

BELLES OF THE BALL
BOOK 3



GIOVANNA
AT THE
BALLROOM
ABBY AYLES

GIOVANNA AT THE BALLROOM

HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BELLES OF THE BALL

BOOK THREE

ABBY AYLES



CONTENTS

[Also by Abby Ayles](#)

[Scandals and Seduction in Regency England](#)

[Praise for Abby Ayles](#)

[Get Abby's Exclusive Material](#)

[Giovanna 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](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Esther at the Ballroom](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Also by Abby Ayles](#)

[Scandals and Seduction in Regency England](#)

[A Message from Abby](#)

[About Starfall Publications](#)

[About Abby Ayles](#)

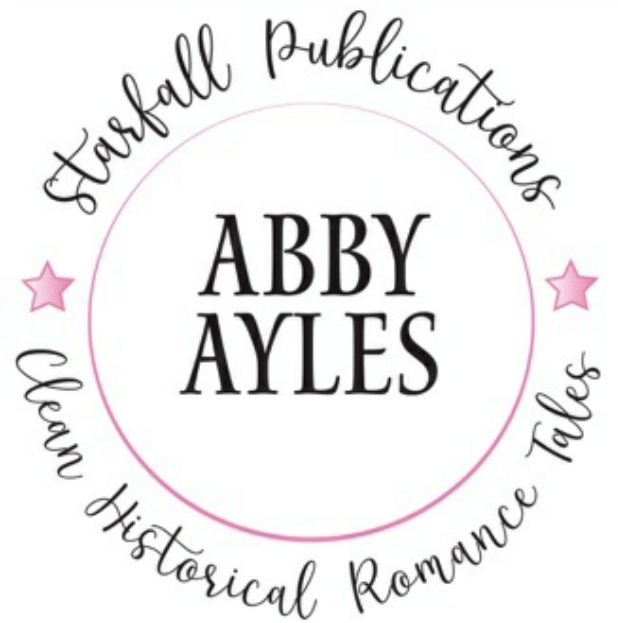
This is a work of fiction.

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*

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

GIOVANNA AT THE
BALLROOM

CHAPTER I

All around Silas, sailors bantered between themselves, going about their business of loading cargo on and off the sailing ships. A salty, sea breeze wafted his way, reminding him of the journey he'd now completed.

Silas had turned into a veteran traveller over the last few years. Although born the son of a servant, it was only thanks to his sister's husband, the Duke of Cornwall, that he'd managed to reach greater things.

A servant marrying a duke of such standing had caused a bit of a scandal some years ago, but as they'd all grown up together, they'd got through it by supporting one another. He'd always been close friends with the duke, and his bond with his twin sister was unbreakable. But Silas wasn't a romantic, he had his eye on adventure, and that's what he'd been doing most of his adult life.

Although now a wealthy merchant and a seasoned traveller, it didn't make him immune from suffering sea legs syndrome after spending twelve hours on a rocking ship. As he walked away from the dock, he wavered a little in his stride.

The winds had been in their favour as his ship had set sail. But the weather was unpredictable, and after an hour or so, things had changed drastically, causing the ship to creak and groan as it battled the high waves. Only three hours later, the passengers were allowed back on deck as the seas had calmed. With a belly full of sea biscuits, Silas was pleased that once again he was setting foot on English soil.

He knew the crossing was nowhere near as treacherous as the Atlantic could be, and one day he would take that very journey. But with so much social unrest everywhere, since the Napoleonic war had ended, he was glad to

arrive in the port of Dover and thus leave his travels behind. England had its own set of problems too, but at least he was familiar with the language, making him happy to be home. Ironically, it was that exact same war that was now encouraging the English nobility to invest abroad.

The Duke of Cornwall had sent a carriage to collect him, as Silas had been carrying out overseas investments on the duke's behalf. On this trip, Silas had been securing many deals for the import of wines and brandy, among other goods. At the moment it was a good deal, bringing goods in from Europe and selling them for a good profit in Britain. Content with the many business dealings he'd secured, he was looking forward to seeing his sister, the Duchess of Cornwall. It was time to enjoy what remained of the festive season.

Seagulls squawked above his head, circling the fishing boats at the other end of the dock, in the hope of stealing a fish or two. Paying them no mind, Silas clambered into the carriage so he could leave behind the salty smell of the sea. His driver weaved in and out of the bustling streets of Dover, and soon they were headed towards the highway that would take him to Cornwall.

In a sleepy haze, Silas recalled some of his dealings, which had been mostly in Italy. He'd stayed a few weeks in Tuscany, a trip hosted by one of the largest vineyards, and made many friends. Silas found the Italians very friendly, despite all the political changes. He'd even invited one of the smaller vineyard owners to join him in England. Even though Conte Marco Romano of Polesine had been an old man, he'd shown much interest in exporting his wines, explaining he needed to expand, and soon.

Silas met the Italian count at a social event, preferring, in the future to deal with the smaller, family vineyards than the larger ones. But then the old man had been taken ill, so they never completed their deal, which had been a shame as he'd liked the count very much.

Still, he'd managed to organise the first shipment at a higher cost from a larger vineyard, which would get them started. Should the old man take up his offer of visiting England, they could start negotiations up again and he'd happily move the contract over to him.

After two days, and many stops later, Silas finally arrived at Welwick Hall, on the Bodmin Estate. Feeling weary, his mood soon lifted once he saw the duke and the duchess, his sister Vera, awaiting his arrival in the courtyard. Even better, the twins, their children, were there to greet him too.

It had always fascinated him how his sister had given birth to twins,

seeing as he and his sister were also twins. He knew what a special bond twins shared, and it pleased him that his niece and nephew shared that same bond that he and his twin sister Vera did.

First to greet him were the children, who ran up to him as soon as he stepped out of the carriage.

“Uncle Silas, did you bring us gifts from your travels“ his little niece begged as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Livy!“ her mother chastised, using her daughter’s nickname, though she did it with a smile. They had called her after Lady Olivia, but somehow her name had become shortened in fondness to Livy. “Give Uncle Silas some space, he’s barely out of the carriage.“

Livy’s twin brother, Lord Owen, took a more reserved greeting than his sister, and shook his uncle’s hand.

“It is good to see you home, Uncle Silas,“ Lord Owen said in greeting, and Silas could see how much he took after his father, the duke.

“Ah, give your uncle a hug, little Lord,“ Silas said, taking the boy in his arms and patting his shoulders.

Next came his sister, Lady Vera Wald, the Duchess of Cornwall. As they hugged tightly, she shed a little tear of joy at her twin brother returning home.

“I do worry about you every time to go on your trips, brother,“ the duchess said quietly in his ear.

“And every time I return, I have many a tale for the children,“ he reminded her as he pulled away, stroking the tear from his sister’s cheek. “You look well, Vera.“

“And you look tired and underweight,“ she answered. “Let us fatten you up before you disappear yet again.“

Silas turned to shake the duke’s hand, “I’m glad to be home,“ he said to his friend and brother-in-law, the Duke of Cornwall, Lord Oscar Wald.

“By god, Silas, it is good to see you back,“ the duke replied. “I worried you might not make it for the Twelfth Night Masquerade Ball, but I am mighty pleased that you have.“

“You have no idea how pleased I am to know that I’ll be enjoying your Christmastide ball this year,“ Silas replied. “Oh, and little Lady Livy, as it happens, I do have gifts. Most of them are all the way from Africa. I went there first, for another quick safari tour,“ he told his niece as they all turned to walk up the stone steps to the front door.

“Did you bring me an elephant, Uncle Silas?“ Lady Livy asked giddily. “I

do hope so, I would love to have an elephant.“

“Well...as it happens, I have brought you an elephant, a lion, and a giraffe plus many more. But there is a catch,” Silas joked as he followed his sister into a parlour room. “They are handcrafted from wood, by the natives.“

“I did not think you could bring me a real elephant, Uncle Silas,” Lady Livy said very matter-of-factly. “But I cannot wait to see the one that you have brought home. Have you brought something for my brother, Owen, too? He’ll take a terrible sulk if you have forgotten him,” she added, knowing her twin brother better than anyone else did.

“Let Uncle Silas unpack his things first, dear,” the duchess suggested, smiling at her daughter’s eagerness. “What I would like to know, brother, is why you haven’t managed to bring a lady back with you?“

“Why would Uncle Silas want to bring a lady back with him?“ Lady Livy blurted out, covering her mouth as she giggled at the thought.

“Because your mamma wants your uncle to marry,” Silas answered, glaring his sister’s way. “But Uncle Silas doesn’t wish to marry, ever.“

The duchess tutted back at him, “Silas, if you keep up all this adventuring, sooner or later...well...never mind. It is not something I wish to discuss in front of the children.“

Silas noticed Lady Livy staring at him with an inquisitive look on her face, no doubt trying to work out what her mother meant. He smiled at her, and winked, watching as a smile blossomed on her pretty face. He’d brought the travelling box in with him that contained all the gifts and took out a little key to unlock the padlock, keeping it secure. Holding it up, he handed it to his niece.

“There you are, let’s see what’s in Pandora’s Box shall we,” he said, looking at the box in question.

“Can I open it, Uncle Silas?“ Lady Livy called out; her eyes wide with delight.

Silas nodded and the children rushed to the box. Inside were rolls of cloth containing items wrapped in even more fabric, and the children took turns unravelling the smaller gifts. As they did, Silas explained the adventure he was having when he purchased each gift.

“Ah, now that one is a giraffe. He has the longest neck you will ever see,” he explained as the children gasped at all the wooden figurines of beasts from Africa.

“Look Mamma,” Lady Livy cried out as she unravelled a monkey.

The duchess smiled and soon the adults were having their own conversation while the children played with their gifts.

“My only interest when I’m abroad, is focusing on Oscar’s business dealings,” Silas said as he sipped on a fancy China cup containing tea. “Oh, and I’ve brought you some tea and coffee back that I picked up along the way.”

“Thank you. But when will you bring yourself a wife back with you?” the duchess persisted with the topic. “There will come a time when you tire of your travels, and only wish for a warm fire and a good woman to care for you.”

“This is true, Silas, old boy,” the duke joined in. “I never regretted marrying your sister. Vera has a wise head on her shoulders.”

“Oh, that reminds me, Lady Olive and her husband will be arriving later today,” the duchess told him. “She’s enjoying married life in Scotland. You see, you can live anywhere and still get married.”

“Enough, Sister,” Silas said, with faux laughter. “Perhaps Lucy will have me back, now that I’m returned?” His sister went quiet, which was unusual for her, “What is it that you aren’t telling me?”

“She did the sensible thing,” the duchess replied, but hesitated for a moment before breaking the news to her brother. “I think young Lucy finally gave up all hope of ever pinning you down and she found herself a husband. A man who promises to stay in one place and provide for her.”

“My Lucy is wed?” he asked, raising his brows in surprise. He paused, thinking what this loss meant to him because he was more than fond of his childhood sweetheart. “Well, good for her, I say,” he added, knowing he’d miss her, but her happiness was important to him.

The duchess looked disappointed at his reaction, “You could at least show a little regret.”

“I would never stop her from finding happiness,” Silas replied. Though he did feel a little sadness at losing her, he wasn’t going to let his feelings be known. Not wanting to discuss the matter any further, he purposely changed to the topic of conversation. “Shall we go to your study and discuss business, Oscar? I have much news to share with you. I’ve even invited an Italian Conte to join us for the special ball. Though he’s quite an elderly gentleman so I can’t guarantee that he’ll arrive. But he produces a fine wine, that much I can guarantee, and at a cheaper cost than the larger vineyards.”

“Must you men talk of such things in here?” the duchess complained. “It

is crude to speak of business in front of the children.“

“Come along, Silas,” the duke said as he stood up to leave. “We can take ourselves to my study, and you can tell me what you have spent all that money on.“

The two men left the parlour, leaving behind two very happy children at play. The duchess opened up a book to read, so Silas knew that she must have forgiven him. He hadn't admitted to her that he'd been pining to come home, but he knew there may be some truth in her warning. Sooner or later, he supposed, he'd need to find a wife and settle down. But then again, he still enjoyed his travels, and it could be that he simply wasn't destined to marry.

CHAPTER 2

Silas and the duke were on their way to discuss business when they were approached by Barker, the old butler, in the main hallway.

“A carriage is coming up the driveway, Your Grace,” the butler informed the duke.

“Ah, that should be Olive and her husband, Julius. I will go and fetch the children and Vera,” the duke said, turning back to the parlour. “We can talk later, Silas, you should go and rest a while after your journey. I want you on top form for tomorrow’s ball.”

As it happened, Silas did feel a little weary and so took the duke’s advice, turning to head for his room.

“It is good to see you home, young Silas,” the old butler said before he took the step on the grand stairway.

Silas realised he hadn’t greeted his old friend, Barker, yet.

“By Jove, Barker, my apologies, I am a little over tired and wasn’t thinking. It is always good to see you again,” he said, taking a step towards the butler and leaning in to hug him briefly, patting his shoulders.

Barker had always been like a father to him and his twin sister, Vera, albeit a strict one. The old man had always played a strong and stable role in their lives, most especially after their mother passed away.

“Every time I return home, it surprises me that you are still hard at work,” Silas said to the old man, as they remained standing in the hallway. “A man in his late sixties should be living a life of ease. Most especially after a lifetime of serving others.”

“This is my home, Silas,” Barker replied. “I could never see myself living anywhere else.”

As they stood talking, the young twins could be heard approaching. They ran through the hallway, dashing to greet Lady Olive, and no doubt collecting their next set of gifts.

“Children, slow down!” The duchess called after them. “Silas? Are you coming?”

“Please inform Lady Olive that I will catch up later,” he told his sister as she too passed him by. “For now, I’m going to my room to rest awhile from all this madness,”

“Good idea, brother, I will see you later,” the duchess nodded and soon disappeared out through the front door.

“Do you have ten minutes to spare, Barker?” Silas asked as he made to go up the stairway to the bedrooms. “Come and escape the bedlam so we can catch up,” he invited. “Oh, and bring a tray of brandy, will you?”

Barker nodded his agreement as Silas climbed the stairway, heading towards his usual bedchamber. As he entered, a maid was unpacking his clothing and hanging it in the wardrobe, so he left the door open.

“Ah, Moira, isn’t it? Silas asked the maid, recognising her because she was one of the prettier servants in the upstairs household.

“Yes, sir, I be Moira,” she replied, sharing a warm smile. “I almost be done here.”

“Tell me Moira, is Lucy still a maid here?” Silas enquired, unsure if his childhood sweetheart was still around.

“No, sir, not if she be the one who married our regular meat seller,” Moira informed him. “She be-”

“Off you go then, Moira,” Barker instructed as he entered the room, interrupting the conversation. “You can finish off later, my girl.”

“Yes, Mr Barker,” she said, and with a swift curtsy she was soon gone.

Silas went to sit in an armchair by the blazing fire. The hearths in the bedchambers were not large ones, nonetheless, it made the room cosy and warm, with the orange glow of burning coals.

“Come and sit with me awhile, if can spare the time, Barker,” Silas said, pointing his arm to the armchair opposite his. The butler carried a tray with a crystal glass goblet containing the amber liquid of brandy. “Are you not partaking in a drink with an old friend?” Silas asked him.

“Not when on duty, young Silas, you know that,” Barker said, though he did go seat himself in the warm chair by the fire. “It is the Twelfth Night of Christmas tomorrow, our busiest night of the entire year. But I will take the

opportunity to speak with you awhile. Tell me how you fair from your last journey?"

Silas took a sip of the liquid and felt it warm his belly as it glided down his throat.

"Well, there's much unrest with the ending of French wars," Silas began. "But it's also a time of great opportunity, and I mean to make the most of that."

Barker smiled back at Silas, looking pleased, "I'm proud of you, young man. You've pulled yourself up from the level of servitude. You and your sister have both done well, so I can now grow old in peace."

"Well... I won't be marrying anyone of nobility like my sister did, Barker. Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Silas said, knowing he'd never climb the social ladder as high as his sister had managed. A cook marrying a duke was unheard of, but then, they had been childhood sweethearts too.

"Are you saddened over losing Lucy?" Barker asked, leaning back to enjoy a few puffs on his pipe.

"I was never the marrying type, she knew that," Silas admitted, though it did sadden him that she wasn't to be around for him anymore.

"Your sister wishes that you'd find a good woman to be by your side, and she'll be at you for it, I'm sure," Barker warned.

"She's already been at me, Barker," he said with a smile. "Besides, she knows I crave adventure."

"Aye, it's funny how the quietest of children turn out to be the most adventurous," Barker chuckled.

"I enjoy having respect and status, Barker. Every man should have the opportunity to better himself, is that not so?" Silas asked though he knew what Barker thought of it all.

"You know my beliefs, Silas. A person belongs in the status they were born to, and yours was servitude," Barker answered as expected. "But, given that your sister's now a duchess, you could never have remained a servant. What the duke has done for you two is nothing short of a miracle. Though gossip is still ripe among many lords and ladies. Or at least those of the opinion that their marriage should never have been permitted."

"Damnation to the lot of them," Silas remarked. "They've been happily married for around eight years now, and as for the twins, they're adorable. How can anyone still gossip after all this time?"

"Those who believe the duke should have married their daughters, no

doubt,” Barker remarked. “Though I’ve heard tell that on one occasion, Queen Charlotte became over tired of the gossip over the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall. So, she declared that she never wished to hear about them again. That’s as good as ending the wagging tongues once and for all, don’t you think?”

“I, for one, am thankful to Oscar, erm... I mean the duke,” Silas admitted. “If not for him, I would never have been the successful businessman I am today. Oh, that reminds me, can you make room for more guests?”

“We have opened every wing in the manor house with each room made ready for guests,” the butler replied. “Why? Have you got yourself a good woman after all?”

“No, no, Barker, it’s nothing of the sort,” Silas said, brushing such a remark aside. “I’ve invited the Conte Marco Romano of Polesine, in Italy, to join us for the special ball that the duke throws. He was an interesting old man I met along my travels, and his wines are most excellent.” Barker looked a little disappointed and Silas supposed he, like his sister, would like to see him married. “Don’t be so disheartened, Barker, it will be a good business connection for the duke. It will be good for the Bodmin Estate to become involved in the wine trade.”

“I do not doubt that, but can you think of nothing but business during the festive season?” Barker complained. “Christmas is not a time for inviting business guests.”

“Christmas is all but done and I spent much of it travelling,” Silas replied.

“Hmmm, that is what I mean. You need to enjoy life too,” Barker said, tapping his pipe and readying himself to leave. “Well, young man, it’s time this butler returned to his duties. The Twelfth Night Christmastide Masquerade Ball won’t organise itself. You know how much the duke and duchess love this time of year, so I’d better go and make sure the servants are behaving themselves.”

Silas stood up to shake Barker’s hand. “I thank you for taking the time out to speak with me, Barker, but I don’t wish to keep you from your duties.”

“You’re a good man, Silas Atkins. I know you’d do anything for the duke and this estate but do start to think about your own life too,” Barker advised. “Or you’ll end up a lonely old man like me.”

After a brief handshake, the butler left his room and Silas was left alone. Tiredness was starting to catch up with him, so he went to lie on the top of his bed.

Whilst Christmas had come and gone while he was overseas, he always tried to return home for the Twelfth Night Masquerade Ball. It was at that very ball where his sister had disguised herself behind a mask and worn Lady Olive's ballgown. The two of them had planned it so that Vera could dance with the duke without anyone knowing. Hah! The duke knew exactly who she was, and that very night he proposed to her at the ball.

It all seemed a lifetime ago and so much had happened since then. He looked forward to seeing Lady Olive again, she had been a real inspiration to him many years ago, and a good family friend. But first, he needed to shut his eyes for a while.

His thoughts soon returned to business, and he hoped that the Italian count would arrive, but the invitation had been an open one. The present arrangement he'd made for the wine imports was with a larger vineyard in Italy, but it was only a temporary one. A more permanent deal with a smaller vineyard would yield higher profits, and that would be perfect.

"Here I go again, always searching for the highest profit margins," he said out loud, tutting at himself.

Closing his eyes, he thought of his childhood sweetheart, Lucy, who was once an upstairs maid at Welwick Hall. They'd enjoyed many a roll in the hay and he'd always adored her freckled, pretty face. In his youth, when he'd thought his life was mapped out, he was certain that they would marry. But then he'd discovered travel and had ignorantly assumed that Lucy would wait for him. She was always the one person he really missed on his travels, and many times he'd asked her to join him, but always she'd refused. Lucy had preferred the security of home, and for him, she'd represented home. Now, his home wouldn't feel the same without her there.

He'd also been friends with Jeffrey, the man who his Lucy had ended up marrying. He was a big fellow, but a kindly one too, considering how he butchered farm animals and then made pies out of them.

At least Lucy had married a man with a solid trade, and one who could provide for her. That pleased him because he knew that he would never have got around to proposing to her because he wasn't ready to settle, and she deserved some happiness.

No; marriage wasn't for him; he was sure of it. He was too consumed with his business dealings, with no time for courting and wooing young ladies. Even though he worked for the duke, he was paid generously and had set plenty of savings aside. Savings that he rarely spent, given that all he did

was work most of the time. Though his safari in Africa had been of his own doing. Perhaps he might consider visiting the Americas next, that would be a worthy adventure.

Travelling for days on end had made him weary and within ten minutes of Barker leaving, Silas soon drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 3

The last few days had been chaotic, with guests arriving, and all the excitement of the ball building up. That was how Silas preferred things, busy and buzzing, so he had no regrets about coming home.

At last, the ball was underway, but it was only early in the evening, so even the children had been allowed to attend for an hour.

“Mother wanted to come,” Lady Olive was explaining to his sister, as the three of them stood in a small group chatting. “Her health is not too good at the moment, so the viscount insisted that she stay in Ireland and not travel such a lengthy journey.”

“That sounds like a wise decision,” the duchess replied, nodding her head in agreement.

“And you, Lady Olive, how are you finding married life?” Silas asked out of curiosity. “Way up there, in the Scottish Highlands.”

Silas knew Lady Olive’s background well because she was a good friend of many years. For a while, after her husband’s death, she had felt she would never be ready to marry again. Lady Olive hadn’t been married to her first husband for long before he died. And it had been a marriage she’d been forced into, so she’d been in no rush to remarry. That was until she met her present husband, Mr Julius Burke, and he’d witnessed the obvious love between the couple. Silas felt pleased for her, she’d played an important role in his life, and he was very fond of her.

“Bah, Scotland is cold, but beautiful. On top of that I am surrounded by the smell of horse dung on most days,” Lady Olive said, smiling with fondness as she spoke. “Being married to a veterinary surgeon means my husband is called out many times day and night, so I keep myself busy with

the other military wives. I am very lucky and very happy.”

“Uncle Silas,” a little voice called out behind him as someone tugged on his jacket. “Can you tell that it is me?” His little niece asked, holding a sparkling mask over her eyes.

“My oh my... it is a princess, I am sure of it,” he declared in faux shock.

Little Lady Livy pulled her mask away giggling, “No silly, it is only me,” she said, loving every moment that she had been allowed to stay at the ball.

“Livy, remember I said not to be a nuisance,” the duchess said firmly to her daughter. “Where is Nanny? You should be to your bed by now.”

Lady Livy looked disappointed at her mother’s orders, so Silas went to cheer her.

“Come along little one, let us go and find her,” he suggested, taking hold of his niece’s little hand.

“Do I really look like a princess, Uncle Silas?” Lady Livy asked, with longing in her voice.

“You had me fooled,” Silas nodded as he went to pick her up because she was fast becoming buried among all the adults milling around the ballroom.

“Lady Livy!” Silas heard a voice call out. “Where have you been?” Nanny said as she rushed over to take her charge away. “My apologies Mr Silas, the girl has been so giddy.”

“Worry not, Nanny, this little princess has delighted many of the guests, so she has played her part,” Silas replied to the old woman.

Nanny had been the duke’s nursemaid when he was a young one, and so had often taken care of Silas and his sister. She was a much loved and trusted part of Welwick Hall.

“Time for your bed, little Princess,” Nanny said, with young Lord Owen in tow. “Say goodnight to Uncle Silas, children.”

Both gave him cuddles and kisses aplenty, and he watched as Nanny led them up the main stairway to their bedchambers. He smiled, recalling how much trouble he, Vera, and the duke used to give Nanny when they were little. She had much patience, and it was touching to know that she now cared for his sister’s children.

Turning around to return to the ballroom, Silas wasn’t in the mood for dancing. Instead, his thoughts wandered to Lucy; he’d missed her on this trip, not wanting to visit her now that she was wed. In the past, she’d always been his lover on his home visits, but that had come to an abrupt end.

Silas entered back into the ballroom, walking around the outer ring of the

dancehall. He felt a little regret that his Italian guest hadn't managed to join them in England. It was a contract he was keen on obtaining and would perhaps return to Italy later in the year to visit the smaller vineyard.

"Ah... there you are brother," the duchess's voice called over to him as she approached with another lady by her side. "This is Lady Maria, daughter of Lord Parker, the Baron of Craigland. I made her promise to leave an opening so that she could dance with you, and that happens to the next dance."

"The pleasure is all mine, Lady Maria," Silas said with a bow of his head, though it wasn't what he felt.

Holding out his arm he led her to the dance floor. It was so typical of his sister to set him up, she seemed more than determined to see him married off.

His partner was a flimsy, young lady and spoke very little, for which he was most grateful. When he did speak to her, she seemed only to answer with a horsy laugh through her nose, which was most off-putting. Eventually, he stopped trying to converse with the woman and looked forward to the dance ending.

As the music stopped, he accompanied her back to where she said her mother was seated. He didn't linger and once he'd left them, he made his way to the games room. That might be the safest place before his sister brought another of her offerings.

There he found the duke, who'd also managed to escape the ballroom.

"Silas, come and join the game," the duke said, offering him an empty chair. "How did you manage to escape your sister?"

"Oh, so you know about all the matchmaking she's doing, do you?" Silas asked, raising his brows.

The duke laughed, "I protested, but she would not listen to me I am afraid," the duke replied, taking a sip from his brandy glass. "I told her not to interfere. But you know Vera, she's convinced that you're heartbroken over your childhood sweetheart marrying herself off to another man."

"Well, she is wrong. I'm not in the least heartbroken," Silas said, unwilling to share the truth. He picked up the hand of cards that the dealer had dealt him at the table. "I wish her well because I'm not yet ready to marry."

For the next hour, Silas enjoyed his brother-in-law's company. But eventually, the duke stood to leave, explaining he couldn't hide in the games room for much longer. The gentlemen at the table laughed, but the truth was

that each of them was most likely doing the same. They'd all need to return to their wives in the ballroom at some point.

After the duke left the game, so too did Silas. He got up to walk around the room and chat with many of his acquaintances. The games room was always a good place to discuss business. Silas thought it would be interesting to discover what investments others were making, now that the French war was ended.

Many complained that they'd had to close their tin mines because their workers were going abroad for better pay. Silas couldn't empathise with the mine owners when they were known for treating their workers harshly.

Indeed, the duke owned several mines, but at least he gave his workers a fair deal. Though Silas had little to do with the business dealing on home territory. He knew that mining wasn't profitable, which was why the duke had sent him abroad to find better agreements. Silas had relished the challenge and risen to it, bringing in plenty of profitable business since he'd started.

Sauntering around the games room, he even engaged in a card game with the Dowager Countess, Lady Graytham, making sure he lost to her. She was a sweet woman, and he was aware that she'd been supportive of his sister's marriage to the duke.

There'd been much gossip and talk of scandals when, at one of these very balls, the Duke of Cornwall had proposed to his sister, a mere servant. But many of the older ladies rallied around. They said that what went on in Cornwall was nothing to do with the pompous lords and ladies of London.

Thanks to people like the dowager, his sister had soon settled into becoming a duchess, and now she thrived in the position. It had helped that they'd grown up with the duke, receiving a very similar education to him. For most of the time, they'd both attended many of the young duke's lessons with his past governess, Miss Martha.

Now that his sister was married, she expected him to follow suit. But Silas enjoyed a bachelor's life, and the many ventures he was having. He wasn't considering settling down yet because he had so little to offer a wife, not being a lord of anything. Thanks to the duke, though, he'd built up some personal wealth and might consider buying some land one day in the future.

Mulling over his thoughts, laughter at the other end of the room distracted him. He was sure that he'd heard someone speaking in Italian, between hearty laughs. Curiosity got the better of him, and made his way through the

room, eager to find out who was causing such merriment.

That was when he saw her... the most beautiful woman he'd ever set his eyes upon... and he'd met many lovely ladies. Mesmerised, he watched on, captivated by the alluring Italian woman who had a laugh that sang out to his soul.

CHAPTER 4

Never had Silas been so entranced by a woman, but this beauty had him captivated. Her pale olive skin gave her an exotic appearance. With thick, black, silky hair arranged perfectly around a slender shaped face, boasting full, dark-pink lips. Well-shaped brows covered dark smouldering eyes, and as she looked his way, he noticed a tear shape mole underneath her right eye. It appeared to look like a permanent teardrop. To Silas, she was the picture of perfection.

Although she'd glanced his way, she paid him no mind as if she had seen right through him. So busy was she, with the entertainment of the gentlemen around her. Silas thought the stakes must be high at the card table, for such a crowd. Or was it her beauty that had attracted such a lot of attention?

Whatever the reason, he remained mesmerised as he observed her movements. Her laughter tinkled, and her voice had a husky tone to it as she spoke in broken English. She held herself with an air of confidence as she played her hands at the card game, the men around all clearly under her spell.

Who is this exquisite woman? He pondered. How am I to get her attention when all around her are excitable young men?

And then he heard it; someone at the table was speaking in a foreign language, and he recognised it straight away as Italian. This caused him to shift closer to the table and see who the foreign voice belonged to. It didn't sound like the old man he was expecting from Italy, so perhaps it was likely nothing to do with his invitation.

As he spotted the young man, he was still convinced that he spoke with an Italian tongue. He'd know an Italian man anywhere because they always appeared to have handsome features, even though they could be quite rugged.

“Mattia Russo, stop distracting me,” the woman’s voice sang out as she chuckled at the man.

Again, Silas was sure that was an Italian name or was it Spanish, he wasn’t sure. But the defined, long shape of the man’s nose had a Roman look to it, and the thick brows he was sure belonged to a man from the Mediterranean region. With thick, dark waves to his hair, he had all the features Silas would expect of a Southern European man.

As he got closer to the table, he could see that the woman was winning at cards. Were they cheating together? If they were, then no one was complaining, not even the handsome young man who she played with. Silas knew her competitor, he was a nobleman from some small place in Somerset. A second or third son of some baron or other, and not a wealthy family by all accounts. But he was throwing money away like he had plenty to spare.

Not that Silas cared, nor did he care for gambling either, he only played with friends or family, and then only for fun. Though it was obvious that the Italian couple were having a lot of fun winning at every hand.

Silas decided to make his move and discover who these guests were. He walked up to stand behind the foreign man’s chair. It gave him a full view of the lovely woman, and he was all the more convinced of their heritage.

To test it, he greeted them in their language. “*Benvenuto in casa mia,*” he said, looking over at the enigmatic eyes of the woman.

“*Grazie,*” she acknowledged, nodding his way. “And you are?” she asked in English, looking back down at her hand.

“*Signore Silas Atkins, al tuo servizio,*” he answered with a nod of his head.

The woman took on a more serious gaze as spoke in her language to her companion.

“*Questo é l’uomo che cerchiamo,*” she said. Her words sounded sharp and fast, the way she pronounced them. Silas couldn’t catch the meaning as she spoke them with speed.

“My cousin, she tells me that you are the man that we seek,” Mattia said, turning around to look at Silas. He then held out his hand for a handshake, as he stood up. “I am Signore Mattia Russo. I accompany my cousin, Signorina Giovanna Romano, on behalf of her father, Conte Marco Romana of Polesine.”

“Ahhh... it all makes sense now,” Silas nodded as he shook the man’s hand. “Tell me, is the conte with you too?”

Mattia took Silas by his arm and led him away from the table. “No, he

was too ill to travel, but you are in good hands I promise.”

Silas looked back at the card table and could see that Signorina Giovanna was finishing off the card game and collecting her winnings. She then stood up to approach Silas and her cousin.

“You will excuse me for exciting your guests,” she said to Silas, in excellent English. “I hoped a good card game might flush you out.”

“Flush me out?” he asked, a little puzzled by her statement. “You only needed to announce yourselves as you arrived, and I would have greeted you.”

“What my cousin, or rather, Giovanna means, is that we did not know your name,” Mattia explained, looking a little embarrassed. “Giovanna saw you from a distance on your visit, so hoped to recognise you. We only knew of your invitation to trade with *Vigneto Romano*, the vineyard of her father.”

“Yes, that is true. I’m so pleased to meet you both,” Silas said, thrilled, but a little confused. “Shall we go somewhere a little quieter?”

Mattia nodded in agreement and the two Italian guests followed Silas through to the main hallway. It was more of a passing point, situated between the games room and the ballroom.

There, he turned to the lovely lady, “Signorina Giovanna, I can introduce you to my sister so that you can sit with the ladies. I am sure you do not wish to be among men when they’re talking business.”

For a moment Silas thought the Italian woman was going to slap him because she looked utterly insulted. Her dark eyes burned into his very soul as she threw him a glare that caused him to shiver.

“I have no interest in your ladies, Signor,” she told him, narrowing her eyes.

“I meant only for company, while your cousin and I speak.” Silas tried to cover his embarrassment, unsure why the lovely Giovanna looked so annoyed with him.

“You will speak your business with me,” she snapped, not taking her glare away from him. “My cousin is here to accompany me on my visit. He has little knowledge of *Vigneto Romano*. Treat me as you would my padre, and all will be well.”

“I see, but are you well versed in business dealings?” he asked, his confusion growing by the minute because he’d never conducted business with a woman before.

Giovanna didn’t answer, she only continued to glare at him, and he knew

he had to say something to save himself.

Saying the first thing that came to mind. “Will you have the next dance with me, Signorina Giovanna?” he asked, instantly thinking he’d said the wrong thing.

“Of course, Signorina Giovanna will dance with you, Lord Silas,” her cousin was the one to answer, and he did so with a faint laugh. “She would be honoured, would you not, Giovanna?”

“I am not a lord, please, refer to me as Silas,” he explained as he looked at Mattia, not daring to look at Giovanna for fear of reprisal.

“*Si*, if that is what you wish,” Giovanna said, holding out her hand to Silas.

Silas wasn’t sure why he felt so nervous, he’d never felt like that with any woman before, but Giovanna Romano wasn’t any normal woman. He lifted his arm, allowing her hand to rest on it as he escorted his guest into the ballroom. The touch of her hand sent a thrill through his body. This woman had bewitched him and now he acted like a fool. He had to get a grasp of himself and take the lead, as a man should.

Entering the dance floor, they took up their positions. Silas worried for a moment, that she might not be familiar with the dance, and began to regret forcing her to the floor. The music began and she soon proved otherwise, dancing with perfection and grace.

When they came together in the dance steps, he looked upon her face to see if might acknowledge him. Her olive complexion was flawless, and her dark-pink lips were divine. Strange thoughts invaded his head, such as stealing a kiss from her sensuous mouth. Quickly, he averted his eyes, determined to stop such loose thoughts in his head.

Now and then their hands touched in the dance moves, and her skin felt soft and warm. What he would give to take hold of her hand and pull her into him for that forbidden kiss. Yet all she did was ignore his presence, using him as her dance partner and nothing more.

The dance ended all too soon, and she waited for him to escort her from the dance floor, as any lady would. Yes, she had been taught good manners and grace, carrying out her role with ease. Silas led her back to her cousin who waited in the outer part of the ballroom, where the bystanders observed.

As they approached Mattia, he gave out a light clap, “Bravo, that was magnificent. You looked very well together.”

It wasn’t what Silas expected him to say, but he supposed Mattia felt a

little lost in an English ballroom. Giovanna's face was still, she neither smiled nor frowned, only wearing a blank look, causing Silas to worry that she too felt out of place.

"Let me introduce you to the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall," Silas suggested, hoping the presence of another lady might put her more at ease.

He was relieved when he found his sister and her husband together, "May I introduce my guests to you both?" he said to the duke as he approached the couple. "Your Grace, this is Signorina Giovanna Romano and her cousin Signore Mattia Russo. Her father is the Conte Marco Romano, owner of the *Vigneto Romano* vineyard that we have talked of."

The duke bowed his head to Giovanna and her cousin, smiling with a warm greeting.

"Signorina Giovanna," Silas said as he turned to his guest. "This is my sister, the Duchess of Cornwall."

The greetings went well, and the duchess took Giovanna under her wing, as Silas had hoped she would. No one talked of business, saving Silas from the confusion of exactly who he would be dealing with, the Italian woman or her cousin.

He was surprised when the ladies started to leave the ballroom, but he and Mattia followed. They entered the games room and went to sit at an empty table, while his sister picked up a set of cards.

"I wouldn't play with Giovanna, Vera," he warned his sister. "I have seen how she plays, and she's very good. Cleaned out a number of men already."

"Perhaps I can teach you a trick or two, Silas," Giovanna said as she picked up her hand.

"My brother hates to gamble," the duchess said, coming to his rescue.

"I work very hard for my money, I don't wish to give it away so foolishly," Silas said in defence.

"Then you must learn how to win," Giovanna said with a smile, something she didn't seem to do often.

"I would prefer if you didn't deal me in," Silas said to his sister. "I'm not in the mood for thinking too hard."

Giovanna found his statement amusing and laughed. "Are you saving your head for our business dealings, Silas?" she teased.

"No," he replied, realising that he sounded a little feeble. It caused him to cough and clear his throat, making his voice sound deeper. "In business, I am well versed."

“Ah, it will be interesting then,” Mattia said, with humour in his tone. “My cousin, she drives a hard bargain when it comes to her grapes.”

“This is true,” Giovanna agreed. “I am passionate about padre’s wines, and I will not allow anyone to take him for a fool.”

As she spoke, she glanced his way with fire in her eyes. He was familiar with the fervency of the Italian people, always gesticulating and speaking out loudly. But Giovanna said everything with her eyes, and stunning eyes they were too.

“I assure you; I have no intention of treating you poorly,” Silas retorted, not liking how she accused him of taking her father for a fool. “I respect the conte very much, and we will come to a mutual agreement that will serve both our families well.”

“Then do not insult me by not playing cards, Signore Silas,” she said, dealing him in the next hand. “I want to see you try to beat me, which I can assure you that you will not succeed in. But do not worry, we will not play for money.”

Silas wondered why it felt like everything she said seemed to be an insult. She clearly thought little of him, to treat him with such disdain, yet she didn’t even know him. He picked up the cards, thinking he had a reasonable hand, he agreed to join in.

Sure enough, many hands later, Giovanna had won every single one. He didn’t want to accuse her of dishonesty but thought that she must be cheating somehow.

“I do not cheat, Silas,” she said as if she could read his mind. “Your face gives you away. I can read your mind by every expression you make. You must learn to hide your thoughts better because you are giving away your darkest of secrets.”

The duchess laughed, “My brother was never one to take risks, so I doubt he holds any dark secrets,” she teased. “But you will find him most agreeable in business, Giovanna.”

“That is not quite true, sister,” he said, sulkily. “I am cautious in life, there is nothing wrong with that. But you are right on one thing; I am of an affable nature.”

“I love you with all my heart, brother,” the duchess told him as she went to stand up. “I look forward to spending more time with you both, Giovanna and Mattia, and tasting your wines. My husband adores Italian wine, and food too, as it happens. I must go and mingle among my other guests.”

Silas and Mattia stood up to bow their heads as the duchess left the table.

“Are you ready to lose more cards?” Giovanna asked Silas before he sat down again.

“If you don’t mind, I too must go and mingle,” he said, feeling a great need to get away and put his thoughts together.

He bowed slightly at Giovanna and made to leave the table.

“I hope you do business better than you play cards,” Giovanna called after him, but he pretended not to hear her.

What was it about this woman that riled him so easily? He should be treating her as he would any business partner, with the uttermost respect, yet she confused him, spinning his head and his thoughts all around.

CHAPTER 5

Giovanna had believed that she would be dealing with the Duke of Cornwall directly, regarding a business deal. Instead, she was having to negotiate with his underling, who wasn't even a lord of any kind. Not only that, but something about him annoyed her. Despite that, she also found the man attractive. Most likely that was why he annoyed her; she had no time for anything other than a business relationship.

Catching the occasional glimpse of Silas, why did he always seem to be looking her way too? And each time she looked his way, she caught a different part about him that she liked.

His Adam's apple was large, and she noted its movement when he swallowed. *Hmmm... he has a very kissable throat...* but as she found herself contemplating such thoughts, she quickly looked away, feeling annoyed at herself.

Then later, she peeked again, this time noticing his square, strong jaw, and the dimples on either side of his cheeks when he smiled. His dark hair was styled short, yet it was unruly, even messy.

I could run my fingers through it and tidy it up. And why is there a particular lock of hair that keeps falling over your right eye? I want to twirl my fingers through it. And I like how your sideburns are a little longer down the sides, shaping your rugged face.

What is wrong with me? She questioned herself as she dealt the cards, challenging him to a game. *Why am I feeling attracted to a man I don't even know?*

And there she was again, peeking over at him, noticing his cute lopsided grin. *I have to stop looking at him,* passed through her mind, but it didn't stop

the urge she felt to press her lips on his. Not that she ever would, nonetheless the craving was there, causing her to feel even more irritated.

The next time she peeked, she thought that his almond-shaped eyes had a slight slant to them. *Do you have Asian heritage in your bloodline? It adds a little mystery to your persona. Your skin may not be as olive as mine, but it's darker than most of these Englishmen.*

Getting ever annoyed with herself for her uncontrollable curiosity over this man, she teased him in punishment, which she knew was most unfair. Giovanna had told him that he gave away secrets through his expressions. Though what she'd meant was that he didn't play cards very well because in truth she couldn't read him at all. Most of the men she'd come across always enjoyed playing cards, but not him, he had to be different. Thus, vexing her even further.

His sister had left the table, and so she began to talk business; and why not, it was the perfect opportunity.

"You have a contract for a shipment with our sworn rivals," she told him, watching for his reaction.

"Do we?" he questioned, raising a single brow at her. "If you mean my contract for a supplier of fine Italian wines, I see nothing wrong with that."

Hmmm... are you going to play hard to get? She mulled over in her head, though he seemed unconcerned over her predicament.

"Let me put it another way, Silas," she snapped, glaring at him as she spoke. "It is my family who have travelled all this way to visit you. Where are they? I do not see them going out of their way to come and trade with you in your own home."

"But I did not invite them, Giovanna," Silas answered with no hesitation in his reply. "I requested your father's presence because I liked him."

"You two should go and enjoy a dance," Mattia suggested, flashing her a worried look. "This is not a place to discuss business. First, you must get to know one another. A good friendship is what helps good business relations."

Giovanna was not in the mood for one of her cousin's lectures. Being older than her, he'd wanted to be the one to make the deal with the English, but she'd insisted that it must be completed by her. After all, it was her *padre* who owned *Vigneto Romano*, and not him.

Why do men always have to interfere? She chided him in her head.

"We have already danced this evening," Giovanna replied, not taking her eyes off Silas. "I would not wish the English lords and ladies to get the wrong

impression, should we dance together more than once.”

“Oh, but you are wrong, Giovanna, we can dance twice, if we wish,” Silas said as if he was challenging her because there was no excuse not to dance again.

“Let us return to my rivals, who are actually our enemies,” Giovanna said, returning the conversation. “Are they to deliver a shipment of their wine to you?”

“I had already agreed on the deal before I met with your father,” Silas explained, and she appreciated his honesty. “Your father approached me with a sample of his wines. I was most impressed with the quality, and more so with the price.”

“My *padre* agreed on a price?” she questioned, surprised because he hadn’t mentioned it, though he’d been quite forgetful of late. “We must begin negotiations all over again, as my father was ill.”

“But you don’t know what the agreement was?” he came back at her, but now he had an expression on his face that she couldn’t read, causing her to smile. So, it seemed that he was capable of hiding secrets after all, but only under the right circumstances.

“Then let us begin our trading, there is no time like the present,” she offered, ready to defend the figures she had in her head.

“Tell me first, why you do not like your neighbour?” Silas asked, and the sincerity in his eyes told her that he was genuine with his question.

“They are criminals,” she answered, hoping to drop the conversation with her answer.

“That’s a strong accusation,” Silas replied. “Do you have evidence of what they’ve done?”

Giovanna didn’t wish to get continue the conversation, so didn’t reply. She wanted to tell this Englishman that it was none of his business, but she didn’t want to lose his interest in trading.

“What my cousin does not wish to talk about, is that her neighbour is always trying to buy her father’s land.” Mattia was the one to reply. “They are known for their bullying ways to get what they want, and for this reason, Giovanna has much hatred for them.”

“I see. Can you not have them brought to justice?” Silas continued with his questions, increasing Giovanna’s irritation.

“There is no proof, and even if there was, nothing can be done,” Mattia explained.

“They shoot at my dogs. They poison our waters. Believe me when I tell you that they are not good people,” she answered, waving her arms around as she spoke of them. That was her usual way when others annoyed her. “Among other serious subterfuge that they play on people who get in their way.”

“Then I apologise for doing a deal with them,” Silas said with a look of discomfort. “If your price is right, you and I shall change all that,” he added.

“I will not give my wines away, signor,” she said, scowling his way to make sure he understood she was not to be an easy target in business. “I may be a woman, but I am passionate about my father’s land and his wines. I protect our business against our neighbours. This I must do if we are to survive.”

She watched as the Englishman held a look of concern.

“Do not worry, Silas, it is not uncommon to be rivals with your neighbours in my country,” she told him, sharing a smile. “This is not your worry, it is mine. If you like our wine, then we negotiate, yes?”

Silas leaned back in his chair, holding his chin in one hand as he looked at the table.

“Do not think this situation will affect our deal, it will not,” she added, wondering why he hesitated.

“I do not doubt it, but I find it regrettable that you live under such circumstances,” Silas said. “You have a beautiful country, and I have found Italians to be passionate people. There has been enough conflict with all the wars that surround our countries, and here you are, fighting among yourselves.”

Giovanna wasn’t happy with his response. She thought him ignorant, but she wanted to trade with him, so she knew she had to bite her tongue. *How could this man be so stupid?*

“Silas, I will be honest with you,” she said, wondering what this man before her was really like. Yes, he was very pleasant to look at, but he had a high opinion of himself if he thought he could tell her how to live.

“It is crucial that we are honest with one another, Signorina,” he answered, and she noted his brows furrow as if he was confused. “That is if we are to enjoy many years of trade together.”

“I would never try to tell you how to run your life,” she said, knowing she was behaving a little sternly but not caring. “I would ask that you treat us in the same way. We have much history that you cannot possibly know, so

accept things as they are.”

“I must apologise for my cousin,” Mattia stepped in, and Giovanna threw him a fiery glare.

She spoke to him in Italian, telling him that the Englishman had no right to tell them how to live with their neighbours. Before she realised, she was soon arguing with her cousin too. They had both forgotten that they were in the presence of a potential customer.

“Might I ask Signorina Giovanna for another dance?” Silas’ interruption stopped them.

Giovanna looked over the table to see Silas looking at her with gentle, soft eyes, and it forced her to come to her senses.

“Do you English not have some rule about a second dance?” she asked him again, unsure if what she’d heard was true. “I understand that people may believe we are... erm... betrothed?”

Silas gave her a half smile and the dimples in his cheeks broke her resolve. When he looked at her like that, she felt like a young girl in some dreamy romance. But when she thought of love, it reminded her of past mistakes, and such thoughts brought her back to reality.

“I assure you, Giovanna, we are allowed a second dance without the danger of wagging tongues,” he told her, standing up to offer his arm.

Mattia reminded her, in Italian, to stop ignoring their future customer, which forced her to stand and accept the Englishman’s arm.

“Either I will have to learn to speak your language, or you must speak only English,” Silas said to her as they left the games room.

“I would be honoured to teach you this, Silas,” she answered, though she didn’t mean it, she was only being polite.

“And I would be honoured to learn, and to have you for my teacher,” Silas said, leading her to the edges of the ballroom.

The music had been quiet for some time, and Silas turned to speak again.

“Ah, it appears we are eating at the moment, and not dancing,” he explained. “Can I take you through for some English delights?”

She bowed her head in agreement, realising she was hungry, though she wasn’t quite sure what to expect at an English table. She hadn’t informed her customer that she’d never stepped foot in England before. In fact, she’d done little travelling ever, mostly concentrating on her father’s vineyard. But that was not something she wished to share with a potential customer.

“I see you are serving French wines to your guests,” she pointed out.

“Yes, how observant, Giovanna,” he said, handing her a glass of port. “But you will change all that for us, will you not?”

“No, you have a shipment from my neighbour first,” she snapped, instantly regretting her words. “My apologies, I allow my passion to overcome my head, forgive me.”

“I would forgive you anything,” he said, moving closer to her.

Giovanna didn’t make any attempt to move away as the Englishman moved nearer. If anything, she welcomed his presence. Although she was annoyed at him for doing trade with her neighbouring vineyard, she was aware that she liked this man. He stirred an odd feeling inside her body and mind, sending a shiver of excitement right through her.

Silas led her to the table of food and began to fill a plate for her.

“Would you care to try some poached salmon?” he asked, and she nodded her agreement.

Handing her the plate, he then went to fill another for himself.

“When you come to visit *Vigneto Rimano*, I will cook for you many of our traditional dishes,” she promised, and surprisingly, she looked forward to it.

“You cook?” he asked, looking utterly surprised.

“I do, and I do it very well,” she informed him, wondering why it shocked him so much.

“I don’t move in many circles where ladies do the cooking,” he explained, though he had many a fond memory of his mother, and indeed his sister, both being excellent cooks in the Welwick Hall kitchen. But those days were long gone, and ladies of the gentry did not cook. “If that is your way of an invitation to visit your vineyard, I will accept it, and I look forward to your cooking too.”

Giovanna picked at her food, not that she didn’t like it, but her stomach was busy doing its own thing. This man, Silas Atkins, made her feel quite strange, though it was not in a bad way. It was a feeling that she recalled having before, when she’d become engaged to a man, who she’d thought loved her; except he’d been lying.

Her previous love, Rodriguez, came to mind, and as she took a bite of the food, it almost choked her. Coughing furiously, Silas came to her aid. He led her out of the room, to take her outside for some air. It was a while before her coughing fit ceased, and it left her feeling quite lightheaded.

“I must apologise, Silas, I... I...”

“No, Giovanna, you never need to apologise to me for anything. That is unless you overcharge me for your wines,” he said with humour in his voice.

She looked at him and could see that he was joking, and she shared in his laughter. Yes, she liked this man. What she didn't like, ironically, was that she liked this man. It gave her an urgent need to get away from him, and her laughter stopped.

“I... I must go and find Mattia, we... we need to be going...”

Those were the last words she spoke to Silas, at the ball. Giovanna quickly found her cousin and they left for their accommodation. She thought of nothing but Silas, on their carriage ride. The man confused her, or rather her feelings for him confused her. In truth she actually did like him, despite that she'd sworn to herself that she would never be interested in another man, ever. Because she never wanted to feel the heartbreak that Rodriguez had caused her, it had been unbearable. Silas only reminded her of those feelings of trust that she once held for a man who she'd believed had loved her, but then had betrayed her in so many ways. It was not a feeling something she ever wanted to hold in her heart again, preferring instead to put her heart into her business.

CHAPTER 6

The evening's event had confused Giovanna somewhat. Her belief that she was dealing with an English duke had soon been dispelled, although it was his wealth funding the deal. Instead, she was to do business with Mr Silas Atkins, and hopefully procure a profitable arrangement between them. But, instead of the meeting going as planned, he'd managed to cause her much personal confusion. She was beginning to wish that she'd never have to see him again. It was going to be distracting dealing with a man to who she'd found herself attracted, and that was not what she wanted.

While she and her cousin were staying in England, they rented a cottage in a small village close to Welwick Hall. Her cousin had sorted that side of their trip, as men always received the better deal in such things. Her father had insisted on Mattia accompanying her. It had caused her to feel a little insulted because she was more than capable of dealing with business.

In the end, though, it seemed that it had been a wise decision because she did feel alone. Mattia was her favourite of many cousins, and she enjoyed his company. Although her father, and her late mother, had many siblings between them, she had none. But cousins were as good as siblings in her country because, to them, family was everything.

Without the intense labour of her various cousins, she'd never be able to oversee the vineyard. They toiled without complaint, providing cheap labour until she could get back to making a good profit.

Entering the cottage, Mattia went in first and lit a candle lamp so they could see. They then lit more between them.

"You know, Giovanna, I like that Mr Silas Atkins. I do believe that you will come to a profitable agreement with him," he spoke in their own

language. “You should stop being so unfriendly towards him. It could be the undoing of your business deal.”

“You are not here to give me advice, Mattia,” she told him outright. “You are simply here to carry my bags, nothing more.”

She knew that Mattia was more than familiar with her ways, and she was thankful that he did not usually take offence at her brashness.

But Mattia seemed to hesitate, and for a moment she thought he might be offended by her last comment. Instead, he simply shrugged at her, and brought up a topic she did not wish to discuss. “It is time to put *Rodriguez Mancini* behind you,” he said, knowing she was still touchy over that topic.

“What are you now, my mother?” she barked back at him, her annoyance now rising at his interference.

“I wish your mother was still around so that she could tell you the same,” Mattia tried. “I have many sisters and I know a thing or two about a woman’s broken heart. I beg you, Giovanna, forget that man, he was never good enough for you anyway. We are glad that you rejected him in the end.”

“If you know women as well as you say you do, you will also know that once bitten, never again,” she told him. “I have no interest in men, only business.”

“Oh, come now, cousin. It was two years ago that you broke from him, why can you not forget him?” Mattia asked, unwilling to let the matter go.

“I have forgotten him, but I have not forgiven him,” she explained.

Picking up one of the candle lamps, she went to make her way to the narrow stairway that would lead her up to the two bedrooms.

“Of course you have not forgiven him, he is your sworn enemy,” Mattia said, attempting to stop her from going to her bed. “You will never forgive him or his family for what they tried to do to you and yours. But Silas is nothing like him, he is a good man, I can tell. And I know that you like him, I can tell that too.”

“Bah! You know nothing,” she hissed. “I am going to my bed, goodnight cousin.”

“I have heard your father tell you to find joy in your life,” he called after her as she climbed the narrow stairway. “He says that you must think beyond business, yet you ignore him. Why is that?”

“I am not discussing it with you, Mattia, goodnight,” she called back, making sure to shut her door loud enough so that he knew she was no longer listening.

She didn't wish to talk about love ever again. All she wanted to do was care for her father in his old age. Then to make his vineyard bigger and better than their neighbour's, the Mancini's. When she'd fallen in love with their son, Rodriguez, she hadn't realised that he only wished to marry her so he could merge their vineyard with his father's. He'd wanted her to act as a wife and mother, and nothing more.

Catching her scowling face in the mirror, she stared back at her image. Yes, her features did look a little wild, and the mole below her eye always made it appear that she was crying. She'd cried many tears from her broken heart, and the last thing she wanted was a relationship with another man. What was Mattia thinking?

Of course, she knew her cousin loved her, as she did him, and he only wanted what was best for her. But if she didn't even know what was best, so how could he? One thing she was sure of, was that it wasn't to have a romance with an Englishman, no matter how attracted she felt towards him.

Then she grimaced at her image in the mirror because she knew, despite her own protestations, she actually liked the Englishman. But since she'd vowed to herself to compete with the neighbouring vineyard, she had no time for romance. And liking Silas was a weakness she could not afford. Moving away from the mirror, she refused to look in it as she began to get undressed.

Silas might not be anything like Rodriguez, but in the beginning, Rodriguez had been a gentleman too, for a while. Then, he'd started hinting at her talking to her father to see if he could take over the vineyard when they wed. She'd told him on many occasions that she was inheriting the vineyard and wanted to run it herself, but he'd laughed at her. He'd accused her of being a dreamer, saying a woman couldn't run a business, and his insults had eventually worn her down.

With a long sigh, Giovanna climbed between the blankets of the bed. She prayed that sleep would take her soon because her mind felt exhausted with all the turmoil in her head.

Yet still, the past haunted her. Rodriguez had caused her so much pain that his memories always made her head throb. She recalled how she'd gone to her father and told him of her doubts about marrying Rodriguez. Giovanna had expected her father would be angry with her because at last, he was gaining a son. Instead, they'd discussed what she wanted out of the vineyard.

That was when he'd told her he was happy that she saw herself running it. Her father had gone on to assure her that a woman was more than capable of

having a good business head. He'd even brought her mother into the discussion, who she had very little memories of. Telling her that when he'd given up all hope of keeping up with the work of the vineyard. Without sons to toil the land, it had been difficult to keep the vineyard profitable. But her mother had been the one to push him into continuing.

Giovanna had been told on many occasions how she took after her mother in looks and attitude. At some point, she'd decided that if her mother could do it, then so could she. And so, she'd laboured in the fields, picking the grapes, and taking them through the complicated process of making wines. Over the years, she'd proved her worth to her father, and to everyone else. That was when she'd convinced herself that there was no reason why she couldn't run the vineyard too.

But there were so few men who would ever be as kind and encouraging as her father. He'd believed in her mother, and they'd kept the vineyard running between them. Only recently had her father become too ill, and Giovanna had gradually taken over many of his tasks. That included looking for new contracts such as this one and coming to England to secure a deal for exporting their wines.

Giovanna felt determined to increase the profits of the vineyard, and not to be looking for romance. She wouldn't be distracted by anyone. A man in her life would only mean taking a back seat, and that was not something she wanted for herself.

As she lay in her bed, Silas would not leave her mind. She thought of how he and the duchess looked alike, as did the young twins, the children of the duchess. Giovanna knew little about having children, but she hadn't realised that twins of different sexes could look so alike.

She'd also been impressed with the duke and the duchess; they had been kind and very welcoming. When her father had informed her that he'd received an invitation to attend a ball at the end of the festive season, she had thought it all rather odd. Then again, she found the English quite strange in their ways. Nonetheless, if it meant arranging an exporting contract, she was keen to take up the offer.

Giovanna was to inherit the vineyard, being an only child, but that wasn't the reason why she wanted it to be successful. It had belonged to her father's family for generations, and she didn't want to be the one to see it fail. They had relied on extended family to keep it going for far too long. Now that her time had come to take it over, it made her even more determined to see the

business grow, and not disappear.

She looked upon Silas as a good opportunity to extend the business into export. In all fairness, Giovanna also knew that she couldn't afford to let this contract fall through. That was why she had come herself, to ensure that it was successful. What she hadn't expected was that she would find a man who caused her insides to tremble with matters other than business.

Yes, she admitted to herself that she did find Silas attractive. When she was around him, she found it maddening that he made her feel peculiar. Her entire body felt like one of those jellies that the English were so fond of. "The ones that wobble on a plate," she chuckled to herself.

I must complete this deal as quickly as possible. Then I can leave this country and its peculiar ways behind, she told herself, pushing Silas to the back of her mind. He is a man who can help me take things forward for my business, and nothing more.

With that last thought, Giovanna closed her eyes, but the image of Silas remained. Soon, she felt weary and began to slip into a sleepy world. Little did she know that was about to dream of a wonderful romance. And it was to be with a very familiar Englishman called Silas.

CHAPTER 7

Breakfast was served mid-morning the next day, allowing for the late hour that everyone would have retired to their beds after the ball. Silas was weighed down with a groggy head, having drunk more alcohol than he'd meant to once Giovanna departed. The Italian woman had made a huge impact on him, and he couldn't wait to see her again, she was intoxicating.

Not only was he impressed with her high spirits, but he hadn't been able to take his eyes away from her full lips; so very kissable. She had a slender, long face, and large brown eyes that conveyed passion to him. Her thick, illustrious, dark hair had been styled to perfection, and he'd longed to take out the pins. He'd imagined her dark curls hanging loosely around her bare, slender shoulders.

Shaking his head, he pushed such thoughts to the back of his mind, what was he thinking? Giovanna hadn't shown any kind of interest in him, if anything she seemed to dislike him, nonetheless, he had to see her again. Besides, there was also the matter of business to attend to, so she'd be in his life for at least a few more days.

"I'd like to invite our Italian guests to dinner if that's acceptable?" he asked the duke over the breakfast table.

"Absolutely, let's treat them honourably while you negotiate a good price for their wines," the duke agreed.

"Good, we need to begin our business discussions as soon as possible," Silas added, using that as an excuse.

"You two looked wonderful together on the dance floor," the duchess joined in, smiling her brother's way. "Tell me, Silas, is she as lovely as she first appears to be? I was very impressed by her independent nature."

“I thought she had a beauty that was most alluring,” Lady Olive also decided to give her opinion too.

“Stop your teasing, you two,” Lady Olive’s husband came to his rescue. “You’re as thick as thieves when you get going. Poor Silas must feel like he has two sisters to contend with.”

This brought laughter around the table, even for Silas. “You’re not wrong there, Mr Julius,” Silas agreed. “It seems that we men must stick together and protect ourselves from the machinations of women. I do love you both, but Giovanna is here on business and nothing more.”

But his statement didn’t convince anyone and his sister continued to pursue the matter. “Hmmm... I see that you’re on first-name terms then?”

“Of course we are,” Silas snapped, wishing his sister would stop interfering in his personal life. “We are business partners, not lords and ladies. Besides, I never mix work and pleasure. If I did that, I’d never get anything done, would I?” He got up from his chair, readying to leave so that his sister could toy with his emotions no more. “If you will excuse me, I have business to attend to.”

He didn’t wait for a reply, nor did he look at anyone to see their responses. These were the people who knew him well and loved him, of course, they could see that he more than liked Giovanna, but he wasn’t going to admit it. Most especially when she didn’t appear to reciprocate his feelings.

Making his way outside, he’d already dressed for a horse ride. It was his intention to visit the address given to him by Mattia and invite his Italian guests to dinner. They were staying in a local hamlet, so it took less than half an hour to reach their rented home.

Dismounting his horse, he tied it to a fence post and went to knock on the door of a thatched-roof cottage in the middle of a terrace of six houses. Small windows peeked out through whitewashed walls, and lobster pots stood in a row, showing this was a fisherman’s hamlet.

It was Mattia who answered the door, looking surprised to see him. “Silas?” Mattia said. “My cousin, she is out on a walk, but please, still come in, I have coffee on the stove.”

Silas was disappointed, even though he tried to deny it to himself. “Yes, coffee would be good, thank you, Mattia.”

As Silas entered the small, dark room, the aroma of coffee assailed his senses. He’d come to like the intense, bitter drink during his time in Italy, and

accepted the small cup that Mattia handed him.

They sat at a small table, situated by a tiny window. For Silas, it was a cosy setting, but he couldn't imagine any lord or lady being enclosed in such a small dwelling.

"Will she not lose her way?" Silas asked, worried that Giovanna had gone for a stroll alone. "She's not familiar with these lands."

"My cousin fears very few things, and a short walk by the ocean is a thing of wonder to us," Mattia replied. "I was asleep when she called up to me to say she would not be gone long. She caused me to jump from my bed and demand she waits for me, but Giovanna waits for no man. She should not be long if you wish to wait."

"Thank you for the coffee, but I'm only calling here to invite you both to dinner at Welwick Hall this evening," Silas explained. "Do you think she will agree?"

"But of course," Mattia replied, gesticulating his arms in typical Latin exuberance. "We will be honoured, thank you."

"Then I'll be on my way," Silas said, downing the last mouthful of dark liquid from the small cup. "I'll send a carriage for around five o'clock?"

"We will be ready, and Silas, do not take my cousin's ways too seriously," Mattia added as he saw Silas to the door. "She lives her life in a man's world, and acts tough, but in her heart she has the softness of a woman."

Silas smiled and put on his hat. "I am sure of it," he agreed, and went to mount his horse, pleased that at least he would see Giovanna later.

A salty breeze hit his face as he sat on his horse. Looking out to sea, he pondered on where she might be. For the briefest of moments, he wondered if he should go and join her, but the thought soon passed.

Setting off on the ride back home, it wasn't long before Welwick Hall came into view. Steering his horse into the courtyard, a stable boy came to take his horse, and through the front door, his sister appeared.

"Silas!" she called over to him with a wave of her hand. "Will you take a stroll with me?"

It surprised him to see her alone, "No children, or Lady Olive?" he asked because the duchess was rarely without her children.

"The twins are out walking with Lady Olive and Mr Julius," she replied. "That's where I'm going now, to try and catch them up."

Silas took his place by her side. "Following dinner, I'll require the use of

the study. It's the best room to discuss business with Miss Giovanna and her cousin."

"Oh, Silas, can that not wait for another time?" the duchess asked, laughing lightly. "Can they not enjoy dinner and then talk business the following day? Let them relax a little, show them some kind of hospitality."

"They are not in England to have fun, sister," Silas informed her as they walked. "They'll want to return to their home as soon as they can."

The duchess didn't reply at first, she tapped the gloves she was carrying, between her hands. "I disagree with you, Silas. If they have come all this way, undergoing that long and difficult journey, they will need some respite before returning."

Silas thought about his sister's words and nodded, "I suppose you could be right," he pondered. "The journey is tedious and tiring, but I need to get business out of the way first. I want to get a good deal for the estate, and for them too of course. These things need to be discussed first and foremost."

"Ah, you always were ever the serious one, even when we were children," the duchess said, slowing down her pace. "You would always be the one to worry about getting into trouble. I do wish that you would settle down and take life a little slower."

"Yes, well... we can't all marry into nobility, as you have done, Vera," he said, feeling a little annoyed that she was lecturing him. "I've had to work hard to collect what little wealth I have, and I'd like to add more before I stop."

"And you are very good at what you do, but I am your sister and I love you," the duchess said, stopping in her tracks to turn and look at him. "I care about your life, and I only want you to be happy. I know you were disappointed over your childhood sweetheart, Lucy, marrying another, yet you show no emotions, Silas. In truth, you seem to have no romance in your life whatsoever."

Silas was about to reply when the sound of the children rang out. He turned to see the twins running towards them with open arms. In a sense, he was relieved that he didn't need to give his sister an explanation. She spoke the truth, all he cared about was his travels and clinching good business deals. He'd done that most of his adult life, thanks to the duke sponsoring him.

As the twins leaped up at him, he took one in each of his strong arms and swung them around and around. Then he faked a fall onto the ground, making sure neither of them got hurt in the process.

“Uncle Silas, I can run faster than you,” little Lord Owen shouted out as he picked himself from the ground.

“I will race you back to the house, and I will win,” Lady Livy countered, setting off in a run.

Silas watched on as her brother soon chased after her. He intended on giving them a head start, and then he’d take flight after them.

“Come on, sister, your children have set us a challenge,” he called over to the duchess as he began to run after the children.

He turned to look at the duchess and she was throwing off her walking pumps, picking up the hemline of her dress, and setting off in a run to catch him up.

“Watch out, children, your mother is about to beat us all,” he shouted after the children who turned around to see their mother running.

Being the gentleman that he was, he allowed his sister to overtake him and made sure that he came in last. Laughter rang out as each of them arrived at the front door of Welwick Hall.

“Hahaha... I haven’t done that in years,” the duchess called out to her children. She was panting from the exertion of her efforts and went to sit down on the stone steps.

“Who came first then?” Silas asked as he arrived soon after his sister.

“We both beat you,” the children called out, jumping up and down joyously.

“Is that enough fun for you, sister?” Silas asked her, also panting at the running.

“It is a start, but I expect to see more,” the duchess smiled, and Lady Olive and her husband finally arrived behind them.

“My sister thinks I am no fun,” Silas complained to Lady Olive.

“We think you are fun, Uncle Silas, and we love you,” the children sang out in unison.

Everyone entered the house together, in a bundle of noisy merriment.

CHAPTER 8

When Giovanna returned from her walk on the beach, later that day, she felt a pang of disappointment that she'd missed Silas. Though she hid her feelings well because Mattia would tease her incessantly if she admitted her liking for Silas. However, it cheered her to hear the reason for Silas's visit, and she found consolation in the fact that she was to dine with him that evening.

A small carriage arrived to take Giovanna and Mattia over to Welwick Hall, as agreed. The evening had arrived, and she was now suffering from nerves and tingles, all at thought of an evening with Silas. *What is wrong with me that I allow a man to make me feel so weak?* she questioned herself, starting to feel annoyance at her weakness.

"You should buy a small property in this area," Mattia suggested as they chatted on the journey. "If you are to concentrate on the exporting business, you would do well having a base in England."

Giovanna didn't answer straight away, mulling over what her cousin was suggesting. "A base would be better in the centre of London?" she replied, not totally opposed to the idea. "Or even at one of the major ports?"

"Ah, but this is such a beautiful place where you would also get much-needed relaxation," Mattia replied with a grin. "And, of course, you would see Silas whenever you came to England."

"What foolish ideas do you have in your head, cousin," Giovanna grumbled. "Silas does not live at Welwick Hall, he travels, that is how he and Father met in the first place."

She gave her cousin a stern look, hoping he would change the topic of conversation so she could sit back and enjoy the view through the window.

He'd been right on one thing, this was a beautiful part of the country. The beach she had walked earlier in the day had boasted many coves and inlets. Through the carriage window, she could see the rugged moorland which was stunning. She would have enjoyed a longer stay to see all that Cornwall had to offer.

"Silas would stay home if he knew you were visiting, I am sure of it," Mattia continued in the same vein. He seemed determined to annoy her, or so Giovanna believed.

"Why should I care if the man is home or not?" Giovanna snapped, avoiding eye contact with her cousin, in case she gave her true feelings away. "Once we have our contract, I will have no other reason to see the Englishman ever again. We can write to one another if he wishes to renew his order in a year."

"Not everything has to be about business, Giovanna," Mattia said with a sharpness in his tone so that she could sense annoyance. "You know what it is I am trying to say."

Serves him right, she thought. Trying to marry me off to an Englishman.

"I can tell that he likes you," Mattia tried a different tactic. "Why else have we been invited to dinner?"

"It is not only a dinner, Mattia," she told him. "It is to discuss business, I guarantee it. Now will you be quiet and let me enjoy the scenery."

But the journey was a short one and already they were driving through the large iron gates of the Bodmin Estate, where Welwick Hall was coming into view.

"Ah, look," Mattia said, pointing at something through the carriage window. "The family has come out to greet us, including Silas."

"That means nothing, Mattia," she told him, throwing him a scowl for misinterpreting everything. "It is mere courtesy, as we would do the same at our home too."

"Yes, they are a good family," Mattia added as the carriage came to a halt. "I have heard that the English do not care much for their children, but Silas and his sister are quite different. He will make a good husband and a good father too, that is, for some lucky woman; do you not agree?"

Giovanna looked his way and felt like slapping his cheek. "You push my patience, Mattia. Did Padre put you up to this?"

Mattia didn't get the opportunity to reply because the carriage door swung open and Silas popped his head inside.

“Let me assist you as you alight, Giovanna,” Silas offered his hand. “These steps can be a little slippery sometimes.”

Giovanna took his hand, as she didn't wish to fall in front of the family. She quite liked the idea of being treated like an English lady. Silas was most attentive, and she felt excited to be seeing him again, but would do her best to hide it.

“Welcome once again, Giovanna and Mattia,” Silas said, leading them to the duke and duchess, who stood waiting in the courtyard.

“It is always an honour to visit with you at your beautiful home,” Giovanna said to the duchess.

“And we are most pleased to have you here to share a meal at our table,” the duchess said, with a warm smile.

Giovanna liked Silas's sister; she was very much a lady. Although she was aware that the duchess was once a servant of the manor house. Her father had told her of Silas's story and although it intrigued her, she didn't understand much about the English nobility. She only knew that the duchess was once a worker, and now she was a woman of affluence and respect. Although this kind of life was far removed from Giovanna's, she did feel a familiarity with the duchess in a small way. Giovanna herself was a worker, and a landowner too.

Not that Giovanna had servants to call upon, but she did have a need to employ staff to work the land. One day, she hoped every family member who presently helped them to keep things going, could go their own way. She wanted to employ outside workers to toil the land, but that would have to wait for profits to increase.

Once in the dining room, Giovanna was delighted to be seated opposite Silas. Though she gave no clues to that fact, even though her heart thumped at speed in her chest. With her cousin by her side, and the duchess at the head of the table, she felt comfortable. The duke had taken his place at the other end of the table, and the other guests were seated with him.

“This is a very dear family friend, Giovanna, almost like a sister to me,” the duchess said, introducing her to their other guests. “Lady Olive and her husband, Mr Julius Burke, live in Scotland, but she lived in Cornwall before marrying.”

Giovanna nodded her head with a smile in the direction of Lady Olive and her Mr Julius. By now, the servants were walking around the table, serving out bowls of soup and bread.

“The food smells delicious,” Giovanna said to the duchess, tasting the chicken soup on a rounded silver spoon.

“It is one of my mother’s recipes,” the duchess replied, showing no shame that her mother had been a cook.

Giovanna wanted to ask about the duchess’s mother when Silas spoke over the table to her.

“How are you finding Cornwall?”

“Oh, it is delightful,” Giovanna answered.

“We were discussing buying a house in the area,” Mattia interrupted her. “To make future business trips easier.”

“Yes, I have often considered buying my own house here and putting down my roots,” Silas replied, looking over at Mattia. He then moved his glance to Giovanna. “I am always happy to make sure that future meetings happen in Italy if it makes things easier. It is a long way for a lady to travel, in such harsh conditions.”

Giovanna paused before replying, annoyed that Silas referred to her gender as if she was a weak little thing. Of course, she knew they could not afford such luxury yet, but he didn’t know that, and his suggestion irritated her.

“We are hoping to have many business dealings in England, besides the one with the duke. I will most likely look to buy a house in London,” she said. “As tempting as Cornwall is for its beauty, I have beauty at my home in Italy. What we need is something practical. What’s more, Silas, I do not mind the journey, I see it more as an adventure.”

“Gracious me you are a brave one,” the duchess joined in. “I hate the journey over to France, and Italy is much further as I understand it.”

“It is, Duchess,” Giovanna answered. “But we must make such sacrifices so that our business can prosper, so I tell myself it is an adventure.”

“I can see why buying a house would be useful,” the duchess replied. “It would give you time to recoup, but you are always very welcome to stay here at Welwick Hall for any business in Cornwall.”

“That is most generous of you, Duchess, but my business will take me elsewhere in England too,” Giovanna said. Although the whole idea was still only a dream of hope for her future.

At that moment she caught Silas looking her way, causing her stomach to lurch that she had his attention. He gave her one of his lopsided smiles, but she didn’t feel like smiling back and so looked away. Giovanna was

conflicted, while she felt pleased with his attention, she tried to fight the pleasurable feelings. Especially as it seemed that he thought of her as some weakling of a female. In her view, she was equally as capable as he was, when it came to travelling.

Who does he think he is, treating me like that? she pondered.

Almost immediately she regretted not returning his smile though, but she knew that her nerves had gone. A gush of fear ran through her, and she felt that she couldn't stay in the same room as him for a moment longer.

What is the matter with me? Here is a man whose attention I desire, yet when he gives it to me, he annoys me, all at the same time. Just because he's handsome doesn't mean I have to fawn all over him. In fact, Italian men are far more handsome than he is, or so she told herself.

"That is a good idea, is it, not Giovanna?" Mattia asked her, but she had not been listening to the conversation at the table.

"Yes, erm... I mean-" she stuttered, perplexed at how Mattia was looking at her, awaiting an answer.

"We have been invited to an English picnic, tomorrow," Mattia explained, saving her from further confusion.

"Lady Olive and Mr Julius will be returning to their home in Scotland very soon," the duchess took over the explanation. "It would be wonderful for us all to enjoy a trip together before you everyone goes their separate ways."

"Oh, yes, that... that sounds good, but..."

"And no business talk will be allowed," the duchess interrupted. "We would like to get to know you better, Giovanna, and enjoy your company."

"But I am here to do business with-"

"My cousin and I will be honoured to join you all," Mattia interrupted her.

"I am sorry," Giovanna said as she went to stand up. "I suddenly feel quite tired. Could you arrange for a carriage to take us back?"

Silas went to stand too, and Giovanna panicked because it was him who she was trying to get away from.

"Please Silas, do not let us disturb your dinner," she said to him, hoping he would sit back down again. "We shall see you all at the picnic tomorrow, but for now, I must..."

"Take Giovanna into the small parlour, Oscar, while Silas goes to organise the carriage," the duchess said urgently to her husband. "I do hope

you are refreshed by tomorrow, Giovanna, and that we have not upset you in any way.“

“No, no, Duchess. It is probably a delayed reaction to the trip over here. I haven't yet acclimatised to my new surroundings,” Giovanna lied. “We will see you tomorrow.“

Within half an hour, Giovanna and Mattia were on their return journey.

“Well... I don't know what brought that on Giovanna, but at least we can meet with them tomorrow,” Mattia said. “They are sending a carriage to collect us. Do you think you will be better?“

“I never wished to join in so many social events,” Giovanna told her cousin, yawning because she did genuinely feel quite tired.

“Please, Giovanna, take your head from business, and allow yourself some time to unwind first,” Mattia advised, though he did look worried. “Business will flow much easier when our two families have gained the trust of one another. This is an important factor of business that you must accept.“

Giovanna didn't feel like arguing with her cousin, so she closed her eyes. Once home, she went straight to her bed with feelings of utter confusion. Why couldn't they simply agree to business terms so she could go home? Instead, she had to face Silas every day, which was not easy, not when she had an increasing attraction for him.

That man does nothing but distract me all the time. Yet he has done nothing wrong. Am I the wrong person to take over Padre's winery after all? Am I a weak female, who needs a man to care for me? I certainly don't feel like I have an ounce of strength in my body right now.

Yet again, Giovanna's mind swirled with confusing thoughts, and all because she had desires for an Englishman.

I am not out to find a husband, she snapped at herself. Only to sell my wines.

CHAPTER 9

Silas felt concerned that Giovanna had taken ill not long after she'd arrived for dinner. They'd only finished the first course when she'd stood up and asked to be taken home. It had been unexpected and taken him by surprise. But then he understood all too well that when one travelled long distances, it could take many days to adjust. Hoping that was the issue and nothing more sinister, he'd reacted quickly.

It had delayed their business meeting yet again, so he'd need to rethink when they could get together to sign the documents and agree on prices. Not today though, as he was now on his way to collect Giovanna and Mattia for his sister's picnic. He only hoped that his guest was feeling much improved because he didn't care for the thought of her being ill.

Pushing such thoughts aside, he pulled up the Barouche outside Mattia and Giovanna's cottage. As he did so, a sudden thought of Lucy, his lost sweetheart, came to mind. He'd missed her sorely on this trip and felt disappointment that she'd married, though he would admit it to none. As he slowed down the pair of horses, he spotted Mattia opening the door to their cottage. Stepping outside, he walked towards the carriage.

"I must drive this English carriage," Mattia said with a grin, looking very keen on taking over the driver's seat.

"I thought you might prefer to sit with Giovanna?" Silas asked because he'd planned to drive them to the picnic.

"No...no...please, I must drive this grand little carriage," Mattia replied, opening up his arms to stress his enthusiasm. "You sit with Giovanna and trust me to drive your handsome vehicle."

Silas climbed down from the front, driver's seat. "Very well, be my guest,

the reins are all yours,” he said, holding out his arm to direct Mattia to take over. “Ah... Giovanna, I trust you are more refreshed today?” he asked as she appeared by his side.

“I am, thank you, Silas,” she replied courteously.

“Let me help you into the carriage, it is quite a high step,” Silas said, offering out his hand out.

Giovanna took it with a gloved hand, and he lent her his strength as she put one foot on the step and pushed to climb up. Mattia was readying the reins as Silas walked around the carriage and entered through the other door to sit by Giovanna’s side.

“You are trusting my cousin with your fine carriage?” Giovanna asked, laughing. “He only drives a dusty old cart back home; we mostly ride around on horseback.”

“Then we are both trusting him with our very lives,” Silas replied with a grin.

Mattia pulled off and the carriage jerked a little, causing Silas’ knee to touch Giovanna’s leg. He quite liked the idea of being so close to this fascinating young woman, so he didn’t move his leg away. When Giovanna reacted by pushing his leg away with her knee, it forced him to shift, leaving him feeling disheartened. It seemed to him that she had no interest in him and was making it more than obvious.

For the rest of the journey, he sat forward to give Mattia directions, making sure to keep a respectful gap between himself and Giovanna. He didn’t feel that he could trust himself if he sat too close, his attraction to her was strong and he understood that wasn’t what she wanted. Then again, he still wanted to get to know Giovanna better, though she didn’t make it easy. His Italian visitor showed little interest in encouraging any friendship with him.

This brought his mind back to Lucy, showing him how much he missed her friendship. As a couple, they’d never mingled with his family, it hadn’t been appropriate because she’d been a servant of the house. Instead, they’d often sneaked off on little picnics, to enjoy their romance alone. Though Lucy had never questioned his intentions for doing this, he had discussed with her that they should avoid being seen together. Now that he thought of it, he’d made it more than clear to her that they could only be secret lovers in their romance.

No wonder Lucy had finally gone her separate way, she knew that he

would never marry her because she was a mere maid. What a fool he had been for allowing her to feel that way. His very own sister had been a mere cook, and she'd married a duke! Silas knew there and then that he'd no intention of making a wife out of Lucy. All along, his only need had been lust and fun. Though, he hadn't thought that he'd miss her company, but he did, and now it was too late, she was lost to him.

Mattia parked up the Barouche with expertise, while Silas praised him for the smooth ride.

"Ah, Brother, you are here at last," the duchess called over to him as she approached the carriage. "Are you better, Giovanna?" she asked their guest while her cousin helped her from the carriage.

"I am, thank you, Duchess," Giovanna replied, glancing down at her. "I must apologise for our sudden departure. I do believe that my journey had finally caught up with me."

The duchess smiled with her greeting. "Well, today I will not allow my brother to bring up any talk of business. Which he will, given half a chance," the duchess mocked Silas with a gentle smile, but he knew that she meant it.

It wasn't that he wanted to talk business, it was more a case of he wanted to complete the contract as soon as possible. He worried that Giovanna might change her mind and prefer to get home before completing their agreement. Silas felt he needed to convince Giovanna that she and her cousin should stay a few weeks in England before considering the return journey.

He watched on as his sister took Giovanna under her wing, leading her to the tables and chairs that had been set up. The table was already laden with food, and he went over to enjoy the feast. Silas didn't need to be forced to have fun, but he found it difficult when he felt so ill at ease. The mysterious Italian woman was having a very odd effect on him, making him moody as he pined for the company of his friend Lucy.

Without a doubt, he found himself becoming more and more attracted to the beautiful Giovanna. She was driving him crazy with the effect of strange desires in his head. Being a gentleman, he would never show his true feelings, particularly when Giovanna seemed to dislike him so much. He had to wonder though, why she didn't like his company. What had he done to upset her? If he knew, then he could make amends and offer his friendship, but it didn't seem to be what she wanted.

"Come over here, Uncle Silas," little Lady Livy called over to him. "Look, we have set up the Skittles."

“I’ll be over shortly, little one,” he called back, taking some food from the table as he watched on.

His eyes didn’t seem to want to look anywhere but at Giovanna, and he watched her as his sister took her to play Skittles with the children. The duke was busy chatting with Lady Olive and Mr Julius, as they looked out at the flowing river.

He recalled how he and Lucy had a secret secluded spot further along this river. A place where they would jump into the deeper waters and swim almost naked. Lucy had been a fun person and he wondered if she still swam there, but with her husband. Though he doubted it, he knew Jeffrey was a man with a more serious nature.

Lucy had always been a jolly character, which had suited her Irish inheritance. Even now he could visualise her cherry lips and freckled face. She was a redhead, but without the typical fiery nature...no, not his Lucy, she had loved to laugh.

Slowly, Silas’s mind returned to reality. He could see Giovanna standing alone by the riverside, skimming pebbles from the miniature stone beach. At first, he hesitated to join her, but in the end, he meandered across the grass until he arrived just behind her.

Picking up a pebble, he went to stand by her side to skim his stone across the water.

“Yes, but how many times can you make your pebble skim the surface?” she asked him, looking at him with intense seriousness in her dark eyes. “It’s not easy on a riverbank, but my record is up to five back home.”

“Ah, so you like to compete, do you?” he asked, picking up a flat pebble and rubbing it between his fingers.

“I have no choice, being raised among males all my life,” she told him, giving him a shy smile as she looked away. “As a girl, I was known to be a *maschiaccio*, erm...you say, *tomboy*.”

“Yes, I can see that in you...not that I mean you are...or look anything like a boy, but...”

“Calm down Silas, I know what you mean,” she laughed as she teased him. “You are referring to my stubborn streak, are you not?”

He nodded, not daring to talk in case he said the wrong words. Why was it that every time he was around this woman, he felt such a fool?

“Come on then... I would like to see you beat me,” he offered, throwing his flat pebble, and counting up to three as it skimmed the top of the water.

“You test my patience,” she said, picking up a flat stone and readying to throw it. “I have held the record for many years.”

But Giovanna’s luck was not with her this day, and she counted only two bounces.

“You may try again, if you wish,” Silas offered, but he knew immediately that was the wrong thing to say.

“Oh! You believe yourself to be more skilled, do you?” she huffed, turned around to face him.

Silas felt annoyed with himself. Yet again he had upset Giovanna, and he wasn’t even completely sure why. Perhaps he should have let her win, but then she’d have been angry at him for that too, so he couldn’t win.

Hoping to make amends he approached her, standing directly behind her. She said nothing, simply waiting to see what he was up to.

“Look, let me show you what I mean,” Silas said, leaning down behind her to get the right shaped pebble. He knew he was taking a great risk at what he was about to do, but hopefully she would appreciate his efforts.

Placing his arms around her, he picked up her hand and placed the pebble in her hand. “You see how flat the stone is, and I’ve already rubbed it warm it up.”

Still, she said nothing, and he took this as permission to continue. Playing with her fingers, he guided her through how she should hold the stone, all the while enjoying the heat of their bodies standing so close together. He tried to ignore the thrill that shivered through him, shocked that she was allowing him to touch her.

“Are you ready to throw it?” he asked, as he guided her body around to face the water’s edge.

Unexpectedly, she pulled away from him, “I should throw this stone at you!” she yelled. “I do not require lessons from you. The only reason you won was because I let you.”

With that declaration, she stormed off, leaving him bereft and confused. He’d truly believed that he’d won her over, but how wrong he’d been.

Giovanna didn’t say a word to him for the rest of the afternoon. Surely, she wasn’t mad at him for winning a game of pebbles, was she? Or was it because he’d tried to give her a lesson in how to throw the pebble? Or even because he’d dared to stand so close to her? Whatever her reason, Silas couldn’t fathom it. On the carriage ride back to the cottage, later that day, he tried to strike up a friendly conversation again.

“I trust my actions towards you with regards the stone throwing, didn’t spoil your day?” he asked in jest, but he could see by the glare she threw his way that she wasn’t amused.

She didn’t answer, so he tried again.

“I hear that you are to go on a trip with my sister tomorrow?” he asked a question whereby she might be forced to answer, or she would make herself appear most ignorant.

“The Duchess has kindly offered to show me around the local town, yes,” Giovanna answered with an unemotional tone.

“It is good that you take in some relaxation before we finalise your business here,” he said, pleased to hear the husky sound of her voice. But not realising how he’d turned the conversation to business instead of pleasure.

“Why, Silas? Do tell me, are in a hurry for me to finalise things and leave?” she asked, scowling his way. “I will go only when I am ready to do so. What is more, I will sign the documents only when the time is right, and I am content with figures supplied by your solicitor.”

The carriage pulled up by their cottage, and Mattia jumped down.

“My apologies, Giovanna,” Silas said before she left his side. “I meant no offence, only that you should partake in other things besides business on your travels. I should know, I’ve been living that way for years.”

“I do not need your advice, Silas,” she barked before taking her cousin’s hand to alight from the carriage.

She said not a word to her cousin and marched off towards the cottage door.

“I fear that we have fallen out again?” Silas sighed as he explained to Mattia.

“Do not worry, my friend,” Mattia said, watching Silas jump down and he went to pat him on the shoulder. “This, it can mean only one thing. That my cousin...she likes you.”

Silas shook his head in confusion as Mattia went to follow his cousin into the cottage. Puzzled at how Mattia came to such a conclusion, he clambered into the driver’s seat.

Readying the reins, he mumbled to himself, “Well, she has an odd way of showing it. If this is liking me, I dread to think how she might be if she hated me!”

Shaking the reins, the horses complied, and the carriage moved, making its way back to Welwick Hall.

CHAPTER 10

Watching through the small, dusty, cottage window, Giovanna was looking out for a carriage. The skies were grey, and she missed the warm climate of her home country, but she wasn't yet ready for that long return journey home.

She recalled how her padre was planning to make the journey himself, but she'd insisted that she join him. When he'd fallen ill, she'd been torn on whether to stay by his side or come to England to save their business, *Vigneto Romano*, by herself.

The physician had visited and assured her that the Conte suffered nothing more other than ailments associated with old age. As a family friend, he'd advised that it was time her padre stopped working in the fields. After much discussion with her padre, Giovanna had made her decision, she had to save the vineyard at all costs. Her cousin Mattia, who was more like a big brother to Giovanna, had insisted on accompanying her. She was glad of his companionship because England was a cold and unfamiliar place.

She'd walked on the beach, but the beauty wasn't the same as in her homeland where hot sands warmed one's toes. The sea waves had been huge as they'd crashed against the high cliffs, and the sands had looked wet and uninviting. But still, the landscape had its own beauty, even though it was different from her home.

As she heard the sound of the carriage wheels, she stood up to say goodbye to Mattia.

"*Cugino*," he said, speaking to her in their own language.

"You mean 'cousin', Mattia, please use English," she insisted. "We must stop speaking in our native tongue, or we may insult the very people who can

help us to save *Vigneto Romano*.”

He nodded in agreement, “But you must try...please, please try to relax and enjoy the hospitality of our hosts,” he said, not at all annoyed at her reprimand. “You are right, we should speak their language to encourage this friendship. Becoming their friends will be the best way to get a good price for your wines. So, smile and enjoy your day with the ladies.”

Giovanna placed her hand on his arm and squeezed it to reassure him, “I will do my best. And then we can think about returning home.”

“No, Giovanna,” he shook his head. “We both know that we cannot do that journey yet, it is too difficult a journey to do so soon, even for a man. Besides, you told me that you wanted to gain more contracts before we left.”

“Are you referring to me as the weaker sex? If so, I may have to beat you,” Giovanna said threateningly, raising her arm in a mock gesture.

Mattia took hold of her arm, smiling as he replied, “You, my little *cugino* are not weak, and you know that is not what I meant. It is not an easy journey; the English Channel can be treacherous in poor weather. When we are both rested, only then can we undertake the journey home. Now go, do not keep our hosts waiting, and enjoy your time in this country.”

Giovanna kissed his cheek and left the cottage, to be greeted by a groom who assisted her to the carriage and helped her to climb inside the carriage. There, she was further greeted by the duchess and Lady Olive.

“Lady Olive, what a nice surprise, I thought you were to leave for Scotland?” Giovanna asked.

“We delayed a few more days until the bad weather passes,” Lady Olive explained. “Besides, how could I miss a visit to Falmouth to see my favourite dressmaker, Miss Sarah Lilly. You will like her; she is a wonderful person who has the most unusual skill of making a dress fit a woman’s body to perfection.”

Giovanna took her seat by the duchess because Lady Olive had perched herself opposite. “I do not require a new dress,” she said. “But I will be happy to meet your friend.”

“Oh, but you are in need of a new ball gown, my dear Giovanna,” the duchess told her. “Only this very morning I have received an invitation from Lady Addleman, the Baroness of Farafox. We are all to attend a ball at Farafox House, and she has insisted that I bring along my wonderful Italian guests. You are the talk of the gentry, Giovanna, they adore you.”

Giovanna smiled but said not a word. The idea of another ball did not

appeal to her, but Mattia had reminded her that they must mingle. It was imperative if they were to get more orders for their wines.

The journey to Falmouth took a few hours, and it was late morning when they arrived at the dressmaker's shop situated on a quaint cobbled street. This part of the town was hilly, with a steep incline to the road they had to walk along, to get to the shop. It reminded Giovanna of a little village not far from the vineyard, so it felt like a little piece of home.

Entering the shop, a bell rang above the door, and the shop owner came to greet them.

"Your Grace, how lovely to see you," the pretty woman said. "I was not expecting you."

"Not to worry, Miss Sarah, I am here unexpectedly because I have a very special guest who is in need of a ballgown," the duchess informed her. "Please meet Lady Giovanna Romana, daughter to the Conte Marco Romano of Polesine in Italy."

The dressmaker curtsied and Giovanna felt a little embarrassed. "It is very good to meet you, Miss Sarah, but I am not a Lady—"

"But you are, Lady Giovanna," Lady Olive interrupted. "You are the daughter of a Count, are you not?"

"Yes, but titles are changing in Italy, following the French war," Giovanna attempted to explain.

"We do not involve ourselves in politics," Lady Olive interrupted, waving her arm and lending Giovanna a lovely smile. "As far as we are concerned, you are the daughter of a Conte, and therefore a Lady in our eyes. Now allow us to treat you with the special care deserving of your rank."

Giovanna knew that now was not the time to bring up Italian politics, she barely understood them herself. As far as she was concerned, her father's title had never brought them anything. They still toiled the land and once she returned home, she would be out working among the vines.

Miss Sarah didn't seem concerned with any of it, and her loyalty to the duchess and Lady Olive shone through. "How long until the ball?" she asked, showing the ladies to the seating area where another woman was setting up tea. "I will need to take measurements and sort out fabrics and colours."

"No, please, I want none of that," Giovanna insisted as her two hostesses took their seats to enjoy tea. "Do you not have dresses already made, so that I can browse them?"

"Well, yes, we have a rack, but the Duchess—"

“That may be our best option as it happens,” the duchess agreed. “We are short of time, but I know your rack dresses are stitched by your own fair hands, Miss Sarah. And that you will do your best to make any adjustments. So please, bring forward the rack of your finest ballgowns, if you will.”

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Miss Sarah nodded before she left to go and fetch the rack.

After a few sips of tea, a drink that Giovanna wasn’t keen on, Miss Sarah turned up with the rack filled with beautiful gowns.

“Oh, *mio dio, sono cosi bellie*,” Giovanna burst out in Italian. Quickly realising her error, she repeated her words in English. “My apologies, my words were an expression that *they are so beautiful*,” she smiled.

“Yes, Miss Sarah does create the most beautiful dresses. They are always a credit to her,” Lady Olive said, standing up to assist Giovanna in her choice. “She keeps a stock of handmade gowns in for the ladies who are caught out. Hence, you see before you her emergency wardrobe.”

It didn’t take long for Giovanna to choose a flowing green chiffon gown, perfect for any ball. Miss Sarah had embroidered delicate golden flowers all over the top layer of mesh, and Giovanna could imagine herself in it. She even agreed to try it on so that the seamstress could make any adjustments needed.

“Must we adjust it?” Giovanna questioned. “What if I don’t get it in time for the ball?”

“I will come along and deliver it myself,” Miss Sarah promised as she assisted Giovanna to take the dress off. “That way, I can make any final adjustments that might be needed.”

“Why do you look so sad, Giovanna, when you should be happy?” the duchess asked as Giovanna sat back down again to finish her tea.

“Wearing such a dress reminds me of a love I once had but have lost in my past,” she admitted and surprised herself for sharing such a secret.

“My apologies, Lady Giovanna,” Miss Sarah said before she left them alone. “I did not mean to overhear, but let me assure you, my dresses always bring their wearers’ romance. Have faith, in this dress and the right man will soon be by your side and in your heart.”

“Oh Miss Sarah, you are such a romantic,” the duchess smiled at the seamstress.

“It is true, Duchess,” Miss Sarah said, placing her hand over her heart. “You should hear all the tales I am given, of how ladies who wear my gowns

have found true love.”

“Please do share but one of those tales with us, Miss Sarah,” the duchess pressed. “You know how I am such a romantic.”

“Yes, do, Miss Sarah, and convince Giovanna that she must to the ball in one of your gowns,” Lady Olive added.

“Very well, I know that I can trust you all,” Miss Sarah said quietly as she stood closer to the group of ladies. “For one Baronet, who’s name remains a secret, I hid a love letter from him, into a lady’s gown. I like to think that a ball is a field of romance. Even though I do not participate in the dancing, I help in the matchmaking.”

“I thank you, Miss Sarah, but I do not know how my padre will react if I fall in love with an Englishman,” Giovanna said, adding a sense of humour to her tone.

“Well, I am from the South of England, and I married a Yorkshire man from the North of England, and now we live in Scotland. That shows what can be done; mixing things up and jiggling them around,” Lady Olive said with a light laugh.

“Do you require any more tea?” Miss Sarah asked. “Or some homemade cake?”

“Yes, yes, I love your cakes, Miss Sarah, they are delicious and highly recommended,” the duchess said.

The ladies stayed on a little longer to enjoy cake and they soon turned to the subject of Giovanna’s lost love.

“Rodriguez is my neighbour, but now I hate him,” Giovanna finished her tale. “I still believe to this day that he only courted me so he could merge my padre’s vineyard with his.”

“You do not believe that he loved you then?” Lady Olive asked, wiping crumbs of fruit cake from her fingers.

“He may have loved me, but he wanted a wife to run his home, not be a part of his business. My padre has always allowed me to help with the vineyard, it is in my blood. I will one day be the owner of *Vigneto Romano*, and I want a husband who will work by my side and not treat me as a domestic servant.”

“Well said,” the duchess agreed. “And we will do our very best to support your business and give you a fair price for your wines. Now then, shall we take a stroll by the sea before we leave?”

“I am thankful for your support, Duchess. It means much to me because

exports will be the saviour of *Vigneto Romano*, of that I am sure,” Giovanna said as they got ready to leave. “I must...erm...how you say...expand, yes, that is it.”

“And so you shall. I will make sure that my brother treats you with the respect you deserve,” the duchess replied before she turned to the seamstress. “Thank you, Miss Sarah, send me a bill for the refreshments and the gown, and we look forward to your visit.”

With that agreed upon, the ladies left the shop to take in some sea air. As they walked along, Giovanna did her best to object to the duchess paying for her gown, but the duchess insisted.

“You are my guest, Giovanna, and I am enjoying your company,” the duchess said. “Now come along and enjoy a brisk walk by the sea.”

“And be blown away,” Lady Olive added, laughing as she went to hold her hat on her head so that it didn’t blow off.

Giovanna laughed too because at last, she felt relaxed. Perhaps her time in England might be more enjoyable now that she had such kind friends. Should Miss Sarah’s promise be true, perhaps her green gown might even lead her to finding true love, then the dressmaker could add another romantic tale to her repertoire.

CHAPTER II

Silas travelled on horseback to Falmouth. He was to meet with the captain of the Sea Swan, a ship that he'd used in the past to export goods from the continent. The port was not a particularly pleasant place to visit. The stench of freshly caught fish made him feel nauseous, along with the hundreds of squawking seagulls flying overhead in the hope of a free meal.

He'd arranged to meet Captain Brown in a tavern not far from the port. The stench still carried in the wind, though none of the seafaring folk ever seemed to notice it. Nonetheless, it took Silas a while to adjust to the unpleasantness.

Although it was an aroma he was used to when travelling by ship, something he'd done much of in the past few years, he never lingered long in any port. It was a place riddled with criminals and murderers, not somewhere you'd want to linger any longer than necessary if you valued your life.

Taking his horse to the local stable, he paid coin to the boy who would keep the horse safe from thieves. Waiting until the boy saw to watering his horse and settling the mare down, he made his way to the Shipman Tavern, for his business meeting.

Entering the tavern, the sour smell of mingling sweat and stale ale assailed his nostrils. He was aware this was one of the better places, having visited the dangerous ones too, in the past. Thankfully, he knew the captain well. They'd agreed on a better part of town, leaving the seedy inns for the sailing folk getting drunk before they set sail again.

"Silas!" a gruff voice shouted out. "Over 'ere."

Looking in the direction of the name caller, he could see his friend, a rough and ruddy-looking man he'd sailed with many times.

“Captain Blithe himself,” Silas said as the men shared a bear hug. “What’ll you be having?”

“Well, it won’t be rum, seeing as I ‘ave plenty of that on the ship, so let’s have an ale shall we,” the captain suggested.

After ordering, they went to sit in a private booth.

“I have your shipment waiting to be unloaded onto a wagon for delivery, but what’s this about Italian wines then?” Captain Blithe asked.

“It’s a new contract I’m negotiating for the duke of Cornwall,” Silas explained. “He’s not overly keen on French wines, and you’ll be collecting the first order when you arrive in Calais.”

“Aye, I seen it on the itinerary,” Captain Blithe laughed, which led to a coughing fit. “He be likin’ his fine wines, that Duke of yours.”

“Go easy on that pipe you’re so fond of, Captain,” Silas advised. “All that smoke is tarring your lungs, I’m sure of it.”

“Bah, a man needs his pipe, he does, more’n he needs a woman,” the captain waved him away.

Silas nodded as he watched his friend puff on his pipe, the long fingers of smoke swirling away mesmerised him.

I for one would rather have a woman than a pipe, he thought. Giovanna is worth more than a million of your pipes my friend.

Keeping his thoughts to himself, he began the discussions of business. For the next hour, they discussed various topics, including payments and dates. After another bear hug, and Silas leaving the captain with a large cash tip, he was glad to be leaving the tavern.

As soon as he stepped out into the slightly fresher air, he inhaled, setting off to collect his horse from the stable. It wasn’t far from the tavern, and already the air was feeling sweeter in his lungs. Down an alleyway, he could see an expanse of greyness where the sea view peeked through. Turning a corner, he almost knocked over someone, and as he went to grab for the woman’s arm to save her from falling, he recognised her immediately.

“Lucy!” he called out with a wide-eyed stare, glancing at her swelling belly. “I... I am sorry, I almost mowed you down, especially in your condition. Of which, I had no idea.”

“Silas,” Lucy grinned at him, clearly pleased to see him. “Well-I’ll be-it’s the man himself. You mean you didn’t know I was wed?”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her belly; it had come as such a shock. “No... I...erm...I knew about you and Jeffrey. What I meant was that you’re

with child,” he said, pointing to her condition with a nervous hand gesture.

Lucy rubbed both hands on her large belly, looking proud of herself, “I heard that you were back. How come you haven’t been to visit us then?”

“I’ve been busy with the duke’s business,” he replied. “Having just come from a business meeting as it happens. But tell me, are you happy?”

“I am now that we ‘ave a little one on the way,” she replied, her red curly hair bobbing around as she nodded. “You know me, Silas, I always wanted young ones.”

“Yes. I’m pleased for you and Jeffrey. You’ll make good parents I’m sure,” he replied, looking at her pretty, freckled face and recalling how kissable her cherry lips were. “He’s a fine man.”

“That he is, and he insisted I stop working at the big house when we knew I was with child,” she informed him. “That’s why I’m no longer there.”

“Ah, I see, no one mentioned to me that you were...erm...you know,” he said awkwardly as he once again gestured his hand at her belly. “And even though I see you’re happy, I still feel like I should apologise to you for leaving as I did.”

“Pay no mind to it, Silas,” she said, taking hold of his hand in fondness.

He leaned in to give her a light hug, it didn’t last long but it felt right.

“I’m as happy as can be now,” Lucy told him as they parted, but she went to kiss his cheek.

Her cherry lips felt warm as she pressed them on his face, and he felt a rush of fond memories of their romantic time together.

“I am glad of that,” he said as she moved away a little. “That your happy, that is, and that you’re having a family, as you always wanted.”

“Don’t you be lookin’ so awkward about it all, Silas Atkins. I knew you’d never settle down,” she said, laughing. “You and me, we had lots of fun. But the last time you left, well, I kind of knew it was time to end it.”

“You should have told me,” he said, feeling bad for not noticing how she felt. “I might not have—”

“You might not have gone? Is that what you’re going to say?” Lucy asked with mock humour. “Don’t be so daft, Silas. I knew you’d never give up your travels, and I didn’t want you to either. You’d ‘ave been far too miserable to live with.”

“I do miss you, but I don’t suppose you want to hear that do you?” he said, feeling a little awkward and wondering what he should say.

“I knows what it is you miss, my love, but me and Jeffrey, we suit one

another. Besides—” she paused as she patted her round belly. “We’re both looking forward to having lots more of these.”

“So, he’s a family man then?” Silas asked, knowing it was another obvious question.

“Aye, he is that, and he’s a good man too,” Lucy added. “But I’ll lend you some advice if you’ll be lettin’ me?”

“Of course, Lucy,” Silas nodded. “I always respected you and—”

“Never no mind all that. What I want to say is very personal. The next time you find yourself a woman in your life who you likes, try and make more time for love,” she said, giving him a wily smile and a wink of her eye. “Now that I’ve find true love, I’d do anythin’ for my man. You ain’t gettin’ no younger Silas Atkins, so don’t you be leaving it too late. Somewhere in this world is a woman who’ll make you feel as I do with Jeffrey.”

“It’s true love then?” he asked.

“Aye, it is that. And it’s time you thought about settling down those wandering feet of yours, or you’ll end up a lonely old man, I’m tellin’ ye,” she shrugged to emphasise her point.

“Well, I’m mighty pleased that you’ve found what makes you happy,” he said, still feeling uncomfortable and wanting to end the conversation.

“Bah! Don’t you be worryin’ Silas, I’m only trying to explain to you that our fun was good for a while, but it wasn’t enough,” she said, patting his arm. “When you meet that girl, you’ll know because she’ll make you feel all moonstruck. Like Jeffrey did to me when he finally plucked up the courage to ask me to be courtin’ him. Anyhow, I haves to be going now, I have me a lovely home to be cleaning. I be glad I bumped into you, even if you did almost knock me to the ground.”

They laughed between them and partook in a final, fond hug before parting. Silas watched as she waddled off, holding onto her belly for balance. From the large size of her belly, it looked like her child would be arriving very soon.

Silas turned to continue his walk to the stable, thinking about the words Lucy had spoken to him about finding a woman who makes him feel moonstruck. As he thought on it, he realised that was how he felt when in Giovanna’s company. She confused him, making him feel unsure of what to say or do.

Could family life ever be for me? he pondered. Could a woman befuddle my mind? Hah! Giovanna certainly does that to me.

And then he knew the answer, Giovanna made him feel that way, and now he knew what it meant. Yes, he could have a woman like Giovanna in his life. At times, she infuriated him, but not in a bad way.

Giovanna was independent and strong, and in many ways reminded him of his sister. Vera had a lot of gusto in her youth. She'd even disguised herself to look like him once, and that was how her friendship with Lady Olive had begun. Another time she'd hidden behind a mask at a masquerade ball to dance with the duke, and now she was married to him. Not many women would dare to do such things, but he guessed that Giovanna would. She was a challenging woman, and he liked that about her. So often she made him feel weak at the knees. Surely that was the feeling Lucy meant when one was moonstruck.

Feeling in a better mood, he began to whistle as he walked. By the time he arrived at the stable, he felt positively happy that he'd bumped into Lucy, and that he'd met Giovanna. Silas was looking forward to the next few weeks, getting to know the mysterious Italian woman.

The stable boy approached him, asking if he was ready for his horse.

"As it happens, I've changed my mind," Silas said, taking out another coin for the boy. "Can you keep my horse a little longer, while I take a stroll around your fine town? Might as well, seeing as I've come all this way, eh?"

With a big grin, he left the confused-looking lad behind and continued his stroll. At least the sun had decided to show itself, and that helped to lighten his mood even further. There was nothing like the warmth of the sun on one's skin to bring on a feeling of good cheer. Though he knew that his real feeling of cheeriness was down to Giovanna. The thought of being with her felt good. Now all he needed to do was think up ways of winning her over.

CHAPTER 12

As the three ladies strolled through the town, Giovanna was impressed with the cobbled streets of Falmouth. It reminded her of a well-cared town in her home country. There were still dirt roads for the carriages and horses, but for the better part, they could avoid most of them by walking on the wooden sidewalks.

As they passed by an alleyway, Giovanna was most surprised to spot Silas, and her heart juddered in her chest. She paused to look over at him, chatting with a pretty, young woman who looked heavily pregnant. Laughing together, she thought their conversation intimate as he hugged her. The woman leaned over and kissed his face, causing Giovanna to feel...she didn't know what it was; anger, jealousy...yes it was jealousy!

"What is it?" the duchess asked as she walked back to check on Giovanna.

Giovanna pointed up the alleyway, "That is your brother, is it not?" she asked, though she didn't need any answer to confirm it.

"Ah, yes," the duchess smiled in answer. "He's with one of the old servants from Welwick Hall. Lucy and Silas were once sweethearts, they have known each other for many years."

"I see that she is with child," Giovanna once again stated the obvious, but she was curious. "Is he the father then?"

The duchess hooked her arm into Giovanna's as they both watched on. "Oh, no, she became impatient with waiting for him and married another. The child is her husband's I assure you. Do you wish to meet her, or shall we continue on our way?"

"I...erm...why do you think your brother is visiting town?" she asked, a

little reluctant to leave, but still allowing the duchess to pull her away.

“Business no doubt,” the duchess surmised. “He has many contacts in these docks.”

Giovanna nodded her head as they spoke, “Perhaps he has come to meet with his sweetheart?” she asked, making her words sound humorous.

“No...no...I doubt it,” the duchess replied. “Silas is silly in many ways, but he would never covet another man’s wife. He’s a man of principles and never acts like a rake. I would say he’s a gentleman, I will give him that. Though I do wish he would settle down once and for all.”

“You do not like that he travels then?” Giovanna asked, trying to disguise her interest in Silas but not doing a very good job of it. “But then you would not have your fine wines, among all the other things he must find for your home.”

“Yes, he’s a resourceful traveller. He’s built himself a good business with imports. Though, to me, he is just a brother and I do worry about him,” the duchess remarked with a frown on her brow. “Come along, let’s go and look at the ocean.”

Giovanna allowed her companions to lead her away but was annoyed at herself that she had once again allowed Silas to get under her skin. He was forever invading her thoughts and she wished she could stop thinking about him all the time. She had to admit that for some unfathomable reason, she’d felt a tinge of jealousy when she saw him with his ex-sweetheart.

I’m sure her husband would not approve of another man being so familiar with his pregnant wife, she mulled over. It looked to me like he still has feelings for her, no doubt wishing she was still his from what I saw.

“Is it not a wonderful sight to behold?” the duchess said, holding onto her hat as she looked out to sea. “I never tire of it, even if it is a dull, grey day.”

“I’m afraid it reminds me of my journey over to England,” Giovanna said, not showing much enthusiasm. “The large waves made my cousin ill, yet they lulled me to sleep. We reacted very differently to the rough seas. But I did feel sorry for Mattia because we must make the return journey.”

She looked out over the vast ocean as it shifted and danced with rolling waves. The duchess was right though, it was a most stunning sight, watching all that power crashing back and forth. The air smelled of salt, she could even taste it in her mouth, and the breeze by the sea was colder than it was inland.

“Perhaps it will be better weather when you return,” Lady Olive said, standing on Giovanna’s other side. “When I travel to Scotland, it can make

such a difference if the weather is kind to us.”

Giovanna smiled and nodded, and hoped she was right for Mattia’s sake. But still, an image of Silas invaded her mind, even as she stood looking at the glorious views of the ocean.

That man will simply not leave my mind, she growled at herself in her head. What a fool I am to ever consider he might be worthy of my attention. It’s clear he’s still in love with his sweetheart. I will keep things formal between us and try my best to avoid him. That way I will not be tempted to give in to my foolish heart.

As she stood churning over her thoughts, a huge wave hit the cliff before them, splashing chilly droplets of salt water all over them. The duchess and Lady Olive ran away, laughing at getting caught in the crashing wave. Giovanna though enjoyed the cold, shocking feeling of the wetness it gave her. It brought her to her senses, and she shook herself before following her friends.

“Come, we will go to the beach, it’s much calmer on that shoreline,” the duchess pointed, still shaking the droplets of seawater from her hat. “That was a little more refreshing than I care for.”

Soon they were strolling along the damp sands. It was still wet from the tide that was now going farther away from them.

“I must complete my business here soon,” Giovanna said, hoping that the duchess might intervene and help her. “I am hoping that the duke might be kind enough to introduce me to more contacts while I am here. If he can, we can go and visit the other English estates. We brought along some crates of our wines for people to sample.”

“I can speak with him, but I find myself reluctant to let you go,” the duchess said out of kindness. “Your visit has been wonderful. Will you return, and stay with us sometime in the summer? Only for longer, let’s say at least a month.”

“It may be a while before we can do the journey again, which is why I would like to secure more trade while I am here,” Giovanna explained.

If she could finalise the deal with Silas, and then garner more trade elsewhere, it would make the long journey worthwhile.

“Well, I shall help too. But only if you promise not to talk business for the rest of this day,” Lady Olive said.

“You are as bad as my brother,” the duchess joined in. “Always thinking of business in your head. I promise I will ensure that Oscar provides you with

more contacts. I am sure that Silas will introduce you to the family solicitor too so that you can use him when you are in England. He is very good and trustworthy.”

“Thank you, Duchess. My family’s vineyard must expand. Otherwise, generations of hard labour will simply disappear,” Giovanna told them. As she did so, the words saddened her because they were so true.

“We cannot be having any of that. I will talk to my Uncle Hector in Scotland, they are very fond of wines at the dinner table,” Lady Olive offered. “I will take your address and write to you to let you know how much wine he would like to order.”

“That is so kind of you, Lady Olive,” Giovanna said, delighted at the kindness of her new friends. “I was so sure that exporting our wine would save *Vigento Romano* and prevent our neighbours from buying our land.”

“Would that be Rodriguez, your lost love?” the duchess asked, holding her face up to feel the warmth from the bit of sun that was showing itself.

“Yes, Duchess,” Giovanna nodded, also putting her face up to catch the tiny bit of warmth that the sun revealed as it popped out from behind a cloud. “I will do anything to prevent the Mancini family from buying our land. It would bring great shame to my family if we were forced to sell the land, but it would be a terrible insult to sell it to them.”

“Let’s not think of such things, we will do all we can to help, Giovanna, I promise,” the duchess assured her. “Now let us enjoy what little bit of sun we have.”

The ladies continued to walk along, with Giovanna trailing behind a little. She did her best to relax and enjoy the scenery, but the grey sea looked cold and harsh. Back home the ocean was a turquoise blue and the water was always warm. But here, nothing was inviting about the ocean, the coldness making her shudder all the time.

“It is a kinder sea in the summer months,” the duchess’s voice broke through her thoughts. “It might not look it now, but we can even put our toes in the water during the summer.”

Giovanna laughed, “Do you not swim in it when it is warmer?” she asked.

“Goodness no,” Lady Olive replied, looking surprised at the very thought.

“Well, actually, I have swum in the sea as a girl,” the duchess said, looking sheepish for admitting her boisterous ways when she was younger.

“I suppose it was the Duke who made you do it,” Lady Olive said, half laughing.

“He did not make me, but yes, I did swim with him,” the duchess replied. “We did plenty of daring things together as children, except for Silas,” she added, turning to Giovanna as she mentioned her brother’s name. “He was always the serious one, but often we all three got ourselves into so much trouble.”

“I am surprised that he was the careful one,” Giovanna said. “He seems to me to be the one who would take risks.”

“He does now that he’s older, but as a child, he wasn’t as carefree as I. Though he wasn’t so cautious about sneaking off with Lucy. What those two got up to doesn’t bare thinking of. Young love makes you forget all caution...well...it did for me,” the duchess confessed. “Anyway, every time we were caught, we had to work even harder, and often in the stables. Silas would do half of my workload and I never really appreciated that side of things when I was taking risks. It is only now that I am older that I realise what a protective brother he was.”

A flutter of envy shivered through Giovanna’s mind. It seemed to her that Silas was at his happiest when he was with Lucy.

“Silas and Oscar always took care of you,” Lady Olive interrupted her thoughts. “Especially when Oscar’s father was on the warpath. Your life was so very different in those days.”

“Yes, and thanks to you, Olive, it all changed,” the duchess said, hooking her arm into her friends. “But that seems like a lifetime ago.”

“You must tell me all about it one day, Duchess,” Giovanna said, surprised at the kindness in Silas’s behaviour.

Again, Giovanna felt that annoying sensation again, wishing she could simply accept Silas’ friendship. But in her heart, she felt that she wanted more than that. What it was about him that had her so captivated she wasn’t sure, but she was not ready for it, whatever it might be.

A warm sensation ran through her body as she thought of him, but she shook it off. It was the same feeling that she once felt for Rodriguez, and she never wanted to go through that kind of relationship ever again.

CHAPTER 13

It pleased Silas that Lucy looked happy and content with life. All she'd ever wanted was to have a nice home of her own and children, but he'd not been ready for such things. That decision had cost him dearly, and he'd lost her to someone else. Though he accepted that, he did miss her company.

His childhood sweetheart had been the one person he could have fun and feel relaxed with, and now that escape had gone. No doubt losing her was the cause of his tensions right now, but he didn't blame her for leaving him. He knew in his heart that it was time for a new chapter in his life and hoped that it might include Giovanna.

Lucy's words of warning echoed in his head. *The next time you find yourself a woman in your life who you like, try and make more time for love. When you meet that girl, you'll know because she'll make you feel all moonstruck.*

"Moonstruck, eh?" he mumbled to himself, walking towards the beach. "I'm moonstruck, that must be what's wrong with me," he added, chuckling.

His thoughts meandered over the times he'd spent in the company of the Italian beauty. *What about you, Giovanna? Are you willing to get to know me? Or is your dislike for me set in stone?*

The first time he'd met her at the duke's ball, he'd thought she was going to slap him because he'd assumed that Mattia was the one to discuss business with. *Hah! You soon put me right on that one, Giovanna.*

Then they had danced together, for the very first time; *you had me captivated from the first moment I set eyes on you, and I never knew it.*

Silas stopped walking at this realisation, or rather at the thought of his admittance of how she'd stolen his heart right from the very beginning.

“Yes, I do believe I could give you my heart, Giovanna Romero,” he whispered, ignoring all around him. “If only you would have it.”

And there lay the problem; Silas was convinced that Giovanna had taken a disliking to him, right from the very start.

Was it because I was shocked at discussing business with a woman? He mused. *Do you now hate me because of our very first conversation together?*

He began walking again, though his mind focused only on confusing thoughts of how to win over Giovanna. How could he get her to forgive his ignorance? In his travels, he’d met many cultures that were different from English ways. He should never have shown surprise at discussing business with a woman, how foolish he’d been. And now she had an opinion of him that was not true to his character.

Recalling that Giovanna had once told him how passionate she was for her padre’s wines, and that she wouldn’t allow anyone to take her padre for a fool. “By Jove, that’s it, if I offer you a generous price, perhaps I can win you over?” he considered, as if something had switched on his head, and that was the answer.

It caused him to chuckle as he looked over at the beach, and lo and behold, there she was, his Italian beauty.

In fact, there was his sister too, and Lady Olive, all three of them enjoying a stroll along the beach. He’d known they were planning something but hadn’t been sure what it was, and now here they were, and his sister had spotted him too. She waved over to him, so now he couldn’t sneak away even if he’d wanted to, but Giovanna was there, so why would he?

Walking towards them, the damp sands underfoot slowed down his pace. Silas couldn’t stop staring at Giovanna as the wind blew strands of dark hair into her face. Even with the overcoat she wore over her dress, he could make out the slender shape of her body as the wind wrapped her clothing tightly around her. How he wished he could win her over, and not only in friendship.

Then again, she did live nearly a thousand miles away from his home, so what implications might that have on any possible relationship.

What am I doing, thinking like that, the woman hates me, I’m sure of it, he reminded himself.

At least she was looking his way and not turning her back on him, could he take that as a good sign? But the closer he got to them, he could make out her facial expression and she was scowling his way.

No doubt she’s annoyed because we haven’t finished that wretched

business contract yet, he told himself. When she hears my generous offer, maybe she'll start to like me. But then, I don't wish to buy her friendship.

His thoughts were making him feel frustrated and he was aware that he was most likely scowling too as everything churned around in his mind. Making an effort, he grinned as he got closer to them because he was always pleased to see his twin sister.

"I see you have no children with you," he said, laughing as he went to hug his sister in greeting.

"Do not go telling them that I came to the beach without them," the duchess said, putting her finger to her lips in mock secrecy.

"My lips are sealed, I promise. I trust your trip to town has been fruitful?" he asked, hugging Lady Olive next, who felt like an older sister to him, she was so close to the family.

"We have an invitation to a ball, so I insisted that Giovanna choose the most beautiful gown from Miss Sarah Lilly, the dressmaker. I always go to her for my own dresses."

"Nothing pleases a lady more than shopping for a dress, so I believe," he said, glancing at Giovanna as he went to kiss her on each cheek.

Her olive skin felt soft on his lips, and her perfume had a refreshing lemony smell.

"I do not like shopping for dresses, Silas," she said, moving away from him. "The Duchess kindly convinced me that I needed a new ballgown because I have already worn the one that I brought with me," Giovanna said. She kept her face expressionless as she spoke. "I had no idea there would be so many balls to attend."

His sister hooked into Giovanna's arm, sensing her discomfort. "Being married to a duke means we can't really refuse too many invitations; it would be seen as rude. It is all a part of his duty to the Crown. But it will be an opportunity for you to meet those other customers we discussed. I will introduce you to all the women I talk into considering your wines."

"What is that?" Silas asked, his ears pricking up at the talk of business. "Much depends on how much *Vigneto Romano* can produce. I have quite a large order and they are a small vineyard."

"Oh Silas," Vera sighed at him. "Do not worry, your order will come first, will it not, Giovanna?"

"Well...we take so long to finalise that I cannot say," Giovanna teased. "But of course, Silas. It was you who brought me here and you shall have my

loyalty for that. But I will point out that we have more land to cultivate once the orders are concluded.”

“I see. Our business is not yet finalised because everyone around me insists we do not talk business,” he mentioned. “I will happily go through things with you when we return to Welwick Hall today.”

“Stop being so shameless, Brother,” the duchess reprimanded him. “There will be plenty of time to talk business, but today Giovanna is enjoying the company of we ladies. I refer to you too, Giovanna, all will be in hand by the time you are ready to leave, worry not over the prices of crates of wine.”

Silas could see from Giovanna’s expression that she would prefer to finalise their business at the earliest opportunity.

“On the contrary, Vera,” Silas responded to his sister’s remark. “I do believe that Giovanna would have more fun if she could finish her business with me. Fear not though, Giovanna, I can promise you good things,” he said, turning to speak to her. “The duke has instructed me to give you a good price as he hopes to build up a long relationship with *Vigneto Romano*.”

“There, does that make you feel better, Giovanna?” the duchess asked with a smile, looking pleased to have got business out of the way. “Now you can relax and prepare yourself for a ball.”

“I thank you for sharing the Duke’s kind words. It puts my mind at rest,” Giovanna said, inclining her head slightly towards Silas. “Will you be attending the coming ball, Silas?”

“Of course he will, won’t you, Brother?” his sister insisted, as if it sounded preposterous should he not attend.

“I hadn’t planned on another ball so soon,” he answered as his sister hooked her other arm into his. “You know I don’t like them, other than to increase business contacts.”

“Shame on you, Silas, using a ball as an excuse to do business,” Lady Olive joined in. “Though why am I not surprised?”

“You know very well that men talk business at balls, Lady Olive. It is a means of hiding away from the women,” he said, purposely to tease the women.

“It could be that Silas is too busy meeting with old sweethearts,” Giovanna said, a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

But Silas didn’t get to reply as Giovanna broke off from the group, walking away and looking deep in thought.

“Oh yes, we saw you with Lucy,” the duchess pointed out, turning her

attention to Silas. "Is she well?"

"As far as I know she is, but then I didn't know she was with child, did I? You see, no one cared to inform me of that part."

The sun had once again disappeared behind a grey cloud, making the sea air chilly.

"Hmmm...shall we return to the carriage?" the duchess suggested, stopping in her tracks to turn around. "But you must understand, Brother, that we chose not to tell you because we were unsure how you would take it. Does that not show that we only had your best interests at heart?"

"Lucy is very happy, so why would I be upset? Silas said, still feeling annoyed that no one had told him of Lucy's condition. "We were not engaged, or even courting for that matter, so she was a free spirit do whatever she wanted."

"Well, Brother," the duchess continued, staying linked in his arm as they left the damp, sandy beach behind. "I would like you to attend the ball and assist Giovanna in gaining as much trade as she can. I shall be talking to all the ladies into inviting her to dine with them while she is still in England. That way they can talk their husbands into trying out the samples of her Italian wines."

"You are doing a lot to help her," Silas said, though he meant his statement more as a question.

"I like her, Silas," the duchess replied. "And I do believe that you do too."

Silas happened to look up and his glance fell over Giovanna, who was now walking in front with Lady Olive. The breeze had picked up, and he couldn't help but think how beautiful she was as she laughed at something Lady Olive said.

"Well, am I correct?" his sister was asking him.

"Your carriage awaits you, Duchess," he replied, avoiding her last question. "I am going to collect my horse from the stable and I will accompany your carriage home."

"That is a good enough answer for my question," the duchess remarked.

"I didn't say anything," he replied, somewhat surprised.

"Exactly. Meaning that you didn't deny it either," the duchess said with a knowing smile. "Go and get your horse and meet up with us soon. Make sure to ride well, you never know who is watching."

CHAPTER 14

For Giovanna, the carriage ride home was far more interesting than it had been coming to Falmouth. The reason was that she had a much better view of watching Silas as he rode on his horse. A part of her wished she was racing him with her own horse. Better still, perhaps she'd prefer to be with him on his horse, wrapping her arms around his muscular frame as she held on to him.

Shaking the thought from her mind, she looked away, suddenly conscious she was staring at him. She wouldn't want him to see her gazing at him, he might get the wrong idea and think her interested in him.

Am I interested in him? she asked herself, still unable to pull her eyes away.

He was a man with a solid build, broad shoulders, straight back, and he carried himself well, his head held high. Yes, he was a proud man, and she liked that feature of his character. His dark hair always seemed to be messy, even though it was cut short. How she would like to run her fingers through his thick locks and straighten it up for him.

How much do you regret losing your childhood sweetheart, Silas? She asked herself, wondering if he was as heartbroken as she had been over Rodriguez, her lost love.

But then, do men ever get their hearts broken? Giovanna pondered but doubted it, she had a belief that men never gave their all to a relationship, not as a woman did. Giovanna had loved Rodriguez from the very depth of her heart. Although she had been the one to send him away, but only because she'd learned the truth of their relationship. Rodriguez coveted her padre's land more than he desired her.

Has Lucy broken your heart too? She mulled over, watching him ride close to the carriage. Are you riding so close because you know that I am watching you?

She'd heard him mention to the duchess that he hadn't known his sweetheart was with child. *Did that also hurt you? That the child in your sweetheart's belly belonged to another man? No... I imagine that you pine to have your sweetheart back in your arms once again.*

Giovanna couldn't help her mixed emotions over him, often feeling that her heart betrayed her head.

Why am I so fascinated with this Englishman? You are most certainly handsome, she agreed with herself. You are not an English Lord, but then, you make no pretence to be one either. You are true to yourself. You are honest at least, Silas Atkins. But the worst part is that you make me feel so out of control, and I hate you for that. Why must I always like a man who has that effect on me? What is it that you do that causes me to quiver in your presence? And why, oh why, am I jealous of your interest in other women?

"You must not worry, Giovanna," the duchess' voice rang out in her ears, and she turned to pay her attention.

"About what?" Giovanna asked, thinking that the duchess had somehow understood what she was thinking.

"The ball gown, it will be ready in time," the duchess replied, looking confused.

"We were discussing the speed at which the dressmaker works," the duchess pointed out. "She is most proficient, and I do believe all will be well."

"I never doubted it for a moment, Duchess," Giovanna replied, realising that she hadn't been listening to the ladies' conversation. "Forgive me, Duchess, my mind was elsewhere. I was thinking of other things."

The duchess smiled back at her, "Those thoughts wouldn't be related to my brother, would they? You seem to be watching him with great fascination."

"No...erm... I mean, I was staring out of the window, but I was not watching Silas," she stuttered, but even to her the words didn't sound convincing.

"Your secret is safe with us, is it, not Lady Olive?" the duchess teased. "Or do you still suffer from the heartache of Rodriguez? I do hope not because my brother is a very eligible bachelor."

“Do stop teasing poor Giovanna, Vera,” Lady Olive interrupted. “Take no notice of our Duchess’ matchmaking games, Giovanna,” she added. “Though Silas will be a good catch for any woman.”

“I do like Silas,” Giovanna admitted, though she wasn’t sure why she had done so. “But we are business partners, nothing more,” she added, attempting to cover up her mistake.

“You are very well suited,” the duchess said, unwilling to let the topic of her brother drop. “Of course, I may be biased with a high opinion of my brother. You see, I love him dearly and would do anything to see him happy and settled.”

Giovanna felt embarrassed, she hadn’t expected the duchess to try matchmaking her with her brother.

“I do not seek a man in my life, Duchess,” Giovanna tried to explain. “I am surrounded by men who try to run life, in my homeland.”

“Oh, goodness me, that is something Silas would never do to you,” the duchess stated, looking surprised. “He would never try to run your life, Giovanna. He would help, but never would he seek to make you unhappy. Remember, he has a twin sister who drilled into him, all his life, that women are very capable.”

“I am sure he is a fine gentleman,” Giovanna said, wishing the conversation would end. “But you forget, Duchess, I live a long, long way from your home. When I marry, if I ever do, it will be to an Italian man who understands how important my padre’s business is to me.”

At last, the duchess remained quiet. Giovanna hadn’t chosen the topic of conversation to be about marriage. As the duchess had pursued it, she felt that she must be honest with her.

Giovanna turned her attention back to staring out of the window. Once again, she ignored the continuing conversation between her companions. It had moved on to a discussion over the coming ball, not something she cared much for. Glancing at Silas on his horse, he happened to be looking her way. He smiled back at her, tipping his hat to her, quickly she looked away with a feeling of embarrassment at getting caught staring at him.

Giovanna then found herself in a daydream, staring out of the window, but at nothing in particular. Still, her thoughts were on the man on the horse. In a sense, she pitied him, coming home to find his sweetheart had not only left him but had also married another man.

Did Lucy leave you because you did not wish to have a family? Are you

like me, Silas, wanting only to concentrate on business?

As she pondered her new thoughts, the carriage began to rock. It was soon swaying so hard that it alerted her to impending danger. It caused her to glance through the window and she could see that Silas was now riding almost level with the carriage horses.

Lady Olive cried out, bringing Giovanna to her senses. She could see that Lady Olive had been thrown to the floor. The duchess was reaching out, trying her best to help her friend.

Giovanna opened the window of the carriage, glad to find that it opened enough for her to lean out and shout over to Silas. But what she saw shocked her; he was in the middle of leaping from his horse, and onto the driver's seat of the carriage. It startled her as she worried for Silas' safety. She couldn't see whether he had landed safely as she saw his body leap from his horse's back.

Leaning back in her seat, she felt petrified, overwhelmed with concern for him. *What if he is killed?* Was her only thought at the dangerous deed he was performing.

"What is it, Giovanna?" the duchess called out as she pulled Lady Olive back into her seat. "What is happening out there? Can you see?"

Giovanna was frozen with fright and couldn't speak. She wanted to explain, but no words would come from her mouth. Her throat felt blocked, and her breathing ragged.

"Goodness, Giovanna, you have gone very pale," the duchess spoke again. "Are we being robbed?"

She managed to shake her head to indicate not, but still, she couldn't speak, so fearful was she that Silas might have killed himself. In truth, she had no idea what had caused him to try to jump onto the carriage. All she knew was that it was a very dangerous thing to do.

The carriage continued to sway around, almost throwing them all to the floor, but each managed to hold on. For Giovanna, she clung to the ledge of the open window, while the duchess and Lady Olive held on to one another.

The carriage began to steady as it slowed down, and Giovanna's knuckles felt painful as she relaxed her tight grip. It soon came to a stop, and within moments the carriage door was flung open.

"Oh, thank God! You are alive!" Giovanna shouted out in panic. She hadn't meant to, but it had been her first reaction upon seeing Silas standing there.

“What is it, Silas?” the duchess asked, looking relieved at seeing her brother too. “What happened? What does Giovanna mean?”

“It is Watkins, the driver,” Silas replied, glancing around at the women as if he checked they were not hurt. “Are you all well?” he asked, panting at all the exertion.

“None of us are harmed, but what does Giovanna mean that you are alive?” the duchess asked again. “Have you and Watkins been attacked?”

“No, it is not that. Once you feel calmer, we must set off again at speed,” Silas informed them. “I fear for Watkins as he’s collapsed in his seat, and I’m unable to revive him. We must get him home and call for the physician.”

“Let me help you to carry him into the carriage,” Giovanna said, jumping through the open doorway.

Silas looked at her in confusion and then nodded his head, realising what she was suggesting. He turned to climb back up to the driver’s seat to get Watkins down. Giovanna thought nothing of following him, putting the driver’s arm over her shoulder.

“Let me climb back down and you can help pass him to me,” Silas suggested.

It made good sense, meaning that he could take most of the man’s weight.

“That was a foolish thing you did there,” she said to Silas as they struggled between them to get Watkins down from the high seat at the front end of the carriage. “I thought for a moment that you might have been killed.”

Silas half laughed as each of them took an arm of the driver’s over their shoulders, leading him to the carriage door.

“Did you worry for me?” Silas asked.

“Of course I did!” Giovanna snapped back at him. “But it was also very brave.”

The duchess and Lady Olive alighted from the carriage. Between the four of them, they put the driver into the carriage, laying him on the floor so that he wouldn’t fall from the seat.

“I will sit with him,” Giovanna offered as she sat on the floor and took the old man’s hand in hers. “We must hurry, or I fear he may die.”

Silas nodded his agreement and closed the carriage door. Within moments, the carriage was moving again, going at speed. It was a much smoother ride than it had been only moments before.

“Do you know what happened?” the duchess asked Giovanna, her face

worried as she looked down at her driver.

“Your brother was a brave man, Duchess,” Giovanna replied, loosening the buttons around the driver’s collar. “He jumped from his horse, and then onto the driver’s seat. He must have seen that your man had collapsed.”

“Yes, that was reckless of him, but also typical, and he did save us,” the duchess said, nodding her head. “Watkins must have pulled on the reins when he collapsed, that will be why the horses speeded up.”

Again, Giovanna did not listen to the ladies chatting with each other, all she could think of was how Silas had been their saviour. Perhaps he was a man who could be relied upon after all, especially in times of trouble.

CHAPTER 15

“The next time I see you Silas, you know what I hope for,” Lady Olive said as Silas embraced her before she embarked on her journey back to Scotland.

“I am going to pretend I did not hear that,” Silas replied, smiling as he kissed her cheek.

“It would make your sister so very happy if you were to settle down,” she added, whispering in his ear.

Silas said not another word on it, as he and his family waved Lady Olive and Mr Julius off, as the carriage moved on.

“What did Olive whisper to you, Brother?” the duchess asked.

Silas tapped the side of his nose; he wasn’t risking bringing up the topic of him getting married or he would hear no end to it. His sister had already tried matchmaking him on far too many occasions, and he was lucky to have escaped so far.

“You were very brave, you know, jumping on the carriage when it went out of control. But you were very stupid,” his sister chided. He thought it more likely she was cross with him for not telling her what Lady Olive had said to him.

“Is the driver well?” he asked, not lingering on the act that he hadn’t given a second thought to.

“He is, though he will be on bed rest for a few days,” the duchess replied. “The physician thought it might be that he has a weak heart as he grows older. We will need to put Watkins on lighter duties in the future.”

Silas nodded but asked no more about it. Rarely these days did he get involved with the servants of Welwick Hall. That was his past, and he’d

worked hard to become a gentleman. Not that he thought any less of a servant, on the contrary, they worked hard, much the same as him. It was more that he didn't want to be reminded that he and his sister had no father and no family of their own.

"Are you coming for a stroll with us?" the duchess asked, holding little Lady Livy's hand.

"No, I'm heading to the library to do a little research," he answered, setting off before she had a chance to question him further. "I will see you all later," he called back, waving goodbye to the children.

It pleased him to find the library empty, but then there were no more guests staying in the Hall anymore. Lady Olive and her husband had been the last of the Christmas seasonal guests to leave. It was always good to enjoy the quietness of the library because most of his days were filled with such noisy activities.

While he concentrated on searching for a particular book, the library door opened, and Barker walked in.

"Ah, Master Silas, I thought it was you I saw coming in here," the old butler remarked.

"Have you taken up reading, at last, Barker?" Silas asked, turning to him. "I'm trying to find a book on Italy. I have this burning curiosity to know more about the country, other than what I have learned during my visit."

Barker entered the library, leaving the door open as he went to sit in an armchair, observing Silas.

"I was there a long time ago," the old man shared. "In Italy, I mean."

"Goodness, I had no idea you'd ever travelled," Silas said, taking an interest as he walked over to his friend.

"I fought in the conquest of Corsica, and met many an Italian prisoner of war," Barker continued. "They were a friendly lot, as it happens. Family is everything to the Italians, usually the bigger the better."

"Yes, I did learn that too, on my travels," Silas agreed as the door opened wider, once again.

"Ah Silas," the duke said, spotting him and entering the room. "Tell me, how does the wine deal go with your Italian visitors?"

"It is not yet finalised. I have drawn up documents to place an initial order for a few crates every quarter for a year," Silas explained. The duke walked over to sit in the opposite armchair to Barker. "Giovanna drives a hard bargain, but I knew that you would want to be generous in your offer."

“You mean to tell me that you have not worked your charm on the lovely Giovanna yet?” the duke asked, half smiling as he teased his brother-in-law.

“You can laugh, but I don’t believe the woman likes me very much,” Silas admitted.

“Since when did that stop you?” the duke chuckled.

“Well... I like her quite a lot as it happens,” Silas confessed, feeling comfortable talking over his latest problem with people he trusted. “I truly would like to get on her better side, but everything I say or do seems to annoy her. That’s why I’m in here researching Italy, to get a better grasp of her ways.”

“It is unusual to see you so enamoured with a woman,” Barker said, looking concerned for him. “We all thought you’d be heartbroken over Lucy marrying another. Yet here you are worrying over a woman you don’t even know.”

“Yes, I bumped into Lucy in Falmouth,” Silas replied. “Why the hell did no one care to warn me that she was with child?”

At this, he threw them both a burning glare.

The duke put up his arms in defence, “I was under strict instructions not to, Silas. And you know the price I would pay if I went against your sister’s wishes,” he huffed. “She would not speak to me for a week.”

“In my opinion that would be a blessing,” Silas huffed back.

“It would never have worked out with Lucy anyway, Silas, no one is to blame for the outcome,” Barker said. “Let’s face the truth of it, Lucy was a servant girl, and we can’t have history repeating itself, now, can we?”

“There is a big difference between myself and Oscar,” Silas snapped, still a little annoyed that everyone had kept Lucy’s condition from him. “I am not a duke. I am not even a lord.”

“Barker is right though, Silas, you really should be considering marrying a lady of substance,” the duke defended his butler’s opinion. “You have accumulated wealth, so I do not see why you cannot aim high, let us say... erm...a count’s daughter, or even a baron’s.”

“Bah! I have no idea how Lucy’s husband manages to hold down a business and start a family too, it’s not for me,” Silas waved his hand in the air. “I don’t have time for a social life while I’m on my travels, let alone meeting a wife.”

“If a mere butcher, such as Jeffrey, can do it,” Barker intervened. “Then so can you. Stop being such a coward.”

“I am no coward, I...just I cannot seem to accumulate wealth and keep a woman at the same time,” Silas argued. “No insult to you, Oscar, but I didn’t inherit my wealth, I had to work damn hard for it.”

“Only because I opened doors for you,” the duke argued back.

“Boys, boys, stop your bickering,” Barker called out, waving his walking stick between them. “Anyone would think you were both youngsters again, the way you posture with one another.”

The duke was the first to burst into a fit of laughter, followed by Silas. “By Jove, we haven’t had a good argument in years, have we Silas?” the duke pointed out.

“No, and I don’t want one either,” Silas said, taking on a more serious tone. “You are quite right though Oscar. If it wasn’t for my sister marrying you, I’d be working in a stable no doubt.”

“I would never have had you doing that,” the duke said. “We have been friends since we were born, we are like brothers you and I.”

“Silas has a good point to make though,” Barker said, breaking up their banter. “Your father was of much the same opinion, young Oscar. He didn’t like to mix business and pleasure, and his preferences were always on business. He took his role as the Duke of Cornwall very seriously, working closely with the Royal family on many occasions.”

“I take it seriously too, Barker,” the duke said, if not a little sulkily. “But I treasure my wife and children first, whereas Father never did.”

“That is the truth of it, *young Oscar*,” Barker always referred to the duke by his pet-name. “He wanted you to be the same as him, and that was why he didn’t like you mixing with the servants. The late duke believed that servants had their place, and it wasn’t mingling with the elite of society.”

“Did he never see how clever my sister was?” Silas asked, somewhat surprised at the statement.

“Yes, and he didn’t like it,” Barker explained.

“No, he did not,” the duke agreed. “That was why I was so determined to employ you as my right-hand man. I was never going to treat servants as he did. He believed strongly that we all had our place in society, as do many of the gentry. That was why it was important to me that you became a successful businessman, Silas. Wealth is everything to the gentry.”

“Yes, I’m all too aware of that fact, and I’m thankful for all you’ve done for me,” Silas said. “I always believed the only thing that would make me happy was to travel and see other cultures for myself. I wanted to soak up the

world around us, never giving much thought to my own part of the world.”

“I do not believe that you never cared for your sister and our children!” the duke called him out on his statement.

“No, I don’t mean that part of my world, I knew they have you to care for them,” Silas explained. “I meant, I never thought of having a family. Though I knew something was missing from my life. I believed it to be mine and Vera’s lack of a family. But now, I know it wasn’t that at all; it was having my own family. A wife and children, they are not beyond me, are they?”

“No, my boy, they most certainly are not,” Barker said, looking over at Silas with pride in his eyes. “You have reached out for the world and taken it, now is the time to make the next step.”

The duke nodded in agreement.

“But I constantly hesitate,” Silas said. “I keep telling myself that I’m not ready.”

“Does marriage scare you, old boy?” the duke asked with raised brows.

“I do believe that it does, Oscar,” Silas admitted.

“Well, young Silas, admitting your fears is halfway to overcoming them,” Barker added, getting up to leave. “Now then, I must be on my way to the kitchen, they’ll be serving tea and cake by now.”

Silas grabbed for his book, wanting to take it to his room, it seemed that was the only place where he wouldn’t be disturbed.

“Well, my friend, there is only one thing left to do,” the duke said, leaning his arm over Silas’s shoulder as they walked out of the library.

“What’s that?” Silas asked curiously.

“Find the right woman to live with for the rest of your life,” the duke replied, patting Silas’s back before he turned to head for his study.

Yes, but for that, she has to love me, Silas thought. And the woman I have in mind doesn’t even like me.

CHAPTER 16

“Giovanna, wake up, sleepy head,” Mattia said, shaking his tired cousin as she slept late in the morning. “A carriage has arrived for you, and the driver insists on waiting.”

“Hmmm...what?” Giovanna groaned, her head still fuzzy from sleep. “What are you talking about? I’m not expecting to go out.”

“Why are you sleeping so late?” Mattia asked, and she could see worry in his eyes.

“I’m not sleeping well during the night, but never mind that. What is this of a carriage?” she asked, sitting up as she rubbed at her eyes and yawned.

“It is true,” Mattia confirmed, going to lift the curtain as he looked through the bedroom window.

“Come and see for yourself.”

“I do believe you, Mattia,” Giovanna said, slowly getting out of her bed. “But who has sent it?”

“Well... I hate to tell you this, but the driver said you are to hurry. The Duchess says that your ballgown has arrived, and the seamstress awaits your arrival,” Mattia said, repeating the message.

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place,” Giovanna called out in annoyance, picking up a pillow and throwing it at her cousin. “I need to hurry; I cannot afford to insult the Duchess.”

“Whoa!” Mattia said, catching the pillow before it hit him in the face. “I sent the maid up who comes to cook for us, but she said that she could not awaken you. I am concerned, so have come to waken you myself.”

“Get out!” Giovanna yelled at her cousin. “I must ready myself.”

For the next fifteen minutes, Giovanna frantically ran around her small

bedroom. She mumbled, complaining that her cousin had allowed her to sleep late, and all this was his fault. Once she'd washed her face in perfumed water that she'd readied the night before, she dressed in various layers of petticoats. Topping them all off with a mustard-coloured day dress.

"Oh Lord, I should take more time to prepare, but never mind," she muttered, running down the squeaky steps as she put her arms into a thin overcoat.

Mattia stayed behind, he wanted nothing to do with seamstresses and female chatter. Giovanna accepted that she had no choice but to attend the duchess's calling. She was relying on the duchess to introduce her to more customers, so she didn't wish to upset her in any way.

On the short journey to Welwick Hall, Giovanna's thoughts were filled with Silas' gallant action. He had risked personal injury when he'd saved the carriage that carried them. It had shaken her for days, worrying over what could have happened, and so she'd avoided visiting Welwick Hall. Nor was she sleeping well because she kept dreaming of Silas coming to harm in a speeding carriage. What could it mean that she was dreaming of him every night?

The carriage door opened, and she blinked from her thoughts; not having realised that the carriage had stopped. A servant led her to the parlour room where the duchess and the dressmaker awaited her arrival.

"My apologies, Your Grace," Giovanna said to the duchess in a fluster. "I...I was taken by surprise and was not ready for the trip. I hope you have not been waiting too long for me?"

"Pay no mind to it, Giovanna," the duchess replied with her usual friendly smile. "Come now and let Miss Sarah dress you. I cannot wait to see you in this ballgown."

With the help of a maid, Giovanna was soon reversing all she had done only an hour earlier, taking off her day dress and a couple of the petticoat layers. The whole morning had felt exhausting, but she knew that she must endure it. She liked the duchess, who had been so welcoming and friendly, and Giovanna didn't wish to insult her in any way.

Miss Sarah was the one who helped her to dress in the ballgown, and it fit perfectly. The fabric was exquisite, feeling cool and soft on her skin, which helped to calm her after such a frantic morning.

"It feels so smooth and comfortable," Giovanna remarked as the seamstress added the final touches.

“Bring over the mirror,” the duchess said to the maid. “So that Giovanna can see for herself how beautiful she is.”

Giovanna turned to glance in the full-length mirror and she felt shocked at the transformation. The image she stared at in the mirror was stunning. Putting her hands to her face in surprise, she found tears trickling down her cheeks.

“Oh... Miss Sarah! It is truly magical how beautiful your gowns are,” Giovanna blubbered, and it annoyed her how she’d allowed her emotions to burst forth so openly.

“Tell me, Giovanna, are those happy tears or sad ones?” the duchess asked, standing to admire the gown.

“I...I cannot believe how it makes me look like a true lady,” Giovanna said in honesty. “Miss Sarah’s gown is beyond all my expectations. Thank you, Miss Sarah, I feel like a...like a princess,” she said, laughing and crying all at the same time.

“My dear, it is you who makes the gown look so magnificent, not I,” Miss Sarah replied, also standing back to admire the gown.

“Why are you so surprised at how beautiful you look?” the duchess asked, taking Giovanna’s hand in hers as she moved to her side.

“I do not have time to...to ever think of myself as a...a woman, Duchess,” Giovanna stuttered. “The person I see in this mirror is not the woman who toils in the fields and runs around trying to save Padre’s land.”

“Who do you see in the mirror, my dear?” Miss Sarah asked with gentleness in her voice.

“I see a...a different side of me,” Giovanna answered shakily. “You see, since Rodriguez, I never considered any man would seek a romantic relationship with me. I work hard in the fields with the men, with my cousins, and I am always dusty and tired at the end of a long day. But in that mirror, I...I look like a real lady.”

“You are a lady, Giovanna,” the duchess said, guiding her to the settee. “Come and sit with me.”

“If Padre could see me, he would be so very proud that his daughter can look so very beautiful,” Giovanna said. She couldn’t stop sniffing, even as she attempted to hold back her tears. “I have always felt that I am such a disappointment to him. What he needed was a son, and so I have tried to play that role for such a long time now. But always, he tells me to stop working in the fields. We argue because I accuse him of wanting me only to cook his

dinners, but I know that I lie to myself. What he really wants is for me to act like a lady.”

“Silas has told me that your father is a very kind and gentle man,” the duchess said, sitting by Giovanna’s side. “I know you imagine that he wanted a son, but you have shown yourself, even to me, that you are more than capable of doing anything a man can do. I do believe that your father is already very proud of his daughter.”

Giovanna managed to stop her tears, “I am so very sorry but this dress, it is so beautiful,” she remarked, glancing over at the seamstress. “You are right Duchess, Padre, he tells me all the time that I must follow my heart. And all I do is let my head rule because we must save our vineyard. Yes, there are cousins, even Mattia, who could take over, but then it would not belong to Padre anymore. I must avoid that happening, the business needs to go to his heir, which is me, and so I must prove that I am up to the task.”

The duchess allowed Giovanna to talk, and for that Giovanna was grateful. She’d never been able to tell anyone her true thoughts, let alone another woman. It felt good, and the duchess was so very kind to her.

“I miss Padre. I have been gone such a long time, but this is a journey I had to take,” Giovanna said, but she knew she was only trying to justify things to herself. “I had to leave Padre, so I could save *Vignetto Romano*.”

“And you will save it, and we will help, I promise you that much,” the duchess said reassuringly. “But your father would wish you to be a woman too, I am sure of it. You must take time to be you, Giovanna, a very beautiful and clever woman.”

Giovanna nodded in agreement, “When I saw myself in Miss Sarah’s gown, I remembered that I was once a woman in love. My heart died when my love was crushed. It is true that a heart can shatter into little pieces. I tell Padre that I will never marry because there is not a man who could put my broken heart back together again.”

“And what does your father think of that?” the duchess asked, with a twinkle in her eyes.

“He...he often likes to tell me of how he met my mother. He wants me to learn that true love can grow from anywhere, like the shoot of grapevine,” Giovanna answered, lost in her emotional outburst. “She was a peasant, you see. She sought work in his vineyard, picking the grapes at harvest time. When he fell in love with her, his family did not approve because she was from a poor background.”

“It is much like my own story, Giovanna,” the duchess shared with her. “I was a servant, and I married a duke, so wonderful things can happen when it comes to love.”

“Haha...you sound like Padre; he tells me that love can blossom anywhere in the world between two people. And...and since I have come to England, perhaps I could find love,” she admitted, surprising herself at how easily she could open up to the duchess.

“I believe that too, Giovanna,” the duchess said with compassion. “I agree with your father, love can blossom anywhere. If it is meant to be, then it will happen.”

“But Rodriguez... I am not sure that I wish to go through that ever again,” Giovanna admitted. “Although, Silas, he also makes my heart beat faster when I am with him. He can make me feel so confused and I do not understand why. It is as if he knows exactly how to stir up my emotions.”

“Hahaha... That sounds like my brother,” the duchess chuckled.

“No doubt he too is suffering from losing his Lucy,” Giovanna stated, taking on a more serious tone.

“It was true that we didn’t know how he would take that news,” the duchess confessed. “They have known one another for many years. As it happens, he seems not to be heartbroken over losing Lucy. If anything, I would say he is thankful that, at last, she has found happiness. That is the nature of my brother’s heart, he only wants the best for those he loves. That is why he foolishly risked life and limb for us all when Watkins collapsed upon the carriage. He does not think of himself.”

“I was so afraid for him when I saw him jump. But that was when I realised he is not a bad person,” Giovanna admitted shyly. “I find myself suspicious of men I do not know, but that is a fault of mine and not of his. Promise me, Duchess, that you will not tell him of confusion. He will think of me as the weaker sex instead of a woman of business. I must save *Vigneto Romano* first and foremost. It is my home and has been in my family for many generations.”

“You are a strong woman, Giovanna,” the duchess replied, patting Giovanna’s arm. “Now then, let us get this gown from you before you ruin it with your tears. And if Miss Sarah’s gown works its magic correctly, who knows how things might turn out at the next ball, you may meet the man of your dreams.”

The duchess stood up and held out a helping hand to Giovanna. Within an

hour Giovanna was stripped of her ball gown and returned to the cottage. She intended on pouring herself a nice hot bath before she and her cousin were expected to return to Welwick Hall for dinner that evening.

It had shocked her that she'd revealed so much to the duchess, but she also felt as if a great weight had been lifted. Giovanna had no sister, but the more she got to know the duchess, the more she felt like one. She trusted her and felt sure that the duchess would say not a word to her brother. She must continue to look strong to Silas, her Padre was depending on this trade.

Though it did bring memories back of Rodriguez. She'd felt a sense of pride that one of the most eligible bachelors in the neighbourhood had paid her attention. He'd showed her off like she was a prize and she'd never realised it. His kisses had sent shivers through her body, but she had been careful that their love went no further. Determined to save herself for their wedding night, which had never arrived. Once she'd discovered his true plan, she'd refused to see him ever again.

But what she felt for Silas was different. Yes, he annoyed her, but that was all to do with her fear of letting her padre down with this business deal.

On the carriage back to Welwick Hall for dinner, she hoped that she would not be seated too close to Silas. She preferred to watch him from afar. At least until she felt confident enough to know and understand how she really felt about this handsome Englishman.

CHAPTER 17

Now that Giovanna had signed the legal documents for him, he wondered whether she'd stay on much longer after the ball at Farafox House. She'd acted surprisingly pleasant toward him over the last few days, but still, he felt confused over his feelings for her. At one point, he'd convinced himself to let her return to Italy and have little more to do with her, other than the renewal of their contract in a year. Then another day he'd almost ridden all the way to her cottage to confess his love for her. All that stopped him was his worry he'd make a complete fool of himself.

"You might like to know that Watkins is back on his feet again," the duke's voice broke through his thoughts. "But I've given him a position in the house, for now, that doesn't involve heavy lifting."

"Ah..." Silas mumbled, turning his head to look through the carriage window. Not that he could see anything because it was dark outside. "Good, though he's more of an outdoor man so I'm not sure he'll like being in the house so much."

"I have told him that he can work in the gardens in the warmer weather," the duke reiterated. "For now, he's in the boot room, where he can sit down and do menial tasks."

"It's good of you to keep him on, Oscar," Silas remarked. "At his age, there aren't many positions he can do, but I'm pleased you don't see it like that."

"You most likely saved the man's life, Silas," the duke said. "I'm not going to then go and throw his life away, am I? It's a case of seeing how much he can do once he's recovered."

"You are a good employer, Oscar," Silas said, smiling. "And most likely

the best Duke that Cornwall has had in a long time.”

“I had a haughty servant girl and a stubborn servant boy for my best friends as a child,” the duke joked, recalling his youth. “They made me see the worth in everybody, regardless of status, but sadly not many of the nobility agree with me. Don’t you find that term odd, Silas, *nobility*? In my experience, few of the upper class behave nobly.”

“You do what you can, Oscar, and that’s all that matters,” Silas said when his sister decided to join in on the conversation.

“Did you call me haughty?” the duchess squealed, tapping her husband’s arm as the carriage rocked around. “Though you might be right about my brother, he is stubborn. Please make an effort to dance with Giovanna tonight, Silas. She and her cousin might leave us any day now.”

“I hardly think my dancing with her will make any difference to her leaving or not,” Silas responded, sensing his dull tone.

“If I shared with you that she likes you, would you make more of an effort?” his sister asked as the carriage began to slow down.

“I disagree, Sister, the only thing our Italian guest is interested in is the sale of her wines,” Silas snapped. “Even at this ball she’s only attending to gain introductions with as many lords and ladies as she can. Her sole purpose in England is to gain contracts to sell her wines. If anything, she makes me feel used. I thought we were to be her only client. It turns out she’s here to take on more orders than she can produce.”

“That is not true, Silas,” the duchess retorted. “They have the land to produce much more, but they need the orders first or the grapes will be left to rot in the sun. You should feel pride that you have assisted in saving their family business.”

Silas grunted at such an idea. It seemed to him that he’d only opened the doorway for Giovanna. He believed that she would have got there all on her own anyway, so independent was she.

He clambered out of the standing carriage last, allowing the duke to assist his duchess out first. Immediately his eyes were taken in by the sight of Giovanna. A warm feeling rippled its way through his body, and he fought it off, before making his way to her and Mattia.

“Good evening to you both,” Silas greeted them, attempting to sound jolly as he hid his angst. “I hope this will be a useful event for you, Giovanna. I understand that my sister is assisting you with possible new customers.”

“Yes, you see, Silas, we women can be as successful as any man,”

Giovanna answered as she moved away from him.

He made no effort to follow her, but he had a longing to be close to her, all night long if it were possible. Not that he would show it because this was a woman who had exhibited little interest in him. Other than to complete their business, which they had done some days ago.

“Can I accompany you both into the manor house?” he asked, hopeful to stay with her a little longer.

“That is most kind of you Silas—” Mattia began to thank him until his cousin said otherwise.

“We need no such assistance, Silas,” Giovanna said, and his heart sank at yet more rejection.

Once Giovanna leaves England, he will then get the *damn* women out of his head. He’d never felt this way over a woman. Or was it more that he wasn’t used to being rejected?

He observed as Giovanna set off first, followed closely behind by her cousin. Giving them some time to get ahead, Silas set off to enter the manor house. It could be that she no longer wished to be seen with him, now that he’d given her what she wanted. Whatever her reasons, he needed to get over her; it was obvious she was shunning him, yet again.

They were to dance together at some point in the evening, as his sister had insisted, but other than that he would try to avoid her at the ball. The thought of seeing her dance with other men pained him. Why could he not tell her of his feelings? But he was like a dithering fool when it came to Giovanna. He liked her cousin well enough, and he would seek his company later in the evening. That way, he could find out if she had been successful in gaining more trade.

Silas hoped that she would do well because in his heart he wanted her to succeed. One thing he could admit about Giovanna was that she worked hard and was relentless in improving the prospects of her family’s business. If only she would allow him to help her and take some of the strain from her shoulders, but no, Signorina Giovanna Romano would accept nothing from him. It seemed as if she disliked him from the moment she’d met him, and he had no idea why. He should talk to Mattia because her constant coldness towards him was a mystery.

Arriving in the hallway of the mansion house, his eyes adjusted to the brightness from the candled chandeliers hanging overhead. That was when he saw how beautiful Giovanna looked in her shimmering green gown. The

colour suited her, and it was offset by a mustard, lace shawl thrown over her olive-toned shoulders. Golden threads glimmered from the expert handiwork of the seamstress who'd hand-sewn every flower petal into the fabric. Again, a warmth ran through his veins as he stared at her. How he would like her in his arms, dancing with no one but him.

But he had to accept that he was not the man she sought if she even wanted a man in her life.

"You should not stare at a lady, Silas, people will talk," Mattia's voice came from his side.

"Ahem, yes, I apologise. Giovanna looks very becoming for the ball this evening," Silas replied, knowing he'd been caught admiring her.

"You should see her in our homeland," Mattia said, with a mischievous laugh. "There, she wears men's pants, and her hair is covered in the dust from the earth. She is not quite so lovely a sight then."

"I would imagine your cousin looks beautiful no matter what she wears," Silas said, absent-mindedly. He wasn't thinking about what he was saying as he continued to stare at Giovanna, who was being greeted by their hostess.

"Ah...so you are taken in by my cousin's charms then?" Mattia asked though it looked like he already knew the answer.

"I admit that I am, Mattia," Silas admitted. "But I cannot, for the life of me, understand why she dislikes me so much."

"Why do you assume that you are not in her favour?" Mattia asked, looking at Silas curiously. "Ah, but do not answer that question," he said, raising a finger to stop Silas from speaking. "Let me explain something peculiar about my cousin, if you are in her favour then she will do her best to ignore you, for most of the time."

"Well...that seems a very strange thing to do," Silas said, feeling confused at such a notion because he thought he knew women well. "I must say I assumed she ignored me because she dislikes me."

"No...not so, Silas," Mattia wagged his finger, and all the while they watched on as Giovanna spoke with the hostess. "Giovanna is surrounded by men every day of her life, and she loves them all because they are family. But she does her best not to talk to them because they annoy her. And so, it could be that you annoy her too, that is why she ignores you."

Silas looked at Mattia in confusion, "I would hate to think what she does if she doesn't like someone then."

"Ah, only then is she extra nice because she feels bad that she does not

like the person. Giovanna will go out of her way to be pleasant to them,” Mattia replied. “So, if she is not pleasant to you, it means that she likes you. Very confusing, is it not?” he said, raising his brows at Silas with his revelation.

“I’ll say,” Silas replied, not sure he understood any of it.

“So typical of a woman, do you not agree?” Mattia said. “You also have an added problem, my friend, because you remind my cousin of her lost love. And for that, she fears you.”

“Fears me, surely not?” Silas remarked with surprise. “I would never harm her. Did this man hurt her...physically?”

“No, no, you misunderstand, it is fear for her heart,” Mattia explained. He held his hand over his heart in a gesture. “Truly, she is afraid of ever letting a man into her life again.”

“You must tell me of this man,” Silas demanded as he was still unable to pull his eyes from her slender form.

At that point, she turned around and caught him staring. Silas felt embarrassed at getting caught, and all he could do was smile over at her. To his surprise, she returned the smile. Even more surprising, she began to walk over to him, causing him to shift uncomfortably. Was she going to talk to him?

“Silas.” His name rolled from her tongue with such elegance. “I do not think I ever thanked you properly for rescuing us in the carriage. Your bravery was most impressive. Who knows what might have happened had you not stepped in.”

Silas nodded, not sure what to say because what he’d done was only to react on instinct.

“Do not look so coy at my praise,” she said, lending him an unusual smile.

Does this mean that you don’t like me because you’re being nice to me? he questioned himself. *This woman has me in such a dither that I cannot act like myself when she’s around me.*

“Are you going to ask me to dance, Silas?” she asked, suggestively. He couldn’t believe she would take the very first dance with him.

“It would be an honour if you would consider taking the first dance with me, Giovanna,” he replied, smoothly.

By some miracle, he was managing to hold himself together. Silas did what any gentleman would do and held out his arm for her to place her hand

upon. As she did so elegantly, he led her towards the ballroom and caught Mattia's grin.

In truth, he had no idea if he was in Giovanna's good books or not, but nor did he care. A dance with her was worth everything, and as she placed her hand on his arm, pride swelled in his chest. He had the Belle of the Ball upon his arm, and they were about to dance with everyone's watching eyes. Later, he would seek out Mattia to learn of this man who had broken her heart.

Could I be the man to mend your heart, Giovanna? he pondered as they took their positions on the dance floor.

CHAPTER 18

Giovanna couldn't stop herself from trembling whenever she danced with Silas. She was starting to feel more at ease with him, more trusting, but still, she was nervous.

"My apologies, Silas," she said quietly as they came together. "I forget the English dance steps, so I may appear unsure of myself."

As the routine of the dance steps separated them, another gentleman took her hand in the move and took the moment to catch her breath. Giovanna smiled at the gentleman, but her thoughts were only on Silas. She could see him with another lady's hand on his, and a wave of envy ran through her veins.

They soon came back together again, and he spoke to her with a softness in his tone. "You do not need to be nervous; your dance steps are faultless."

"I suppose my angst could be for a different reason then," she admitted, though she would not tell him that he was the cause of her trembling hands.

"Has my sister caused you to worry? I would be happy to stay with you throughout the introductions she has mentioned," he offered. "But please do not take that as an insult," he added quickly.

Once again, they were forced apart, and she thought about how cautious he was around her.

He must think that I hate him, she mulled over, observing him whenever she could see him. She liked how he always smiled at his female partners, though it did cause her an irrational envious twitch. *I would like you all to myself, Silas, but I know it could never be for us.*

Her thoughts were a jumbled mix as they came together in the dance, and then they were forced apart again. She thought the dance tedious because it

kept taking her away from him. But she had to perform it well as it was important to convince these people that she was a proper lady.

The duchess always referred to her as Lady Giovanna when she introduced her to others. Usually followed by her padre's title, which seemed to echo some importance in this country. It meant little back home because politics were changing so quickly, but at least no one could take away their land.

"You look deep in your thoughts, Giovanna," Silas's voice came to her as he stood still in front of her.

"I was thinking of my homeland," she admitted, realising that the dance had come to an end.

The music had stopped, and all the ladies and lords bowed and curtsied to one another. Silas then offered his arm to lead her from the dance floor.

"I do understand," he said to her, leaning his head close to speak in her ear. "When I am on my travels, I also become homesick, but when I return home, I'm keen to be back on my travels again."

She could feel his warm breath on her neck and imagined what his kiss would feel like if he was to lean in a little further.

Pushing away such a thought, she berated herself for thinking it, and answered, "I miss Padre more than anything else. I love Mattia like a big brother, but Padre is my source of wisdom. He has put his trust in me to come all this way and is relying on me to make sure our vineyard prospers."

"Then please, I want you to feel that you can ask me for advice anytime," he offered. "That is if you feel unsure over anything," he added, again being careful how he used his words.

"Oh dear, it seems that I am forcing you to speak of business again," she said, looking into his soft, brown eyes. "You can now understand how I never stop worrying."

As he returned her stare, she could see how genuine his concern was.

Please stay with me, she prayed in her mind, his presence gave her more confidence. Giovanna knew that was good at making it look as though she was sure of herself, but both she and her cousin knew that her act was all bravado. Mattia never let on that he could see when she faltered, but it was all becoming such a strain. Having to pretend she was a self-assured woman when she was so nervous inside.

"You are my saviour in so many ways. If not for you, we ladies would most certainly have been injured," she reminded him of the carriage. "As my

gallant saviour, I would like for you to advise me when your sister begins her introductions.”

She noticed how humbled he looked as he replied, “Thank you, Giovanna, for putting your trust in me. I will not let you down, I promise you.”

“Is it me, or are we just getting to know one another, Silas?” she asked, smiling with satisfaction as they made their way toward the duchess.

“It is an honour to get to know you, Giovanna,” he replied, and she thought how confident he appeared as he accompanied her through the crowd. A crowd that made her feel quite nervous because she knew so very few of the guests.

For a brief moment, she felt a flash of inner embarrassment at being so close to him. Tonight, something had changed for them both, and she was feeling much more comfortable in his presence. She would like to have brought up his Lucy and her child but feared it might offend, or worse, annoy him. After all, she had no right to pry into his personal life.

How do I tell a man I would like to get to know him better without seeming too forward? She mulled over, keeping quiet as she pondered how to show him that she liked him. What if he doesn't have any need to get to know me? I am nothing like his Lucy; why should he care about a woman who lives thousands of miles from his home?

Giovanna's befuddled mind caused her to waver in her step, and Silas was quick to take her by the wrist and elbow.

“Are you feeling lightheaded?” he asked. “The ballroom can become a very stuffy place.”

Before she could answer, the duchess arrived with three other ladies that she wanted to introduce.

“Ah, Lady Giovanna, I am pleased to see that my brother is keeping you company,” the duchess pointed out.

She then turned to introduce the married ladies accompanying her. In turn, they each assured her that their husbands would taste her wines. One of them invited her and Silas to dinner, which took her by surprise. Another asked her to send over a sample bottle and she would ensure they placed an order should her husband approve of it.

For the next two hours, the duchess hooked her arm to Giovanna's, leading her around the rooms. They constantly stopped so that she could introduce her to many potential customers. As it progressed, her head was

becoming dizzy. What pleased her most though, was that Silas stayed with them. He was there to pick her up should she falter, and he spoke of her wine as if it was the best he'd ever tasted. His presence encouraged her to speak up when conversing with the gentry.

"I will leave you in my brother's capable hands now, Giovanna," the duchess finally said. "It is time to go and find my husband, who most likely needs rescuing from some drab conversation."

She thanked the duchess, then turned to Silas, "That was exhausting, but I am most thankful for your support."

"It might be a good idea to take in some fresh air," he suggested, holding out his arm to guide her outside. "And we can discuss which invitations you would like to attend, then take out those you would like to avoid."

"I will avoid none because every order is vital," she said as he led her through an open doorway, and onto a large stone veranda. "Oh, the night air feels so very cold in this country," she said with alarm as they stepped outside.

"If I stand a little closer it might help keep you warm," he suggested, and she wondered if he was being suggestive or if it was an innocent remark.

It was time for her to ask him a question that she was desperate to have an answer to. As he moved forward, a thrill shivered through her at how close they were standing. They were not alone on the veranda; others were outside also getting air.

"Silas, can I ask you a very personal question?" she began, hoping that after this night she might understand things better between them.

"I am nothing but an honest man," he said, half smiling as he drank from his tumbler of spirits. "What is it that I can help you with?"

"Are you still in love with your Lucy?" she blurted it out, wanting to say the words speedily because she knew it was not a question he would have expected.

"I... I don't understand," he said, staring back at her, and she could see confusion in his eyes. "Why would you ask such an odd question?"

Giovanna felt a wave of nausea rush into her mouth as her cheeks felt warm and watery. "I am sorry, Silas, it was not for me to ask about your love... I..."

She couldn't stay with him after making such a fool of herself. How could she explain to him that she felt envious of his childhood sweetheart? It would be admitting that she more than liked him, that she was besotted with

him, and she was only just beginning to realise it herself.

“Lucy was special to me... I mean she is—”

“No,” Giovanna said, holding up a finger to stop him from talking. “I do not know why I asked you about her, and I am sorry, I... I must go... I must be alone,” she said and turned to dash away from him.

She took to the stone steps that led down into the garden, where various candle lamps dimly lit up a small pathway.

What a fool I have made of myself, she convinced herself, speeding up her walking to get away from the house. I should not have shown my weakness. Now he will not think of me as a strong woman because I act like the weaker sex. I am the weaker sex. I wish I could go home...

CHAPTER 19

It took a moment for Silas to get over the shock of Giovanna asking him if he still loved Lucy. He recalled that when he'd replied to her question, her beautiful face had turned a sickly alabaster shade. For a moment he'd suspected she might faint, but instead, she turned and fled away from him. By the time he'd recovered, she was nowhere to be seen. Looking out over the garden, he thought he spotted her heading into a dark area of the garden.

It would have been better had she fled back inside the house, but Giovanna being the person she was, had sought to be alone. He had to find her, he couldn't bear the thought of her being miserable and upset because of something he'd said.

Pushing his way through the crowded outside area, he made his way in the direction that he'd seen Giovanna. Why had she asked if he loved Lucy? He'd spent the last few weeks thinking she had no interest in him or his life, yet she asked such a personal question.

Does it mean that she likes me?

Dashing down the same stone steps that Giovanna had taken only moments before him, he could make out her silhouette ahead. He wouldn't be much behind her if he hurried, and should find her before she lost herself. The woodlands that started on the grounds of Farafox Manor were extensive. Should she enter, she could soon find herself going around in circles. Plus, it was a fox haven, hence the name, and the shrieking noises they made might startle her.

It wasn't easy to run over the long-wet grass of the lawn, but he was glad he'd decided to wear boots with his outfit. Giovanna, on the other hand, would only have dancing pumps on her feet.

“Giovanna!” he called out her name, unsure if that might scare her or bring her to her senses. “Please, where are you?” he tried.

Where the blazes have you got yourself? he wondered, glancing here and there in the hope of catching another glimpse of her.

Just as he was thinking that he’d never find her, he spotted a shape making its way back to the house. Moving closer, it relieved him to see that she had turned around, realising the error of running in the wrong direction. Allowing her to return on her own, he kept his distance and observed her movements. She arrived back at the house, and he followed on from behind, still keeping a gap between them because he didn’t want her running off again.

He half thought she might seek her cousin, but instead, she headed toward the drawing room and passed through a set of open French doors. As she didn’t turn around to come back into the drawing room, he too exited the doors, only to find himself standing on a large balcony. Glancing around, as there were other people outside too, he spotted her looking over the balcony railing in the corner.

Approaching her, he knew he needed to tread carefully because he was sure it was him who she’d been running from. He had no idea why, but he was determined to find out.

“Are you unwell, Giovanna?” he asked as he arrived by her side. “I was concerned when you ran away from me.”

It surprised him how pale she was as she looked back at him. He decided that he would stay with her a while longer.

“Shall I go and seek out Mattia for you?” he asked, concerned that she might feel uncomfortable with him.

“No, Silas, I want to be with you, as it happens,” she answered, surprising him with such a revelation. “You see, I asked about Lucy because I saw you with her. I also noticed that she is with child. At first, I thought her child might be yours, but your sister explained the situation to me.”

Silas nodded, surprised that Giovanna had asked about him. She had shown little interest in him before, in fact, he thought she perceived him as annoying. Not that he ever went out of his way to irritate her, it seemed that he managed to do it without even trying.

“It must have been a terrible blow to you,” Giovanna stated.

Now that he could see her better, he was sure that she had been weeping.

“I was not surprised that she’d married another,” Silas explained, though

he didn't understand why Giovanna would be interested. "Though it did surprise me when I bumped into her in Falmouth and saw that she was with child. No one had cared to tell me that part, though I don't know why it should bother me."

"Is it because you love her still?" Giovanna asked, and he'd noticed that she wouldn't look his way, instead, she continued to look out over the garden.

"I will always have a place in my heart for Lucy, but I knew we would never marry, if that is what you mean?" Silas replied.

"Did she miss you whenever you went away?" Giovanna was asking some odd questions and Silas was flummoxed, wondering why.

"I suppose so," was all he could answer because he'd never asked her.

"Did you not miss Lucy when you travelled?" Giovanna's questions continued.

"No... I mean...we had much fun when I returned, but we both knew..." Silas paused, so confused at Giovanna's questions. "Why do you wish to know about Lucy?"

"I too have had my heart broken," Giovanna said, closing her eyes and rubbing at her face with a gloved hand. "I was curious to know whether she, or you, suffered such a feeling."

"No, I did not break Lucy's heart and nor did she mine. She's an old flame, but we never committed to one another in any way. Of course, I miss her, but as it happens, she's very happy now. Lucy and her husband are very much in love with each other. That makes her a part of my past, not the future," he said, pausing to try and move closer to Giovanna's side. He could see her trembling. "Are you cold? Please, allow me to take you indoors."

"I want to stay out here with you Silas, if you do not mind," she said. "Are you afraid that people will talk about us if we are seen together?"

"Not in the least, and I'm sorry to hear that someone broke your heart, Giovanna," he said, wondering if it would be right for him to ask her some questions now.

"Are you, Silas?" she asked, turning to look at him and he noticed she looked a little better. "I mean, are you sure that you did not break Lucy's heart, forcing her into another man's arms?"

"I most certainly did not, Lucy chose to go a different way to me, that was all," he answered.

"May I tell you something, Silas?" Giovanna teased.

“Please do, if it will make you feel happier,” he said, pleased to see the sickly pale colouring had now left her face.

“At first, I was wary of you. I did not wish you to think that you could under-price my goods because I am a woman,” she told him. “Then I realised that the duke was the one who would decide the arrangement, and I like your sister and her husband, they are kind.”

“Ah, but you do not like me then because you thought I wanted to give you a bad deal?” he asked.

“Who said I did not like you?” she asked, giving him a half smile as she said it. “Very well, for a while, I did not like you because I thought that you had broken Lucy’s heart. Enjoying her company when it suited you and then leaving her behind every time you travelled. I do not care for men who treat women so thoughtlessly.”

“I treated Lucy with nothing but kindness and respect, I assure you,” he said in defence. “She’s a lifelong friend of mine.”

“I know that now because I have learned the truth of it,” Giovanna remarked.

“It surprises me that you would take such an interest in my life,” Silas dared to suggest, knowing it was risky to hint at such a thing.

“You are my business partner, and I wanted to know more about who I was visiting, and trusting with my wines,” she admitted.

“Tell me, Giovanna, about the man who hurt you so badly,” he asked, again knowing it was a huge leap to be asking about her personal life.

“I was to marry a neighbouring family’s son, and I believed that he loved me,” she began, showing no qualms over divulging her story. “Rodriguez was very charming, but what I did not know was that he was more interested in merging Padre’s land with his family’s. When I learned of this, I confronted him, and he told me that he would learn to love me in time.”

With her last few words, he noticed her voice changing as she no doubt found it difficult to convey her love story.

“Do you still believe that you loved him?” Silas asked, and instantly he regretted it because it was obvious that she did.

“I thought that it was love, but now I am not so sure,” she admitted.

Silas was now by her side and inhaled a deep, delightful scent of oranges. He’d noticed, on the odd occasion that he’d managed to get closer to her, that she always smelled of fruit. Sometimes lemons, other times berries, but always pleasing.

“I’m relieved to see you more cheered,” he said. “Though it saddens me to know that you’ve been hurt by this man. Know that not all men behave in such a dishonourable way.”

“I do know, although it has taken me a long time to learn this,” she said, looking him in the eye as she turned to face him. “For a while I felt a kind of anger with you, believing that you might have broken a lady’s heart too. But I am pleased to admit that I was wrong.”

“Oh, and what do you believe of me now?” he asked, raising a brow at her, and sharing a smile too.

“I now believe that you are a kind, English gentleman,” she said, almost with a giggle. “And if you would do your duty, and ask me for a second dance, I will accept.”

“Nothing would delight me more, than enjoying another dance with you,” he said, taking a small bow and holding out his arm for her to take.

He knew that he’d be willing to dance with the lovely Giovanna a third or even a fourth time if she accepted. Gossip would soon be ripe, but that never bothered him. Though he should explain the rules of dancing with the same gentleman more than twice, to Giovanna. He felt as if he had only just gained her trust, and he didn’t want to lose it again.

CHAPTER 20

Silas woke up feeling reasonably good the next morning but still a little sleepy from a dream.

It had been a rather odd dream, *whereas he'd danced with Giovanna all night long at a ball. Because he'd danced with her more than twice, her father had demanded that he marry her. Instead of being in a panic at the thought, he was overjoyed.*

If anything, he'd awoken with a bit of disappointment that it was only a dream.

He recalled how he'd danced with Giovanna twice at last night's ball, so it shouldn't set off any wagging tongues. They'd spent the rest of the evening together, and she hadn't accepted any more dances, saying that she had hurt her ankle in the garden. Her excuse had delighted him because he was sure she wanted to dance with no one but him.

Later today, he was to collect her from the cottage and take her to three of the invitations she'd received at the ball. It felt good that she was letting him into her world at last, when all she'd done so far was push him away. Once he'd readied himself, he practically skipped down the stairway, whistling a merry tune.

"Someone is very dapper today, considering how late we all went to our beds," the duke said as he opened his bed chamber door to see who was whistling.

"I am taking Giovanna around some of the estates this day, Oscar, so I need to look my best," Silas called up to the duke as he paused on the stairway.

"There will not be any breakfast ready yet," the duke informed him. "I

ordered them to serve it late because of the ball we all attended. And stop that confounded whistling, I have a headache.”

“Then you shouldn’t drink so much wine, my friend,” Silas answered and began to hum instead, continuing on his way down the stairway.

He heard the duke slam his bedroom door shut and Silas smiled to himself. He knew that Oscar hated balls, so he tended to drink too much whisky to get through them.

“Is that you, Uncle Silas?” his nephew called down, his head peeking through the upstairs balustrade.

“It is I, little Lord Owen, and mind you don’t get your head stuck in those bars,” he called back, looking up at the boy.

“Can you ask Nanny to bring my favourite jam for breakfast?” Lord Owen called down. “She’s gone to the kitchen for our breakfast. We are to eat in the classroom today because Pappa is still sleeping.”

“Be careful up there,” Silas said, chuckling. “Your Pappa is awake and he’s like a grumpy bear. Off you go before he opens his door again. I will go talk to Nanny.”

“You are the best uncle in all the world, Uncle Silas,” Lord Owen said, laughing, and then ran off before his father caught him.

Silas was heading down to the kitchen anyway, to get himself an earlier breakfast, so he followed the servant’s stairway. The kitchen felt very strange these days, without his mother or his sister cooking there anymore. Always the kitchen had been a busy hub, and that part hadn’t changed.

“Ah, Nanny,” he called out, spotting her setting up the trays for the children, along with one of the kitchen maids. “Lord Owen asked me to tell you to get his favourite jam.”

“As if I would forget,” the old Nanny chuckled.

Returning her smile, he recalled the Nanny and governess who worked at the Welwick Hall when he, Vera, and Oscar were children. He still had the globe that the governess had gifted to him when she’d left the Hall to get married. She must have known he’d be a wanderer. They were fond memories and he hoped that his niece and nephew would have equally as good memories of their childhood at Welwick Hall.

He was about to ask one of the kitchen maids to make him up a breakfast tray when he spotted Jeffrey, delivering meat from his butchery. Not one to ignore his friends, Silas headed over to the outer cold room, where Jeffrey was placing the meat on a table.

“And how does your wife fair on this fine morning, Jeffrey?” Silas asked, lending a wide smile to his old friend.

It surprised Silas when Jeffrey didn't return his friendly smile, he was known to be such a jolly fellow.

“Erm... Silas... I erm...” Jeffrey stuttered, looking away from him.

“Is Lucy well?” Silas asked again, a knot tightening in his stomach as he started to think the worst. “She hasn't had the child yet, has she? He added. “Oh Lord, I hope nothing is amiss,” he continued, taking a fit of panic in his head.

Lucy was still important to him, and he would pay for a doctor if she needed one.

“No...no, she be well, thank ye kindly, sir,” Jeffrey said, turning to face Silas. “It be more I wasn't to know how you would be with me, after I taken...well...you know.”

“Oh, that!” Silas replied, realising what was bothering Jeffrey. “If she was going to marry anyone, you are a good man for her to have chosen, Jeffrey. I am pleased to see that you make her so happy.”

“Yes,” Jeffrey nodded. “She be happy. In fact, I think she be nesting today,” he added with a twinkle of pride in his plain brown eyes. Silas could see that the man was more relaxed, now that he was free to talk about Lucy as his wife. “I was practically thrown outta the 'ouse this morning. She said she wanted to clean it from top to bottom.”

“Ahhh...so the date must be imminent then?” Silas asked.

“Aye, I'm to be a father soon,” Jeffrey grinned with pride. “You must know though, Lord Silas, I see her looking miserable after you'd gone away you see. So, I invite her to a barn dance, and then we find that we get on real good.”

“Yes, Lucy always liked to dance. You take good care of that little family of yours,” Silas said, turning to walk away and leave the man to his work. “You're a good man, Jeffrey, you'll do just fine. And I am not a lord, I am still only Silas.”

“Very well then, Mr Silas,” the man said and turned to get on with his deliveries.

Jeffrey was a large man, though he needed to be with all the heavy lifting and carrying of large meat carcasses he lugged around. But it was not a trade Silas could favour. His aprons were always bloodied, though he appeared much cleaner than he used to look. Perhaps Lucy was making him change his

work clothes daily, which must be a good thing for his customers.

Shuddering at the very thought of what the man had to endure, Silas approached a kitchen maid and requested a tray of breakfast.

“I’ll take it in the smaller study room if you please,” he added. There, he would sort out some figures for Giovanna, should she wish to trade with the families she was meeting today.

At the top of the servants’ stairs, he bumped into Oscar again, only this time the duke was dressed.

“Finally arisen, have you?” Silas said in jest.

“You still here? This house is far too noisy on a morning,” the duke complained. “A man cannot sleep off the effects of too much liquor in peace these days. Is breakfast to be served yet?”

“I am taking mine in the smaller study,” Silas explained. “Didn’t think you would be up for another hour or so.”

“Ah yes, you’re spending time with the lovely Giovanna today are you not?” the duke recalled. “Inform all those potential customers of hers, that the Duke of Cornwall highly recommends Italian wines because they are far superior to any other. Can’t even get hold of German wine anymore, and I refuse to buy the French stuff out of principle. As for the Spanish, well...I am not keen on that stuff at all.”

“Yes, I am not surprised,” Silas retorted. “It’s the plump grapes they grow in Italy. They make a big difference. Although it’s almost time for Giovanna and her cousin to leave us, and it saddens me if I’m honest.”

“Then marry the woman and be done with it,” the duke called out, leaving Silas to walk towards the dining room. “Mind you, that would mean you living in Italy, so do not tell the Duchess I suggested such a thing, will you?”

Silas continued his route to the smaller study, situated near the library. His thoughts meandered over what would happen if he were to marry a woman who did not live in England. Certainly, Giovanna would not leave Vignette Romano, that much he was sure of. Her home was everything to her. Besides, he doubted that such an Italian beauty would marry anyone but another Italian. So that would most likely put him at the bottom of any potential suitors.

Despite his reservations over how such a union might work, he found himself falling deeper for her. It seemed the more he got to know her, which had happened at the ball, the more he was wooed by her charms. She was clever, witty, and even a little outspoken when she relaxed, but in the most

adorable way. He assumed it was because she was surrounded by her male relatives back in her homeland. She thought nothing of butting into a conversation between men, should she overhear something she disagreed on.

Then again, she was as graceful as any English lady he knew. He might not have heard her sing, or play any instruments, but if her dancing was anything to go by, then he was confident of her skills. Not that it mattered because he was no lord anyway.

Sitting at the study desk, he wrote down the names and addresses of the three gentry homes they were to visit this day. There were more on the list of invitations, but three was enough in any one day. He hoped to get her around them all before she left to return to Italy.

And there his thoughts froze; *what will I do when she leaves my life?*

Sitting back in the chair, at the large mahogany desk, he pondered on his life without Giovanna in it, and he didn't like the idea at all. She'd come into his world, and he'd been enamoured with her beauty and grace ever since the night of the duke's ball. They'd had their ups and downs, but now all seemed good between them, and he wanted it to stay that way.

A knock came at the door and the maid walked in with his breakfast tray. His appetite had diminished a little, but he still ate his food because his stomach growled at him.

With the figures now down on paper, and breakfast finished, he got up to leave the house and head toward the stable. Today he was taking a carriage with him. The one that Mattia enjoyed driving, and so it would mean that Silas could sit with Giovanna in the carriage.

Yes, he'd take one day at a time, and enjoy the company of Giovanna while he could. Pushing his worst fears to the back of his mind, he hummed a merry tune. Before leaving the house, he meandered towards the dining room, where he knew his sister would be taking breakfast by now. Before he left, he had a special task to do, and it would require the assistance of a lady.

CHAPTER 21

Pulling up outside the cottage was a familiar-looking carriage. Giovanna recognised it and called over to Mattia, who was sitting reading a local news sheet.

“He’s here, Mattia,” she said, trying to hide the over-excitement in her voice. “He’s brought the carriage that you like to drive, does that not please you?” When she didn’t get an answer from her cousin, she turned around to tut at him. “Put down that reading matter and let us get ready to leave, *sbrigati*,” she added, warning him to *hurry along*.

“What? *Santo cielo!*” he complained. “We are to go straight away?” he asked, putting his feet into his boots.

A knock came at the door and Giovanna dashed to open it, only to look upon Silas with surprise on her face. In his arms, he held a huge bunch of handpicked flowers, and on his face, he wore a cheeky grin, so very perfect.

“Stunning flowers for a beautiful maiden,” Silas said, taking a mock bow. “Though I must admit I did not pick them myself. I wanted only the best, so I commandeered the help of my sister.”

“Well, the Duchess, she has good taste. They smell divine and I love them, thank you, Silas,” Giovanna sang out, taking them from him and leaning in to take a smell of the delightful scent. “First, I must put them in water, and then we can leave. Are you ready yet, Mattia?”

Giovanna disappeared out of the room to see to her flowers, while Mattia walked over to the open doorway where Silas waited.

“I am to drive today, I hope?” Mattia asked as they waited outdoors together for Giovanna.

“I do hope so. I am happy to keep your cousin entertained,” he said,

smiling at Mattia in a hopeful way.

“But of course,” Mattia smiled back knowingly. “I hear that you two danced together at least twice at the ball,” he said, holding up two fingers. “And spent the entire evening in each other’s company. My cousin was exhausted when we arrived home. You must have done a lot of talking.”

“I can hear my name being mentioned through that doorway!” Giovanna called from elsewhere. “Ignore my cousin, Silas, I had a wonderful time,” she added, entering the room with the colourful display of flowers in a cut glass vase.

“Me too, Giovanna, and yes, Mattia, it seems that we had much to talk about,” Silas nodded, unable to stop smiling. “I do believe that at long last, your cousin sees what a wonderful English gentleman I am.”

“Oh, hush you two,” Giovanna scolded, but with a smile. “Come, we have much to do this day,” she continued to chatter as she exited the open doorway.

Mattia first went over to the horses and patted their noses, talking to them with a soft voice. “I like to know which horses you have chosen for me,” he explained to Silas, continuing to whisper in the horse’s ears. “Once we have introduced ourselves to one another, I guarantee that the ride will be a smooth one.”

“Good to know,” Silas laughed, turning to watch Giovanna who was approaching the carriage. “Let me assist you up the step,” he said, taking her arm.

She sat herself on the single carriage seat, watching the two men sort out directions.

“Here, Mattia,” Silas called over to Mattia before he climbed up onto the driver’s seat. “I have drawn up some maps of each of the venues that we are to attend. We will luncheon at Carnaby Manor first, with the Dowager Countess, who I’m confident will be placing an order. That reminds me, Giovanna,” he said turning to look up at her in the open carriage. “I have drawn up some papers so that all you need to do is enter the numbers if you wish. Then I will then send them to our family solicitor for approval, to speed things up for you.”

“You have thought of everything,” she replied, feeling a sense of contentment over how much he was helping them.

“Our second visit is to Robin House. It’s a small estate owned by Lord Patterson, a local baron. My sister thought he would be a useful connection

for you because he owns many inns. I am led to believe also..." Silas turned back to Giovanna to finish his sentence, "that his order may be a large one."

"What would I do without your family," Giovanna stated as she clapped her hands together. She was looking forward to spending the entire day with Silas.

Silas passed the pieces of paper to Mattia and continued speaking as he climbed into the carriage to sit next to Giovanna.

"We will end our day in the smaller town of Trentwood, where Mr Kirby, a well-established nutmeg merchant, resides. There, we will take afternoon tea with him and his wife. They are very keen to do business with you because they like to impress the Duke."

Mattia shook the reins to set the horses going, causing Silas to shift on the seat and brush his shoulder against Giovanna's. His touch pleased her, and it was even better when he didn't move it.

He leaned in to speak with her, "Then, we will return to Welwick Hall where my sister expects us all for dinner this evening. Do you approve of the plan, Giovanna?" he asked, handing her the contracts he'd made up.

Giovanna made it look as if she was reading through the contracts. Though she couldn't concentrate on the words, not with Silas's arm touching hers. Even through their clothing, she could feel the contours of his well-developed biceps. She hoped he'd never move, feeling most content to be so close to him.

"I am not going to be able to change for dinner," she objected, hoping to prompt a conversation between them.

"Don't worry about that, you look lovely anyway," Silas said. "My sister knows we are having a busy day of it."

"You know, Silas, I have some sadness in my heart," she dared to admit to him. "Our time in your country is coming to an end."

"Yes, I have been giving that some thought too," Silas said, keeping his arm pressed against hers.

"At least we ended up with a good business relationship between us," she pointed out.

What she didn't dare to say was that she wished they had time to develop their friendship into a romance. For the first time in many years, she wished she had a mother to advise her on what to do. Whilst she was keen to return home, Giovanna wasn't looking forward to leaving this man behind, never to see him again.

“Do you recall how we first met? You were not sure who I was,” he said. “You and Mattia were in the games room at the ball,” he added.

“Yes,” she laughed. “It was your voice I first recognised. Although I had not seen you before, I had heard your English voice, and it stuck in my mind.”

“And you tried to force me to play cards, even though I dislike playing,” he chided.

“I can apologise if you like,” she intimated.

“A bit late now as it won’t change anything, will it?” he laughed, and she soon followed his deep chuckle with her own laughter.

“I wish I had met you in Italy,” Silas mumbled. “I am glad that I met with your father as he is a good man. But I was tied up with another meeting.”

“My padre is the best,” she stressed. “The best padre and the best man in the whole of Italy.”

“That’s a tall order for him to live up to,” Silas replied.

They continued to chat on and on, mostly about nothing in particular. But time passed by quickly and soon they arrived at Carnaby Manor. The Dowager, Lady Granham was most pleasant as she greeted them. They took tea out in the garden, while her little dogs ran around yapping at everything that moved. Giovanna thought them amusing. She had many dogs back home but none as small as these.

It appeared there was never to be any doubts on Lady Granham’s part. The dowager explained that she was always going to order a few crates of their Italian wines. She adored Italy, having wintered there many times in the past with her late husband.

After leaving Carnaby Manor, Mattia drove them to the baron’s estate. He had six daughters and the whole family was present for the meeting. Each of the daughters tried her samples and everyone was delighted with how splendid it tasted. Their father immediately placed an order. The daughters fussed over Silas and Mattia, and her cousin enjoyed every moment of it.

Giovanna felt that familiar slither of envy at seeing Silas laugh with the other ladies. But she played her role well, speaking with the baron and his wife. They left Lord Patterson and his wife after he’d signed up for a far larger order than he needed.

“Let the Duke know that I am most thankful for his introduction to such refined Italian wines,” Lord Patterson went out of his way to say to Silas. “His recommendations are highly commendable.”

As Mattia pulled the carriage away to take them to their last destination, Silas remarked to Giovanna, “See how it pays to have a sister married to a duke.”

“I am lucky that I have you, Silas, to assist me with so many new trading contacts,” Giovanna said. “Though I will thank the Duke and Duchess for their help too. Without your family, I do not believe things would have been so successful.”

Silas turned and took Giovanna’s gloved hand, and bringing it up to his lips, he kissed her knuckles.

“You give us too much credit, Giovanna,” he said, softly, looking into her eyes and causing her heart to judder. “Your beauty and charm have played a significant part in this too, so do not give all the praise to others.”

Giovanna couldn’t move her hand away, she wanted Silas to keep hold of it, and continue staring at her with his deep, dark eyes. A strand of dark, wavy hair escaped his neat haircut, and she reached out to take it in her fingers. They held one another’s gaze, he with one of her hands in his, and she with her other hand close to his face. Unable to resist, she stroked his firm cheek, admiring his square jaw and dark red lips.

What would a kiss from those lips be like? She wondered, wishing she had the courage to lean in and steal one.

With his other hand, he stroked her soft cheek, and the couple were captured in a brief moment of secret desire. It was Silas who pulled away, being the gentleman that he was. Giovanna was frozen to the spot, wishing so hard that he had kissed her because she knew that she could not have resisted.

As the carriage drove through the gates of Welwick Hall, Giovanna was aware that she had to pull herself together. But when she glanced at the man who was stealing her heart, he smiled back at her. Had he wanted to kiss her too?

I would not have resisted, my love, she thought, still wishing that he’d pressed his lips upon hers, and shared that very first kiss.

CHAPTER 22

They arrived back at Welwick Hall in time for dinner, after a long day of negotiating contracts. With no time to clean up, everyone headed straight for the dining room. There, Silas was secretly pleased to find himself seated opposite Giovanna.

“I trust your day has been fruitful?” the duchess asked, glancing over at Giovanna.

“Indeed, it has, Duchess. Thanks to Silas, all the contracts are signed and ready for the solicitors to draw them up,” Giovanna said, sending Silas a radiant smile. “He has saved me so much paperwork and time.”

“It is so typical of my cousin,” Mattia joined in, looking over at his smiling cousin. “She came to gain one agreement of trade, and instead go home with many.”

“Here, here to that,” Silas said, raising his glass in a toast, “Though I do believe there are more yet to come once word gets around.”

There was general consensus around the table as everyone followed Silas’ gesture, raising their glasses to Giovanna’s success.

“I doubt you will need to go through the tiresome act of visiting anyone else,” the Duchess said to Giovanna. “The first three that I chose for you, are the kind of people to spread the word. It would not surprise me if you were inundated with letters containing orders over the next few days. The gentry are terrible gossips, but on this occasion, it is a good thing.”

Silas noticed Giovanna’s face had turned to a look of gloom, “Are you not happy with more orders, Giovanna?” he asked.

“Yes...yes...of course, but it will mean our task here is done,” Giovanna stated, her eyes looking over the table only at him. “And I need to return soon

as there will be much to do to fulfil the orders.”

“You are right, Cousin,” Mattia called out, though he was much cheerier over Giovanna’s statement. “We must get planting more vines, bottling the wines, and boxing everything up ready for exportation. This will be great news to take home.”

The general cheer around the table was shared by all, but Silas could see that Giovanna was hesitant to join in. Although her cherry lips were smiling, he could see sadness reflecting in her dark eyes. Now and then she looked over at him, and every time he gave her a meaningful smile to reassure her. It pleased him that she no longer appeared embarrassed at their eyes meeting. If anything, he felt that his comforting smile helped to bolster her fading confidence.

He would try to speak with her later and see if he could discover why she did not share the cheer over her success. Something was bothering her, and at a time when she should be celebrating.

While Silas had a good appetite after such a long day, he couldn’t help but notice that Giovanna only picked at her food.

What is it that weighs so heavily on your shoulders? He pondered, but kept the thought to himself, not wishing to break the general cheer around the table.

As dinner came to an end, his sister led them through to the larger parlour room, allowing space for the children to run around. She was never one to insist her children stay quiet. This was a happy home, where the children were free to share their natural energy and curiosity.

It came as no surprise to Silas, when his young niece came tugging at his arm, “Play horses with us, Uncle Silas, please. Father can be Owen’s horse and you will be mine,” Lady Livy pleaded.

It was a game they’d played many times over. Silas thought nothing of it as he scabbled on all fours, while his little niece climbed up onto his back.

“Let us commence the battle?” the duke called out, his son on his back. “There can be only one winner, and that will be us, will it not, Owen, my son?”

The children screamed out in delight at their father’s challenge, readying to prepare for rough play.

“Come on then Uncle Silas, let us beat our enemy!” Lady Livvy called out, waving her wooden sword in the air.

Silas knew it had to be a strange sight for Giovanna to see, two grown

men on all fours, while the children upon their backs had a faux battle with wooden swords. But he felt no embarrassment; this was his family and the children's happiness was everything to him.

For the next fifteen minutes, they battled to see who could be thrown to the floor first. The children clung on with delight, totally engrossed in their noisy play. But it was with great relief when the duchess clapped her hands together, calling out that it was time for the children to go to bed.

As the children climbed from their sturdy steeds, Silas and the duke collapsed to the floor. There they lay on their backs, both panting to catch their breath.

"Who won, Father?" Lord Owen called out. "I am sure it was me."

"No, it was me," his sister insisted.

"How about we call it a draw," the duchess suggested. "Now follow Nanny and off to your beds."

Silas was pleased when he sat up before the duke. "If I still have more energy left than you, Oscar, I do believe that means I won," he teased.

Though it pleased him, even more, to see Giovanna laughing at their antics.

"If only we had another child so I could have joined in," Mattia said, laughing too. "It makes me miss all my nieces and nephews back home."

"Well, you can take my place next time," the duke offered, standing up, only to collapse in a chair.

"Silas went over to the balcony door and opened it, allowing the cool air to whisper over his perspiring skin.

It felt good, cooling the sweat from his brow. "That game gets harder every time we play it, Oscar. Are we getting too old for it?"

"Speak for yourself, old man," the duke retorted as his duchess came to sit by his side, fanning his face to cool him down.

Silas was standing looking through the open French doors. He hadn't noticed that Giovanna had got up from her seat and approached him. She sat on the large pianoforte stool, situated by the side of the balcony doors, and he smiled down at her.

"You are very good with children," she said, shyly, smiling back at him as she turned to glance at the pianoforte lid.

"Hahaha...maybe not for much longer, My little niece has pulled a muscle in my back, I am sure of it," he complained in jest, approaching the pianoforte. "Do you like to play this instrument?"

Giovanna nodded her answer, and Silas went to lift the lid. Even more daring, he also took the seat by her side, on the extra wide stool, their legs touching as he shuffled onto the seat.

“Shall we?” he asked, his fingers dancing along the keys to play a tune. He’d chosen one he was certain she would know because it was an Italian folk song.

While his fingers played, he turned to look at her and sunk into the depths of her dark, wide eyes. As he’d hoped, she moved her hands to join in, and they each played a part in the harmony on the pianoforte. Surprising her further, he began to sing the folk song in her language, and she raised her brows at him in disbelief.

“Is there nothing that you cannot do?” she asked.

“Well... I can sing the words, but I am afraid that I do not have a clue what they mean,” he chuckled.

“It is about two lovers,” Giovanna whispered. “They live in rival families and in the song they are wanting to elope.”

“Ahhh... I can only hope then, that it doesn’t have a tragic ending, like all the Shakespeare plays seem to have,” Silas said, continuing to sing.

It gladdened his heart when she began to sing the song too. Soon, they were singing in harmony, staring into one another’s eyes. As the song ended, the rest of the room clapped out loudly.

“Bravo!” Mattia called out, performing a standing ovation. “That was very impressive, my friend,” he said, holding his hand on his heart as his eyes watered up.

“It most certainly was, Silas,” the duchess agreed, joining in the applause. “You are always surprising me, and every time it reminds me why I love you so much.”

“Well...if you were to ask Giovanna, I guarantee I will have muddled up my words. Though she will be too kind to say so. Thank you for joining me and ignoring my errors,” he said to Giovanna, standing up to hold out his hand for her to take as she too stood up and took a curtsy.

“Is that true, Giovanna?” the duke asked as the clapping died down. “Did he make a total mess of it?”

She put her forefinger and thumb together in jest, “Only a little,” she laughed. “But his voice is beautiful.”

“As is yours,” Silas said, their eyes still transfixed together as they each bowed their heads to one another.

The entertainment continued as Giovanna and the duchess took turns playing and singing on the pianoforte. They played popular tunes so that all could join in, and the rest of the evening was filled with merriment.

Let us finish the day with a brandy, or a sherry if the ladies prefer,” the duke suggested, going to pour the drinks himself from the drink’s cabinet.

Silas had seated himself by Giovanna’s side, wanting to continue his enjoyment of being close to her. Though he was careful not to embarrass her in any way.

The duke approached them with a silver tray which was full of tumblers of brandy, and tulip-shaped glasses of sherry.

“Pick up your glasses to toast a great evening, spent in excellent company,” he said as everyone cheered. “And to finish off this pleasant night, I would like to invite you all to the theatre, to watch a performance of ‘Twelfth Night’.”

Everyone cheered, and so it was agreed that they would all attend. Towards the end of the night, Silas arranged for a carriage to take Giovanna and Mattia home. He also insisted on accompanying them all the way to their cottage. Secretly, he wanted to spend the last few moments of the night in the company of the beautiful Italian woman he had fallen in love with.

As the carriage drove him back to Welwick Hall alone, it gave him time to reflect on what a good night he’d had with Giovanna by his side.

CHAPTER 23

Giovanna waited expectantly, knowing that Silas would arrive any moment to take her and Mattia to the theatre in Falmouth. Of course, she was looking forward to the play, but more so to seeing Silas again. She had an inkling that Mattia knew it too, but she was too excited to calm herself and hide it from him.

“Staring through the window will not make him come any quicker,” her cousin teased.

And then she heard the wheels of a large carriage pulling up.

“Oh, look, Mattia, it is a grand carriage with four horses,” she declared, heading for the door.

As she opened the door, Silas was about to knock and almost caught her face with his hand.

With a smile, he said nothing at her promptness. Instead, he held out his arm to lead her to the carriage that awaited them.

“Tell me, Giovanna,” Silas began as they all took their seats in the carriage. “Do you attend the theatre much when you are home?”

Mattia laughed, nudging his cousin who had seated herself next to him. “We are lucky if we get to the local town when the travelling theatre comes, but that is about it,” Mattia explained.

“The carriage is very grand, Silas,” Giovanna said, brushing off her cousin’s remark.

“Nothing to do with me,” Silas replied, looking over at Giovanna who was seated opposite him. “My sister insisted on taking the best carriages to the theatre. She says that people expect it of them, even though, like me, she’d rather take a smaller one.”

“Being a duke must mean he has huge responsibilities,” Giovanna said, enjoying the flow of conversation with Silas.

Her heart had been fluttering in her chest all night long, and with the arrival of Silas, she was sure that it thudded even louder.

“As a representative of the Royal family, he’s forced to keep up appearances when out in public, I suppose,” Silas replied, not thinking much of it. “You will find the show very different to street theatre. Though I too have enjoyed street theatre on my travels”

“The event will be a good ending to our time in your country, do you not agree?” Mattia remarked, his words causing a dull ache in Giovanna’s tummy.

She did miss her padre, but how she wished she could think up an excuse to stay longer. Giovanna was sure that she wasn’t yet ready to leave because it would mean never seeing Silas again. Should she tell him how she felt? But that brought with it so many other problems. Did he feel the same way about her? Even if he did, she could never leave her home, ever. Most likely he would not leave his home either.

As the same old thoughts swirled around in her mind, she spoke less and less, and soon the conversation was between Mattia and Silas only.

I must not think about it this evening, she told herself, determined not to spoil the event.

Giovanna tried to think of other things and reminded herself how glad she was that she’d sent word to Miss Sarah yesterday. The dressmaker had rushed a dress from the rack, back to her, fit for attending the theatre. It was a simple design in a deep mauve, with long, white lace sleeves, and a matching lace hemline. To match it was a beautiful shawl, that shimmered from the gold thread.

Miss Sarah knew how to choose a dress for every occasion, and she knew to trust her. Not only that, but she’d also sent the dress to her on the same day, with a rider. Giovanna had sent a letter of thanks to Miss Sarah, for her help once again, along with a few sample bottles of Italian ruby wine that she still had left.

The carriage pulled up outside the theatre. Many heads turned their way to stare at them because they’d arrived in such grandeur.

As Giovanna stood next to the carriage, Silas again offered her his arm, and she took it willingly. He led her into the beautiful building that boasted golds and reds in its exquisite décor. Walking together, he kept leaning in

close to chat quietly in her ear.

“My sister forced me to enact many Shakespeare roles when we were children,” he admitted with a fond smile as if the memory was a good one.

“I very much like the story of Romeo and Juliet, but I wish it had a happier ending,” Giovanna replied. “Were you ever Romeo?”

“Goodness no, that would have been Oscar’s role,” Silas chuckled. “She was very bossy and gave me roles that were not so important because I would complain so much.”

“Hahaha...you did not like Shakespeare?” she asked, enjoying their private conversation, in their own little world.

Her mind had cut out the activities around her as she listened only to Silas’ deep tenor voice. His warm breath tickled her skin teasingly because she knew that his lips were so close to her cheek.

“It surprises me how different in character you both are when you look so alike,” Giovanna said.

“Ah...but my sister has got so much fatter than me, do you not agree?” Silas said loudly, knowing that the duchess was close to his side.

Giovanna knew that he teased the duchess, and she watched on as Lady Vera reacted to her brother’s comment. They enjoyed light banter and laughter, and Giovanna was so happy to be a part of it.

She’d never been one to crave attention, but everyone there treated them as if they were royalty too. Silas had even told her that they would be seated in a private box, to give the duke some privacy. Otherwise, the gentry would bother him throughout the show, and that would ruin the whole experience.

Although Italy was famous for its theatre and operas, her family lived far from any of the cities so they knew little of such entertainment. Even though her padre was a Conte, it did not mean much in a country that was so fragmented, following the Napoleonic wars. She was aware that her people were fighting for unification, but it involved those who lived in the cities, not those who toiled the land. Some even said that soon there would be civil war in her homeland, but her family had little to do with the politics of others.

For now, she would enjoy the hospitality of her hosts, and continue to improve things for her own family. She believed that she could do that with the help of her padre and her cousins, but now she was wondering if she needed the solid foundation of a husband too.

Am I wishing I could marry you? She questioned herself as she watched Silas laughing with his family. *But you would want me to live in England and*

I could never do that.

All the time her mind considered this and that. Such thoughts still tumbled around in her head, over how she felt for Silas. The only certainty she knew, was that every day she liked him more and more. Every day, her heart fluttered when she saw him. What would she do when he was gone from her life?

I am thinking of it all again, she admonished herself, standing back a little while Silas spoke with the duke and duchess.

They were still in the large reception hall, surrounded by the crowds, and she knew that her mind was wandering at will yet again.

I am here for business, not to find a husband, she cautioned herself. *I must stop the obsession I have with this man.*

“Are you well, Cousin?” Mattia’s voice came to her.

“Yes...yes, of course,” Giovanna replied, being extra careful when in her cousin’s company, as he knew her all too well. “I am simply overwhelmed by our theatre visit. It will be good to get out of the crowds when the show begins.”

By coincidence, Silas moved to her side, “We are going to our seats now, are you ready?” he asked Giovanna.

She nodded with a smile, once again taking Silas’ offered arm to accompany her to the private box.

“Are you enjoying your visit so far?” Silas asked as they took their seats next to one another, on the chairs next to the duke and duchess.

Giovanna nodded, clapping her hands as she followed the lead from the crowd. The curtains began to lift. Silas also began applauding, not waiting for a spoken answer from her. In reality, she was enjoying herself, but always in the back of her mind was the nagging realisation that it was all coming to an end.

The actors took a bow before they began, and Silas turned to Giovanna saying, “It is a splendid seasonal play.”

Giovanna leaned in close to him to hear his words, what with all the din around them. “Yes, I hear it all about disguise and tomfoolery,” she answered as the applause stopped, and the play began.

* * *

The play had ended, but the actors took their bows again while the

audience applauded their skills. Giovanna had enjoyed the play thoroughly and as the duke stood up to leave the box, she thanked him for his invitation.

All through the show she'd managed to forget the troubles that plagued her mind. She'd laughed with Silas, and they'd whispered to one another on occasion. All adding to her enjoyment of his company. She recalled how Mattia had pointed out that it would be a wonderful ending to their visit. But she thought that it was also the perfect ending to her friendship with Silas.

The crowds were making their way to the large theatre foyer, where people stopped and chatted, blocking the stairway and the doorways. She felt Silas place his hand on her waist to guide her through the crowd, delighted at his intimate touch. Did he know that his fingers made her entire body tingle? Did he know that she was falling in love with him?

No, he does not, she told herself.

About to spiral into the depths of her sadness once again, Silas grabbed at her hand. He guided her as they squeezed between the people in the crowded foyer.

Again, he leaned to speak in her ear, "At least this way I will not lose you," he laughed.

But does he know how wonderful it feels that he grips my hand so tightly in his? How I love that he protects me. He is so very, very perfect.

The feel of his fingers wrapped around hers comforted her, and she felt safe and secure. Giovanna decided there and then that she would no longer allow her thoughts to spoil her evening. Silas squeezed her fingers and she looked up at him, wondering if he was sending her a secret message.

No, I promised I would stop doing that, she recoiled. *I must stop questioning his every move.*

"It has been a wonderful evening," she said to him, distracting her mind from thinking up any more confusing questions.

She would enjoy the rest of her stay, but she had to accept that Silas was not hers to love.

CHAPTER 24

“Mattia is talking with some very pretty ladies, and he appears besotted by them,” Silas noted. “Will you allow me to accompany you to the carriage?”

Giovanna nodded her agreement and walked with her to the waiting carriage. Silas felt delighted at how the evening was going. The lovely Giovanna had stayed by his side all night, and they’d enjoyed many intimate moments of whispering and laughter. At first, he’d thought it better to wait for Mattia before entering the carriage, but Giovanna’s shivering forced his hand.

“May I dare to suggest that we wait inside the carriage for your cousin?” he asked her, not wanting to assume that she would like to sit with him in the carriage without an escort. “My intention is only to get you out of this chilly wind.”

Giovanna nodded again, her teeth chattering with the cold air. He assisted her up the carriage step and climbed in behind her. Without thinking, he found himself sitting by her side, wanting to give her his body warmth. He didn’t wish to make anything of the situation, not wanting to embarrass her, so made light conversation to put her at ease.

“So what did you think of the famous English playwright, Shakespeare?” he asked.

They’d been so close all night long that he’d automatically taken the seat by her side, but now he could see it was a mistake and he’d overstepped the boundaries.

“I enjoyed the play very much. It is a pity we have little time back home, to attend any theatres” she said, still shivering as she spoke.

Silas sensed that she was still chilled from the night air. What he would like to have done was to wrap his arms around her and pull her close to him so that they could share their body heat. Instead, he leaned forward to the opposite seat, lifting it to reach down for a blanket in the box underneath.

“Here we are,” he said, laying the blanket over her knees. “See if that helps with the chill.”

Still, he took the seat by her side, reluctant to part from her. Being so close gave him a sense of contentment. And so, he continued to chat with her, as if they had known one another for many years.

“I cannot imagine you playing a role in a Shakespeare play,” she teased.

“I wasn’t very good at it, I assure you,” he said, making fun of himself. “But I would be your Romeo if you would like to read Romeo and Juliet with me.”

“I do like the tale, but it has such a tragic ending,” Giovanna pointed out.

He could see her smile from the yellow glow of the candle-lit lamp, hanging on the side of the carriage. A familiar fruity aroma lingered in the air, and he inhaled it, wanting to take in her very essence. His mouth felt dry, as did his tongue. Considering stealing a kiss from her brought some moistness to his mouth, and he licked his parched lips.

Does she feel the same way? he wondered. Should I kiss her?

Silas desperately wanted the intimacy of a kiss with Giovanna but had no idea how she would react. Was it worth the risk of offending her, or would she welcome his tenderness?

They continued to chat, but he struggled to concentrate on the conversation. A wave of desire rushed through his veins. Becoming aware of his heavy breathing, he slowed it down, honing in on her words.

“I must apologise that my cousin is taking so long,” she said.

“At least we are warmer in the carriage,” he replied. “Shall I get another blanket for you?”

If only his mind would stop thinking about how much he desired this beautiful woman beside him.

“No, I am warmed through now,” she replied, making no effort to move. He surmised that she must feel comfortable with him. “You are quite right, Silas, it is warmer in here, out of that chilly night air.”

Is she hinting that she is glad to be alone with me? he wondered.

He purposely turned to make eye contact with her, but she quickly looked away, avoiding him.

Am I sitting too close to you, or should I move closer? His thoughts were all over the place as he considered his next move. He'd never felt so nervous with a woman before.

"I do know a line of Juliet's," Giovanna told him unexpectedly.

"Please do share it with me," Silas suggested, looking at her with tenderness so that she wouldn't shy away.

"Very well, but do not laugh at me," she smiled back at him. "Are you ready?" she asked, raising the dark line of her brow. "Juliet is standing on the balcony, and she says, '*My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite.*'"

"Very good," he clapped at her unabashed effort, and it lifted his courage.

Listening to her laugh at her little recital was the deciding factor. Taking a deep breath, he reached out to take her small, gloved hand in his.

"If I were to kiss you, then go to hell, I would. So then I can brag with the devils I saw heaven without ever entering it," he quoted, and then leaned in to press the warmth of his lips upon hers.

His mind was spinning with desire as his fingers buried into her dark hair; *at last, I can show my love for you,* he told himself, convinced the time was right.

But how very wrong he had been...

Giovanna first pulled back her head, her eyes wide with terror.

"I...I have decided to wait outside for my cousin," she said, turning her face away from Silas as she pushed him away.

Silas felt as if he had been slapped in the face, instantly regretting making such a daring move. He remained in the carriage, trying to take control of his senses. He'd been left reeling with shame.

"Damn it!" he growled to himself, not realising that he'd curled up his fingers to form fists.

Angry at himself, he wasn't sure what to do. Should he join her outside? Should he apologise or leave things unsaid?

She never wanted me anyway, he told himself. *Why should she? I have no title. I'm an English man, not an Italian, why should she show any interest in a foreigner?*

How very wrong he'd been in his judgement – yet it had seemed so right.

No, you fool, she's never shown that kind of interest in you, his mind whirled over. *She only wished to be friends because I helped her. What an idiot I am to have misread her so badly.*

There was nothing for it, he had to go outside and apologise to her, otherwise, she might never speak to him again. He couldn't have her leaving England and thinking of him as a forceful beast.

Silas went to climb out of the carriage, but his hands shook with the shock of his ghastly misjudgement. He approached Giovanna, who'd walked away from the carriage when she saw him climbing out.

"Giovanna, please, will you forgive me for acting like a lovesick fool?" he asked, not caring if anyone heard, he cared only to make amends.

"No Silas, I...I cannot talk with you at this moment," she told him, and he noticed she was clutching a handkerchief.

As she walked even further from him, once again she dabbed the handkerchief to her eyes. Silas made no further effort to comfort her. He could see that his presence only made things worse, hadn't he already caused her enough upset?

He wasn't going to leave her alone out here in the darkness of the night, so he risked moving a little closer to speak with her again.

"Look, I need to stand close by so that you are not alone," he said with a softness to his voice. "I will wait with you for Mattia but know that I am feeling deeply ashamed over what I have done."

He heard her gasp as she once again dabbed at her face with the handkerchief. She was trying to hide her face so that no one could see her discomfort. But he knew of it because he had caused it. As she turned her back on him, his confusion escalated.

Why is she always so angry with me? he asked himself, making no further effort to console her. *Oh, my love, I am so very sorry,* his mind whispered the words that he wanted to say to her.

He felt like a youth who'd gone for his first kiss and then suffered rejection. Never had he misjudged a woman so badly before. Over the course of his travels, he'd had many relationships, some may even say too many. Certainly, his sister would, if she knew of his many intimate dalliances. She'd accuse him of being a rogue or even worse, a cad.

Not meaning it, a frustrated growl vibrated from deep inside his chest and escaped his lips. He felt so confused as he watched Giovanna suffering, and it was all his fault. She looked so forlorn, standing there waiting for her cousin's comforting presence. All his defences were caving in, and he felt as he if were some kind of beast. Attacking a woman without her permission, and then leaving her to weep alone.

Where did it all go so wrong? His thoughts continued to tumble around as they both waited separately. *I thought that you cared for me, but I was so very wrong.*

The deeper he thought of their relationship, the more he convinced himself that, in fact, Giovanna had shown disdain for him right from the start.

He spotted Mattia from a distance, and once again risked approaching Giovanna. “I can see your cousin so I will go and hurry him along,” he said to her, noting how she kept her back to him.

He was reluctant to leave her alone, but it was the only way to get things moving.

“Mattia,” he called out. “Your cousin is shivering as she awaits your arrival,” Silas said with a sternness in his tone as he arrived at Mattia’s side. “Say your goodbyes to these ladies, we must get going.”

Silas didn’t linger to await an answer, he quickly turned and went to stand by the carriage. Within moments, Mattia was approaching, and thankfully he was also escorting his cousin towards the carriage. Silas stood back, allowing Mattia to assist her into the carriage. Climbing in behind them, he took his seat by Mattia’s side, avoiding eye contact with anyone.

“That was a wonderful evening,” Mattia sang out. “Yet you both seem utterly miserable, have I missed something?”

CHAPTER 25

Giovanna glanced at her cousin with burning eyes, unable to stop herself from taking her distress out on him.

“What have you been doing? You were far too long,” she snapped. “It is too cold for me to be standing around waiting for you?”

“My apologies,” Mattia replied, with a lecherous smile playing out on his lips. “As you could see, I was surrounded by very pretty ladies,” he added, which maddened her even more.

Silas had purposefully seated himself opposite her cousin, which was a relief because she could not bear to look at him. Her mind whirled and swirled with confusing thoughts, causing her to remain silent while the two men chatted. Mattia continued to boast at how pretty the English ladies were, and Silas...well...she didn't want to listen to what he had to say.

I did not come all this way to have my heart broken a second time, yet...

Shaking any thoughts of Silas from her mind, she focused on the window. Not that she could see anything through the glass, but at least she could ignore the droning of her cousin's voice. Yet his words still managed to get through and she was forced to listen to his boasting.

“I am to meet with a Lady Felicity tomorrow,” Mattia was telling Silas.

“I'm not familiar with the name, Mattia, but it sounds like you will have a good time,” Silas replied, his voice flat and strained.

“A good time you say?” Mattia asked. “These English ladies, are they erm...how do you say...erm?”

“For goodness' sake, Mattia!” Giovanna snapped, annoyed that he was willing to risk the lady's integrity for his own sordid pleasure. “Can you please not embarrass us with your...your disreputable behaviour.”

Giovanna had taken Mattia by surprise with her remark, and her words caused her to feel a little ashamed. She knew that her cousin would never behave in such a way.

“I was talking only of stealing a small kiss, cousin,” Mattia said, sounding shocked that Giovanna would think otherwise. “You know that I would never —”

That was it, she’d had enough and could take no more. Mattia and his whining had forced her nerves to shatter, and she shouted out...

“*A kiss should never be stolen, Mattia!*” she barked in Italian. “*A kiss is precious...well...at least it is for the lady.*”

A tear escaped her eye and she gasped. She’d known that Silas could speak a little of her language, but she wasn’t sure he’d understood what she’d said.

“*Very well, Cousin, I will not steal a kiss if it offends you so much,*” Mattia replied in Italian and then returned to English for Silas’ sake. “My apologies for my cousin’s outburst, Silas, and that we speak in our mother tongue. It appears that she is very tired.”

“Please, no apologies are needed,” Silas said, again his voice flat, and nor did he look her way.

“The play was magnificent,” Mattia said, continuing to speak English to show his respect for their host. “If Giovanna would agree, we should stay on a little longer and take in another one. But I see that my cousin is too tired to be making such decisions this night.”

“Yes, the theatre is a wonderful experience,” Silas replied.

“I would be happy to return to see the same show,” Mattia said light-heartedly.

Giovanna realised that she’d upset him too. All he was doing was trying to make polite, but simple conversation.

“The best shows are in the London theatres,” Silas said, trying to make out that nothing was amiss. “You should visit there before you return to your homeland,”

Giovanna felt ill, her stomach churned as her tears fought to burst forth and make a fool of her. She tried not to listen to their voices, particularly not to Silas’ soothing, deep, manly tone.

“I am a great fan of London and all it has to offer,” Silas spoke again, trying to make amends to Mattia for his own solemn mood.

“*Hah, it is not you that he has insulted!*” Giovanna spat out in Italian,

aiming her words at her cousin.

“What?” Mattia asked in English. “My apologies again Silas. I do not know what has got into my cousin. She must be suffering from the heat of the theatre, and then stepping out into the chilly night air. It has befuddled her head.”

Giovanna turned to glare at her cousin, annoyed that he was accusing her of being befuddled.

She continued to speak in her native tongue, “*I am not the one who is going around trying to steal kisses,*” she said to Mattia.

“*Why are you so angry with me?*” Mattia asked in Italian, forgetting himself at his cousin’s strange behaviour.

“*Because you are a man!*” Giovanna hissed.

Mattia nodded his head in frustration, turning to look at her. “*Giovanna, please tell me what has happened to make you so angry?*” he begged, still speaking in Italian because now he was concerned for her.

“*You talk of enjoyment, and you talk of stealing kisses,*” was all she answered.

“*What is wrong with that?*” Mattia asked; their conversation was now in the full swing of their native tongue.

Even Giovanna was ignoring her own rules of never speaking Italian in front of their English hosts.

“*You told me it was bad manners for us to speak our language, yet here you are berating me in Italian,*” Mattia pointed out. and she could tell he was struggling to understand her reasoning.

“*It is Silas’ fault,*” she barked, hoping that Silas would hear her mention his name, but not caring what he thought.

“Why?” Mattia questioned in English, raising both hands in the air in exasperation.

“*He... He tried to kiss me,*”. she admitted, keeping up her Italian so that Silas would feel as frustrated as he had made her feel.

“*But you like him, so where is the harm in that?*” Mattia asked.

“*I do like him, and that is why we cannot...he cannot dare assume that I would accept such a relationship,*” she replied.

Giovanna was forced to stop speaking as her voice was breaking, showing the strain of her emotions. She knew that Silas watched her, but still, she refused to look his way.

“Silas,” she heard Mattia turn to speak with him. “I thank you for your

patience. It appears that my cousin has gone mad and I am attempting to sort this thing out.”

“Is she angry with me?” Silas asked, and his question caused Giovanna to feel ashamed.

“Of course I am mad with him,” she called out, still speaking in her native tongue. *“How dare he expect that I would accept his kiss. How dare he think that I would be interested in such intimacy?”*

“Calm yourself, Giovanna,” Mattia tried. *“Silas is not Rodriguez. Why are you so afraid of your feelings for this fine English gentleman?”*

“Because it can never be. First, he will expect me to live in England. You know I could never do that,” she called out, her hands gesticulating wildly as her passion shone through. *“Then, he will expect me to be a lady, and run his house. This is so typical of all men, no matter where they come from.”*

She glanced Silas’ way and saw the look of worry on his face. It hurt her to see him struggling, and she felt sorry for him. What was this man doing to her, making her so confused that she was losing herself?

“Giovanna, you are assuming that every man is the same as Rodriguez, and that is not the truth,” Mattia tried. “I apologise again, Silas. Please forgive that our conversation is not in English. My cousin, she is very vexed at your attempt to kiss her.”

“I cannot believe that you have said that Mattia!” Giovanna yelled, just as the carriage jostled her about.

“Why not? It is the truth is it not?” Mattia said in defence.

“If I wanted to marry, I would have gone through with Rodriguez’ proposal of marriage, would I not?” she snapped.

“Ah, I see now what I have done,” Silas said, and the two cousins went deathly silent at his words.

“You have done nothing, my friend,” Mattia said, and Giovanna was even more annoyed that her cousin supported the Englishman.

“I might not be able to understand all that you say,” Silas told him. “But I was not aware that Giovanna had received a marriage proposal. It makes sense why she felt insulted at my untimely effort to kiss her.”

“No, you do not understand—” Mattia began, but Giovanna intervened.

“Do not tell him otherwise, Cousin, I forbid it,” she demanded. *“Let him believe that I have another man back home. Then he will leave me alone and I will not need to feel so confused.”*

“Bah!” Mattia flicked his hand at her. *“This man, he has feelings for you,*

and all you do is run away. I will never understand women.”

“I see now that I have insulted you, Giovana,” Silas asked, his flicking her way in embarrassment. “I never meant to upset you in such a way. I beg your forgiveness. Had I known that you were spoken for, I would never have been so forward.”

The carriage came to a stop and Giovanna dashed to the door to let herself out. She wanted no assistance, rushing to get to her bed and hide away.

What is wrong with me? she questioned as she flew into the cottage. *I love this man*, she told herself, knowing that was the real truth of it. *Yet I cannot allow myself to let it go any further. I must stay with my padre. I can never leave my homeland. I am needed there and that is where I want to be.*

Throwing herself onto her bed, she wept out loud. Conscious of the noise she was making, she buried her head into the softness of a feather pillow.

“I hate myself. Why did I have to go and fall in love with an Englishman,” she whispered into the pillow.

A tap on the bedchamber door brought Mattia into her room, and she sat up.

“I am sorry, Cousin. It is only that I... I am in love with him, but I know it cannot be,” she sobbed.

Mattia came to sit on the edge of the bed, leaning in to embrace his cousin.

“Sshh...” he said soothingly. “We will think of something, but for now you must put on your nightclothes and get some sleep. I will sort out a warm, milky drink for you, and then you must allow your mind to rest.”

As he stood up, she grabbed his fingers, “Thank you, Mattia, what would I have done if you were not with me?”

“I will help all I can, Giovanna, I promise,” he said. “I am here for you.”

CHAPTER 26

When his companions exited the carriage rather abruptly, Silas thought it better to leave them alone. He knocked on the carriage roof to instruct the driver to move on and take him home. It was not his place to intervene, especially as he was the cause of Giovanna's distress.

I am sure she does not despise me, after all, we've had so much fun these last few days, he mulled over as the rocking of the carriage soothed his thoughts. Then again, she might hate me now, after I misjudged the entire situation.

His thoughts were not helping his cause, not one bit. The more he believed himself the cause of her anguish, the deeper and darker the hole that he was digging for himself became.

There is no way out of this, he thought, tapping his fingers on the seat next to him. Damn it! I've been such a fool; she will never forgive me.

His mind paid no attention to the bumpy carriage ride, jostling around now that the carriage was lighter. All he could think of was the shock on Giovanna's face when she'd pushed him away after he so stupidly attempted to kiss her.

"Why did I do that?" He questioned himself out loud. "Why did I have to go and spoil everything?"

Shifting in his seat, he felt so annoyed with himself for making such a serious error.

We were getting along so well, enjoying each other's company, he tried to convince himself. Why does this woman make me so nervous? I've never been like this, not with any woman. I'm like an inexperienced youth, believing myself to be in love, yet unsure of what to do about it.

He glanced through the glass window. They were passing the gates of Welwick Hall and he recalled when they'd first met at the Twelfth Night Ball, in the games room.

"My God, I was attracted to you from the moment I set eyes on you, Giovanna!" he declared, mumbling into his open hands that rubbed at his face in worry.

How have I messed this up so much?

Will you ever speak to me again?

I must make amends before you leave, Giovanna, I must...

The carriage stopped and a steward opened the door as he sat rooted to the spot inside. He hadn't even realised that they'd arrived, his mind constantly falling into a whirlpool of thoughts.

Climbing out, he entered the manor house. He'd been so distracted that he hadn't thought to thank the driver or the steward who'd opened his door. Yet he always went out of his way to thank servants for the work they did because he'd been in their shoes.

And now I'm turning into a pompous English gentleman. Hah! Well, Giovanna does not think of me as a gentleman anymore, so perhaps I am not.

"Ah, Silas, you're back," the duke's voice echoed out.

Silas looked up to see the duke with a drink in his hand.

"I'll have whatever you're having," Silas said, pointing to the glass tumbler.

"Vera went to check on the children, but I am not ready to go to bed," the duke said as if he needed to explain what he was doing. "Come and join me in the parlour," he offered, turning to walk into the room.

Silas gave his hat and coat to Morris and followed on behind the duke.

"I say, Silas, you're looking a bit fraught," the duke noted, pouring his brother-in-law a glass of brandy. "I am somewhat surprised, you looked as if you were having a good night at the theatre."

"I was... I did, thank you," Silas answered, accepting the glass.

He took a large swig, then paused as he waited for the liquid to warm his innards. Taking a few more large sips, he finished off the whole glass.

"Help yourself to another," the duke said, pointing at the drink's cabinet as he went to sit down. "What's got you so vexed?"

As Silas poured an extra-large brandy, he pondered on denying anything was troubling him. But what was the point, he knew that he could unburden himself on the duke, they were lifelong friends.

“I did something very foolish tonight and I’m regretting it terribly,” Silas said, walking over to join the duke in the seating area.

“Don’t tell me you went to visit Lucy because in truth she has broken your heart?” the duke asked.

“No, I’m happy for Lucy, that she’s found love,” Silas nodded, now only sipping on his second brandy.

“Well, it cannot be anything to do with Giovanna, you two were close all night long,” the duke said.

“Yes, well that’s what I thought, but it turns out that I misjudged...no... I...erm...got it all wrong.”

“Are you going to tell me what has happened, Silas?” the duke asked with raised brows. “Or do I have to beat it out of you, as I did when we were boys?”

“Hah!” Silas chuckled at the memory. “You and my sister were such bullies.”

“We can still bully you if you do not share your worries,” the duke threatened in jest. “I can go and fetch Vera.”

“Yes, my sister has a knack for beating my brow. But it will be no secret. I...I attempted to kiss Giovanna,” Silas said, gulping down the last of his second brandy.

“And?” the duke asked as if he thought there was more to the story.

“And she took it as an insult,” Silas sighed, sitting back. “Pushed me away and then babbled on in Italian to her cousin, all the way to the cottage.”

“Women are fickle creatures, are they not?” The duke remarked, nodding and looking thoughtful. “I know you like her, Silas, so in my mind, I am sure that you will work this thing out. My advice is not to have another drink, and instead, take yourself to bed.”

Silas did just that because he had no stomach for any more alcohol.

“Goodnight, Oscar,” he said to his friend. He knew that he wouldn’t sleep well. He’d lain awake all night thinking how to make it up to Giovanna and tell her that he loved her and meant no insult.

* * *

Silas stayed home the next day, speaking with his sister to get her advice on what he should do.

“I wouldn’t rush into anything yet, Silas,” the duchess advised. “Perhaps I

should be the one to go and talk with Giovanna, sort of woman to woman.”

“No...this is something I want to resolve myself, Vera,” Silas said, not accepting her offer. “It’s my mess and I will be the one to apologise to her, face to face.”

“But it may only serve to embarrass her,” the duchess suggested.

A tap sounded out on the parlour door, and Morris entered.

“Forgive me for disturbing you, Duchess, but there is a visitor for Mr Silas,” the butler explained.

“Show them in,” the duchess said, and Silas hoped it might be Giovanna.

Instead, it was Mattia who walked through the door, smiling at the duchess as he thanked her for seeing him.

“I will leave you two alone,” the duchess said, getting up to leave.

“No, my lady, I wish to speak with you all. My cousin is shopping for last-minute items to take home,” Mattia explained, taking the chair that Silas offered him with an arm gesture.

“Are you not visiting London before you leave England?” Silas asked as he had understood that they were not to leave for another month or so.

“It seems that Giovanna has decided that we should leave earlier,” Mattia said. “Today, she is travelling to Falmouth. She wants to see if she can book us a berth there, to sail from Portsmouth to Calais.”

“Portsmouth? So she is serious about leaving?” Silas asked, surprised at the suddenness of it all.

Mattia nodded his head, “I believe that my cousin is missing her father, and yearns to return home.”

“I see, but it seems so sudden,” Silas said, feeling a panic in his stomach at the thought of losing Giovanna much sooner than expected.

He hadn’t apologised to her yet, he had to see her, he had to explain how he felt and why he’d done what he did.

“I came to thank you all,” Mattia continued. “My cousin is too upset over being away from home.”

“Of course, but...but...did she give you any message for me?” Silas asked, feeling desperation in his heart.

Mattia shook his head, causing the duchess to speak up. “What my brother means to ask, is if Giovanna has forgiven him. She has no doubt shared with you that he has upset her?”

“Yes, she has shared it with me, and I am sorry that she is so stubborn,” Mattia said, a look of sadness in his typically dark eyes. “I can speak no sense

into her when she gets like this. It is not you, Silas, Giovanna, she...she suffered so badly when another let her down. Our families are now enemies, it caused such a terrible friction.”

“Can you at least wait while I go and write a letter to her?” Silas asked, frantic to get word to her. “Or could I come and speak with her?”

“No, that would not be wise, my friend,” Mattia said. “A letter would be better.”

Silas nodded, recalling what he’d heard in their Italian conversation. “I know that she has a marriage proposal in Italy, doesn’t she?” he asked. “I heard her mention it, in the carriage.”

“No...no, you are mistaken, Silas,” Mattia shook his head again. “What you heard was her speaking about the marriage proposal from Rodriguez. But that was never to be.”

“So why does she hate me so much?” Silas asked, partly relieved that there were no other suitors.

At the time, they had been speaking too quickly for him to understand, and he’d only picked up a few prize words. Then, he’d convinced himself that the marriage proposal must be the reason she’d been so offended at his attempt to kiss her.

“No, Silas, she does not hate you, but please, I cannot speak on her behalf,” Mattia said, and Silas could see the strain on his worried face. “I will await your letter, perhaps it might help.”

“Yes, of course,” Silas agreed. “I will go into the smaller study now and return as soon as I have it penned. You are a true friend, Mattia, for waiting. Thank you so much.”

It was the hardest letter Silas had ever written. Somehow, he managed to finish it, even though his mind was reeling with the realisation she was leaving and that he would likely never see her again. Silas hoped that the letter would show, at the very least, how much he regretted his forwardness. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, but there was no time to say all the words he wished to convey. And so, he told her that her friendship was important to him and that he hoped that he meant something to her.

After Mattia had left, Silas was unsettled, and in no mood to speak with anyone. Instead, he went to the stable and requested a horse to be saddled up. The only way to get the anxiety from his system was to go and ride around the estate. At least that way he could feel the wind on his face, which he hoped would blow away his troubles, even if only for an hour or so.

CHAPTER 27

To help distract her thoughts from all that troubled her, Giovanna had taken herself to the market square in Falmouth. There, she hoped to find gifts to take home. She knew that today was market day, from previous visits with the duchess, and recalled there should be an array of market stalls.

Giovanna had loaned a horse from a neighbour with whom they'd made friends. She arrived in Falmouth late in the morning. Once there, she stabled the horse and wandered around the market, browsing the stalls. It felt good to be doing something other than tormenting herself over Silas.

That morning she'd informed her cousin that they would be leaving as soon as possible. While she was in Falmouth, she would go to the harbour and speak with the harbour master to find out the sailing times in Portsmouth. Hopefully, she might find someone who she could book passage with, for a ship sailing to France.

As she wandered around the noisy market, her nose was assailed with the sweet smells from a spice stand. There, she purchased nutmeg balls, which she wanted to try out in a new recipe with red grapes. Should it work, she could always send for more.

A man was calling out his wares from a fresh-smelling vegetable stall. Glancing over, she found herself attracted by the colourful vegetables and fruits. She bought some of his earthy-smelling, red apples, of which he said he'd picked only that very morning.

Other vendors called out their wares to the passing shoppers but she barely heard them. Her thoughts had once again turned to Silas and the stolen kiss.

Why did I push him away? Was a question she'd asked herself many

times over and over. *Oh, Silas, I am very sorry that I treated you so badly, but I couldn't allow you into my heart.*

She'd come to the market in the hope of pushing him from her mind, but it hadn't worked very well because he kept sneaking back in.

I must concentrate on finding gifts for my nieces and nephews, she told herself as she paused between the stalls.

That was when she spotted a carpenter's stall and parts of it were filled with small wooden toys. Thinking they might be manageable to carry home for the children, she made her way to look through the man's handiwork.

As her mind left Silas behind for a brief moment, the buzz of chatter came to her senses. She smiled to herself, taking in a deep breath as she enjoyed her visit to the busy market square. Picking out some small, wooden, farm animal figurines, she found herself standing next to a couple. They too were sifting through the wooden animals, searching for a horse. As she'd already taken out the only horse figurine, she offered it to the woman, only to realise that she recognised her.

"You are Lucy, are you not?" she asked, smiling at the heavily pregnant woman.

The red-haired woman smiled back with full, cherry lips and sparkling blue eyes.

"I am, but how do you know me?" Lucy asked, not looking the least bit offended at Giovanna's forward question.

"I am an acquaintance of the Duchess' family," Giovanna explained, purposely not mentioning Silas' name. "On a previous visit to Falmouth, the Duchess pointed you out as one of her good friends."

"The Duchess is a kind lady," Lucy said, still wearing a happy smile on her lips. "This is my husband, Jeffrey. We were seeking this horse for our little one, who'll be joining our little family very soon," she said, rubbing her belly with pride.

Giovanna looked over at the man who'd stolen Silas's sweetheart, and she smiled in greeting. He was a large man, with a ruddy face. She recalled that he was a local butcher, and the thought caused her to shudder. Why ever would anyone choose a man in such a profession, over the handsome and intelligent Silas?

"I am pleased to meet you, Jeffrey," she said as he took the offer of her handshake.

His hands were large but he came across as a warm, friendly character,

flashing his teeth with a lovely, welcoming grin.

“I be pleased to meet any friend of the Duke’s,” he said, placing a strong arm around his wife’s shoulders protectively.

“Are you the exotic visitor from Italy?” Lucy asked, her freckles highlighted in contrast with healthy-looking pink cheeks.

“I am from Italy, yes. I am a wine maker. My family owns a vineyard and I am here to do trade. I understand you are a butcher, Jeffrey?” she asked, making light conversation as she took the opportunity to assess the lovely Lucy.

“Aye, that he is, and I thank ye for not referring to him as a slaughterer,” Lucy replied. “Even though that’s what he is, I hate that word”

Lucy came across as an intelligent woman, and Giovanna felt impressed with her. “Before you married, I understand you worked at Welwick Hall?” Giovanna dared to ask.

“Aye, that I did, but these days I must do my work from home, and I make candles,” Lucy explained. “It’s a messy business but it puts money aside for our little one.”

“Yes, I understand, and I am happy to make the acquaintance of any woman who is business minded, like myself,” Giovanna said, feeling a deep respect for Lucy.

“If I didn’t keep working, the housework would drive me mad,” Lucy said, half-joking, but Giovanna was sure that she meant it.

“I agree, too many people believe that a woman’s place is in the home, but you and I know better,” Giovanna said, liking the woman more. “My cousin and I are guests of Mr Silas Atkins from Welwick Hall. We are here to trade with him and his family.”

She watched Lucy closely as she mentioned Silas’ name, wondering how she might react.

“Ah, the wanderer,” Lucy replied. “I call him that because he likes to live anywhere but at home.”

“You know him well,” Giovanna said, not showing any surprise in Lucy’s description of Silas. “But if not for him, I would not be here gaining trade for my family business. In that sense, I am grateful that he travelled to Italy.”

“Be careful of his charming personality,” Lucy warned, and Giovanna picked up a sad glimmer in her bright eyes.

“He be a good man, Silas, and he has been our friend for many a year,” Jeffrey said, showing no malice for his wife’s former lover.

“Oh yes, he has a kind heart in him alright, but it is still a wandering heart,” Lucy added. For the first time, Giovanna recognised that Lucy’s heart had been broken by Silas.

“I would not know of such things,” Giovanna said, unwilling to show her fondness for the man. “We are business partners, nothing more.”

“Then he be a lucky man to have such a lovely businesswoman in his life,” Jeffrey said, shifting uncomfortably on his large, booted feet.

Giovanna lent him a smile of thanks, knowing he was attempting to pay her a compliment, in a roundabout fashion.

“Aye, but one day some woman will pin that man down,” Lucy said unexpectedly, a distant glaze in her eyes, looking as if she was recalling some memory with him.

“I thank ye for the horse,” Jeffrey said, taking it from his wife’s hands. “It be the perfect toy for our little one, when he, or she, joins us.”

Giovanna thought the man looked a little embarrassed as if he liked to speak highly of Silas, but something held him back. She guessed it was because he felt that he had taken Lucy from him. Yet Jeffrey showed no malevolent intent in his demeanour, seemingly refusing to think badly of his old friend.

“Yes, thank you...oh, we don’t even know your name,” Lucy said, looking at Giovanna questioningly.

Giovanna worried that Lucy could tell she was in love with Silas. Women could be very astute when it came to love.

Giovanna held her hand out again, “I am Signorina Giovanna Romano. What is more, I must be on my way. I have business in the harbour,” she said, shaking Jeffrey’s hand as he was the one to take up her farewell gesture. “It was lovely to meet with friends of the Duke and Duchess, they are wonderful people.”

“And we are friends with Silas too,” Lucy added, sharing a half smile, which confirmed to Giovanna that the woman suspected something.

Giovanna paid for her goods and walked away quickly, feeling annoyed with herself.

Why am I feeling guilty? I have done nothing wrong, she chided herself.

Nonetheless, she felt an urgent need to get away from Silas’ former lover.

Why am I so afraid of him? She asked herself, over and over, yet she could never find an answer.

Mattia would say it was Rodriguez’s fault, and to some extent it was. But

why could she not put that behind her, and accept Silas for who he was? He was caring and gentle, yet still, she could not let him into her heart.

Again, Giovanna wished she had a mother. She needed a woman to whom she could speak of her heart's desire, and who she could trust to guide her.

What if I had accepted his kiss, what then? She mulled, dashing towards the harbour. *No. The only way to deal with this situation is to leave, and as soon as possible. I must go home to the people I love and trust.*

She could see why Silas had been attracted to Lucy; she was an attractive, fresh-looking young woman. Her freckles gave her a look of mischief, and her lips were full. No doubt they had enjoyed many a kiss together. On top of that, Lucy seemed to be a kind and caring young woman, like her husband, they made a lovely couple. It was no wonder that Lucy did not wait for Silas, she was a woman who needed her lover to be by her side.

So where would that put us, Silas? The words tumbled in her mind. *We live hundreds of miles apart. Who would be the one to leave their loved ones?*

The rest of the afternoon passed her by, her thoughts constantly returned to the kiss that almost happened. How she would have loved to have felt Silas's soft lips on hers and his warm breath on her face. But most of all, she wanted to open her heart to him.

"But I cannot do it," she called out as she rode the horse back to her cottage.

"Ahhh, Giovanna, you are home at last," Mattia greeted her as she arrived.

"This is not our home, Cousin," she snapped. Though she wished that she was home right now. In fact, she wished that she had never come to this infernal country where it always rained. More importantly, she wished that she'd never met Silas.

"I know it is not, but it is our temporary home," Mattia insisted. "But listen to me. Today, I have been to say farewell to our hosts, and I was given a letter to pass on to you."

Giovanna did not need to ask who it was from; besides, she recognised the handwriting. She snapped it from her cousin's hands as if the very paper might burn him. Without giving it a single glance, she shoved it in the pocket of her dress.

"I have managed to book our passage, leaving in a week," Giovanna informed her cousin. "We will even have two cabins, which will be good."

“Yes, sharing an open room with the other passengers was not comfortable when we came here. But how did you manage to book cabins?” Mattia asked, surprised, because it had been impossible on the journey to England.

“I mentioned that we were here visiting the Duke of Cornwall, and it seemed to impress them,” she admitted.

“Hah! The Duke will not mind, I am sure. He will want us to be comfortable,” Mattia remarked, impressed with his cousin for her good sense. “You do make a fine businesswoman, but please Giovanna, do not leave this country with things unspoken.

Giovanna ignored his words, but she knew that they were wise.

CHAPTER 28

That night, following dinner, Giovanna went to her room to begin the monotonous task of packing. She had more clothing to take back, than what she'd brought with her. Classy dresses were not something she normally had in her wardrobe, but she'd been forced to buy a few. Social events with the English aristocracy demanded it. She even doubted that she'd ever wear them again once she returned home.

Sitting on a chair in her room, she pondered on how once, many generations ago, her own family were part of the aristocracy. That was how her family had historically gained the land they now owned. While never taking much interest in politics, she'd heard her father complain of the French rule. Once the French war had ended, he then grumbled at how the Congress of Vienna had brought about the Austrians to rule their beautiful country. Italy was still a divided country, but it was her home and she loved it.

I cannot wait to be home, she told herself, folding various pieces of clothing. The maid had offered to sort the packing for her, and Mattia had taken her up on her kindness. But Giovanna wanted to do it herself so that she could recall her trip to England.

The ballgown, made by Miss Sarah who was the Duchess's dressmaker, was hanging before her on the wardrobe door. It was a very special gown, one that she'd enjoyed wearing on a wonderful evening at a ball while dancing with Silas.

Silas, the Englishman who always treated me as an equal in business, she recalled as she thought fondly on him. *Despite my always pushing you away, you never stopped being my friend, did you, Silas?* Giovanna stroked the dress, remembering how polite and attentive Silas could be towards her, with

his charming smiles and the witty remarks that she had enjoyed when she'd managed to relax with him.

Then there was the theatre night, it had been an enchanting evening, but ruined when Silas had tried to kiss her.

"The kiss that never was," she whispered, brushing her fingers over her lips. "What would it have been like to have kissed you, Silas?"

He'd made her feel so safe during her visit to England. Protecting her at the balls, assisting her with all the new orders for wines that she'd gained from the English gentry. And then sharing the theatre play with her, only for her to reject him at the end of it all.

"What have I done?" she said out loud, standing up and feeling annoyed at herself.

Have I thrown away the only chance of real love and happiness? She wondered, taking in a deep breath, she inhaled the fragrance of the ballgown fabric. It was the sharp lemony scent that she'd worn that night and reminded her of those dances with Silas. They had whispered to one another, and laughed, and talked of many things other than business. They had shared little secrets about one another. She'd admitted to him that she feared snakes after a childhood incident. He'd told her how his sister had coerced him as a child, into lots of mischief.

Giovanna tried to imagine Silas as a child, running around with the duke and his sister. He'd said that the late duke had been strict with them but had still allowed them a good education. She'd shared with him how she too had been educated, upon her padre's insistence. Silas admitted that he still owned some things from his childhood. One item was a precious globe, which his governess had gifted to him because she knew he would travel the world.

So many childhood secrets had been shared between them in their more intimate moments. Never once had he pushed her for anything but friendship. Many times, she'd wanted him to kiss her, and then when he finally tried, she rejected him.

"Why?" she chastised herself. "Why did I do that?"

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stared at the ballgown, knowing perfectly well why she'd rejected his advances.

Because I was scared, she admitted to herself. *We live such different lives, my love. You adore your travels, and I can see that you love your home in England too. I love my home in Italy and could never sacrifice it. You and I...we can never be.*

Giovanna felt exhausted with all the conflicting thoughts spinning out of control in her head.

“The letter!” she exclaimed, rushing her hand into the pocket of her dress, to pull out the piece of paper.

It was still sealed; untouched and unread. Breaking the waxed seal, she unravelled the piece of paper and began to read his words. Not once did he say that he loved her, but she could read between the lines that he did. It was a letter filled with regrets. She laughed at the part where he told her that he was not sorry for his attempt to kiss her. He had done so because of his growing feelings for her.

Stroking the ink on the paper, as though she were stroking his long fingers, she imagined him writing the words. Words that told her of his fondness and asked that she remain his friend forever.

“What is the point of that?” she called out, sitting up with a start, and throwing the letter on her pillow.

I did not come here for romance, Silas Atkins, I came for trade, to save my family’s business, she thought to herself.

Standing up, she returned to her packing. For the next ten minutes, all was fine, and she made progress. But every time she looked upon the ballgown still hanging before her, a lump formed in her throat.

She slumped onto the bed, taking hold of the letter again, it seemed to make her feel close to Silas.

“I will not write back to you, Silas, I cannot,” she said, speaking to the piece of paper as if it were Silas himself.

If I were to write the words down, my heart would deceive me, and I would be forced to tell you of my love for you.

Giovanna could feel a sting in her eyes, fighting back the tears that were doing their best to escape.

No, I refuse to cry over you, Silas. I cannot, for that would mean admitting that I fear losing you.

Again, she threw the letter down and stood up, telling herself that there was little point in developing their friendship. She needed to concentrate on returning to her homeland and getting on with the business at hand. Even more, she needed to see her padre. Who knows how ill he might have been in her absence?

Giovanna had planned this trip to England, to save the family vineyard, but she had been hesitant because of her padre’s illness. He had pushed her to

stand independently and fight for their business. Her padre had lots of faith in her, convincing her that she could establish trading partners for their wines. With Mattia by her side, she had convinced herself she could do it too.

But now, there is you, Silas, and I am lost, all in the name of love, she admitted.

Without realising, she lay on the bed again, deep in contemplation over Silas.

Smiling, she thought, *I can see you play acting when you were a child. I can imagine Vera bossing you around, even though you are taller than her.*

His sister was a big part of his heart, and she understood why. They were two peas in a pod, and their relationship had survived his everything. The death of his mother, growing up fatherless, and even starting life in servitude.

I should have asked Vera more questions about him, she deliberated. *I should have tried to get to know the Duchess better so that I could have shared my feelings with her. She would have told me about your little escapades together as children. I already sensed that you were the more serious one in your little group. Yet, at the same time, you would shoulder most of any punishment given you both, whenever you were caught. That tells me that you have always had a good heart.*

“Is that not what I want?” She declared, jumping up again.

“Oh Lord, what am I to do?” she called out for the hundredth time. “I do not know which will be worse, leaving you behind, or staying with you. Either one will be agonising.”

Walking over to the window, she tried to ignore the voices in her head.

“I wish someone would tell me what to do,” she said, looking through the glass and into the darkness of the night. “It is all about the unknown, and I do not know which way to tread. Which path should I take, and what should I believe?”

Sitting on the window seat, she hummed the tune to herself of the song they’d sung together on the pianoforte that night. It had been a song of forbidden love, not that theirs would be forbidden, but it would be complicated.

“Too complicated,” she reminded herself. “Am I angry, or am I sad? I do not even know what I feel anymore,” she growled, cross at her conflicting thoughts.

A tear finally escaped, and she quickly wiped it away, as if it was not allowed to show itself.

“I will not cry. I refuse to feel sad at this...this...preposterous situation, all caused by you,” she said, trying in her mind to push all the blame onto Silas.

You should never have tried to kiss me. Because a kiss would have confirmed your affection for me, she told him in her mind, as if he could hear her thoughts. *But then, I would give anything to have felt your kiss before I left. I wanted to kiss you, Silas, but...but I was too afraid to do it. And then I was angry with you for loving me.*

Another tear escaped, but this time it was from the other eye. Giovanna allowed it to trickle down her cheek, tickling at her skin. It was soon followed by another, and then another, until both eyes gushed with small teardrops.

“You are not Rodriguez”, she stated, her lips juddering with a burst of emotions.

You are nothing like him, so why do I treat you as if everything he did to me was your fault? Padre, I wish now that you were here, by my side to comfort me, to advise me and tell me what to do.

A little gasp escaped her throat as the weeping fit developed into a full-blown sob.

In her mind, she recalled the day that Rodriguez had announced that he expected her to go and live with his mother. She was to assist her in the kitchen and to work for the menfolk who would be toiling both estates.

At first, she'd tried to reason with him, telling him that her padre needed her. That was when he told her of his plan. That her father would also live in the same house because the lands were to be merged as one huge family estate. The house she lived in was to be demolished, and dormitories built in its place for the workers.

Giovanna had been devastated at the news and had told him so. They argued and he'd called her stubborn and unreasonable. He'd asked her if she wanted children, saying that if she did, she needed to learn from his mother, or she would be an unsuccessful mother.

“How dare he?” she shouted out, no longer angry with Silas.

She was angry because of Rodriguez. None of what happened then was Silas' fault. Silas would never presume to tell her what to do. He respected her as an equal, which was unusual for a man. Although her cousins all treated her with respect too, they were family. Did that mean that Silas could become a part of her family?

“Aargh!” she yelled. “I do not know what to do,” she said, clapping her hands together in frustration. “I do not know what to do. I only know that I love you, Silas, that is all I know for sure in my heart.”

With her little outburst, she threw herself onto the bed and buried her head in the pillow to hide the noise. She sobbed her heart out because the truth was that they could never be a couple. There was the matter of hundreds of miles between them. The pain of her problem was physically dulling her mind, and her heart too. Giovanna longed for her mother, wishing hard that she was there, to guide her in the right direction.

CHAPTER 29

The duchess loved having her brother home, and she wished he was home for good. Vera missed him when he went on his ventures, and there was always a dangerous element to travelling around the world. What if his ship was to sink? How long would it be before they found out, or would they even find out? What if a wild animal killed him when he was on one of his hunting trips? So many things could go wrong, that she longed for him to settle down.

He hadn't been down for breakfast that morning, so now she worried that he might be ill. Silas had not been himself lately, and she had no idea what was wrong with him. These days he didn't talk to her like he used to. But she could tell his moods by watching him, so close were they as twins. If only she could read his mind, then she would know what troubled him. On second thoughts, did she really want to know what went on in that muddled head of his? Perhaps not.

Why couldn't he have been normal, like any other English gentleman?

Because he was born a pauper and he'll never forget that, was always her answer.

The duke had done many things to help her brother step up the social ladder, but still, Silas refused to forget his place. He wouldn't join any of the gentlemen's clubs in London, to keep Oscar company, saying it wasn't his scene. That part was true, but he could do it for Oscar, yet he continued to shy away from such places.

Her brother didn't much care to associate with the nobility as she had been forced to do. Always, he told her that he'd never be *'one of them.'* It maddened her because if she could do it, then so could he. Yet, he continued to turn his back on it all. At least he attended balls and soirees with them, so

she should be grateful for that.

Vera was standing outside his bedroom door, hesitating before she knocked. Would he welcome her intrusion? Taking a deep breath, she wrapped her knuckles on the door and waited to hear him answer, but all was quiet.

“Silas, please let me come in,” she begged, tapping on the door a second time. “You need to eat. Tell me, are you unwell?”

Still no answer, so she turned the doorknob and attempted to push the door open, but it was locked.

“I know that you are in there because the door only locks from the inside,” she called through the closed door. “I will sit on the floor outside of your door until you decide to come and speak with me,” she threatened, in the hope of some kind of response. “Please, Brother, tell me what it is that you are fretting over. I must know, for I am fraught with worry.”

“Go away, Vera!” His voice came from the room.

“Hah! At least I know you are still alive,” she called back. “Silas, I am your twin sister. When you are sorrowful, so am I.”

“No, you are not,” he called to her. “Now go away Vera, I don’t wish to talk to anyone.”

“I only want to know what it is that has you so upset,” she explained. “I have never known you to act this way before. And I can think of nothing that would have you so broken. Please, Brother, tell your sister what it is, that I might help.”

Again, her brother didn’t answer and so she walked away. Vera was sure that Silas wasn’t ill, so perhaps Oscar might be able to help him. Swiftly, she took herself down the grand stairway, passing by the hanging portraits of her husband’s ancestors.

This time she tapped on a different door, not waiting for an answer as she opened it and entered the duke’s study.

“Vera, my love, what a pleasant surprise,” Oscar said, looking up from the paperwork he was writing. “Whatever is it? You look a little vexed.”

She took a seat in one of the armchairs by the study’s hearth, looking over at her husband.

“My apologies, husband, I do not like to disturb you when you’re working, but it is Silas,” she answered.

“Silas?” the duke questioned, looking puzzled. “Is he ill? Shall I call for the physician?”

“No, it isn’t that,” she replied, enjoying the heat from the coals on the burning fire. “He isn’t himself; I know it. He is not eating because, as you know, he didn’t come down for breakfast. Nor did he send for a tray, I checked.”

“I have my suspicions over what ails him, as it happens,” the duke told her, coming over to sit by her side.

She waited for him to take his seat, watching his handsome face with an overwhelming feeling of love for this man.

“You see,” Oscar began. “I went through a similar situation myself, many years ago.”

“You will have to tell me more than that, Oscar,” she said, frustrated at his evasiveness. “If you can help my brother, then you must do so.”

“Ahh...but I cannot, and nor can you,” he said, taking his wife’s petite hand in his and rubbing it because it was cold. “Do not worry so much over him, my love,” the duke continued. “He is in love. What’s more, you are very cold. Let me get you a blanket.”

She adored Oscar for his caring nature, and he got up to take a blanket from the back of a chair. Vera respected her husband for his knowing ways, he always had an answer for everything.

“Do you think that’s what all this is about?” she queried, wondering why she had not thought of it herself.

The duke nodded back at her, “Giovanna, I would think.”

“She is such a sweet person, but she cannot possibly feel the same way though. They’re leaving to return home very soon,” Vera said, disappointed.

“Exactly, and that will be what is wrong with Silas,” Oscar pointed out. “Your brother might have enjoyed the company of many a fair maiden, but this is the first time he has been in love with one.”

“Of course, you are right Oscar,” Vera smiled, removing her blanket and standing up.

“Stay under the blanket by the fire, Vera,” Oscar suggested. “I don’t mind you sitting with me while I work.”

“No, husband, you are a wonderful man who always seems to know what is to be done,” she said, leaning in to kiss his lips.

“Well, if it gets me a kiss every time, I will think up more solutions to your problems,” he said, sharing a big grin and a twinkle in his eyes.

“No time for that,” Vera said, brushing off his romance. “You need to get working on a solution for my brother’s problem. He’s in love with a woman

who is about to leave him. Whatever can we do?"

"We should do nothing, Vera," he said, standing up to return to his desk. "We cannot go around interfering in a grown man's life. That is what your brother is now, Vera, all grown up and able to help himself."

"I know he is," Vera growled, insulted by her husband's untimely reminder.

"But you still want to interfere, don't you?" Oscar asked, his pen midway in the air as he went to dip the ink pot.

His wife nodded over, and he discarded the pen as he observed her pacing his study.

"I will never get anything done while you worry over your brother, will I?" he stated the obvious.

"We have to help him, Oscar, we have to do something," she appealed to his better nature.

"I have an idea, but it is a little unorthodox," Oscar said, smiling at her.

"Well, husband, do tell me or I will go mad with worry," Vera insisted, stopping in her tracks as she waited for Oscar's explanation.

"Why don't you do what you did all those years ago?" he said, moving the feather pen so that he didn't get ink all over the place, while his wife demanded his attention.

Vera nodded, waiting for the rest of Oscar's explanation. "And that was?" she asked, wondering what he referred to.

"Oh, come now, Vera, have you forgotten how you dressed up as your brother and pretended to be him in front of Lady Olive?" Oscar asked, reminding her of her mischief. "You even did it for me once, if you recall, to cheer me up."

"Yes, yes, of course I remember, I got the idea from Shakespeare's Twelfth Night," she nodded, now laughing with him. "But I don't know how that will help," she added, perplexed at her husband's meaning. "Do I even look that much like him these days?"

"Well, he is taller than you, and perhaps broader at the shoulders, but you could still do it," Oscar encouraged. "I am sure it would bring him lots of cheer to see his sister dressed as himself."

"I'll find his clothes in the laundry room, the maid will help me" Vera said, thinking of Oscar's plan out loud.

"You go and do that, while I send a messenger to Giovanna with an invitation to come to Welwick Hall at once," Oscar added, dashing to his

desk to begin the letter.

“If your father knew of our escapade, I would be in the stables, sleeping in the haybarn for a week for my participation,” Vera chuckled, recalling the capers they used to get up to as children.

“And I would be forced into Latin lessons for a whole week, until my head would take no more,” Oscar recalled, scratching at his head of hair as if he might change his mind. “Hah! But we are the adults now, my love, and we may do as we please,” he added, continuing to write the invitation that would draw Giovanna to visit with Silas immediately.

“So long as the twins never find out that their parents still act like children,” Vera said, sharing a shameless grin with her husband. “What are you saying in your letter?”

“Erm... I could say that he has much to discuss with her,” Oscar suggested. “Go...you must make haste and do the deed to cheer Silas. Once you have his attention, get him to open his heart and talk about a solution to win over Giovanna.”

“Yes, yes, I am going,” Vera nodded, heading for the door as her mind raced with ideas. “What if I suggest that he ask her to delay her departure? Do you think she would?”

“Hmmm...he doesn’t want to be too forward,” Oscar hummed, as they plotted and planned the event between them. “From what I understand, she fears that all men are the same as her lost love, Rodriguez.”

“Yes, you are quite right. Silas needs to win her over gently. I am going to suggest that he discuss Rodriguez with her, so that he can convince her that is nothing like that scoundrel,” Vera said, pausing before opening the study door to leave. She was feeling excited as she plotted with her husband on how to save true love.

Turning around to wish her husband luck in his part, she found him standing right behind her, the written letter in his hand. Feeling proud of him, she threw her arms around his neck, kissing him for helping her.

“Is that my reward for assisting you?” Oscar grinned happily, leaning in to enjoy his wife’s kiss. “Could we take this to the bedchamber perhaps?”

His efforts got him a small slap on the arm, “Don’t be so preposterous, Oscar. We do not have time for dallying. I have much to do before Giovanna arrives. I must convince my brother that he needs to confess his love for her.”

“I have but one question, my love,” Oscar said, embracing his wife as she leaned into his strong chest. “What if Silas doesn’t want his sister meddling

in his affairs?”

“I will remind him that it falls upon his sister to come to his rescue and force his hand,” Vera replied, convincing herself their plan was the only way. “Otherwise, he will lose the woman he loves.”

“I am almost envious,” Oscar said, leaning in for yet another peck of her lips. “That their love is at the beginning. Beginnings are the most exciting.”

“Are you saying that our love is no longer exciting?” Vera asked, shocked at her husband’s words.

Oscar pulled her in even tighter, “You know I do not say that. Our love is as wonderful as it ever was. Though I do recall how excited I was when you wore that mask at your first masquerade ball, and we danced together. You must admit, it was very thrilling.”

“You’re right, beginnings are exciting, but they are also worrying,” she said, snuggling into his arms for comfort. “I, for one, prefer to have you by my side daily, so that I can share my love with you.”

“I would not change a thing, my love,” Oscar said, squeezing his wife lovingly. “And I will be glad when this is all over, and I can have you all to myself again.”

“Tonight, husband, I am yours. But only when I have performed my role as my brother, and he has won over Giovanna’s heart,” Vera promised.

CHAPTER 30

After rummaging through the laundry with the help of Mary, the laundry maid, Vera was ready to knock on her brother's door once again.

"You must let me in, Silas," she pleaded as he ignored him. "I have something to say to you that is most urgent."

Standing outside his bedchamber door dressed in her brother's clothes was making her want to burst out into giggles. But she played it cool and continued to tap on his door, he had to open it sooner or later.

Finally, she heard the click of the lock on the inside and the door opened just a little.

"Go away Vera, I am not in the mood," Silas said through the gap in the door, without showing himself.

"There is something that you must see, Brother," Vera persisted, waiting for the door to open a little further.

Silas showed his face, and it was not a pretty sight.

"What the blazes!" he called out, pulling the door open fully to look upon the duchess dressed in his clothes. "What are you doing?"

"Do you like it?" Vera asked, attempting to stand like a man with a stiff pose and her head held high. "Am I a convincing Silas Atkins?"

Silas' sunken face broke and a grin formed on his mouth.

"You look uncannily like me, you little minx," he said, going to hug his sister for her efforts to cheer him. "Though you haven't grown nowhere near tall enough and my jacket hangs from your shoulders like a sack of potatoes."

Vera did a twirl for him as she waltzed into his room. "I am here to show you the happier side of your nature. As your sister, it is my duty to pull you from your misery."

Silas couldn't help but laugh, his sister was mad, but he loved her efforts nonetheless.

"Consider me cheered and get my clothes off, you'll ruin them," he said in jest as he went to sit in a chair by the window.

"Seriously, Silas, I am here to discuss things before you sink into oblivion with your sulking mood," Vera said, going to stand by his chair.

"It's very hard to talk to myself," Silas grinned again, looking at his sister's outfit. "And what is that moustache you have drawn below your nose? I don't have one, and if I did, it would be better than that thin line."

"Bah! It was merely to emphasise my maleness, but I am here on a serious mission, brother," Vera stressed to him. "We will discuss Giovanna and we will do it right now."

Silas's face went sullen again, "No, Sister, there is nothing to be done. She might even be gone by now," he said with a gravelly voice.

"I happen to know she is not gone," Vera announced, cleverly. "She is on her way here to see you, because you sent for her."

"What have you done, Vera?" Silas asked, jumping from his chair.

"We have sent her an invitation to come to Welwick Hall at once," Vera explained.

"Who is 'we?' Why can you not leave keep your nose out of my—"

Vera raised her hand to stop Silas from speaking, "There is no time for complaining. Oscar and I are in this together because we are determined to force your hand. You will admit to Giovanna of your love for her, and you will convince her that you are nothing like Rodriguez, do you hear? I know that you love her, Silas, I can tell these things in my twin brother, and it is driving me to despair."

"Vera, it is not for me to force Giovanna's hand," Silas complained, pacing the floor.

"Yes it is, and that is exactly what you shall do," Vera answered, unwilling to listen to his moaning. "She is on her way here because you have said you have things to ask her. Use your common sense, Brother, and make sure that you keep her. Do you hear me? She is the best thing to happen to you in your entire life. Now then, I will be waiting downstairs and I will not take off this outfit until I see you down there."

With that order, Vera marched from his room praying that she had done enough to motivate him into meeting with Giovanna.

* * *

Having sobbed for far too long, Giovanna had no more tears to shed. She scolded herself for her weakness, pacing around her bedchamber floor.

I profess to be a strong-minded, cool-headed businesswoman, yet I sit and cry over things I have no control over, what sort of strength is that? she asked herself, angry at how her emotions were overwhelming her. *I must change things and do something about this. I am a woman who travelled hundreds of miles for my estate. So, yes...*

"I can, and I will," she whispered, heading to open her door and dash down the stairway.

"A letter has arrived for you, Giovanna," Mattia informed her, holding it up. "A messenger has only this minute delivered it."

She could see the Welwick Hall seal, "It has to be from Silas," she called out, snatching it from her cousin's hand.

"Whoa!" he yelled at the speed she'd taken the letter from his hands. "What has got into you, Cousin?"

"Sorry, Mattia, but I need to read it, quickly," Giovanna explained, breaking the seal and unfolding the piece of paper.

"He...he wants to see me," she stammered, feeling a wave of nausea that at last they might be able to talk. "I must go, Mattia. I have to leave now."

"I should come with you, Giovanna, it is dark out there," Mattia insisted, getting up from the table where he had been reading.

"No, I want to go alone," she insisted. "I will borrow the neighbour's horse, I know the mare well, she will get me there safely."

"Giovanna, no," Mattia complained, but she went to grab her coat, ignoring his plea.

"I do not want you there, Mattia," she cried back to him. "Can you go to our neighbour and explain that I have borrowed one of their horses? I do not have time to go and seek their permission."

With that request, she left the cottage, running to the barn where the neighbour's horse was stabled. As quickly as she could, she saddled the same mare that she'd ridden to Falmouth. It was a huge working horse, used for tilling the fields, but she was familiar with large horses at home too.

The horse's hooves thudded on the hard, dry ground as she set off at a gallop. Finding her way in the darkness might not be easy, but she didn't care, getting to Silas was all that mattered. Most of the trail was on a

highway. Though she could barely see a few yards in front, not knowing if anyone was coming the other way. A coach would have its lamp lit, and she was sure that her horse would sense if another horse was on the road.

Time flew as she dashed to Welwick Hall, and she was soon passing through the open gateway. Giovanna wasted no time, running to hammer on the main, front door of the manor house. Surely Silas would answer? The door opened, but it was not Silas, it was the house butler, looking at her in surprise.

“Lady Giovanna, how...? Please...it is terribly late, come in and take off your coat,” Barker said, with a worried look in his eyes.

“I must speak with Mr Silas, please, has he gone to his bed yet?” she asked, praying she wasn’t waking up the entire household.

“No, my lady, I do believe that I saw him going into the parlour. Let me take you to him,” Barker replied, leading her to the parlour room.

He opened the door, and she stepped inside, only to see Silas standing by a burning fire in the hearth. He had his back to her, but she was sure he was aware of her arrival.

Remaining standing close to the door, Giovanna spoke, “I am thankful for this opportunity to speak with one another, Silas,” she began. “I have much to answer for in my behaviour towards you, but you have to understand that I can see no future for us. Whichever way I look at it I cannot begin to understand how we could make it work. I cannot risk my family home; it is everything to me.”

Why was he not turning around? It was causing her to feel shunned that he kept his back to her.

“You have asked me to meet with you, yet you refuse to speak,” Giovanna tried again. “You must surely know of my past? Of Rodriguez and how he misled me. I thought that he loved me, but all the while he only sought to control me and take over my padre’s land.”

Pausing, she attempted to calm her breathing, her heavy breaths were causing her to feel lightheaded.

“I love my home, Silas,” she continued. “It has taken many generations of hard work and commitment to work the land and secure the future for our family name. I know you think of me as uncaring for you, that I choose my homeland over you. But I beg you to understand what Rodriguez did to me. I do know if I can ever trust the love of man ever again.”

Still, Silas did not answer her. Perhaps she too should turn her back, and

walk out of the door, never to look back at him. What did she need to do or say to get his attention?

“Marriage, love, I sometimes feel that it is all out of my reach,” she said, baring her heart and soul in the hope that he may reply. “You have visited Italy and come to know its proud people and their ways. So, you must know that family ties mean everything to every Italian man and woman. What we build up as a family, is what we pass on to the next generation. My padre did not have a son, nor did he have any other children, so it falls on me to protect what has been created in our family name. It is everything to us, so I beg you, Silas, to understand that...”

Giovanna sighed and stopped talking. She looked upon his back still, wondering why he had invited her to his fireside when he had no intention of speaking with her. A wave of fatigue made her head feel foggy and she moved to take a seat. If she had remained standing, she was sure her legs would have given way. The speedy horse ride to the Manor House had taken its toll on her body.

“Is it all for nought that I answer your call, Silas?” she asked, too tired to express her true frustrations at his ignorance. “Why could you not have come to me?” she queried, with a feeling of frustration ever-growing at his imprudent behaviour.

“Pah! You English as so arrogant, always wanting others to run around after you,” she said, gesticulating her arm as she stood up in annoyance. “Why send for me, Silas? If you have nothing to say?”

Giovanna felt in half a mind to approach him and force him to turn and face her, but she resisted and slumped back into a chair. For a while, she played his game and sat in silence, although it was more because she felt close to tears and needed to calm her nerves.

“Well, if this is all you have to say after I have opened my heart to you,” she began again. “Then I will continue with my journey home and put any memory of you behind me. I am sure that in time we shall forget each other. After all, our meeting here will not be very memorable, will it?”

What was wrong with him? Why would he send her a letter to come and visit him this night, when he had nothing to say? Giovanna was confused and could feel her temper rising. But rather than shout at him, she felt her tears threatening to burst out, yet again.

All I ever do is cry over you, Silas Atkins, she thought to herself, saying no more words; what was the point?

Silas was seemingly not listening to her anyway, otherwise, he would have responded. What game was it that he played?

“I love you, Silas,” she finally admitted, though it was now through sorrowful tears.

Giovanna’s breath caught in her throat as she said the words. At last, she had admitted the truth of it. Dropping her head, she scooped her face in her hands, uncaring that tears streaked down her cheeks. A bitter taste in her mouth caused her to cough as a wave of nausea clumped like a hard knot in her stomach.

Still, the man she loved was standing stubbornly with his back to her.

“Can you not see how afraid I am of losing you?” she asked, her voice hoarse, but it didn’t matter, he wasn’t listening. “That is why I push you away at every moment. And the kiss that night, I wanted that kiss, Silas, but I could not...”

Pausing in her words, Giovanna gulped back her breath, feeling as if her lungs were empty of air and she might choke.

“I...I know that our lives together could never work,” she whispered, now speaking to herself rather than to Silas.

She didn’t even look over at him anymore, sitting back in the chair she felt alone with her thoughts.

“I could never live in England. You could never live in Italy. So, I see little hope in any life together,” she said with a hushed voice, nodding her head as if agreeing with herself. “If only you knew how much my heart desires you. If only you could understand what it is that I feel for you.”

Again, she sobbed into her hands, although quietly to herself. Her heart felt heavy, and she even forgot that Silas was standing before her. In her mind, she was alone, as she had always been with this problem. Unable to share her worries with any other because no one could ever understand her predicament as much as she did.

Others would only advise her to forget her home, but that was something she could never do. Her padre was her life, he meant more to her than any romance. And judging by Silas’ ignorance, she was beginning to accept that she meant very little to him. A quick kiss in a carriage, a few dances upon the ballroom floor.

“I see now that I was right,” she said to herself. “You and I could never have worked. You are a travelled man, why would you want only one woman in your life? I understand, Silas, though I am confused why you said that you

wanted to speak with me.”

Silently she wept again, forgetting where she was or who she was with. In her mind, she wished she was at home in Italy. She wished she'd never come to England, and then this would never have happened.

True love is nothing but empty dreams and a broken heart, she wept. Yet, here I am, experiencing it for the second time in my life.

CHAPTER 31

Vera could sense that Giovanna had stood up, by the sound of her voice as she spoke. “That is it, Silas, I cannot have my heart broken a second time, and that is why I have pushed you away all this time. There, now you know. What is more, I am leaving you now, and you can forget that I was ever here. Goodness knows why you called for me when all you do is turn your back. Goodbye Silas, I do not wish to see you again before I leave for my homeland.”

Vera hadn’t known what to do when Giovanna mistook her as Silas. The room was dimly lit, which must have played its part in the deception. Vera thought her friend must be so emotional that she hadn’t noticed Silas’ form was smaller.

Still disguised as Silas, Vera approached Giovanna, who was standing by the door. How she was going to explain this mistake she had no idea, but she had to admit to it out of respect for Giovanna. She kept her head low, looking at the floor. Once she was standing in front of Giovanna, Vera took hold of her hands in hers.

Giovanna glanced at Vera and gasped, pulling her hands away as if touching hot coals. But it was a great relief for Vera to know that at last, Giovanna had realised her mistake.

“What?” Giovanna called out, staring at Vera with a wide-eyed, fiery stare. “What is this?”

“I must speak with you, Giovanna, or all will be lost,” Vera said, keeping her eyes locked with Giovanna’s.

“Who?” Giovanna hadn’t quite understood what was happening. “You are an imposter. Who are you, sir?”

Vera undid the cravat she wore around her neck, and took a pin from her hair, letting it loose around her shoulders.

“Duchess? Is...is that you?” Giovanna asked. “I... Why would you do this to me?”

“That is a good question, Giovanna,” the duchess replied, sharing a gentle smile. “Because I never meant for this to—”

“This is trickery!” Giovanna snapped. “You are mocking me.”

“No, Giovanna, my brother does not even know that I you are here yet,” the duchess began to explain.

“Why? Why do you dress as a man?” Giovanna asked, puzzled and annoyed, as Vera could see in her dark eyes.

“You might say that I have a history of interfering when I know that true love is at risk,” the duchess admitted. “But in this instance I couldn’t declare myself because I am trying to bring you two together,” she raised her palms to express herself.

“I do not understand. What is it that you think you can do?” Giovanna asked, and from her tone, it became obvious that she was still annoyed with the duchess’ deception.

“I sent the message to you, as if Silas had written it. At the same time, I have been working on my brother too. Otherwise, I fear that you two may regret ignoring one another,” the duchess said, walking over to the drink’s table. “Can I pour you a sweet sherry to calm your nerves? I know that I need one,” she said, raising her hand. “Look, my hands are trembling. This is not easy for me either, Giovanna.”

The duchess turned to pour two sherries and then approached Giovanna, who took hers automatically. Vera could see that her friend was still shocked at her behaviour.

“You answered my brother’s calling, Giovanna, which proved my suspicions,” the duchess said, taking a seat on the couch.

“I am confused. What suspicions?” Giovanna asked, staying in the same spot and holding her sherry glass tightly in her hands.

“That you love Silas,” Vera answered, taking another sip of the sweet sherry to settle her own nerves.

“You have proved nothing,” Giovanna barked. “How dare you mislead me like this. You are supposed to be my friend, yet you mock me by playing cruel jokes such as this.”

“That is not what I am doing, Giovanna, and I am your friend. That’s why

I have attempted to get you to admit the truth of things,” the duchess reasoned, hoping to placate her friend. “I have watched you, both of you, as your relationship has blossomed. You must understand something about my brother, he has never wanted to fall in love. He has a terrible habit of pushing people away. Look what he did to Lucy, and I know that he loved her once, not so long ago.”

“Hah! Did you try to trick her too?” Giovanna asked, outraged at being made a fool of.

“Please, Giovanna, come and sit with me so that I can explain myself to you,” the duchess said, but Giovanna moved further away from the sofa.

“Very well, I will explain anyway,” the duchess tried again, remaining calm so that Giovanna would stay and listen to her. “As you know, my brother and I were born into servitude. Our father was a seaman and never returned, so it was up to our mother to raise us.” Vera paused for another sip of sherry, seeking comfort in her glass as she brought up such difficult memories of their past. “Silas and I have always been protective of one another; one supposes it’s because we are twins.”

“I do not see how this has anything to do with your trickery, Duchess,” Giovanna spat. “You had no right to make me believe that Silas wanted me.”

“Ah...but that was not supposed to happen. I was waiting for Silas to arrive. Goodness where he has got to,” the duchess said, standing up. “If I had not intervened, my brother would have let you go, and you would have let him go too.”

“Then it proves that he does not want me, so why do you interfere?” Giovanna asked.

“I attempted to speak with my brother earlier, but he locks himself away in his room,” the duchess confessed. “It’s not like him, Giovanna. Being his twin sister, I have picked up some things over the last month, such as his unusual behaviour. He has fallen in love and does not know what to do. He is lost, and only you can help him.”

At last, Giovanna came towards her and took a seat on the sofa. Vera could see that she was deep in thought, so she sat back down again, remaining silent. The duchess once again took hold of Giovanna’s hands, noticing that she was still trembling. Vera squeezed with a kind gentleness, sharing a warm smile as she looked at Giovanna.

“You must believe me, Giovanna, that I do this because my brother will never forgive himself if he lets you go,” Vera said with a reassuring voice.

“Yet neither of you are doing anything about it, and that is what frustrates me. I cannot sit idly by and watch you lose you each other, you are both special to me.”

“Do you believe that he loved Lucy?” Giovanna asked, her eyes looking unsure.

“Not really,” Vera surmised. “They were childhood friends and he never saw himself as ever becoming her husband. But with you it is different. Have you ever heard of lovesickness? That is what I very much believe he is suffering from, even as we speak.”

“It is not all Silas’ fault,” Giovanna said in a small voice. “I pushed him away, even though I did not want to. But Rodriguez has scarred my heart and left me feeling like a frightened rabbit.”

“I know, Giovanna, but please do not compare Silas to that man, they are nothing alike,” the duchess was quick to point out.

She noticed that Giovanna had broken into a little chuckle, “What is so amusing in all of this mess?” the duchess half smiled.

“It is very strange speaking to a duchess who is dressed as a man,” Giovanna said light-heartedly.

Vera started to laugh too, “Yes, I suppose it is,” she agreed. “But if I am successful in making you two see sense, then I would do it all over again. It has saved more than one romance, I assure you.”

“Why did you do it before?” Giovanna asked, curiosity getting the better of her. “It seems a strange thing to do.”

“Well, I got the idea from a Shakespeare play, the Twelfth Night,” the duchess shared. “I was secretly in love with the Duke, and suspected that he was to marry Lady Olive.”

“Was Lady Olive in love with him too?” Giovanna asked in surprise. Lady Olive was one of the duchess’ best friends. “Only, it will be very awkward for you if she is.”

“No, she never was, it was only my belief. I delivered a message to her to meet with an anonymous messenger. That is when I pretended to be my brother,” the duchess said with a fond smile as she recalled it all. “I wanted to warn that she should only marry the Duke if she truly loved him. I suppose I was warning her off because I couldn’t bare it if he was unhappy in their joining.”

“Sounds to me as if you were the one madly in love,” Giovanna noted.

“I was. Which is why I understand the situation between you and Silas.

Being in love can cloud one's judgement, and all you can think about is that first kiss with one other," the duchess chuckled.

"Yes, I do not know if you have heard that he tried to kiss me and how I reacted," Giovanna said, throwing her arms in the air as she expressed herself. "I almost slapped him, and then I ran away."

"But I do believe that you wanted Silas' kiss, did you not?" the duchess asked.

Giovanna nodded her head in admittance, looking down at her hands as if she was trying to hide her shame.

"You do not need me to tell you that Silas is a good man," the duchess told her, not saying any more about the lost kiss. "Perhaps having a twin sister gave him a sense of how to treat a woman. I do believe that my brother is a sensitive soul. That is why he is in his room now, ruminating over your rejection as he tries to mend his broken heart."

"I refused his kiss because I was confused. Think of it, Duchess, I live in Italy, and he lives in England," Giovanna pointed out. "I have no idea how that would work because I cannot leave my homeland."

"You will never know if you do not give him a chance," the duchess said. "As for the love between you two, he is suffering as much as you are. I know because that was why I called you here, to get you two together."

"You could have simply asked me if I loved your brother instead of making a fool of me," Giovanna said, moving her arms over Vera's outfit.

"If anyone is the fool, it is me," the duchess admitted. "I didn't want to push you together if you did not love him. After my little performance, I do believe you feel the same way as he does. So, now it is up to you two."

"No. I am sorry but all of this changes nothing, Duchess," Giovanna said, standing up. "I still cannot see how we can ever be together, Silas and I. You tell me that he loves me too, but that only makes it hurt all the more. I can see no future for us, ever."

Before Vera could say another word, Giovanna was heading for the door. The duchess knew there was nothing she could do to stop her. She had tried to force her hand and it had not worked. Giovanna was afraid of commitment as much as Silas, that much was obvious.

"Please, Giovanna, wait for my brother, he will tell you—"

"No, Duchess, I cannot bear to look upon him, for I love him so much. I...I must go."

And that was it, Vera watched on helplessly as Giovanna fled. She had to

go and find Silas...

CHAPTER 32

Giovanna was disappointed at being tricked into rushing to Welwick Hall. To make matters worse, she hadn't even seen Silas. But the more she thought of it, the more she convinced herself that it was for the best. When she'd received her invitation to see him, she thought he might have had all the answers. What a fool she'd been for thinking that such a thing; there simply were no answers to their conundrum.

Marching out of the parlour room, where she'd made an utter fool of herself, she dashed to the main door. Stepping outside into the darkness of the night, Giovanna couldn't see the horse that she'd left tied to a post. The mare must have been taken in by one of the stable hands, so she headed that way.

It was a chilly evening and Giovanna hadn't come out very well prepared, so she shivered in the night air. Hopefully, she'd be back at the cottage soon, once she'd managed to locate her horse.

Arriving at the stable, she headed inside to look for her mare. There was no one around so Giovanna shouted out to get someone's attention.

"Hello!" she yelled and was soon answered by the appearance of a sleepy young stable hand.

"Can I 'elp you miss?" the lad asked, looking a bit surprised to see her.

"Have you taken in the mare that I tied up in front of the big house?" Giovanna enquired.

"No, miss," he said, yawning as if he'd only that moment woken up. "I been asleep, up in the hay loft. No one ain't brought any 'orses in here this night. Your 's must have wandered off."

"Yes, I suppose that's possible, I was in a hurry at the time," Giovanna agreed. "Thank you, boy, and I am sorry to have woken you."

“Do you want me ‘elp miss, to find your ‘orse?” he asked. “I can get my master too.”

Shaking her head, Giovanna answered, “No, I can manage. Go back to your sleep. Here boy, take a coin for your troubles,” she said, handing him a shilling from a small purse in her pocket.

Giovanna didn’t feel too concerned about her situation; she was confident she’d soon find the horse. Setting off in the darkness, she followed the trail home. No doubt the horse would have followed the road until it sensed somewhere to graze. Such a large horse would soon get hungry and stop to eat more than once no doubt.

Passing through the gates of Welwick Hall, she started to worry a little that there was still no sign of the horse.

“How could a horse so large have lost itself?” she questioned under her breath. “Lord, it could be all the way home by now.”

Pushing on, she had to keep going because it was a long way back to the cottage on foot. Her nervousness increased as she walked along the road in the pitch black.

Why ever did I go to Silas’ calling? I would not be in this mess if the duchess hadn’t decided to interfere, she pondered, stepping cautiously on the rough road underfoot. What if a villain appears out of nowhere? He might murder me, knowing I am all alone.

Terrifying thoughts flitted through her mind, now that she was further along the trail home. Giovanna knew the way, but she felt so vulnerable in the dark.

The skies were clear, and she could see thousands of tiny twinkling dots against the deep black void above. It wasn’t a full moon though, so she couldn’t see the road very well, which hadn’t bothered her too much on her journey to Welwick Hall. She’d been in too much of a hurry to meet with Silas to think about murderers and the scary sounds of the night.

“This is all your fault, Silas,” she mumbled to herself, shivering. “And Vera’s too, for interfering.”

Something caused her to stop. Was that noise the thumping of hooves? It couldn’t be her horse, not at such a galloping pace, so she didn’t hang around to find out. Giovanna nipped through a gap in some bushes so that she could hide out of sight. Not staying by the roadside, she wanted to keep going though, so she walked among the trees at the side of the road. She intended to return to the road further on.

Without realising, she'd headed deeper into the dense woodland. It wasn't long before she realised that she must have wandered away from the road because she couldn't find it.

The terrifying screech of a fox sounded out, not far behind her. It was so chilling and high-pitched, that she imagined it was some other poor woman being murdered.

"Where am I?" she sighed, trying desperately to find her way out of the woodland.

Arriving at an open glade, she almost fell over a huge tree trunk laying across the bracken. By now, Giovanna was beginning to tire, so she took a seat on the felled tree. Getting her breath back, she listened out for the sounds of the night, shivering from the cold.

"I have no idea where I am," she said to herself, wishing she'd never stepped foot in these cold lands of England. "Home is so much warmer. How I wish I was home with you right now, Padre," she sobbed, losing control of her dithering emotions.

An owl hooted in the tree above her. Giovanna looked up to see it but all she could see were a pair of bright lemon-coloured eyes, glaring down at her. It caused her to jump up, her heart thumping hard inside her chest. She knew it was only the owl's eyes, but it still gave her a frightening scare.

Setting off again, Giovanna tripped over a root on the uneven floor beneath and found herself laying on the prickly woodland ground. Smelling the greenery of the leaves surrounding her, she scampered to her feet, catching her hand on a razor-sharp gauze branch. The stinging prickle sent an agonising pain up her arm, causing her to cry out as she shook the branch away from herself.

All around, tall, dark tree trunks overshadowed her. Their limbs hung out in all directions, cutting out what slithers of grey light she had. A sickly, sweet smell of decay hit her nostrils, somewhere close by was a dead animal, she was sure of it. This was a deathly quiet place, other than the occasional eerie sounds of the wild animals.

Do they have wolves in England or bears? She questioned, unsure what might be running free in the impenetrable darkness. *No. I'm sure there are no dangerous animals,* she convinced herself so that she could stop any panic from setting in.

Surrounded by murky shadows, she gasped and panted as she rushed in what she thought was the direction of the road. It felt as if the trees had

engulfed her, and she would never see the light of day again. The tall trunks appeared like sinister sentries, staring down at her, and she had no idea which way to turn.

* * *

Silas ran down the stairs after his hot bath. He'd wanted to clean up for Giovanna's arrival, having spent days in his room unwashed. Entering the parlour, he was greeted by Vera, still in her disguise but looking pale and agitated.

"What is it, Vera?" he asked, knowing by her face that something bad had happened. "Is Giovanna not here yet?"

Behind him, Oscar came dashing into the room, "Was that the main door I heard banging?" he asked as Vera ran into his arms sobbing. "Oh no, what has happened my sweet?"

"I've ruined everything," she sobbed. "Giovanna was here, and she thought I was you, Silas. She poured her heart out to me. Then, when she knew it was me, she fled, saying there was no hope."

"What? Out into the night on her own?" Silas asked. "How did she get here?"

"I...I don't know, I never asked," Vera wept. She was about to explain things better, when the head groom came, knocking on the parlour door.

"Excuse me botherin' you, Your Grace," he said, frowning with anxiety. "My stable lad just told me that Lady Giovanna's gone off along the road in search of her missing horse. I'm assuming no one knows of this?"

"On her own?" Vera sang out. "I... I'm so sorry Silas, I had no idea—"

"Well, how did you think she'd got here if none of us sent her a carriage?" Silas growled at his sister. "Sometimes, Sister, you are more than a fool," he snapped, turning to leave the room. "I have to go and find her before she gets hurt out there."

"Wait! I will go with you, Silas," Oscar called after him. "You too," he instructed the groom. "Go and get the stable hands to help us search, she cannot have gone far on foot."

Silas grabbed a large outdoor coat from the coat stand, not even knowing if it was his. It was to warm Giovanna, when he found her. Furious with his sister, he felt that this was all her doing. When it was all over, he was going to give her a piece of his mind. Role acting belonged on stage, not in real life.

Why couldn't his sister ever grow up?

He heard Vera call after him, that she would take a carriage to Giovanna's cottage, in case she turned up at that end. Not replying, he dashed outside, only to be hit by the cold night air.

"Oh, Sister!" he growled, running to the stable to get a horse saddled and start his search on the road between here and Giovanna's cottage. "Hell, she'll be terrified," he continued to grumble as he paced the stable yard awaiting his horse.

As soon as the stable boy brought out the saddled horse, he mounted it and galloped off.

I'm coming, my love, keep safe, for God's sake, please be safe...

CHAPTER 33

With teeth chattering from the frozen air, Giovanna felt terrified. What had started as an act of impulse by riding to Silas' call, had ended up with her lost and scared in a dense forest.

It felt as if she'd been lost for hours, and her mind played tricks with her.

With every creak of a branch, she imagined that someone was following her.

Every screech of a fox could be yet another murder.

The trees were alive, staring down at her with eyes that peered out of every branch.

The very air itself cloyed at her throat, and she wondered if evil spirits had found her. Were they trying to suck out her very soul?

"I am going to die in this place, I know it," she said between trembling lips.

I will die in this woods and no one will ever find me. I will never see Padre again, or my cousins, Giovanna thought, and couldn't even sob a single tear at the concept of her death because she was far too cold.

I will never get to know you, Silas. If I had only been truthful with you. We could have married and had children of our own, she imagined. Her entire body ached and burned all at the same time. *Hah! Now I admit such a thing to myself, and now it is too late.*

Pushing her body, she tried to keep going, thinking that the forest must end sooner or later. But once again she tripped over, her body sprawled across a rock that stuck out of the cold earth.

I cannot give up. I must keep walking, she motivated herself into getting up again. *Is that the sound of someone following me? Could it be my horse?*

she wondered, hopefully.

Forcing one step at a time, she moved on at a slow pace, the effort painful on her mind and body.

Yes, Silas, I do love you, she told herself, thinking that if she kept Silas focused in her head, other bad thoughts could not infiltrate.

But other images crept into her mind. She imagined being cornered by some giant hungry wolf that she'd heard tell of in Italian folklore.

Collapsing to the frozen floor, the words formed in her mind, *In bocca al lupo.* Into the wolf's mouth," she repeated in English, recalling the words of an ancient Roman poet.

He wrote of an ancient king who would only serve his gods with gifts of human flesh. His gods were not happy with this, so they punished him, by turning him into a wolf that ate human flesh and nothing else.

God be with me; she countered against the haunting world of nightmares; and began praying to get through the night.

Still, her thoughts could not be calmed. Giovanna envisioned the *Serpente regolo*, a legendary giant snake that lived in the Italian mountains. Suddenly she imagined she might fall into a large pit of snakes, and they would eat her alive.

Again, she got up and moved on, panting, and gasping for air as her lungs fought for oxygen against the chilly night air.

Something stirred in a bush nearby. Glancing at it, Giovanna could make out the shape of a black and white creature, so she ran in the opposite direction. Falling into a bracken bush, she screamed out at the sickening pain.

What was that creature? She panicked, laying still so it wouldn't hear her.

After enduring the razor-sharp prickles for as long as she could, she tried to move but was unsure how to untangle herself from the sharp branches.

Slowly, she picked at each branch, willing herself to remain calm. The fabric of her dress tore several times and knew that when they did eventually discover her corpse, they might not even recognise who she was.

"Oh Silas, Silas!" she called out, wishing he was with her, rescuing her from certain doom.

Thoughts of never seeing her padre, or Mattias, or any of her many cousins again, flitted through her head once again.

At last, she was free of the sharp branches, but she'd taken many injuries to get out of it. She moved on again. Now and then stopping because of a

cracking twig, or a hooting owl in the distance.

I am perfectly safe. I have just become lost in the dark of the night, she told herself, knowing that her thoughts were becoming too irrational.

Moving from tree to tree, she clung to the strong trunks. Her wide-eyed stare flitted around as she looked out for danger. Danger never came, but it did not stop the fear in her head.

Another shrill cry of a fox sounded out, but she forced herself to remain strong.

“It is nothing but a creature of the night,” she mumbled, dashing to another tree. “The trees are your friend, Giovanna,” she convinced herself, using them to hide.

Without warning, Giovanna’s stomach lurched and she keeled over, vomiting onto the earth before her.

“This is too much; I can take no more!”

It is hopeless, her mind told her as she collapsed to the floor, her back leaning against a hard tree trunk.

She could feel the hard, knobbly outline of the bark against her back, her clothing in tatters. Although she felt frozen to the bones, there remained a dampness of sweat on her brow. Giovanna didn’t know whether she felt fear, anger, or simply sheer desperation.

A curdling scream sounded out and she jumped up. Although she knew it was nothing, her mind still played tricks as imagined murderers and monsters, demons and ghosts, witches and...

“Stop it!” she cried out into the dark, determined to keep some self-control, even if everything she did seemed futile. But she felt so helpless, unable to keep her mind focused on the reality of what was happening to her. As the hysterics faded, she stood up, rubbing at her eyes. That was when she spotted something in the distance...

It appeared like the shape of a building, large and dark, but it was real, she was sure of it. Forcing herself to move, she panted in relief that there may yet be hope. The shape grew in size as she neared it until she was within a good enough distance to see that it was a wooden cabin.

Laughing like a madwoman, she wavered in her steps, dashing to clamber up the creaky, wooden stairway. There was no time to knock, she needed to get in there and seek help from whoever lived in it. The door opened as she leaned on it too hard, and she fell to the floor.

The cabin was empty of life, and at first, she felt disappointed that there

was no one to save her. But as she heard a growl from a distant bush, she rushed to slam the door shut.

Still in the dark, she felt around the door for some kind of locking mechanism but found nothing.

“What the hell was that?” she asked herself, but there was no one around to answer her fears.

As her eyes adjusted to the single room, she could see the shape of a table. With every ounce of strength, she moved it towards the door. Finding a renewed energy, Giovanna piled chairs onto the table, lending it a bit of weight should an animal try to open the door.

Stepping backwards, she looked upon her makeshift blockade, and for the first time since she'd become lost, she felt a little safer. Her panting slowed and the heavy pain in her chest seemed to have eased. Looking around, she spotted a small bed. Heading in that direction, she was quick to collapse on the dirty, straw mattress.

It felt like heaven, or perhaps she was in heaven because she was already dead.

Finally, the tears came, and she allowed herself to sob. To begin with, she wept out loud, feeling as if all hope was lost, even though she'd found the cabin. Soon, her tears began to fade, and her mind took on more clarity.

“No, all is not lost, I can survive in here, I am sure of it,” she told herself.

Her body felt heavy, and her mind soon fogged up again. Giovanna had never felt so tired in all her life. Closing her eyes, images of Silas came to mind. The irrational fears of monsters and demons were all but forgotten.

“I should have told you, Silas,” she murmured. “But I couldn't even admit it to myself how much I love you.”

And now, when you find me, I may be gone from this world. I can never tell you the truth of how I felt about you, my love. Because I was always too scared. Yes, I was a coward.

Something banged on the outside of the cabin, causing Giovanna to jump from the bed.

“Is there no end to this fear?” she shouted out, her dread returning and her heart pounding. “I hate being alone in this godforsaken place.”

Her body wavered as she listened out for any more terrifying noises, but none came. Soon, her eyes closed, even though she attempted to stay alert. Her body was drained and she returned to sit on the edge of the bed.

Pulling a blanket from the bed, she wrapped it around her shoulders. For a

moment she thought she ought to search for a weapon, but what was the point? Giovanna half expected that she would die in this place anyway.

I will be better off dead; her thoughts rang out as her emotions dipped again. I'm incapable of knowing what to do when a man loves me, all I do is punish him. No man will ever want a woman like me, who is afraid of her own shadow.

She lay on the bed, her thoughts swirling with despair.

I pretend to be a businesswoman, but I am useless, she told herself. Without the help of Silas and his family, I would have gained nothing. I pretended I was clever and needed no one, but all the time I was lying to myself.

Again, her tears flowed, and again her energy waned until she felt her mind drifting. Now and then she shot into wakefulness, knowing she needed to stay alert. But it was getting harder to stay awake each time. Soon, all was blank in her mind as the darkness overcame her thoughts. At last, she had found peace, in a deep dark sleep.

CHAPTER 34

Vera prayed that she would find Giovanna safely in her cottage. She'd instructed her driver to ride as fast as he could, and that he was to look out for anyone on the highway as they went by. She too watched out of the window of the carriage, hoping beyond hope that they would find Giovanna safe and well.

Why did I have to go and do my usual interfering, she constantly asked herself over and over, while on the journey. What was I thinking, not sending a carriage for her? I was so wrapped up in helping my brother, but all I did was make everything worse.

She punished herself with words of bitterness and regret. Vowing to herself that once Giovanna was found, she would never dress up as Silas again.

Why did I think that would help, dressing up as my brother? It was only meant to cheer him. Giovanna wasn't meant to see me, she punished herself with worry, only making her feel much worse. This is all my fault. I will never forgive myself if you are harmed in any way Giovanna. Brother, I am so very, very sorry.

The Duchess was in a pitiful state. She knew that had she not sent that invitation for Giovanna to go to Welwick Hall immediately, none of this would have happened. But she'd acted on instinct, which had always been impulsive.

Well, not anymore, she chastised. I will learn to stop and think first...oh please Giovanna, please be safe and well.

Vera rubbed frantically at the carriage glass window as if her rubbing at it hard might lend her sight of Giovanna. She couldn't see much as she watched

the haunting shapes of tall, gnarly trees pass them by.

I cannot believe that you are out here alone, and it is all my fault, she blamed herself again and again.

She hadn't even noticed how much she was being jostled around inside the fast-moving carriage. But then a thought occurred to her, and she banged on the roof of the carriage to get the driver's attention. The carriage began to slow down, and she could hear the driver's voice instructing the horses to stop.

Not waiting for the driver to jump down and open the door, she pushed it open and dashed outside to speak with him. He hadn't even had the chance to clamber down from his seat yet, she'd been in such a hurry.

"Radmore, we had better slow down," she called up to him in a breathless panic. "I am worried that we may run her down if she is still on the road."

"Aye, Your Grace," Radmore called back as he climbed from his seat. "You should not get out of the carriage, my Lady. It is the middle of the night and who knows what might be lurking in the bushes."

"But Giovanna is out there," the duchess replied, straining her eyes to see among the dense tree trunks. "And she is all alone," she gasped.

"Please, my Lady, let me help you back into the carriage, and we will get on our way," Radmore said, attempting to get the duchess to turn around.

"But she might be out there, Radmore, we must save her," the duchess sobbed, worried sick over Giovanna's safety.

"Please, Duchess, I must insist that you return to the carriage," Radmore pleaded. "We are almost at the cottage. Lady Giovanna may even be there by now."

"Yes, Radmore," Vera nodded, not thinking straight because her mind was feeling weighed down with such a heavy burden.

She allowed Radmore to assist her back into the carriage, "I will drive a little slower," he informed her.

Once the carriage began to move again, Vera wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the chill from being outside.

"Where are you, Giovanna?" she sobbed, unashamed of her tears because all she cared about was her friend's safety.

A little further down the highway, Vera began to wonder how Giovanna could have got this far on foot. She knew that her friend was not on the road, and nor would she be home unless she'd managed to find her horse.

"Yes, perhaps that is it. She found the horse and has arrived home

safely,” she tried to convince herself, not thinking rationally. “I must believe that you are safe, I must.”

As the carriage stopped again, Vera didn’t notice the lack of motion until Radmore was standing at the open door.

“My Lady, can I assist you to the cottage door?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” she nodded. “Are we here?” she asked, confusion fogging her mind.

“We are, Your Grace, but there are no lights on in the house,” Radmore pointed out.

With Radmore by her side, she was grateful for his company. Vera tapped on the door, but there was no answer. She tried knocking louder but little noise came from her efforts.

“Shall I attempt to call them up, my Lady?” Radmore asked.

The duchess nodded and stepped back, allowing Radmore to hammer on the door.

“Who’s down there at this hour?” she heard a voice come from above her head.

Looking up, she could see someone leaning from an open window.

“Is that you Mattia?” Vera called up, a croak in her voice from her sobbing.

“Duchess?” Mattia asked, sounding surprised. “I am on my way down.”

The door opened moments later and a sleepy-looking Mattia stood in the doorway with a lighted lamp, “Come in, please, what are you doing here so late? Giovanna is with Silas, is she not?”

“Oh Mattia, it is all my fault,” Vera said, feeling lightheaded as she knew now was the time to face what she had done. “You must get dressed, we have to return to Welwick Hall if Giovanna is not here,” she said, hoping he would hurry.

“I am confused, Duchess, what is your fault?” he asked, looking worried.

“Please, you must make haste,” she replied. “I will wait for you in the carriage and explain on the journey.”

* * *

“It was my idea to send that invitation,” Vera admitted. “In an attempt to get two very stubborn people who love each other together. But it all went wrong.”

The duchess continued to explain the events of the evening, all the while fighting back her tears. She felt that she had no right to weep because she was the perpetrator of all that had come about.

“I can see that you blame yourself, Duchess, but you should not,” Mattia replied. “You were right to suspect that Giovanna is in love with your brother. I too was frustrated at the pair of them.”

“Yes, but I did not even think to send a carriage to collect her,” the duchess explained. “I was so wrapped up in my plan that I forgot it was so late.”

“My cousin would not allow me to accompany her, so keen was she to get to Silas,” Mattia explained. “So, it is my fault too because I allowed her to go alone.”

“Oh Mattia, what will we do if anything bad has happened to Giovanna?” Vera cried, unable to stop her tears now.

Mattia reached out and embraced her briefly, “Hush now, Duchess. From what you tell me, everyone is out looking for her. Besides, my cousin, she is a tough one.”

“She may very well be, but it is difficult for even the toughest of people to be lost in the middle of the night,” Vera remarked, biting on her nails. “In a foreign country at that,” she added in a flurry.

The carriage passed through the gates of Welwick Hall and Vera could see people walking around. She knew them to be members of the search party, but that didn’t ease her burden. The carriage was soon pulling up outside the hall, and Mattia went to assist the duchess.

“It seems that some of the search party is returning,” she said, glancing around at the servants she recognised. “I do hope it is because she has been found and is safe.”

Barker came out to greet her, the old butler looked tired.

“Is Giovanna safe?” the duchess asked, hopeful of a good answer. “Tell me all is well, Barker, please?”

“Alas, I cannot, Your Grace,” he replied. “But His Grace and young Silas are still out there searching.”

“Of course they are, neither will give up until she is found,” the duchess choked out the words.

“I am going too,” Mattia told her. “I cannot sit around while I know my cousin needs me.”

“No Mattia, you do not know these lands, and then you will be lost too,”

the duchess insisted. "Please, can you not stay with me?"

"I can stay until you are settled but then I must go in search of Giovanna," he offered. "How can I not? You must understand?"

"If you can wait for the others to arrive, I will get someone who knows the lay of the land well to go with you," the duchess suggested. "But you cannot go alone, Mattia."

Mattia agreed, and Barker led them into the drawing-room where everyone was gathering. It was Callahan who approached the duchess, he was their land manager and had been for many years.

"Duchess, the duke asked me to check on you," Callahan said. "He asked me to tell you not to blame yourself, as he is sure that is what you'll be doing."

The duchess could take no more and began to waver. She felt weak and lightheaded as her body began to fail her. A pair of strong arms grabbed her, saving her from tumbling to the floor. She felt herself being lifted, and when she started to come around, she was laying on a couch.

"What happened?" she asked, confused about where she was and what was happening. "Mattia, why are you here?"

"Hush, my Lady, you must lay your head back and close your eyes," his voice echoed in her head.

"I feel so dizzy, what is happening?" she mumbled, but soon the world was black.

CHAPTER 35

“We should have found her by now,” Silas panted, manoeuvring his horse to stand next to the duke’s. “Where do you think she is, Oscar?” he asked, rhetorically. Silas was sickened with worry over how long it was taking to find her.

“When we left the highway and parted ways, a messenger sought me out. He told me that her horse has been found,” the duke explained. “It never left the grounds of Welwick Hall. But they have covered the grounds and there is no sign of her. I sent instructions for them to go back to the hall until I return.”

“That only adds to my worries. It must mean that she set off walking home along the highway,” Silas concluded. He raised his lantern to glance around at the dark land of the field, where they had met up again. “I’m going into the forest; do you want to return to the roadway?”

“Surely she would not have wandered into the trees?” the duke questioned, holding up his lighted lamp to question Silas.

“She could have thought the horse might have wandered in there to graze, or some such thing,” Silas replied.

“Yes, of course,” the duke nodded, watching as Silas turned his horse towards the trees. “Be careful in there, it is pitch black. I do not want to be searching for two people, should you lose your way too.”

“You forget, I know this forest like the back of my hand,” Silas responded. “Unless you’ve somehow managed to move the trees around?”

“Silas!” the duke called after him to get his attention before he left. “You must forgive your sister. I too played a part in trying to get the two of you together.”

“I should have known that Vera would drag you into her mischief-making,” Silas said, showing a scowl on his face at his annoyance.

“She felt your stubbornness was stopping you from being together,” the duke explained. “Let’s be honest, both you and Giovanna have a terrible stubborn streak.”

Silas’ horse was restless, snorting as its large body fidgeted. The horse was keen to get moving again.

“Whoa boy,” Silas settled the horse while he finished speaking to his friend. “I know she meant well, Oscar. Once we have found Giovanna and she’s safe, I might be able to put my sister’s mischief behind me. We will see.”

“Oh, and I forgot to mention the other part of the message,” the duke called out in afterthought. “Vera has arrived back at Welwick Hal. Which I am afraid means that Giovanna has not yet arrived at her cottage.”

“Her cousin will be frantic too,” Silas pointed out. “You should return to the hall then, but I must make haste. If Giovanna’s in this forest, it is not going to be an easy task to find her.”

The duke nodded, “I am going to check the highway again before I go back. If you are not returned when I get back to Welwick Hall, I will bring a search party to follow your tracks. Take care, Brother, I do not wish any harm to come to you.”

The two friends parted ways, the duke returning to the highway and Silas heading for the forest.

Before Silas had travelled the world, as the duke’s business representative, he had carried out the role of estate manager for many years. Forests could only change slowly over the years, so he was confident that he knew a safe way through it. As the estate manager, he’d often walked through these trees, and in the pitch black of night as he searched for poachers. This task should not be much different.

Leading his horse cautiously along a narrow pathway, he knew that it was likely made by wild animals. Silas would have preferred to be on foot, but he had a lot of ground to cover. Being in the denseness of such a forest, he knew that if he called out her name it would not likely carry very far, but still, it was worth trying. And so he shouted out her name every few minutes, in the hope that if she could hear him, she would call back to alert him to her presence.

At first, all he heard was the screeching of foxes, and the hooting owls,

none of which concerned him. Silas wasn't easily spooked, not even in such dark conditions.

"Giovanna!" he called out, again and again.

After calling her name, he moved on a short distance, only to repeat the process. Always treading carefully, for the sake of the horse. He also held up a lighted lamp, so that he could see if she was fallen.

At one point, he thought he could see something out of place in a bush ahead. Moving his horse towards the large, prickly gauze bush, he leaned down to tug at the item he'd spotted. It was a piece of fabric, and he was sure it was the material of a woman's dress.

Patting his horse's mane, he mumbled to himself, "At least, if it is, we know we're heading in the right direction."

Moving his horse on, he called her name more often now that he was confident that she was in the forest. They still only moved at a slow pace though, so that he could hear all around him. It frustrated Silas that there was no answer to his calls, but he would not give up now that he had found the piece of fabric.

Now and then he dismounted, picking up long pieces of branches to use for opening up gaps in the brambly bushes. If she had fallen, she might be underneath the long grass, or even hidden in a bush unconscious.

Silas finally allowed the horse to choose its own direction, in the hope that it might sense, or even smell her. He had every faith in his horse because once tamed, they were creatures that always sought out human contact. Sure enough, the horse led him to a hunter's lodge, which didn't surprise Silas.

"Good lad," he praised his horse, dismounting with the intention of searching the hut.

He thought it unlikely that Giovanna was in there, but she was a resourceful woman and would fight to stay safe, or so he hoped. Trying the door, he couldn't get it to budge. These lodges didn't have locks, they were only meant for brief rests, particularly if caught out in bad weather. He assumed that the wood had expanded in wet, cold weather, which wasn't unusual for the old lodge doors.

Silas tried knocking on the wooden door to see if anyone answered but there was no reply. Determined to at least look inside the lodge, he started to put his weight against the door. Intermittently, he shoved at it with a kicking foot and then rammed it with his shoulder.

After a few moments of such effort, he began to realise that the door

wasn't stuck in a natural way. Something was lodged behind it, stopping it from opening. He could only assume that something had fallen behind it and he continued to work on getting the door open. In truth, he didn't expect Giovanna to be in there, otherwise, she would have called out. Still, something niggled in his mind, encouraging him to keep trying to get access. Only that way could he eliminate the hut from his search.

As the door started to give, he could make out a wooden table leg through the small gap. Someone had put a table behind the door; was it Giovanna?

"Are you in there, Giovanna?" he shouted, but still there was no reply.

There's more than just a table behind there, he told himself as he kept heaving at the heavy door.

Slowly, it gave way, and the table legs scraped across a wooden floor. There was now a big enough gap for him to enter the lodge. Picking his lighted lamp back up again, from where he'd placed it on the floor, he entered the lodge. As no one had spoken back to him, he didn't expect anyone to be in there, but his curiosity about the table behind the door had got the better of him.

He didn't speak as he squeezed through the small gap in the doorway, and once inside he raised the lamp to look around. Spotting the chairs piled on the table too, he thought that whoever had done that wouldn't be able to get back out. It could only mean that someone was inside the lodge.

Putting the lamp on the floor, he walked into a corner to check the shadows. There wasn't much furniture in the place, but a glimmer of light fell over a bed. As he looked at the bed, he spotted a raised lump underneath a dark blanket; Silas dashed over to it.

And there she was, fast asleep.

Silas wasn't sure if felt relief at finding her, or worried that she hadn't heard him. Was she unconscious, and not simply asleep? He approached the bed and kneeled beside it.

"Giovanna," he said her name with a quiet voice, gently shaking her shoulder.

It felt like a lifetime before a tiny moan came from her lips.

"Giovanna, my love, I have found you at last," he said with joy, stroking her smudged cheek with the back of his fingers. "It is me, Silas. I have been looking for you everywhere, and here you are, at last."

Her eyes flickered as she attempted to open them. She'd been laying on the bed with her back to him, but he'd turned her over to check her. He

waited patiently, allowing her time to focus, but he still had no idea if she was injured. Giovanna moved, staring at him and giving him a small smile. She was alive, and that was good enough for him. He must give her a chance to come around, and soon he would hold her in his arms. At long last, he would get to tell her the truth.

CHAPTER 36

“Is that you, Silas?” Giovanna managed. “Am I dreaming?”

Silas kneeled by the bed, carefully stroking her cheek.

“You are not dreaming, my love,” he whispered. “It is me, in the flesh. You are safe, and I intend on keeping you safe forever.”

He couldn’t resist placing his lips on her forehead, then kissing her cheeks, and finally her lips, but only with soft, tiny pecks.

Giovanna was weak, he could see that, but he would take his time in moving her, allowing her to come around a little more. She moved her arms only to wrap them around his shoulders; his whole world felt perfect. He responded by squeezing her in an embrace, lending her his strength so that she could sit upright.

“I must look dreadful,” she half laughed, half cried.

“No, Giovanna, you look as beautiful as ever to me,” he assured her, wiping a tear from her smudged cheek. “Though I can’t say the same for your dress,” he joked.

“I...I do not want you to see me like this,” she said, becoming a little distressed in her semi-delirium.

“Ssshhh...” Silas hushed her, embracing her once again. “I promise, my love, I only see the beauty in you, even when dressed in rags.”

Giovanna let out a little laugh, “Am I truly in rags?” she asked as he let her go.

“Yes, but they are beautiful rags, now that I look upon them closer,” he said with a soft smile.

“Oh, Silas, I am so glad you are here,” she murmured, “I was petrified out there.”

“But you are not alone anymore, my love, I am here, and I intend on staying in your life,” Silas told her.

“You do?” she questioned, gazing into his eyes.

Silas stared back, into her dark eyes that glistened with tears, and he knew there and then what his mission in life was. But first, he needed to get her back to Welwick Hall, and then call out the physician to check her injuries.

“Do you think you can move?” he asked. “Have you any injuries that might be too painful?”

Giovanna looked at her hands and then she glanced at her body, “No, I am sure I am well. Most of what happened was brought on by panic. I went blindly through the forest, imagining wild beasts and spirits. I felt as if I had gone mad.”

Silas leaned in to embrace her again, “There is no madness in you, Giovanna. You are more exhausted than anything else. I need to get you back to the Hall, but it will be on horseback. Do you think you are up to it?”

“Do you have a lamp so that we can see where we are going?” she asked. “I have grown a sudden fear for the dark.”

“I do, but you need not fear the dark, not when you are with me,” he answered, determined to get her through this.

Slowly, he helped her to stand on her feet, noticing that she was barefoot.

“You cannot walk to the horse with nothing on your feet,” he said, positioning himself to lift her into his arms.

As he picked her up, she placed her arms around his shoulders, trusting in his judgment. Smiling into her dark eyes, he found her soft lips irresistible and leaned in to steal a small kiss. Silas felt overjoyed when she responded likewise, and as he pulled his face from hers, they smiled at one another, gazing into each other’s eyes.

“Did I ever tell you, Signorina Giovanna Romano, that I love you?” Silas said, stating his declaration of love for her.

She shook her head, still managing to smile as she continued to gaze into his eyes.

“That is a coincidence, sir, because I love you too,” she answered, not averting her eyes away as she too declared her love.

“Then this is a good trade, do you not agree, that we love one another?” he asked in jest.

Giovanna nodded and leaned her head into his chest. He could see that she was still quite weak and started to make his way out of the log cabin.

“You will remember to take the lamp, Silas, won’t you?” she asked, her voice quivering as they stepped outside into the darkness.

Silas had left the lit lamp at the doorway, and he collected it so that it might comfort her. Placing it on the ground by the horse, he helped her to sit on the horse’s back.

“Can you lean into the horse’s mane, until I am behind you?” he instructed, then mounted himself behind her.

Shifting on the saddle, he took the reins as she leaned her back into his chest. He opened up the large overcoat so that it blanketed her, lending her some warmth. The horse set off and guided them back through the forest at a slower pace. Silas knew a quicker route that would get them back on the highway, which would be easier going for the horse. Still, he kept the horse moving only at a walk, holding Giovanna between his arms.

He could smell her hair as the scent of the forest assailed his nostrils. But the warmth of her body wrapped in his arms was the most comforting. She was safe, and she was with him now, he could ask for no more.

As they arrived through the gates of Welwick Hall, a few of the servants were still out scouting the grounds. They waved over to him, turning to walk back to the manor house upon seeing he had Lady Giovanna. He spotted one of the younger lads set off at a running pace, no doubt to inform the household they were on their way.

Pulling his horse up in front of the manor house, the duke awaited his arrival, with Mattia by his side. They rushed over to Silas and reached up to take hold of Giovanna, lowering her from the horse in Mattia’s arms. Silas dismounted, taking Giovanna from Mattia’s arms.

“You have done well to find her,” the duke remarked. “I have already sent for a physician because your sister has taken ill.”

“Vera? What’s happened?” Silas asked, allowing a very tired Giovanna to lean into his chest.

“Nothing that a good night’s rest will not cure,” the duke told him as he walked by his side. “And your forgiveness, of course.”

“Now that I have Giovanna, I care nothing of what Vera did,” Silas said, walking up the stone steps to enter the manor house. “But I do care about my sister’s health. I will speak with her tomorrow and all will be well.”

“Can you carry Giovanna up the stairway?” the duke asked, guiding Silas to the bedchamber. “We have a bed prepared for her, and a physician awaits.”

Within minutes, Silas lay Giovanna on the large, soft bed, stepping back

to allow the physician to examine her.

“Silas, please do not leave me,” Giovanna called out, a strained panic in her voice.

“I am here, my love,” he said, approaching the bed. “But I must step outside the room while the doctor looks at your injuries. As soon as he’s finished, I will return,” he assured her, holding her hand.

Silas, Oscar, and Mattia stepped into the hallway, leaving the maids and the physician to attend to Giovanna.

“You know, it was not only Vera’s fault, all that has come about,” the duke informed him as they waited outside the bedchamber. “It was actually me who penned the invitation. We collaborated to bring you two together. Vera panicked that Giovanna would leave the country if she left it too late.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Oscar,” Silas nodded as he listened to the duke’s confession. “You two were always whispering your mischief in corners. Neither of you have changed,” he smiled, patting Oscar on the back. “You are both forgiven. But let us hope that your children are not like their parents, or you will have your hands full forever.”



Silas slept on a chair at the bedside of Giovanna, for the rest of the night. He was awakened by a tap on the shoulder and looked up with sleepy eyes. Before him stood the duke, by his side was Vera, and behind them was Mattia.

Standing up, he hugged his sister, whispering into her ear that she was a silly fool, and of course, he forgave her. Giovanna then awoke. With a croak still in her voice, she spoke.

“I am so very glad that it was not a dream I was rescued,” she said as Vera dashed to take her hand.

“Before we all speak of yesterday’s events, I wish to ask Mattia a question,” Silas said, stopping anyone from talking. He turned to Giovanna’s cousin and looked him in the eye as he spoke. “As you are here to represent the Conte Romano, I want to ask if I may request Giovanna’s hand in marriage?”

Vera gasped from behind him, but she kept her silence. A deathly quietness descended in the bedchamber, as Silas and Mattia gazed at one

another.

Mattia burst into merry laughter, “I thought you would never ask,” he replied. “And the Conte will be overjoyed to accept you as his son. But you had better ask Giovanna too, or she will slap me if we do not seek her approval.”

This brought laughter to the room. Vera went to open the drapes and let in the yellow, warming glow of the sun.

Silas turned to the bed where Giovanna was now sitting up with the aid of her pillows. He kneeled on the floor beside her and asked, “My beautiful Giovanna, will you make me the happiest man in the world and accept me as your husband?”

“I do not know how we will do it, Silas, but yes. I cannot live without you now that you are in my life,” Giovanna replied, accepting his hand in hers.

Silas stood upright, leaning in to hug her. Vera was crying and hugging the duke, and Mattia breathed a huge sigh of relief that it was all over.

“I will tell you right from the start so that you worry no more,” Silas spoke out loud. “I would travel to the end of the world for you, so coming to live in Italy will be easy.”

Giovanna laughed with joy, “Oh Silas, you love me that much?” she asked, tears in the corners of her eyes.

“I do, my love. Between us, and your cousins, you will have the most successful vineyard in all of Italy,” Silas announced.

There was the sound of excited noises rang out, as the children came running into the room, joining in the happiness of the family celebrations.

EPILOGUE

“I still cannot believe how beautiful your home is,” Silas remarked.

He was enjoying a leisurely breakfast with Giovanna; on the veranda of the room he’d been allocated.

“I still cannot believe that you are here, with me,” Giovanna reflected, looking over the small table at her fiancé.

“Well, you had better start to believe it because once we are married, we will be together, forever,” Silas warned.

He leaned over the table to stroke the silky smooth, olive skin on the back of Giovanna’s hand.

She turned her hand around to accept his palm in hers. “Today is to be a wonderful day, I cannot wait to welcome your sister and the duke on their arrival. It is my turn to play the hostess.”

“They will be here soon enough, and I know they are going to love your vineyard, and your family too,” Silas offered.

As he finished his last word, the sound of rolling wheels echoed out from the courtyard below. He stood up to get a better view of what was happening and could see it was a coach arriving.

“Goodness, they have arrived early,” Silas said as he grabbed Giovanna’s hand and led her from the room. “Come, my love, let’s go and greet them together.”

They flew down the stone stairway that spiralled from their landing to the ground floor. Hand in hand, they went to greet their guests who were now stepping from the coach.

“Sister!” Silas called out as he and Giovanna went to hug Vera together.

The conte arrived too, as too did other members of Giovanna’s family,

including Mattia. The conte shook hands with the duke, and Mattia showed his delight in seeing the duchess again, kissing her cheeks in a traditional greeting.

“Goodness but it is so warm in Italy,” the duchess said, fanning herself as she was introduced to Giovanna’s family members. “And what an amazing home you have, Conte,” she added, turning to Giovanna’s padre. “I do hope you are fully recovered and now in good health?”

“As soon as my Giovanna told me that she was in love, I sprang back to life,” the conte replied, chuckling with a burst of hearty laughter. “I do believe that I may be the happiest padre alive.”

“And I the happiest of sisters,” the duchess replied.

They were led through to a garden, where a long table was set out with refreshments and a feast of food. The entire morning was taken up with chatter around the feast table, as everyone celebrated the two families coming together. The twins had plenty of playmates and the sounds of children playing and adults chatting echoed out in the warm, sunny air.

Giovanna then took Vera to show her their room in the huge, historic Italian villa, while Silas chatted with the duke.

“Your new home is stunning,” Oscar remarked.

“Yes, though I still feel like it’s all a dream,” Silas replied. “This glorious building was once owned by the Medici family, if you remember your history.”

“Bankers, eh?” Oscar said, recalling his history lesson. “I adore the elevated position, you can see for miles, and is that an orchard over there?”

“It is, but not apple trees,” Silas replied, discussing his new home with pride in his voice. “They grow olives, in their thousands. And you will never have tasted anything like them, straight from the trees.”

“I would love a tour of the vineyard,” Oscar requested.

“And so you shall, Brother, once you are settled,” Silas replied. “My new family are very proud of their land and will enjoy sharing it with you.”

* * *

On the third day of the duke and duchess’ arrival, it was the day of Silas and Giovanna’s wedding. Giovanna was so happy that she kept asking Lady Vera to pinch her, to make sure it was not a dream.

As a romantic gesture, the night before their wedding, Silas had plotted

with Mattia to serenade Giovanna. It was an Italian tradition, and one he was happy to perform, underneath her bedroom balcony.

“I never thought that seeing you cry would make me so happy,” he’d said to her on the completion of the Italian song. Mattia had accompanied him with a mandolin.

“They are tears of joy, my love” she called down from her balcony, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. “How did you learn all the Italian words?”

“Mattia has been my patient teacher,” Silas said, giving Mattia a bow of respect.

And that was the prelude to their wedding. The next morning began in Giovanna’s bedchamber, where the wives of her favourite cousins gathered to prepare her for the ceremony. The duchess stayed by her side, as Giovanna wanted her treated as the guest of honour. There was much laughter and giggling, as her closest friends shared jokes with her about married life.

“We have prepared your virgin wedding bed with the best white linen sheets...”

“And draped white lace all over your shared bedchamber...”

“And the duchess’ little girl jumped up and down on the bed as a sign of fertility...”

“You will find money and sugared almonds between your sheets, to bring you wealth and joy...”

The teasing lasted the entire morning.

By midday, many carriages, carts, and coaches arrived. They transported everyone to the historic church in Giovanna’s hometown, only five miles from the villa. The Roman Catholic ceremony only lasted an hour, but Giovanna had wanted it to go on forever, as the mayor married them. Her husband was the most handsome man in the church, and she felt like a queen in her beautiful white gown that symbolised her purity for her husband-to-be.

Of course, the feast was to last all night long, and what a feast her padre had organised in their honour. A pig was roasting, and their *millefoglie* wedding cake towered high with fruit, cream, and the most delicious layers of buttery pastry.

Silas and Giovanna performed the melodic *tarantella*, courtship dance. While Mattia accompanied them with his mandolin. Then everyone joined in, picking up the tempo with the rattling of bells and tambourines, and dancing the *pizzica*.

Mattia was left in charge of collecting the money for the bride and groom, which was a tradition of any Italian wedding. Silas and Giovanna were the centre of attention, and she thought it to be the best wedding she had ever attended.

The bride and groom finally got a moment alone. “And now, my wife, we belong to one another,” Silas said, embracing her under the canopy of a clear jet-black sky, spotted with silver twinkling stars.

“I am so very lucky, Silas, that you have agreed to live in Italy and help me run the vineyard,” Giovanna said, feeling that she could never thank him enough.

“I will do anything to be close to you, my love, that is all I ask,” Silas said, stroking her bare shoulders. “Though, I am afraid we must visit England for Christmas, or my sister will never speak to me again.”

“That is fine, my love, wherever you go, I go too,” Giovanna replied, content with life, with Silas by her side.

Silas and Giovanna found the soulmate they were looking for in each other!

As the Balls of the Welwick Hall and Miss Sarah’s famous dresses keep bringing true love in the surface, more romance stories bloom in this enchanting dukedom!

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513586>

If you want a Bonus Scene of this book visit the link below (or just click it):

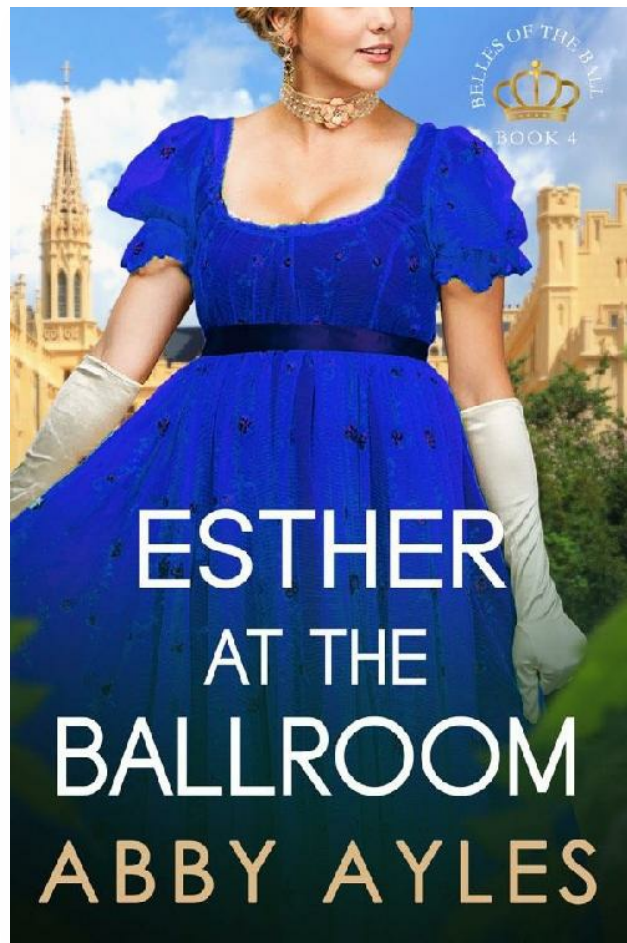
<https://BookHip.com/XGVTZRS>

Or read the prequel of the series while Oscar and Vera were just children...

<https://BookHip.com/MDRMLCA>

ESTHER AT THE BALLROOM

PREVIEW



Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513586>

A mistaken identity, a lost love and a journey to find true happiness.

After losing her parents in an accident, Lady Esther is forced to live with her cold-hearted aunt and cousin, who treat her like a servant and offer her none of the opportunities a lady should have.

While Laurence, a man of means, falls in love with her cousin, he begins to form a close friendship with Esther. Though they know that their affection for each other cannot be, they cannot help but be drawn together.

Esther mistakenly receives love letters intended for her cousin; she responds, hoping to keep her friendship with Laurence alive.

When her cousin's mother discovers what is happening, she accuses Esther of ruining her daughter's chances with Laurence and Esther's life is in danger.

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513586>

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 began 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.

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513586>

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.

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513586>

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.

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513586>

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 sinched 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.

Read it now!

<https://readerlinks.com/l/3513586>

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](#)