so you ought to spend it wisely.” Rippon waved his hand in dismissal, and William pushed himself out of the chair and cross the room.

Jonas was standing just outside the door, and when William stepped out into the hallway, the other man’s face lit with concern.

“Lord William,” Jonas said, his voice laced with kindness. “Your father told me what he was planning. And well, I know it won’t be easy, and it is not a fair ask. But if there is anything I can do to help with your endeavors, please do let me know.”

William was touched by the man’s offer of kindness, and he opened his mouth to tell him so, but Jonas just shook his head and walked away. Mind reeling from the odd interaction with the steward, as well as the demands that were just thrust upon him by his father, William couldn’t imagine going back to his chambers to stew alone.

So instead, he just kept walking through the house. The sound of the piano was no longer floating through the air, and he couldn’t hear any sound or sign for where everyone might be. Deciding that what he needed in that moment was a spot of fresh air, William decided to go out into the gardens.

Striding through the house, William stewed on the demand from his father. He hadn’t thought it was fair when Rippon had attempted to pull the same thing with Laurence, and he did not think it was a fair request now.

William knew that as the eldest son and the heir to Lord Bolton’s titles that he held a load of responsibility upon his shoulders. He had always known it. And while he loved his brother, Laurence had never considered what his role within the family was until he had to.

But William had always known. The responsibility and the duty that he had been born into had weighed on him heavily for his entire life. And William had no plans to shirk those responsibilities.

He did not particularly want a wife. It was something that he had been thinking about while he was away in London over the course of the past fortnight. William had no desire for love, and if he were to be honest with himself, no use for it either. He was a practical man, and try as he might he could not find a practical use for love. Not that he had tried particularly hard.

But he had known that his time for when his father would demand he find a wife was dwindling. And with that responsibility dangling over his head, he had even considered bringing it up to his father soon, just to get it over and done with. But what he had not expected was for Lord Rippon to issue an ultimatum.

Had his father come to him and posed it as a negotiation, or even just said that he'd like to talk about William's plans to find a wife, William likely would have been in reluctant agreeance. But now that the choice had been completely taken out of his hands, he wanted nothing more than to rebel against it.

William arrived at the large doors at the back of the house that led to the patio and to the beautifully sculpted gardens beyond and pushed them open. Rays of sun beamed down upon him, immediately warming his skin as he stepped out from the comfort of the manor house.

A laugh like tinkling bells caught his attention, and he turned toward the sound, finding Esther and Laurence sitting at one of the wrought iron tables at the edge of the patio, sharing a plate of grapes. At the sound of the door shutting with a clatter, Laurence and Esther's gazes turned toward him.

The moment his brother took in the set of William's shoulder, his gaze immediately darkened.

"What happened?" Laurence asked, waving William over to the empty seat at their table.

Crossing the patio in a few, quick strides, William took a seat and glanced at the couple sitting before him. He paused for a moment, weighing his words and how he wanted to approach this with his brother. Finally, blowing out a breath,

he placed his elbows on the table and rested his forehead in his hands.

“Father has demanded that I find a wife by the end of the season.”

William was staring at the ground through the bars of the table, but he didn't need to be looking at Laurence or Esther to know that their mouths were wide open with shock.

“He told me,” William continued. “That if I was not engaged, he would take my title and all of the responsibilities that I am set to inherit and pass them to you.”

There was a sharp intake of breath, but whether the gasp came from Esther or from Laurence, William did not know.

He raked his fingers through his dark brown trusses, tugging at the roots nervously as he finally worked up the will to turn his gaze to his brother. As William had accepted, Laurence's mouth and eyes were wide with shock.

“He can't do that,” Laurence muttered.

“We both know that he can.” William huffed out a laugh. “And we both know that he will. Have you met our father?”

“But finding a wife would not be such a bad thing, would it?” Esther's voice was low and kind when she spoke, and William turned his gaze to his sister-in-law.

He regarded her fondly, eyes roving from Esther's face to Laurence's. Watching the romance unfold between Esther and Laurence had been a true treat. Originally, Laurence had been set to marry Esther's cousin, Agnes. A girl that his brother had been friends with since they were quite young. But, through a series of odd but not unfortunate events, he had ended up with Esther instead.

And the two were madly in love. Anyone with eyes or sight could tell it was so. Every time they looked at one another their eyes clouded over with it, and they frequently could be caught sharing doe-eyed looks across a room.

And even if William had no desire for love himself, he was truly glad that his brother had found it. Laurence had always

been the more fanciful of the two of them, and it made William glad to see his brother happy.

“I know that it is my duty to find a wife,” William answered, making sure to keep his tone measured as to not betray his anger towards his father’s decision. “And it is something that I have thought about for a while now. I merely wish that he would have given me more time.”

“But it’s possible to fall in love quite quickly,” Esther said with another kind smile, and William fought the urge to scoff. “Just look at Laurence and I. I fell in love with him before I even knew it was him.”

Laurence blushed a bit at Esther’s words, and William recalled that their courtship began with a misdelivered letter. ‘An intervening of fate’ Laurence had once called it.

“I have no requirements of love for myself and my wife,” William explained. “I simply require that she’s a suitable match. But that’s the problem. Most of the ladies of the ton that Father will approve of are already spoken for. So, I do have my work cut out for me.”

“No requirements of love?” Laurence’s eyebrows shot up in astonishment. “Well, that’s quite a miserable outlook, isn’t it?”

William shook his head. “I have no need for love, Brother. You were lucky. But that is not often the case for people like us. So no, it is not love that I need. It is an heir.”

He knew that the words sounded callous the moment that he spoke them, but he didn’t dare attempt to backpedal and take them back. Additionally, it did not matter if they were callous, because William knew that they were true.

“There is more to marriage than producing an heir.” Laurence said, regarding his brother with worry.

“That is all marriage is for noble men. You know this.”

William held his brother’s gaze, the other man narrowing his eyes at him as Laurence scrutinized William’s demeanor. He did not shrink away under the weight of his brother’s stare. He had almost folded in front of his father, and he would not

do that here. Not before his brother, and not when they were having such an important conversation.

“We just want more for you, William.” Esther said, taking his attention away from Laurence.

“I don’t need more,” William corrected. “But if you’d like to help me look for a suitable wife, by all means.”

The words fell between them, and the husband and wife shared a quick, conspiring look. Leaving William to wonder if perhaps he had just tempted fate.

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513488>

CHAPTER 4

Agnes

“Close your eyes,” Benedict said, his deep rich voice dripping over Agnes like honey.

She threw a hurried glance around the room, where Helena was nodding off in the corner. Agnes watched as the woman gave a slight snore, her chin dipping down to her chest, once again leaving her practically alone with the earl. Agnes eyes flitted toward the door of the room, both excited to be alone with Benedict once more, and nervous that her mother would catch Helena sleeping when she should be acting as a chaperone. She did not want the maid to lose her position, not only because the woman was with child, but because Agnes genuinely enjoyed her company. But ultimately, her desire for alone time with the earl won out.

“What do you mean?” Agnes asked, turning her gaze back to his handsome face.

His stormy blue eyes stared back at her, reminding her of the first thing she noticed about the man. The way they danced when he smiled or when he laughed, always giving away what he was thinking. And right now, they were lit with excitement.

“I mean I have a surprise for you,” he explained as an amused smile lit up his face. “And I would like for you to close your eyes.”

The command was barely a whisper, causing Agnes to lean in closer to Benedict to hear him. The gentle command brushed over her, causing her skin to erupt in goosebumps and making it impossible to refuse.

With a blush creeping into her cheeks, Agnes did as she was asked and shut her eyes tight. She listened intently as the fabric of Benedict's clothing swished as he moved, trying to use those cues to identify what he was doing, but she could not.

All that she knew was that one moment she could hear the fabric of his beautiful waste coat shuffling, and the next moment there was the shuffle of feet across the hardwood floor. A small puff of wind from the movement combined from the direction of the sound told her that he was now standing in front of her, but what he could possibly be doing, she could not fathom a guess.

The smell of him drifted up to her, a deep, heady scent like that of cedar or spice. It made her want to lean into him. With her sense of sight shut down, it magnified everything else around her tenfold. She could hear the rapid beating of her own heart at his closeness, could feel the stirring of the air rising up to brush her cheek due to his movements. And it was lighting everything within her on fire.

"Alright," Benedict said, his voice coming from closer than she anticipated, causing her to give a slight jump. "Open your eyes."

Agnes' lashes fluttered open, and the first thing her eyes landed on was Benedict's face. It was mere inches from hers, so close that she was able to make out flecks of gold within the depths of his bright blue eyes that matched the gold of his shining hair. He was even more beautiful up close. And when he smiled at her, showing all of his stunning, white teeth, Agnes' pulse skyrocketed.

"Look," Benedict said, dropping his gaze downward.

Agnes followed the line of his eyes, realizing what she had missed when she was distracted by his beauty. In Benedict's hands was nestled a beautiful, green velvet box. He held it

open, and on the inside, lying atop a folded square of silk, lay an astonishing silver, diamond, and ruby necklace.

Agnes' eyes went wide, flickering from the necklace, up to his face and then back again.

“Benedict,” she breathed, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Her hand fluttered up to her chest, resting directly over her pounding heart as she gazed at the gift, trying to soak up the magnitude.

“Do you like it?” His voice was laced with worry, and her eyes immediately snapped up to his.

“Yes,” she answered immediately, so forcefully the sound of it caused Helena to give a grunted snore in her sleep, almost waking her.

“Yes,” she said again, lowering her volume but not the earnestness in which she spoke. “It is absolutely beautiful.”

“Brilliant,” Benedict said, reaching into the box and plucking the necklace delicately from its resting place. “If you don't mind, I would like to help you put it on.”

Agnes felt a flush rise immediately to her cheeks, and the only answer that she gave was a quick nod of her head. A wide grin tugged at the corner of Benedict's lips as he moved to stand behind her.

She heard him behind her, working to unclasp the delicate piece of jewelry. And then, he stepped closer to her. He was close enough that she could feel the heat radiating off his body, and for a moment she yearned to lean into him.

Esther's words from the day prior floated into her mind, telling Agnes that what she was feeling was desire. She had scoffed and been embarrassed by her cousin's words. But now, being in the moment with those feelings coursing through her, she knew that her cousin had been right. And Esther had also been right when she had said that it was natural. Because the feeling that Agnes had, the stirring deep in the depths of her belly and the goosebumps dancing along her flesh, she knew that it was as natural as breathing.

The necklace drifted into her line of sight as Benedict draped it around her throat. His fingertips danced along her collarbone, and then along the nape of her neck, causing her nerves to begin their cacophonous firing.

“You have a lovely neck,” Benedict purred, leaning down to whisper the words in her ear.

His breath stirred the small tendrils of hair that spiraled by her face, causing them to tickle. And the feel of his breath dancing along her skin sent shockwaves rocketing through her. Agnes’ breath began coming in short, tiny gasps, and her heart was beating so quickly that she thought it might pop out of her chest.

The sound of someone clearing their throat sent both of them snapping to attention. Agnes’ dark eyes flitted around the room until they landed on her mother, standing by the door with her hands on her hips, regarding them with careful disapproval.

Realizing what the scene must have looked like when Dorothy had walked in, Agnes blood heated and she felt the color rise into her porcelain cheeks. Benedict, however, seemed entirely unphased.

“Lady Jarvis,” he said amiably with a respectful incline of his head. “I was presenting Agnes with a gift.”

He gestured toward the necklace, and Agnes stayed still as her mother walked forward. Dorothy’s small, dark eyes roved over the jewelry, and Agnes could all but see the ideas churning within her mother’s mind.

“That is quite a lovely gift,” Dorothy said finally, her tone harsh as her gaze danced from the necklace around Agnes’ neck up to the earl.

“I thought of her immediately when I saw it. It was so beautiful that it reminded me of her, and I knew that she must have it.” Benedict’s voice was sweet as he spoke.

He moved out from behind Agnes, walking around and positioning himself to where she could see him. She had expected his face to be the same as hers, flushed with color

due to the shame of having been caught so close to one another. But his beautiful features were as nonplussed and angelic as ever. There was not a single line of stress or worry on his regal features, and she envied him for his steadiness in that moment.

“Quite a gift indeed,” Dorothy murmured as she took a step closer. “I assume that his means a formal proposal is on the horizon?”

“Mother!” Agnes snapped, terrified that her mother’s brazen comment would be seen as offensive by the earl.

Agnes’ eyes darted from her mother’s face to Benedict’s, and she was relieved to see that his expression had not changed.

“I assure you; it is on the horizon. My intentions with your daughter are nothing but pure.” He turned his gaze to Agnes, his blue eyes shining with affection as he regarded her, and it made her heart stir to life and begin it’s fluttering once more.

“Then there is no reason to delay,” Dorothy chided. “If you are so well intentioned.”

“I am simply waiting for the correct moment,” Benedict dipped his head. “But there is nothing for you to worry about.”

He glanced at the grandfather clock that sat in the far corner of the room, giving a quick start when he realized the time.

“Lady Agnes, Lady Dorothy,” he turned his gaze to each of them in turn. “I am so sorry to rush out on you, but the time got away from me. As it always does, where Agnes is concerned. But alas, I must be going.”

He turned to Agnes, extending his hand to her. She placed her palm delicately in his, the warmth of his palm radiating through her with ferocity. They gazed at each other as Benedict dipped his head, brushing his lips faintly across her satin gloved knuckles.

“Until next time, lovely Agnes.” His voice came out in a purr, and it made Agnes’ center turn molten.

Benedict let go of her hand, the absence of his warmth rushing in on her instantly, and then he turned to face Agnes' mother.

"It was a pleasure to see you, as always," Benedict said, dropping himself into a bow as Lady Jarvis inclined her head at him.

"Lovely to see you," Dorothy returned, but the steel in her eyes negated the kindness of the words.

Benedict walked past her mother, and Agnes watched him the entire way. When they heard the front door open and shut with a loud bang, Dorothy whirled to face the room.

"Helena," she snapped loudly, causing the pregnant maid to jolt awake. "Wake up and fetch us some tea."

Helena pushed herself up with a grunt of effort, eager to get out of the room and complete the order that had been barked at her. Agnes watched with a pit in her stomach as the other woman waddled from the room, her last line of defense between her and the inquisition she knew that was impending from her mother.

The moment the parlor door closed behind Helena; Dorothy whirled on Agnes.

"What were you thinking?" She hissed, stepping closer to her daughter.

"What do you mean?" Agnes' brow furrowed in confusion.

"Allowing him so close to you. To touch you!" Dorothy's voice was high and shrill. "If word got out how close the two of you were when I walked in, it could ruin you, girl. And if you are ruined, we *all* are ruined."

Dorothy's mean dark stare narrowed on her daughter. "You have to be more careful," she commanded, and Agnes dipped her head as shame began to unfurl in her chest. "You cannot allow people to see the liberties you allowed him to take in that one small moment, do you understand me? That must be the last of it. We cannot risk the potential engagement with a scandal."

Dorothy gestured around her, indicating the walls that were now all but bare of the beautiful paintings that once adorned them. Her cheeks flushed crimson, marking them with the guilt that rocketed through her.

“The fate of this family and our entire estate rests on your shoulders, do you understand me?”

Her mother’s words were harsh, and Agnes bowed her shoulders under the weight of them. But she also knew that they were true. The Jarvis’ financial situation, and subsequent lack of a dowry, was something known only by Dorothy, Esther, the Boltons’ and, of course, Agnes herself. And without the financial incentive a dowry would provide, Agnes had been worried that she would have trouble finding a husband. She was quite aware that she was lucky to have found a man that was not only rich and could save her family’s finances, but that seemed to adore her enough that she believed he would overlook the lack of the dowry when the time came.

The way that Benedict had looked at her when he unveiled the necklace, it had been so eager and so full of love and caring. She had never imagined that someone would ever have looked at her like that.

Agnes knew that she was beautiful. One did not spend their entire life being treated the way that she had and end up unaware of the reason that doors are opened for you when they are not for others. She was of a high-born, and as far as the rest of the ton knew, rich family.

If she had a dowry, she knew that she would have a pick from any suitor that she could possibly desire. But without one? It was incredibly important that her betrothed be someone who loved her enough that it did not matter. And the way that Benedict had looked at her, well it led her to believe that she may have finally found exactly what she needed.

Her hand fluttered to the hollow of her throat, dancing along the metal of the necklace that now hung there. She gripped one of the blood red rubies beneath her finger, feeling

it warm under her touch as she clung to it, imagining it as the warmth of the man who had fastened it around her neck.

“I understand, Mother.” Agnes said, and she hoped that her mother heard the truth in her words.

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513488>

GET ABBY'S EXCLUSIVE MATERIAL

Building a relationship with my readers is the very best thing about writing.

Join my newsletter for information on new books and deals plus a few free books!

You can get your books by clicking or visiting the link below

<https://BookHip.com/MDRMLCA>

PS. Come join our Facebook Group if you want to interact with me and other authors from Starfall Publication on a daily basis, win FREE Giveaways and find out when new content is being released.

Join our Facebook Group

abbyayles.com/Facebook-Group

ALSO BY ABBY AYLES

The Keys to a Lockridge Heart

Melting a Duke's Winter Heart

A Loving Duke for the Shy Duchess

Freed by the Love of an Earl

The Earl's Wager for a Lady's Heart

The Lady in the Gilded Cage

A Reluctant Bride for the Baron

A Christmas Worth Remembering

A Guiding Light for the Lost Earl

The Earl Behind the Mask



Tales of Magnificent Ladies

The Odd Mystery of the Cursed Duke

A Second Chance for the Tormented Lady

Capturing the Viscount's Heart

The Lady's Patient

A Broken Heart's Redemption

The Lady The Duke And the Gentleman

Desire and Fear

[A Tale of Two Sisters](#)
[What the Governess is Hiding](#)



Betrayal and Redemption

[Inconveniently Betrothed to an Earl](#)
[A Muse for the Lonely Marquess](#)
[Reforming the Rigid Duke](#)
[Stealing Away the Governess](#)
[A Healer for the Marquess's Heart](#)
[How to Train a Duke in the Ways of Love](#)
[Betrayal and Redemption](#)
[The Secret of a Lady's Heart](#)
[The Lady's Right Option](#)



Forbidden Loves and Dashing Lords

[The Lady of the Lighthouse](#)
[A Forbidden Gamble for the Duke's Heart](#)
[A Forbidden Bid for a Lady's Heart](#)
[A Forbidden Love for the Rebellious Baron](#)
[Saving His Lady from Scandal](#)
[A Lady's Forgiveness](#)
[Viscount's Hidden Truths](#)
[A Poisonous Flower for the Lady](#)



Marriages by Mistake

The Lady's Gamble

Engaging Love

Caught in the Storm of a Duke's Heart

Marriage by Mistake

The Language of a Lady's Heart

The Governess and the Duke

Saving the Imprisoned Earl

Portrait of Love

From Denial to Desire

The Duke's Christmas Ball



The Dukes' Ladies

Entangled with the Duke

A Mysterious Governess for the Reluctant Earl

A Cinderella for the Duke

Falling for the Governess

Saving Lady Abigail

The Duke's Rebellious Daughter

The Duke's Juliet

Secret Dreams of a Fearless Governess

A Daring Captain for Her Loyal Heart

Loving A Lady.

Unlocking the Secrets of a Duke's Heart

SCANDALS AND
SEDUCTION IN REGENCY
ENGLAND

ALSO IN THIS SERIES

Last Chance for the Charming Ladies
Redeeming Love for the Haunted Ladies
Broken Hearts and Doting Earls
The Keys to a Lockridge Heart
Regency Tales of Love and Mystery
Chronicles of Regency Love
Broken Dukes and Charming Ladies
The Ladies, The Dukes and Their Secrets
Regency Tales of Graceful Roses
The Secret to the Ladies' Hearts
The Return of the Courageous Ladies
Falling for the Hartfield Ladies
Extraordinary Tales of Regency Love
Dukes' Burning Hearts
Escaping a Scandal
Regency Loves of Secrecy and Redemption
Forbidden Loves and Dashing Lords
Fateful Romances in the Most Unexpected Places
The Mysteries of a Lady's Heart
Regency Widows Redemption

The Secrets of Their Heart
Lovely Dreams of Regency Ladies
Second Chances for Broken Hearts
Trapped Ladies
Light to the Marquesses' Hearts
Falling for the Mysterious Ladies
Tales of Secrecy and Enduring Love
Fateful Twists and Unexpected Loves
Regency Wallflowers
Regency Confessions
Ladies Laced with Grace
Journals of Regency Love
A Lady's Scarred Pride
How to Survive Love
Destined Hearts in Troubled Times
Ladies Loyal to their Hearts
The Mysteries of a Lady's Heart
Secrets and Scandals
A Lady's Secret Love
Falling for the Wrong Duke
Dukes and Duchesses of Love
Regency Rakes and Radiant Brides
Dukes' Bridal
Dukes Duchesses and Scandals
Dukes and Hidden Truths
Secrets Scandals and Society.

A MESSAGE FROM ABBY

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed every page and I would love to hear your thoughts whether it be a review online or you contact me via my website. I am eternally grateful for you and none of this would be possible without our shared love of romance.

I pray that someday I will get to meet each of you and thank you in person, but in the meantime, all I can do is tell you how amazing you are.

As I prepare my next love story for you, keep believing in your dreams and know that mine would not be possible without you.

With Love, Abby Ayles

PS. Come join our Facebook Group if you want to interact with me and other authors from Starfall Publication on a daily basis, win FREE Giveaways and find out when new content is being released.

Join our Facebook Group

abbyayles.com/Facebook-Group

Join my newsletter for information on new books and deals plus a few free books!

You can get your books by clicking or visiting the link below

<https://BookHip.com/JBWAHR>

ABOUT STARFALL PUBLICATIONS

Starfall Publications has helped me and so many others extend my passion from writing to you.

The prime focus of this company has been – and always will be – *quality* and I am honored to be able to publish my books under their name.

Having said that, I would like to officially thank Starfall Publications for offering me the opportunity to be part of such a wonderful, hard-working team!

Thanks to them, my dreams – and your dreams — have come true!

Visit their website starfallpublications.com and download their 100% FREE books!

ABOUT ABBY AYLES

Abby Ayles was born in the northern city of Manchester, England, but currently lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with her husband and their three cats. She holds a Master's degree in History and Arts and worked as a history teacher in middle school.

Her greatest interest lies in the era of Regency and Victorian England and Abby shares her love and knowledge of these periods with many readers in her newsletter.

In addition to this, she has also written her first romantic novel, *The Duke's Secrets*, which is set in the era and is available for free on her website. As one reader commented, "*Abby's writing makes you travel back in time!*"

When she has time to herself, Abby enjoys going to the theatre, reading, and watching documentaries about Regency and Victorian England.

Social Media

- [Facebook](#)
- [Facebook Group](#)
- [Goodreads](#)
- [Amazon](#)
- [BookBub](#)