



Never Her
Duke

HAZEL LINWOOD

NEVER HER DUKE

A Historical Regency Romance Novel



HAZEL LINWOOD



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BEFORE YOU START READING...

Here is a prequel chapter that will help you understand and visualize the story inside my book better.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“How could I so foolishly declare my interest to the wrong man?”

Attracting a very specific gentleman is the only way Lady Rachel could save her family. Even if that means risking her own reputation. But everything is about to be ruined when she ends up confessing her supposed undying love to the wrong man...

Duke Luke has witnessed enough trickery to know that Rachel’s confession is nothing but a scheme. So he must protect his friend from her infuriating yet irresistible charm.

When Luke vows to stop Rachel’s plan, he realizes that she is so much more than she lets others see. And nothing can stop the feelings that blossom between them. Forcing Rachel to choose between her heart’s commands or her duties...

CHAPTER I



“That’s him. It must be him.”

“Would you calm yourself? If you grow much more excited, you are likely to shatter that wine glass in your hand.”

“Oh, I cannot help it.” Rachel tried her best to soften her grasp on her glass as she looked past her cousin to where her father was talking to a masked gentleman.

She had to agree that this evening, everyone had gone to great lengths to hide their identities. The Marquess of Ladeston was completely unrecognizable to her. Though she had only met him once before and knew he had dark auburn hair, tonight it looked darker from the way it was slicked back and half covered by the vast mask he wore. The mask, which was made of deep blue and black embroidery, was a stunning one, concealing his features completely.

“Tonight is the night,” Rachel whispered to her cousin. “My father impressed the matter on me most assuredly.”

“Yes, I had noticed,” Alicia murmured, looking rather nervous herself. The loose curls of her light blonde hair that hung down from her updo concealed her cheeks a little as she hung her head forward. “You must allow me to speak freely, Cousin.”

“When have I ever not wanted you to do so?” Rachel put down her wine glass and turned her focus completely on her cousin. “You can always speak as you wish to with me. You are my dearest friend in this world.”

Alicia smiled momentarily before that smile slipped from her face.

She was usually quiet with many people, but not with Rachel. It was the thing that told Rachel more than anything else how much her cousin trusted her.

Alicia’s parents were down at their country estate on the south coast. For the season, she was staying with Rachel and her parents, and Rachel couldn’t have been happier to have her company. She was a true friend, in a house where she didn’t always feel as if she had friends.

“I fear this plan of your father is an ill one, indeed,” Alicia whispered as if they were talking of great scandal. She fidgeted, adjusting the great golden mask on her face. “If anyone were to discover it—”

“I know, Alicia. Believe me, I know that all too well.” Rachel sighed deeply and leaned back on the nearest wall, looking around the spot where they were hidden in the corner of the ballroom.

So far, she had avoided the heady mixture of people and suffocating heat at this summer ball. The doors to the garden had been flung open, but they seemed to accommodate little in the stifling warmth. Ladies fluttered fans in front of their faces, and many gentlemen had removed their tailcoats, leaving them slung across the backs of chairs, with some even daring to roll their sleeves up to their elbows in an attempt to cool down.

In their discreet corner, Rachel was at least able to stay out of the worst of the heat, though it was not why she had sought out this spot. She had hidden here in the shadows because of her reluctance to do her father's bidding.

She looked toward her father now, Miles Nightingale, the Earl of Brauncold, and felt a certain amount of disdain for the smug smile on his long face. He stood tall beside the Marquess of Ladeston, his blue eyes sparkling and very noticeable, as he hadn't bothered putting on his mask.

Rachel fidgeted with her own mask now. The small green silken covering did little to hide her identity, but that was the way her father wanted it. What her father wanted, he usually got.

"I cannot help it," Rachel whispered to Alicia. "Believe me, I do not want to do this either. It's a mad idea. Foolish, even."

"To say the least." Alicia nodded in agreement. "So, why on earth have you said you will do it?"

Rachel leveled her gaze at her cousin, noting the pursing of her lips and the fear that was palpable in the air between them. Rachel held onto such fears herself. They made her palms sweaty, in a way that had little to do with the heat in the stifling room.

“What would you do in my place, Alicia?” she asked, eventually, her tone lower than usual.

Alicia looked down at her wine glass, fidgeting with the spindle so much that she was the one who now seemed in danger of breaking her glass.

“That I do not know,” Alicia murmured. “In truth, I do not know what I would have the confidence or resilience to do. All I know is that what you have been asked to do by your father is mad, indeed.”

“I know that too.” Rachel looked away once more. Rather than looking at the Marquess of Ladeston at all, she set her gaze on her father. His dark hair flicked back and forth as he talked to the Marquess with such effervescent animation.

Rachel was reminded of a glass bubbling with prosecco, rather in danger of bubbling over the edge. That was her father at this moment, unable to stop talking or stand still.

“You do know too that your father is asking you to risk your reputation for this. It is quite mad.”

“I know.”

“Your name, what people think of your virtue!” Alicia whispered in panic.

“I wish there was another way,” Rachel murmured, more to herself than to Alicia at all.

When she had been young, Rachel had dreamed of seeing a smile on her father’s face. To be looked at with pride and admiration, for just once, rather than the shock of remembering she existed and stood in the corner of his room at all. How many times in her childhood had she walked into rooms where her mother and father sat together, and they turned to face her, blinking, as if struggling to remember who she was?

At least these days, her father noticed her much more. He would even occasionally smile at her. Even if they were rather brief, they still counted as smiles.

I am eager to please him.

Now, at least, she had the chance to please him, and her hands were tied, regardless of when it came to her options.

“I must go,” Rachel whispered to her cousin.

Alicia nodded but said no more, plainly still worried about the details of their plan.

Rachel stepped away from her cousin, only to see that her father was no longer at the Marquess of Ladeston’s side. Miles

was now talking to her mother, Eliza, and the Marquess had vanished.

Halting at the edge of the room, Rachel turned her head back and forth, seeking out eagerly where he was. She lost sight of him in the crowd, and when he eventually re-emerged, it was at some distance across the ballroom. He seemed tall now somehow, but she supposed that was a trick of the light, and maybe even the work of the two glasses of prosecco she had drunk.

He walked toward the open doors that led to the garden and shrugged off his tailcoat, leaving it behind on the back of a chair before he disappeared outside.

Now is my chance.

Holding her breath in order to build up her courage, Rachel followed him to the door. She was careful to glance around her, to check if anyone else was watching, but everyone was so concerned with their own heated states and stealing one another's fans that no one looked her way. Not even her father and mother glanced at her.

Taking the opportunity, Rachel slipped out into the garden. At first, she breathed deeply, rather thankful that the air was at least a touch cooler outside this summer evening, if not completely chilly.

Hurrying across the terrace, she hunted for where the Marquess of Ladeston had gone. He'd left the terraces behind and seemed to be standing in the middle of a courtyard,

surrounded by ornamental roses pressed into stone containers. He looked out across the roses, his body barely moving at all.

He wished to escape the ballroom, did he not? I wonder why.

His body was lit by the last light of the sun in the sky, and Rachel allowed herself to admit for the first time that he was a striking figure, taller and stronger than she had first thought. Slowly, she approached him from behind, knowing well enough that if they were seen in this manner, there would be a hint of scandal. For why would a lady meet alone with a gentleman?

“Lord Ladeston?” she called to him.

He flinched and turned to face her, that fine mask abruptly in view. He’d rearranged his waistcoat and cravat, so they sat quite perfectly now upon him.

“Excuse me. We should not be seen out here alone together.” He bowed to her, clearly intent on departing as quickly as he could.

I am so sorry, My Lord, but I cannot let you leave. I have no choice.

“Please, I beg of you, just allow me to say a few words, and I shall be on my way. I promise you,” she pleaded with him, watching as her words halted him to the spot.

He turned to face her completely, halting behind one of the rose containers.

“Well, if we are to talk, then there is something you should know. I—”

“Please, My Lord, my courage has taken me thus far, and I fear I must say what I have to before my courage fails me completely,” she cut him off, fearing how rude she had been, but she had to do this now.

She’d drunk the two glasses of wine to find Dutch courage for this moment, and she feared they would wear off and she’d no longer be able to say what her father wished her to say at all.

“As you wish.” The Marquess’s voice deepened.

Oh. I did not know he was capable of such a tone.

Quite enraptured by the sound, her eyes settled on him again. She took a step forward, determined to see more of him, and stopped on the other side of the container. So close to him now, she noticed something she had never seen before.

His eyes were green, richly so, rather like the leaves of a fine oak tree with newly sprung shoots in spring.

How mad this is!?

Rachel realized with irritation that she now had to flirt and charm a man whom she knew so little about that she hadn't even noticed the color of his eyes before. It was awful to be so deceptive to a man.

Yet, I must do it.

“What is it you wished to say?” The Marquess inclined his head toward her a little. It was an encouragement as he waited for her to continue.

Rachel held her breath, listening to that deep raspy tone for a minute. She could have sworn the Marquess had a lighter voice than that, yet he had responded to her when she had used his title.

It is the wine. It is making me hear things.

“I know, My Lord, that there has been little introduction between us. You cannot have missed the eagerness of my father to make your acquaintance.” She hoped that this amount of honesty would be enough to disarm him, to make him see that she was not a complete fool.

He inclined his head once more in a slow nod, showing he understood.

“Yet, everything I know about you has quite... struck me, My Lord.” She breathed deeply, feeling like the greatest fool to walk the earth.

The edge of the Marquess's lips turned up into a small smile, or was it a smirk? She couldn't be sure in this fading light.

"I realize that you know very little about me." She walked toward him, trying to move around the rose container, yet he walked the other way, keeping some distance between them.

She halted, not wishing him to be frightened of her advances.

"Yet, I must say something now." She waited, wanting to see if he would say anything more to her, but he did not. "You have quite captivated my heart, My Lord. In every manner."

When he said nothing and an awkward silence extended between them, Rachel wondered if this was how all confessions of love passed. Were they more awkward than thrilling at all? She certainly didn't feel thrilled. Then again, she barely knew the man before her, let alone loved him.

"My heart is yours, My Lord," she whispered, her voice failing her.

Pray, say something now!

CHAPTER 2



Do not laugh.

Luke struggled to hold it together as he stared at the lady before him. How was it possible that a woman who had decided to profess her love for Robert could be so mistaken as to not realize that another man was standing in front of her entirely?

“Really?” Luke said, his tone, unfortunately, betraying the humor he felt at the moment.

Her rather forced smile faltered, and he took a step toward her, rounding the rose container.

This woman was dressed beautifully, in a dark green gown cinched at the waist, with a soft green mask to match. He was curious to see her without the mask, to know the contours of her face and more about the shape of her eyes, for they were partly hidden. Her dark brown hair cascaded down her back in a mad array of curls.

Luke's usual longing for perfection was strangely satisfied as he stared at her. There was not a hair out of place, nor a crease in her gown.

"You come out to tell me this and leave a ball, risking scandal in the garden with me?" He deepened his voice further, noting that her rather full lips no longer smiled at all.

The beauty mark just above her top lip rather entranced him, and he stared at it for a second before tearing his gaze away.

"I had to tell you in private," she explained, her voice rather deep and sultry.

Damn that voice.

It called to him, even when he wanted to laugh at her.

"No." He shook his head, focusing on what exactly was wrong with this whole situation.

If she cared about Robert, then she would have known at once that he did not stand before her, but another did. They were so close, surely, she could not mistake it. It would be impossible!

She is just like all the other women who set their cap at either him or me. They see our titles and not the men we are.

He glared at her, feeling hatred and anger simmer underneath the surface. She was superficial, just like all the others who

had ever approached Robert, and he was determined to protect his friend from any woman such as her.

Robert has suffered heartbreak once before. I will never let it happen again.

An image appeared in his mind, from years ago, when he had helped Robert down the hill after the dog had chased him with his injured ankle. Just as Luke had promised that day to protect his friend, he had done so ever since.

Monsters may not chase Robert these days, but greedy women with their eyes on his fortune rather than the heart he had were the ones Luke had to fend off these days.

“I do not think you really know me at all.” Luke walked around the young lady, very aware of the way her slender body turned to follow him. Even with her mask, she had an attractive figure. It was irksome to have her be so cold and shallow to think only of Robert’s title. “My advice is to learn more about the man you profess to care about before you go about declaring you are in love. It would be a wiser decision than any attempt you had to trap him in scandal.”

He gestured at their lonely situation. When her full lips parted and she intended to say more, he backed up from her. He had no intention of staying near a woman with scandal in mind, even if her full, dark pink lips were enchanting and rather difficult to look away from.

I shall keep Robert safe from a woman like you.

He said nothing more and turned on his heel, darting back through the lawn and across the terrace gardens. He glanced back toward her once, seeing that she was now following him toward the ball. Yet, she no longer kept her chin high as she followed him. If anything, she hung her head and walked rather slowly.

For a brief second, he could have persuaded himself that she was genuinely hurt by his words, but then he remembered the foolishness of her declaration and how she had made it to *the wrong man*.

“Laughable,” he muttered as he chuckled and walked into the ballroom.

Determined not to let Robert fall prey to her, he sought out his friend. Robert was coming off the dance floor, where a rather eager and plump lady was clinging to his hand. Seeing the fear in his friend’s dark eyes and the flush in his cheeks because of the heat, Luke hurried toward him.

“Ah, there you are, Robert. Forgive me, Lady Thistle, but I must steal my friend away.” He took Robert’s elbow and towed him away before Lady Thistle could object. She only had the chance to jut out her bottom lip.

“Thank you.” Robert sighed with relief, puffing out the air in his slender cheeks. “Good God, I swear I have not had a chance to breathe tonight between dances. It is madness. The ladies swarm around me like bees.”

“Yes, I had noticed.” Luke nodded at a group of ladies nearby who were staring at Robert intently. He towed his friend to the

nearest refreshments table and poured out claret for them both. "Have a drink. It will help."

"Why do they not swarm around you so? You have the greater title!" Robert objected, downing part of the glass and then coughing on it in his eagerness. Luke clapped his back to help clear his lungs.

"Possibly because they know I would spot anyone who feigned attention to me a mile away," Luke whispered, glancing away. Fearing that Robert would be offended by such a statement, he topped up Robert's glass and went on. "Besides, you are known as the kinder man, by far. Any woman would rather set her cap at you."

"You're too kind to me."

"I am not." Luke wouldn't hear of it.

As far as he was concerned, Robert was the best man alive. Only his own father competed with Robert in terms of kindness, and Luke had had the misfortune to lose his father the year before last.

Robert was a good soul, wise, and incredibly intelligent in some regards, but perhaps naïve in others. A romantic heart, he liked the notion of falling in love and looked for simple pleasures in life, despite being a marquess.

"You're being my protector again." Robert tutted, shaking his head. "You know you hardly need to take care of me anymore, Luke. We're no longer boys playing in the estate woods."

“Perhaps not.” Yet, Luke had no intention of letting down his guard, especially not after what he had just witnessed. “Robert, is there another lady that has been paying attention to you, as of late?”

“Take your pick.” Robert gestured tiredly with his claret glass toward the gaggle of ladies gathered not too far away, that were whispering and gossiping about him behind fluttering fans.

“None of them. This one is rather slender in build, as opposed to your last dance partner. Dark brown hair, a beauty mark here.” Luke tapped his upper lip. “And she is wearing green tonight.”

Robert frowned deeply.

“I might as well have just described a plant to you, for all you know about her.” Luke laughed as he looked at his friend.

It was a running joke between them that Robert knew little about plants or their names. It was a stark contrast to Luke, who loved anything to do with the outdoors.

“I have no idea who you mean.” Robert shook his head. “Why do you ask? Should I be paying attention to this lady?”

“What? No, no.” Luke shook his head firmly. By no account did he want Robert paying attention to her now. “I only ask because...” he trailed off as she entered the ballroom.

Luke's eyes turned toward the mysterious woman. She stepped inside, lifting her chin higher, though that same impassive look now lingered on her full lips, which were pressed together. She fidgeted persistently, wringing her hands together.

"Who are you staring at?" Robert asked, turning around.

"No one. Let's have another drink."

Luke snatched up the wine carafe and topped up Robert's glass again. He feared that if he was attracted to this woman when she wore a mask, then what sort of effect could she have on Robert when she removed that mask?

"I fear you're getting me drunk." Robert sighed. "It might make this evening easier to contend with." He glanced in the direction of the gossiping ladies nearby.

"See? You do need me," Luke teased his friend. "Watch this."

He took a step toward the ladies, with a heavy glare on his face. At once, they dispersed, shooting off in different directions like flocking jackdaws. Luke couldn't help laughing as he turned back to his friend and took a bow, approving of a job well done.

Robert laughed too, putting down his glass long enough to applaud him upon his return.

"Nicely done. Still that knight, eh, Gawain?"

Luke laughed, for neither of them had mentioned that name for a long time.

“Perhaps.” He glanced in the mysterious lady’s direction, only to find she was gone. He searched for her, turning his head back and forth frantically.

“Looking for someone?”

“No,” Luke lied, continuing to search.

“Of course not. You turn your head back and forth like a smarting cockerel for your own amusement, do you not?” Robert said teasingly.

Luke looked sharply at his friend, just as the violin music that filled the room softened. The familiar sound of a bell rang out, and at once, everyone removed their masks. The masquerade had come to an end, and it was time for those who had gone to any great lengths to reveal their identity, at last.

Luke took off his mask and handed it back to his friend.

“Thank you for swapping with me,” he added in a quiet tone so no one else nearby could hear them.

“Any time.” Robert smiled with ease and handed Luke’s rich blue mask back, the ripped silk plainly noticeable.

Luke was comforted, his spine softening when Robert didn't question him about his need for neatness and perfection. He could have sworn that Robert was the only one who didn't question it these days. As soon as Luke had arrived, looking disdainfully down at the ripped mask, Robert had offered up his own.

That was why she thought I was Robert.

With that thought, Luke looked around in search of the mysterious woman again, though he still wasn't convinced by her act. He was different from Robert in many ways, and the concealment of half of his face should have been enough to tell it, even though Robert's hair looked darker this evening, as it was so slicked back.

Luke found her across the room as she removed her mask, hooking the ribbon around her wrist. She was in intent conversation with a young woman, and now with her face fully on show, Luke felt even more disappointed than before.

God's wounds, why did she have to be beautiful? Robert may have a hard time refusing her advances now!

She had a small sloping nose and rather rounded cheekbones that in someone so slender were incredibly captivating. Her eyes were large in her face, her full, dark pink lips all the more noticeable now that they were not cast into shadows by the mask.

"Luke? Are you well?" Robert waved a hand in front of his face.

“Perfectly well,” Luke lied, his voice practically hissing between his teeth as he stared at her.

An older man moved to the woman’s side, and judging by how possessive that touch was, Luke deduced they had to be related. Perhaps her father. The man drew her forward, with the other young woman trailing behind them.

Oh, no. They are coming this way!

“Let’s get out of here.” Luke turned around, eager to help Robert escape.

“Get out of here? Where are we going?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“I can’t. Not now. That’s the Earl of Brauncold.” Robert pointed over Luke’s shoulder. “He seems most eager to talk to me this evening.”

“I wonder why,” Luke muttered, moving to Robert’s side as he watched the pair approach.

Lord Brauncold bowed deeply to Robert. “I trust you are enjoying your evening, My Lord?”

“Very much. Thank you.” Robert gestured to Luke. “I have not introduced you to my friend. This is Luke Hayward, the Duke of Hurbex.”

Luke bowed briefly to Lord Brauncold, noting the way that the Earl barely glanced at him. If anything, when he met Luke's heavy glower, he seemed very eager to look away, indeed, and return his focus to Robert.

Luke busied himself with looking at the mysterious woman instead. She was staring straight at him, not at Robert at all.

So much for her favoritism of Robert, then.

He tried not to think about that intense look and those eyes. Standing so close, he could see they were light brown, with rather large irises. He held her gaze as he raised his wine glass and took a sip.

“Lord Ladeston, you remember my daughter, Lady Rachel Nightingale.” Lord Brauncold gestured toward the beautiful woman.

Seeming to remember herself, Lady Rachel forced a smile and turned to Robert, curtsying very deeply, indeed.

“This is my niece, Lady Alicia Rowell.” Lord Brauncold gestured toward the other young woman, who bent her head forward and at least managed to blush under Robert's look.

Lady Rachel didn't achieve that.

Luke couldn't take his eyes off Rachel. She seemed aware of that stare, for even as she forced a smile for Robert, she kept

glancing at him.

“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Alicia.” Robert bowed to Lady Rachel’s cousin. “And, Lady Rachel, good to see you again too.” He gave no sign of recognizing Lady Rachel from Luke’s description, and the way he looked away again rather quickly at least gave Luke some hope that his friend might be impervious to the woman’s attempts at charm.

“I was just saying what a shame it is not to see my daughter dancing here tonight,” Lord Brauncold said with ease. His light blue eyes twinkled with knowledge, and Luke fought to hold back his groan at the Earl’s obvious attempts. “I would dearly like to see her dancing.”

“Well...” Robert stood taller.

Oh, no, you don't.

Luke stepped forward, intent on protecting his friend.

“I should be glad to accompany your daughter in the next dance, Lord Brauncold.” He offered his hand to Lady Rachel.

CHAPTER 3



Rachel stood tongue-tied. She could feel her father bristling at her side in disappointment. She was supposed to dance with Lord Ladeston, not this gentleman.

The Duke of Hurbex.

She had struggled to stop staring at him since she had approached him, even though she knew she should not. He was taller than Lord Ladeston, had a slightly stronger build too, and his suit flattered his figure very well. The thing that struck her the most was the strong lines of his jaw, as if he had been sculpted from marble, with a strong brow.

Those eyes...

For a minute, she thought she knew them, but before she could think anymore, she felt her father step on her toe, urging her to answer.

“I would be glad to dance, Your Grace. Thank you.” She offered her hand to the Duke, hardly surprised when she heard her father’s heavy sigh.

The Duke of Hurbex took her hand and led her away, the grip on her hand so tight that she balked in surprise.

“Your Grace, I—”

“You’re persistent, are you not?” the Duke whispered, leading her toward the dance floor.

“I beg your pardon?” She stared at him, getting that unmistakable feeling that she knew something of the man before her as she looked up at him.

He refused to glance back at her, but he stared at the dancers on the floor instead, his gaze preoccupied. He didn’t answer her, but waited until the last dance had finished, then drew her into the middle of the dance floor.

“Your Grace, I do not understand.”

He turned to face her, taking both of her hands and standing so near that she felt the breath escape her body. He was a handsome man, indeed. He had the sort of face that she was certain would make many women weak.

I wonder what he looks like when he smiles.

Clearly, she was not going to be blessed with any such smile. He bent his head subtly toward her, perhaps even more so than was deemed proper, but in the middle of a dance floor, no one else seemed to notice.

“No? You do not know me, Lady Rachel?” A smirk appeared on his lips, and she was frustrated she had not been treated to a full smile. “And yet, you seemed so eager to confess your love for me only a while ago.”

What did he say?

Rachel was baffled, staring at him, racking her brain in an attempt to understand what he meant by such a strange statement. He was not the man she had told she loved. She was certain of that.

“What do you mean?”

He didn't answer her and just continued to smile.

They stood apart, waiting as the opening notes were struck. It was a quadrille, a piece set to four-time music that required certain figures to be danced by each couple, with certain steps even performed with adjoining partners. They curtsied and bowed to one another, though Rachel noted the entire time that the Duke did not look away.

Feeling something in her stomach flutter, a kind of excitement, she moved toward him as he did her. They copied the movements of every other couple on the dance floor, circling one another and holding one another's hand.

“Why do you stare at me so keenly, Your Grace?” she asked, trying to break the tension between them. It seemed to crackle, and she found it impossible to look away from him.

“I am merely wondering when you will realize your error.” That smirk was back in place. “It’s entertaining to me, more so than I can say.” He added the latter words in her ear, a practical whisper, or caress against her skin, before he turned and circled the lady beside her.

Distractedly, Rachel circled the other gentleman, glancing back at the Duke and thinking of how inappropriate he was being, as well as how much she liked it. Her hands were clammy beneath her gloves, and she was rather glad tonight that she was wearing them.

“What error?” she asked as she returned to him. He took hold of her waist and walked her back a few steps, that touch so intimate that she held her breath. “You speak as if you know me, whereas this is the first conversation you and I have ever had.”

“Not quite.” There was a glint in his eyes, one that was mischievous. Rachel no longer knew if she liked that look or if it infuriated her.

“Enough mysticism,” she quipped as she stepped back, demanding he release her a beat too early.

He raised his eyebrows, showing that he knew what she was doing. Knowing that she couldn’t draw attention to herself, or her parents would be livid, Rachel slowed her pace and hurried to complete the next part of the dance, walking around him on her own.

“How do you pertain to know me, Your Grace?”

“You should know the man you said—” He paused and took her hand, catching her and bringing her swiftly back in front of him. They performed the next movements rather too quickly for the music, clasping arms together as he tilted her back a little, their heads drawing close. “The man you said had captivated your heart.”

Rachel’s heart was in her mouth as she stared up at the Duke. Now, his earlier statement of claiming she was in love with him made sense. At once, it hit her.

Those eyes.

They were the luscious green hue she had seen outside, although even more noticeable now in the candlelight. Without his mask on, she could see so much more of his face and those statuesque elements that had been completely hidden by the fabric before.

Oh, God’s wounds! No wonder I thought he looked taller than Lord Ladeston and had darker hair than him. It was because they were two entirely different men!

Unable to find words, Rachel was spun back on her feet by the Duke. He released her, letting her totter on her feet as she stared at him. As the other couples moved to the music, the Duke stepped toward her again, resting his hand on her waist as they circled each other.

“I... I thought you were your friend,” she said hurriedly, finding she could no longer look him in the eye, in her embarrassment.

This is too awful for words! What would Papa say if he found out that I made a love declaration to the wrong man?

“You were not the man those words were intended for.”

“I know. You addressed me as Lord Ladeston.”

“Then you should have corrected me.” Feeling sudden anger as they changed sides and circled one another the other way, she tried to ignore the heat that was caused by his arm wrapped around her waist. “You should have stopped me.”

“I attempted to do so, but you pleaded with me not to halt you. By then, I could see what you truly wanted. What all of this charade was about,” he said in clear scorn.

“What charade?” she asked as he released her.

They turned to face one another once more as other couples danced around them. Forced to separate, they could not talk for a minute, and Rachel stared at him.

How could I be so much of a fool not to see that they were different men?

She blamed the liquor in her system and the darkness outside as well as the mask, yet she feared something more was at play. She had so longed not to make such a declaration to the Marquess of Ladeston that she hadn't even bothered looking properly at him before she had said the words.

As the Duke stepped toward her once more, she held her breath, noting there was something in his countenance that she had found missing from his friend's. He wasn't just more attractive to her, but there was something in his smirk that made the tension in the air rise. It drew her to him, as she knew it should not do.

"What charade?" she asked again as they returned to the beginning of the dance, moving around one another, hand in hand. "I wished to declare my love to your friend."

"Two hearts beating as one, eh?" He chuckled, the sound rumbling and making her hand hold on tighter to his own. "Love goes by haps. Some cupid kills with arrows, some with traps."

Rachel pushed sharply away from him, breaking the choreography once more, but he caught up to her fast, catching her by the waist and walking her back further still.

"Shakespeare?" she whispered. "You know Shakespeare, your Grace?"

The Duke frowned momentarily, that smirk of catching her out vanishing before her eyes.

"Much Ado About Nothing, is it not?"

"You read well, Lady Rachel." He drew the two of them in a circle once more, before they were separated. They went to

other partners and performed the necessary steps, coming back toward each other swiftly.

Is it me, or is he grasping at me all the more now?

“Yet, I stand by the quote. You seek to *trap* my friend, do you not?” he hissed in her ear as they stepped from side to side. She walked around him.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Do not deny it,” he snapped in a low tone. “You sought to follow him outside, declare your love, maybe even be caught alone in some scandal.”

“Your Grace!” Her voice pitched high as he caught her arms with his and he tilted her back once more. His face came nearer to hers still, and their argument halted for a breath.

She could have sworn his eyes looked down at her lips. She followed suit, looking at his.

What is this feeling?

When he put her back on her feet and she stumbled away, she wasn't sure the giddy feeling was from the liquor. He chased after her again as per the choreography, and they went back to circling one another, with his arm around her waist.

“I never sought to trap him,” Rachel insisted, returning to their argument. “What you witnessed was a private moment meant for your friend, not for you.”

“You believe yourself to be in love, do you?” the Duke asked with a single brow quirking high.

“I...”

“Aha, a hesitation. No, I now know the truth. As another great man said, ‘love is just like eating large amounts of chocolate.’” He chuckled in a low tone. “Perhaps you mistake what you feel, Lady Rachel.”

“John Milton.” When she identified the quote once more, his brows knitted together. “I’m startling you.”

“More and more.”

They were forced apart as couples walked around them. This time, when they stared at one another, Rachel couldn’t deduce anything in his expression. Was that anger? Intensity? Hatred?

Please, do not let it be hatred.

For some reason, the thought that the Duke of Hurbex might hate her cut her deeply, especially after a dance such as this.

When they came back together, returning to the middle of the dance floor, he was eager to talk, his words coming thick and

fast.

“Stay away from my friend, Lady Rachel.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I will guard him from any lady who seeks to trap him in a loveless match for their own advancement,” he practically spat out, for he was so incensed. “He is a good man. He has the best of hearts, and I will not see him hurt.”

“Your protection of him does you credit.” She circled him the other way. “Yet, you forget yourself, Your Grace.”

“How is that?”

“You forget that I meant what I declared outside.”

Rachel hated the lie. She had not meant it at all, but she could hardly admit to that now. Her father would be furious if he ever found out, and there was something about wishing to dissuade the Duke of Hurbex from such a hateful look that she desired so much.

“Doubt me if you wish, but my heart is true.”

“Really?” The Duke looked doubtful as the dance came to an end. They stared at one another, falling still. “I somehow doubt a woman such as yourself is capable of the constancy of love.”

Her jaw slackened. Any attraction or tension she might have been feeling in the Duke's presence vanished into thin air. A muscle in her cheek twitched as she stared at him, so hurt that she could summon little to say at all.

She curtsied, faster than any other lady on the dance floor did, and sought to walk away. Yet, he caught up with her quickly and took her hand, escorting her from the dance floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she was aware of people looking at the two of them. More than one person had noticed the strangeness of their dance together.

"You have insulted me enough for one night," she said with venom, angling her head a little toward him. "At least, allow me to escape you now, as you have just disparaged me in the strongest possible words."

"I am not insulting you—"

"Then you do not know what an insult is!"

"I am calling you out on your aim." The Duke pulled at her hand as they stopped walking amongst the crowds and looked her in the eye.

"You misunderstand me." She breathed heavily, staring up at him, aware that they still had a hold on one another's hand, though they no longer needed to. "I am truly interested in your friend."

“Truly? Then we shall see about that.” His voice deepened.
“You couldn’t be drawn in by another, then, could you? If your heart is as constant as you suggest it is.”

“Of course, my heart is constant.”

“Is it?” He stared at her, his grip on her hand never loosening.

Without a word, Rachel slowly disentangled her hand from his, knowing the truth of the matter. Had the Duke of Hurbex been a kind dance partner, she might have been in great danger of being drawn in by him.

Fortunately, his manner has made it impossible. Well, mostly.

“Remember this, Lady Rachel. Your plan will not succeed.”
He released her from his captivating gaze.

She turned away from him, hurrying across the room as quickly as she could to put some distance between them. Every so often, she glanced back at the Duke of Hurbex, and as he returned to the Marquess of Ladeston’s side, she found he was looking at her too. Their eyes kept meeting across the room, something unspoken passing between them, though on his part, she presumed it was fury.

“What happened?” Alicia asked, hurrying to Rachel’s side.
“Here, it looks like you need this.”

“Thank you.” Rachel took the glass of champagne from her cousin and quickly swallowed a large mouthful.

“What a dance,” Alicia whispered, her lips parting in awe. “I came to watch over you as your father ensnared poor Lord Ladeston into conversation. I have never seen a dance quite like it.”

“You have not?” Rachel’s hand tightened around the glass with fear.

“What does it mean, Rachel?” Alicia asked, stepping to her side and lowering her voice further.

“It is just a complication, that is all.” Rachel looked at the Duke once more, only to find he was still staring openly at her. “A complication.”

I pray he will not be too great a complication to my father’s plan!

CHAPTER 4



“So? Rachel? Answer me, for God’s sake.”

The power in Miles’s words made Rachel look up from her breakfast plate. She had merely picked at her food this morning and was struggling to eat any of it.

It is because I fear his disapproval, that’s why.

“I do not know what to say, Papa,” she whispered softly.

Miles sighed heavily and rubbed his temple, appearing in great pain. At the other end of the table, Elizabeth, Rachel’s mother, sat calmly, reading the scandal sheet in front of her. In contrast, she was eating fine and seemed much more occupied with her food and her scandal sheet than their conversation.

It has always been this way.

It was how Rachel predominantly pictured her parents ever since she had been a small child. They were much more

interested in other pursuits, rather than talking to her. Miles, at least, spoke to her a little more these days.

A sudden strike to the table made all the cutlery dance. Even Elizabeth looked up from her scandal sheet.

Rachel's eyes shot to where her father had slammed his fist onto the table. He lifted his head, his graying hair now pushed back behind his ears.

“Rachel, we talked about this. You were supposed to find the Marquess of Ladeston and initiate... something.” He waved a hand in the air, clearly not wishing to go into the details. “As it was, there was a clear distance between the pair of you all night. You didn't even dance with him.”

“He did not ask me to dance,” Rachel reminded him.

This didn't seem to help matters, as her father just picked up a knife and slathered butter onto some bread rather angrily. In his haste, he tore the bread, and barely seemed to notice.

“I cannot demand a dance from a man that does not ask me, Papa. That would be highly inappropriate, would it not?”

Rachel tried to remind him of all the lessons that he and her mother had insisted she learned growing up, not that she learned them from either of them. When it came to propriety, literature, or even the outdoor world that she loved so much, she had learned it all from her governesses.

Her most loved governess, Miss Eloise Chambers, had taught her many things about the outside world. Rachel used to sit for long hours at a time in the garden, learning the names of the plants, until the housekeeper or another member of staff was sent to rally Miss Chambers to bring Rachel inside.

Neither Mama nor Papa ever came to find me themselves.

“This is nonsense,” Miles muttered after a minute. He lifted his buttered bread to his lips and tried to take a bite in the exact spot where he had created a hole. Rachel bit her lip to stop her laughter as he readjusted and took a proper bite. “I opened the conversation to allow him to ask you to dance.”

“The Duke of Hurbex asked me.” Rachel stared down at her plate, but she didn’t really see the food. She saw the statuesque face instead, the light-brown eyes that she had revisited in her dream that were originally so cast in shadow under that mask. “That was hardly my doing.”

“You could have turned him down.”

“How? How, without appearing rude?”

“I do not know.” Her father was flustered, turning bright red in the face as he threw down what was left of his bread. It landed butter side down on his plate. “I do not like that man. I think it is best that we try to give him a wide berth.”

“Why don’t you like him?” Rachel asked, sitting forward in her chair. “Have you heard anything about him?”

Elizabeth lifted her head, and out of the corner of her eye, Rachel caught her mother staring at her with interest. Out of fear of looking too intrigued by the Duke's name, Rachel sat back again.

"I've heard scraps here and there." Miles scratched the stubble on his jaw distractedly. "He's an astute man, a perceptive one. He's very particular about whom he does business with and whom he keeps company with too." He grimaced, an expression so strong that his nose curled. "The way he hovers over his friend is concerning."

"He cares for Lord Ladeston," Rachel said, finding her voice as she lifted her gaze. "That is an admirable quality."

She thought of the passion with which the Duke had tried to defend Lord Ladeston the night before.

No wonder I have felt so guilty since the end of that dance. It is because I know the Duke of Hurbex was right.

"Perhaps if the Duke of Hurbex is not a man so easily..."

"Deceived?" Elizabeth offered, speaking for the first time that morning. Rachel looked at her, startled that her mother had zeroed in on the right word so aptly.

"No. *Persuaded* is a better word, I think," Miles corrected.

Elizabeth shrugged and just went back to reading, tucking the curls of her dark brown hair that were a lot like Rachel's own

behind her ears.

“If the Duke of Hurbex cannot be so easily *persuaded*,” Rachel argued, trying to stop herself from fidgeting as she did so, “then maybe this pursuit of Lord Ladeston is not such a wise idea.”

The strength of her father’s glare made her regret speaking at all. She sat back in her chair, her spine slumping under his withering gaze. His pale blue eyes seemed icy to her at that moment, as cold as the snow that had come that year’s winter.

“Rachel.” Miles slowly sat forward, resting his elbows on the table with his hands clasped together. His movements were slow, but they spoke volumes, and it told Rachel what danger she was in because of her his wrath. “We have been over this. It must be done. We have no time to wait, and it must be done soon, or... well, I shudder to think of the consequences. We shall have no need of you anymore in this house, you know that, do you not?”

He took off his napkin and thrust it down onto the table. Standing, he moved to the window that looked out over the busy street.

Rachel swayed in her own seat, thinking of her father’s threat.

Since her father’s plan had come together, it was the first time in years she had felt talked to by her parents. They spoke to her as if she was a person, rather than an ornament that had been propped up in the corner of the room, merely there to look the part.

If she didn't do as her father wanted, then his threat felt imminent.

He has spoken before about sending me away to one of the country estates. I'll be quite alone.

That sense of loneliness had her hands curling at her sides, digging deep ridges into her palms.

"I didn't have a chance to get the Marquess of Ladeston on his own last night, Father. Yet, I shall try again. I promise you that." She couldn't bear the loneliness. Her words erupted from her with sudden eagerness.

"That's it, dear," Elizabeth said, her tone distant as she turned the scandal sheet over and read the back. "Try and try again, we must. There are always more events. You shall simply have to corner Lord Ladeston at the next event."

Corner him? I am not a hunter, and he is not a deer!

Rachel felt bile rise in her throat. She grappled with the nearest teacup and downed it, trying to stop that bile from coming up again.

"Yes, yes, it must be done." Miles cleared his throat and turned around to face her once more, his hands clasped behind his back. "Remember this in the future." He cocked his head to the side, deep in thought. "Keep a wide berth of the Duke of Hurbex."

“Why, exactly?” Rachel whispered, praying her father had not seen anything of the dance she had shared with the Duke the night before.

Alicia had not been able to stop talking about it for the rest of the night. She had said multiple times how it had appeared like a lover’s tiff to anyone who had watched them.

“Because he is too perceptive, too guarded a person,” Miles said in a rush. “We have been over this, Rachel.” He rubbed his temple tiredly. “You know why we have set our minds on the Marquess, do you not? He is my competitor in business. I need a way to control him, to stop things, before they can get too out of hand. Do you understand that?”

“I know, I know,” Rachel muttered.

She’d heard it countless times before how her father was doing well in business until the Marquess of Ladeston’s investments had flourished. They were competitors. Facing ruin, her father’s terror and fear for their own position had driven him to this goal.

He intended to marry Rachel off to the Marquess, in order to control his business through the marital connection.

“Just stay clear of the Duke of Hurbex and try harder with the Marquess of Ladeston. Is that understood?”

When she didn’t answer right away, slowly, that hand lowered from his head, and he glared at her. “Is that *understood*?”

“Yes,” Rachel mumbled, her voice rather quieter than she had expected it to be. “May I retire from the breakfast table now?”

Rather than answering her, her father dismissed her with a casual wave of his hand. She left her seat hurriedly, glancing back once to see her mother’s thin lips smiling as she read something in the scandal sheet. Evidently, Elizabeth took more pleasure in other people’s problems than she did their own.

Rachel left the room swiftly. She went to her room and gathered the book she relied on so heavily these days, taking a pencil with her. Seeing the sun shining, she left her chamber fast and retreated downstairs, through a door, and out into the garden.

Although their townhouse was on a busy street in Covent Garden, they were fortunate enough still to have a good plot as a garden. Rachel now wandered these borders, listening to the distant catcalls of street sellers from the town square. When she found an archway covered in roses, she sat down beneath it on a small marble bench and opened the book in front of her.

Large and bound with heavy leather, it was a sketchpad she frequently went back to. Many of the lessons Miss Chambers had taught her over the years to stay calm, Rachel had put into use in this book. On a myriad of pages were drawings of plants that she found beautiful, interspersed with quotes from writers that she loved and had written alongside those drawings.

Turning to the last page, she found the sketch she had started the night before. It was of the Duke of Hurbex, but as she had known him in that dance, without his mask. She drew his face, in great detail, concentrating on the shading when it came to the statuesque contours of his face. Lastly, she wrote down some of the quotes he had uttered in their argument.

“Love goes by haps. Some cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.”

Angrily, she drew an arrow that cut through the word ‘traps’ and shaded the arrowhead rather deeply.

“Why am I doing this?” she whispered to herself, her pencil never letting up as she returned to the Duke’s face and continued with that shading.

It struck her that she may be a little infatuated with the Duke’s fine appearance. Fearing she would just be like any other foolish girl of the *ton* who developed a fancy for a wealthy man so distant from her, and one who plainly didn’t like her, she popped the pencil behind her ear and hastily closed the book, shutting out the sight of the Duke’s face.

“I shall stay away from him.” She was half hoping that by uttering the words aloud, she could somehow make the resolution more real. “Just as my father says, it is wise to avoid the Duke of Hurbex.”

However, she sought to avoid him for a different reason. Whereas her father plainly feared the Duke could realize what was afoot in his plan, she feared her liking for his handsome face becoming too strong.



“Rachel, is there a reason you’re clinging to my hand so tightly?” Alicia’s rich dark eyes turned to Rachel, a soft smile curling her lips. “You’ll break my bones!”

“I’m sorry.” Rachel was trying to keep her trembling to a minimum as they followed her mother and father into the Countess of Redwick’s house.

The dinner party was to be a small affair, and as her father had impressed upon her before they went into the house, there would be fewer people there. It would be easier to approach Lord Ladeston.

“Rachel.” Alicia winced all the more, jerking her head toward Rachel, her blonde hair quivering around her ears.

“I’m sorry.” Rachel softened her grasp on Alicia’s hand.

“Rachel, come.” Alicia pulled Rachel away from the entrance hall and into the nearest drawing room.

It was hot, thanks to the summer, and even with the windows fully open, there wasn’t even a breath of breeze that ran through the room. Full of people wandering back and forth, all pulling at their collars and their jackets. The ladies fluttered their fans in front of their faces, and Rachel followed suit, though her heat came from a different source.

Across the room, she caught sight of the Duke of Hurbex. He was beside Lord Ladeston once again, and they kept to their own company, sharing a quiet word and sipping red wine.

“Rachel, please, listen to me,” Alicia whispered, pulling her into the corner of the room so no one approached them for conversation. “If you do not wish to do this so much, to the

point that you are shaking to this degree and in danger of breaking my hand, why is it that you are doing this?"

"I..." Rachel struggled for words. She looked at the door as her father and mother walked in. "I have no choice," she whispered, eventually.

Alicia heaved a resigned sigh and took Rachel's arm, steering her further into the room. "For the sake of the bones in my hand, I hope that's true," she said in a low tone.

Ladies they both knew approached them. Amongst them, there was the chief gossip of the *ton*, Lady Pipwick. At her side were two much younger women, both so preoccupied with looking elegant that one picked at the neckline of her gown restlessly, and the other fluttered her fan as fast as a bee's wings, in an effort to stop herself from perspiring.

"Ah, Lady Rachel, Lady Alicia, how are you both this evening?" Lady Pipwick asked, moving to their side.

"Very well, thank you," Rachel lied, glancing over the gossip's shoulder as she looked for Lord Ladeston.

As fast as her eyes settled on him, she turned to look at the Duke beside him, only to find his green eyes staring at her across the room.

The Duke took his friend's shoulder and steered him away, moving him toward a group of men that were busy in conversation.

He's doing everything he can to keep me away from his friend.

“Have you two seen who is here tonight?” Lady Pipwick asked, stepping closer toward Rachel and Alicia.

Subtly, Rachel felt Alicia's hand curl through her arm. They had both been frustrated by Lady Pipwick's gossiping ways for months, and they were certain she had been behind two particularly cruel comments that had circulated about the two of them.

Rachel was thought to be too proud by some in the *ton*, thanks to such gossip, and Alicia was said to have the backbone of a mouse. Rachel stepped slyly in front of her cousin, hoping to protect her from any future hurt Lady Pipwick could cause.

“Who?” Rachel asked, forcing a smile so the lady did not know just how displeased she was in her company.

“The Duke of Hurbex! Oh, yes, imagine that.” Lady Pipwick laughed and looked at the two ladies on either side of her, clearly encouraging them to laugh too.

Rachel flinched at the mention of the Duke, trying her best not to seek him out across the room.

“He is not so commonly seen at such events, though from what I hear, he intends to come to many of them now, alongside his friend, Lord Ladeston.” Lady Pipwick giggled. “Perhaps the Duke of Hurbex is hunting for a wife, at last?”

Rachel couldn't resist the urge. Her chin turned up, and she looked across the room. The Duke was no longer staring at her but was standing at his friend's arm, watching as an eager gentleman talked to the Marquess. From the expression on the Duke's face, Rachel thought he was rather silently judging the gentleman who had approached them.

Is he looking for a wife?

She fantasized briefly about how different life could have been. Had her father not made such demands of her, had their family's position not been in trouble, and had she not been so compelled by the sense of duty, perhaps a meeting between her and the Duke of Hurbex could have passed entirely differently.

“Although in my opinion, a lady would have to put up with a good deal to be the Duchess of Hurbex.” Lady Pipwick lifted her chin higher, appearing so proud that Rachel exchanged a quick grimace with her cousin.

“What do you mean by that?” another lady asked.

Rachel shot a quick glare to the woman who had spoken, wondering why they were encouraging Lady Pipwick at all.

“I mean that the Duke of Hurbex is a difficult man. I've heard rumors that you are more likely to find him wandering the earth like a nomad than you are the great ballrooms of the *ton*.” Lady Pipwick shuddered as if such a thing was a horrid thought, indeed. “Who would want to be his wife? What could one even find to talk about with such a man?”

Rachel glanced away, looking at the Duke once more. She longed to know what Lady Pipwick had meant, and what the Duke liked to do that had earned him the reputation of wandering like a nomad.

“If you would excuse me.” Rachel curtsied to Lady Pipwick.

“Are we to lose you from conversation so soon?” Lady Pipwick asked, her eyes widening at her quick escape.

“If you find the Duke of Hurbex’s conversation so dull, I fear you will find mine even worse. Good evening to you.” Rachel quickly made her escape, catching out of the corner of her eye the way that Lady Pipwick’s jaw fell slack.

Rachel towed Alicia away, who giggled in her ear.

“Why are you defending the Duke, Rachel?”

Rachel could not answer the question.

CHAPTER 5



“Here she comes.” Luke peered over the rim of his wine glass as Lady Rachel made a beeline for him and Robert across the room.

“Who?” Robert asked distractedly.

He was sighing and looking down at his own glass, clearly tired of the long conversation they’d just had with one particular gentleman who had been trying to induce Robert to invest in his new business venture.

“Worry not about what Mr. Laidlaw had to say.” Luke took the glass from his friend and topped it up. “Here, that’s too empty. Let me see to it for you.”

“Why is everyone always trying to get me to invest in mad schemes?”

“You’ve hit the nail on the head.” Luke sighed and passed the glass back to Robert. “You’re a successful man, and everyone wants a piece of the pie, so they’re offering up mad schemes in the hope you’ll invest, and they can take a cut of the money.”

“Surely not!” Robert forced out a laugh, but the sound died quickly when Luke just continued to stare at him. “You’re a cynic, Luke. Maybe some of these investments are genuine.”

“Of course, they are,” Luke said with thick sarcasm. “As genuine as the woman who is now approaching us.”

“Who are you even talking about?” Robert looked around in search of said woman, but Luke caught his arm and held him still, not wanting to give Lady Rachel hope that Robert was searching for her.

Lady Rachel appeared a second later at their side, curtsying to the two of them.

“Good evening, Lord Ladeston.”

“Good evening, Lady Rachel.” Robert bowed in response, a kindly smile on his lips.

As Lady Rachel’s eyes flicked to Luke, he bowed his head too, but made no encouraging intimation to see her.

Why is she looking at me like that?

Her eyes lingered on him for too long. Frustrated, he looked away, angered that she could look at him in such a way when she had clearly set her sights on Robert.

“I am glad to see you again this evening, My Lord.” She addressed Robert alone. Her voice pitched a little higher, as it had done when Luke had been in the garden with her at the masquerade ball.

Perhaps she means to repeat such a declaration, but this time to the right party.

Luke stepped forward, putting himself at a right angle to both Robert and Rachel. He had every intention of stepping in and halting such a declaration, if it came to it.

“And I you,” Robert said, clearly distracted as he looked over Lady Rachel’s shoulder, his focus elsewhere.

“Perhaps I may have the pleasure of your company this evening? I would be glad to be seated by you for dinner,” she murmured with clear hope, though Luke noticed that her hands fidgeted constantly in front of her, her fingers clasping and releasing like long cat’s claws.

“If you so desire it.” Robert smiled at her, his eyes flitting elsewhere.

“If I didn’t know any better, Lady Rachel,” Luke said, butting into the conversation, “I’d say you were doing your best to ensnare my friend into your company.”

“Ensnare?” Lady Rachel angled her head toward Luke, her dark brows lifting. “What a word to choose. Is it so wrong for a lady to desire a gentleman’s company?”

Robert flushed a deep shade of red, embarrassed by her forward words. He coughed too, feigning interest in his claret.

“Robert, I see Lord Myers is here tonight.” Luke took his friend’s shoulder. “Did you not wish to speak to him about your business ventures?”

“Yes, that’s right. Excuse me, Lady Rachel.” Robert bowed to her and hurriedly left.

Lady Rachel looked ready to follow him, but she did not. She stood very still, instead, her head turning back around to face Luke, with her eyebrows lifted.

“You intervened, Your Grace,” she muttered in a low tone. “Have I given you such cause to dislike me that you would actively prevent me from speaking to your friend?”

“Yes,” Luke said without hesitation, lifting his wine glass to his lips.

When she balked, taking a single step back from him, he hesitated.

Was that too strong an admission?

“If this was your attempt to flirt with him, though, I can rest assured that I do not need to intervene.” He chuckled, lowering his glass once more. “Your flirtatious skills are lacking, and my friend is safe.”

“Is this how you conduct every conversation you have with ladies you have just met? With such rudeness and insults?” She stepped toward him, the challenge in her tone rising.

Taken by that tone, Luke stepped toward her too.

“Not with every lady.”

“I’m just the fortunate lady, then, am I?” She cocked her head to the side, and Luke’s eyes followed the curve of her neck.

She is too distracting for her own good.

“Are you well, Your Grace?” Lady Rachel had caught his momentary hesitation. He lifted his glass to his lips one more time, needing to quench a sudden thirst. “You seemed distracted.”

“I thought I told you not to flirt.”

“How was that a flirtation?” She laughed and angled herself around. She stood beside him, her arm brushing his, and it made the breath catch in his throat. “I consider that a greater flirtation.”

“Then you are better at it than I first thought.” His hand tightened at his side, for he despaired, being so drawn in by her attention. “Do not do such a thing to Robert.” He took a step away, but much slower than he should have done. “You’ll knock the poor man for sixes.”

“Hardly. He has run away from me, has he not? At your request.”

“Thank goodness for that.” He turned his head sharply to her. “Lady Rachel, I do not know what you mean by setting your cap at my friend. Perhaps like so many others here tonight, you have your eyes on the fortune that he has managed to build for himself.”

Lady Rachel looked down at the glass in front of her, her cheeks blushing a deep shade of crimson.

“Aha! Have I discovered your secret?”

“You misunderstand me,” she murmured, fiddling with her glass. “You mistake an interest in a good man for an interest in his fortune.”

“No lies, Lady Rachel, I beg of you.” Luke slowly shook his head, watching as her gaze returned to his.

They had stepped rather close toward one another again, and in the back of his mind, Luke feared what any gossipers would make of their interaction and close position, but try as he might, he could not step away.

“You think the world of your friend, do you not?” she asked, a small smile appearing on her lips. “Is it so wrong for a lady to think as well of him as you do?”

“Oh, do not appeal to that part of my character, now.” Luke laughed, tipping his head back. “You orchestrate yourself well in conversation, Lady Rachel, but it will not work on me. I will say this once and for all. Choose another suitor besides Robert. Choose another man entirely.”

“Who should I choose?” She stood taller and beckoned to him with her hand. “Come now, I would be glad of your instruction, Your Grace, as you clearly think so well of your own opinion and so little of mine.”

“That is not what I said.”

“It is what you meant at every stage of this conversation,” she reminded him, and he could not argue with her.

Have I been quite so disparaging?

“Point out to me in this room who else is such a good gentleman as Lord Ladeston?” She motioned toward the room, urging him to pick a gentleman. “Lord Myers, perhaps? Mr. Redford? Or even Mr. Jarvis?” She halted and wrinkled her nose at the rotund gentleman with ruddy cheeks who was standing a few strides away and whose hands were grappling a little too strongly at the young woman beside him.

“Even *I* will admit you can do better than him,” Luke said in a low tone, chuckling as he moved to whisper in her ear.

“Thank God. You at least give me some virtue, then, if you think me superior to him,” she whispered back, turning her head so they were closer to one another once more.

What is happening?

Luke paused, rather intoxicated being so close to Lady Rachel. The scent she wore, of bergamot and rose, enveloped him. Slowly, she lifted her champagne glass to her lips and took a sip.

“Perhaps a little,” he murmured. “I might not encourage you to choose Mr. Jarvis, but I beg you, choose another besides Robert.”

“Who?” She lowered her glass between them. “You?”

He laughed warmly at her words and tipped his chin back.

“Do not think I could be drawn in by your artful ways, Lady Rachel.” He shook his head, slowly returning his gaze to her. “I have just seen your flirting skills, for one.”

“And you didn’t seem to object too much, at one point.” She stepped past him, making an appearance of reaching for the bottle of sparkling wine behind him, yet she managed to brush her arm against his once more. He laughed at the touch.

“See? Artful, indeed,” he whispered and turned to face the table with her. He took the bottle out of her grasp, their fingers brushing on the glass. She gasped and looked up at him as he topped up her glass for her. “Two can play at such a game.”

“That they can.”

She looked at him intensely, and he returned her stare. For a brief second, he could have fooled himself that they were not talking about Robert at all. They were only talking about themselves.

Yet, she has chosen Robert. I am just here to interfere.

“Do not look at me in such a way,” he ordered, though his voice lacked the strength he had intended. He stared at her instead as she blinked. “Lady Rachel.”

At last, she looked down at her glass, her hands closing around the spindle. He could have sworn there was a tremor in her fingers, but perhaps he had imagined it.

“No matter what your natural charms are, I will not allow you to take advantage of my friend.” He stretched across in front of her, returning the champagne bottle to its place on the refreshments table.

“I never said that was what I was doing—”

“You do not know him,” Luke cut her off. “Enough of this conversation, for we are going around in circles. Let me make this plain.” He turned to face her fully, aware now that her cheeks were flushing even redder, and her eyes seemed to struggle to meet his gaze at all. “You have pursued him when you barely know each other at all. What little I know of love tells me such a thing is impossible. One cannot live without knowing another’s heart.”

“Young men’s love then lies, not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes.” Her slow words captured his attention.

“*Romeo and Juliet.*” He nodded in approval. “An apt quote, indeed, for I believe you look at Robert now with your eyes and not your heart at all.”

“You seek to find error where there is none.”

“No, Lady Rachel. I do not.” He shook his head, trying to hold her gaze a little longer, but she angled her head away.

Briefly, Luke thought he caught a glimmer of wetness in her eyes. Were those unshed tears? Then, it was gone, and the momentary thought left him.

“I shall keep an eye on you, Lady Rachel. Pray, stay away from Robert.”

Knowing he could not stand beside her anymore, he turned and left, hurrying away across the room, where he sought to listen to Robert’s conversation about his business. Something Luke had noticed over the years was that although Robert had proved himself highly intelligent and an excellent businessman, he did not always fight his own corner when it came to joint investments with other gentlemen.

I shall seek to protect him, in every way.

As Luke reached Robert’s shoulder, he looked back at Lady Rachel across the room. She kept her back to the main party,

and he couldn't catch a glimpse of her face, not even when her cousin, Lady Alicia, approached and stood beside her, talking in a low tone.

"That is tiresome," Robert said suddenly as the gentleman he had been talking with left. "I should not talk about business at an event like this. It should be for amusement."

"That it should." Luke nodded in agreement.

"Where are you looking so intently? Is everything well, Luke?" Robert waved a hand in front of his friend's face, clearly sensing he wasn't focused on their conversation.

"My apologies." Luke shifted his focus to his friend. "Robert, allow me to give you a warning. Lady Rachel may be lovely, and she seems intent on speaking to you, but I would be wary of her if I were you."

"Wait, you mean the Earl of Brauncold's daughter?"

"Yes, the lady who approached you just now and asked to be seated with you at dinner." Luke felt his brows furrowing together. "Robert, did you barely take note of her?"

"In truth, yes." Robert sighed and looked away. "I've been distracted this evening. That is all."

"Good, then stay distracted."

Luke took a sip of his wine as he glanced at Lady Rachel as she talked with Lady Alicia. Still, Lady Rachel kept her back to the room, apparently refusing to engage with the rest of the people there at all. Lady Alicia took her arm, and they spoke in low tones.

It is as if they are conspiring or sharing secrets. Or perhaps I am wrong...

At a second glance, Luke thought it possible that Lady Rachel was turned away from the room as she fought tears, and her cousin was attempting to comfort her, but he hurriedly dismissed the thought. There was little chance he could have such an effect on her to bring her to tears, surely?

“Just because a woman is beautiful, Robert, it does not mean that there is beauty within,” Luke pointed out to Robert, who stood at his side and was now looking at Lady Rachel too. “I fear that Lady Rachel may be one such woman.”

“Oh? And what do you judge to be beauty within?” Robert asked with a small smile on his face. “How many ladies do you have experience with, anyway?”

“That is a discussion we should not have, and you know it.” Luke looked at his friend with a smile as he laughed.

They both knew that in Luke’s younger days, he had perhaps been a little wild. Yet, not these days. He kept to his own company, mostly, preferring to converse with very few friends. It had been a long time since he had even considered the idea of a courtship with a lady.

“Go on, then, Luke.” Robert smiled and encouraged him with a wave of his hand. “You are clearly intent on being philosophical for a moment. So, tell me, what should I know about the beauty within?”

“Beauty lives with kindness,” Luke explained, quoting another Shakespeare play. Robert didn’t notice but looked away, clearly thinking of something else entirely.

I wonder if Lady Rachel would have noticed the quote.

“All I am saying is that we know so little of Lady Rachel, and I fear her attentions to you are... well, I fear that they have an ulterior motive.” Luke struggled for the right words. “She might have fair features, she might be intelligent, even witty and rather... attractive.” He cocked his head to the side as he watched her across the room. Still, she kept her face averted, and he rather longed to see it again. “Such things are not enough to demand a constancy of heart.”

“Constancy of heart, eh? You are poetic as well as philosophical this evening.” Robert laughed and clapped Luke on the arm. “Have no fear. What I am looking for in a woman amounts to something else, I am sure. I imagine a woman of a sweet nature. A woman whom one has to get to know for a long time before one knows the truth of her heart. I am not one for a woman who wears her heart on her sleeve.”

How strange. I could have sworn Robert was looking at Lady Rachel.

Even as Robert stared her way, Luke was sure this description did not fit Lady Rachel. She was bold, perhaps a little nervous,

but she hardly hid her feelings!

“You are looking at the wrong woman, then.” Luke took his friend’s shoulder and steered him to look elsewhere in the room.

Robert laughed warmly, even as Luke struggled to look away from Lady Rachel.

Who was Robert talking about if not Lady Rachel?

Luke didn’t have an answer, but he noted that Lady Rachel left the room. Still, she did not reveal her face.

CHAPTER 6



“Rachel, enough!” Miles hissed as he trapped Rachel’s arm in his and dragged her into Hyde Park. “I cannot watch the calamity of last night take place all over again. I have it on good authority that Lord Ladeston is here today to watch the sailing regatta. So, you must make this happen.”

“Papa, please.” Rachel tried to retrieve her arm from her father’s.

She glanced back at her cousin and her mother behind her, pleading for help. Alicia wore her usual concerned expression, her lips pressed together, but Elizabeth seemed uninterested. She stared out across the riverbank along the Thames, her hair fluttering in the wind as her eyes observed those who had gathered.

“Please, what?” Miles asked sharply in Rachel’s ear.

“I attempted to sit with Lord Ladeston last night at dinner, and he refused. What more do you need to hear?” Rachel eventually succeeded in tearing her arm out of her father’s. “He is not interested in me. Perhaps it is wise to abandon this endeavor entirely.”

Just as she thought she had succeeded in escaping her father's hold, he took hold of her wrist again.

“Ow, Papa!”

“Shh,” he warned.

They stood between the crowds that had gathered to watch the promenade and the sailing. As Rachel looked between the groups, fearful of being seen at the mercy of her father, he gripped her hand lower down at his side, clearly intending to hide it.

“I am not having you back out of this now, Rachel. I have made myself abundantly clear. Where is your sense of duty, hmm? Where is your loyalty to this family?” His blue eyes bore into her own, never once flinching or looking away. “Do you have none? Do I no longer have need of you in my house and under my roof?”

Rachel's voice failed her. She stared back at her father, thinking of the conversation she'd had with the Duke of Hurbex the night before. What he had said had bothered her greatly, to the point that she had teared up at the dinner party and needed to leave for a few minutes, just to stop anyone else from spotting her tears.

Only Alicia knew of the pain Rachel was going through. At this moment, Alicia moved to her side and offered a hand to her arm. It was a silent attempt at comfort as Miles gripped Rachel's wrist painfully.

“Please. You are hurting me.” Rachel met her father’s gaze.

He double-glanced down at his hand on her, seeming startled by such an idea. Slowly, he released her, and she rubbed her wrist, trying to relieve some of the stinging pain in her skin.

“Come, enough of this.” Miles gestured down the riverbank. “Let us find Lord Ladeston. Perhaps you can correct the errors of last night.”

He led the way toward the river’s edge, where many people had gathered in front of a gazebo that served drinks. Most people stood by the water, pointing at the sailing boats and the dinghies, as others hurried forward onto a small dock, stepping into their own boats.

“Do me a favor,” Rachel whispered to Alicia as they followed behind her mother and father. “Push me in the water now, then at least this pain of doing ‘my duty’ will be over.” She said the words mockingly, even though deep down she felt the truth of them.

A woman in my position has to do her duty, does she not? What else is there? What else would get my father’s approval?

“You know I cannot do that.” Alicia winced at her side.

They trailed behind Miles. Rachel slowed her pace, hardly eager to reach Lord Ladeston after he had so expertly avoided her the night before at dinner.

Lord Ladeston stood on the dock, pointing at the boats, his face lit up with excitement.

“He is a handsome man, is he not?” Rachel whispered to Alicia as she pointed at Lord Ladeston.

“Very.” Alicia nodded eagerly at her side.

“Yes, that is what I thought. I should be more excited about setting my cap at him, should I not be?”

“Love doesn’t work like that.” Alicia’s hold on Rachel’s arm tightened. “And you do not love Lord Ladeston, do you?”

“I do not know him.” Rachel found herself quoting the Duke’s words from the night before.

He is right. God’s wounds, I do not wish him to be right, but he is!

As if the Duke had been summoned by her thoughts, he walked the other way down the riverbank toward his friend. He was missing his tailcoat in the strong heat of the day, with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He waved at his friend, and Lord Ladeston beckoned for him to come and join him on the dock.

“Rachel?” Alicia elbowed Rachel in the ribs.

“Ow, what was that for?”

“Just noticing that you seemed rather intent on staring at another gentleman entirely.”

“I do not know what you mean.” Rachel ignored her cousin’s teasing and hurried toward the dock, following her parents as Miles stepped toward Lord Ladeston to engage him in conversation.

The first few seconds of conversation, Rachel could not hear, though she saw her father bow and saw Lord Ladeston return that greeting. Elizabeth moved away and joined Lady Pipwick by the gazebo, taking a drink and gossiping in a quiet tone.

At Lord Ladeston’s side, the Duke of Hurbex stopped, his arms folding across his chest. He bowed his head to her father in acknowledgment but did not offer a full bow.

He looks at my father with more suspicion than he looks at me.

Rachel crossed the last distance toward them, slowly moving to her father’s side, where she and Alicia curtsied.

“Ah, Rachel, there you are.” Her father turned to face her as if delighted by her presence.

I have never known him to be delighted by me.

Rachel rubbed the sore spot on her wrist, still thinking of how he had gripped it in anger.

“Rachel was just saying how much she wished to get out on the water herself.” Miles’s words made her snap her head toward him.

I said no such thing!

“Yes, she looks eager,” the Duke muttered in a wry tone.

Rachel rather thought she was the only one who had heard him, as she looked toward him, and no other did. He bore an amused smirk and raised an eyebrow, clearly welcoming her to argue with him.

“Well, I can see why.” Lord Ladeston looked out across the river. “What a day it is for sailing.” He motioned to the sun and the other boats on the water.

“So many people out there, one is in danger of tipping the boat over,” Miles said with a laugh. “I would like for my daughter to have an escort on the water.”

Rachel’s shoulders slumped as she looked at Alicia. Her cousin was equally embarrassed, blushing a rich pink shade.

“Then I shall be happy to escort your daughter, Lord Brauncold.”

The voice that had spoken was not the one Rachel had been expecting. Far from Lord Ladeston taking up her father's offer, the Duke of Hurbex had. He offered his hand to her, just as he had done for the dance a few nights before.

"Oh, I..." Miles faltered, clearly struggling with how to turn him down.

"What do you say, Lady Rachel?" The Duke held onto that knowing smirk. "Did you have another escort in mind?"

"No, indeed. Thank you." Rachel took his hand, trying to ignore the fluttering in her stomach.

Rather relieved to have avoided her father's tricks for another few minutes, she allowed the Duke to lead her toward the edge of the dock, where small boats were lined up. Glancing behind her, she saw that Lord Ladeston had offered his hand to Alicia and was now escorting her to another boat.

Miles was so furious that his hands balled into fists at his side. Even Elizabeth's appearance behind him with two glasses of wine in her hands could not calm him.

Wordlessly, the Duke helped Rachel down into the boat. When he gripped her waist to steady her, she held her breath, trying not to admire the handsome lines of his face. He released her, encouraging her down to the stern of the boat as he took the other end and reached for the oars.

Rachel couldn't stand the silence. The glares he kept sending her way reminded her too much of their conversation from the

night before and how it had led to the tears she had tried too hard to keep hidden from him.

“If we are to sail together, do not let us sail in silence, Your Grace,” she pleaded.

The Duke lifted the oars and conveniently sailed them far away from Lord Ladeston and Alicia. Rachel glanced away, noticing what he had done. Returning her focus to him, she raised her eyebrows.

“Any conversation would suffice.”

“I thought you were going to challenge me on successfully separating you from my friend again.”

“I would be happy to have any other conversation with you besides one where you insult me for my interest in your friend.” She sat taller, determined today to be strong. She would not cry at his words, just as she would not become emotional at her father’s demands of her.

“Then what shall we talk about?” the Duke asked, that smirk never slipping from his face. “Shall we talk about your attempts to flirt with my friend, instead? I found that very amusing.”

“You would,” she murmured. “You seem to find amusement in all my actions.”

“Well, you can hardly blame me.” His smile broadened. “You declared your heart to be Robert’s when you stood before me. Ha! What a performance you made that night!”

“If you are just here to disparage me again, then I’d rather dive in this water and swim back to the shore.” She folded her arms across her chest.

“Pray, do not do that.”

“Why not? I would have thought you’d be delighted by anything that would separate the two of us.”

“Because if you are to dive into the water, I would have to be a gentleman and dive in after you to help you out.”

“I am perfectly capable on my own in the water.” She sat taller as he paused with his oars. “I can swim.”

“And in that gown?” He nodded his head toward her heavy dress. “The water would drag you down, and I’d have to pull you out, Lady Rachel. We both know that.”

Rachel looked down at her dress, thinking of what it would be like to have the Duke in the water with her, reaching for her and helping her out. Such redness bloomed in her cheeks that she angled her body away, looking over the edge of the boat so he could not see her face.

“You could leave me in there, and I would not disparage you for it. I believe you would even be quite tempted to leave me

there. You plainly dislike me so much that you are happy to be alone with me just to stop my wish to reach your friend.” She glanced back at him only when she was certain her cheeks were no longer so flushed.

The Duke said nothing, but he returned his attention to the oars, turning the boat around and sending them further down the water.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Further away from Robert, so you cannot get to him.”

“I can hardly entrap him like a siren when we’re not on the same boat.” Rachel laughed at the madness of the idea.

“You may intend to try. You could use your beauty to trap him, so the greater distance I can put between the pair of you, the better.”

Rachel stared, speechless.

He thinks I am beautiful?

The Duke’s arms moved faster with the oars, taking them further away still down the water. They ended up surrounded by other small boats with courting couples and siblings pressed together. Each boat was in danger of bumping into another, but the Duke managed to expertly maneuver them through a small gap and out the other side.

“You have done this before,” she remarked, watching him closely.

“I have. You’ll often find me doing any outdoor activity that I can.” He concentrated on his task, turning the boat and avoiding another collision.

Intrigued, Rachel sat forward, thinking of what Lady Pipwick had said when she had gossiped about him.

“I heard a rumor that you were fond of the outdoors, Your Grace. What is it you like so much about it? The landscape, the nature...” She waited for him to say something, to take part in a different conversation with her that was one where they weren’t exchanging insults.

The Duke stopped moving the oars, his eyes finding her own.

“The sense of adventure, for one thing,” he murmured in a low tone. “That is something which can hardly be mirrored in any ballroom or at any dinner party, can it? When given the option of standing on a riverbank to watch boats or jumping in one myself, I would always rather jump in.”

“So, you actually wished to sail? You did not just ask me to separate me from your friend?” Rachel asked, watching as his small smile appeared.

“A man can have two aims, can he not?” He moved the boat toward the river’s edge, and Rachel realized with disappointment that he was heading to a second dock.

“Have you tired of my company, already?”

“Well, I have achieved one aim.”

He nodded to the other side of the river. Rachel followed his gesture, seeing that Alicia and Lord Ladeston had ended up in their boat trapped between others. Alicia was laughing warmly, and even Lord Ladeston looked more at ease than Rachel had seen him before.

“You are far away from him now.”

Their boat collided with the edge of the dock, and the Duke hurriedly wrapped a trail of rope around a nearby post, then leaped out of the boat. He offered a hand to Rachel, and she took it without thinking, her fingers curling around his own. As he helped her up, she stood on the edge of the dock, not moving away from him, and not releasing him either. His hand flexed in her hand before he halted too.

“What is it?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“You called me beautiful, Your Grace.” She swallowed around a sudden nervous lump in her throat. “Did you mean it?”

“I thought I told you not to flirt with my friend. You certainly do not need to extend your endeavors to me.” He released her hand.

“I was not flirting. I was asking.”

He stepped away, froze, then looked back at her again, a curious expression on his face. For a second, she didn't feel judged by him. There was something in his look that made her believe he understood her.

I am not beautiful, Your Grace. I know what I see when I look in the mirror, but if you believed me to be...

Her stomach quivered, and she could have sworn moths danced beneath her skin.

“Ah, Rachel, there you are.”

Her father appeared on the dock. He looked flustered, having run so far down the riverbank to catch up with them.

“Lady Rachel.” The Duke bowed to her in parting, his gaze finding hers briefly before he left, hurrying back up the dock and onto dry land.

Rachel found it hard to tear her gaze away until her father took her arm. He gripped her wrist once more, making the bruising across her skin worse.

“Ow,” she murmured. “If you do not wish to have people questioning why I have bruises, it would be best if you stop.”

Miles released her abruptly. He turned to the river and rubbed a hand over his face, his body plainly stressed.

“This is madness,” he muttered darkly. “I bring you here to charm the Marquess, and you end up on the water with his friend, instead. A duke that is so canny, he would see us coming from a mile off.”

He already has done it.

Rachel didn't think it wise to murmur this aloud, so she stayed silent as Miles turned away from the river, his fingers tapping out a rhythm as his palms pressed together.

“I know what we must do,” he claimed, his voice suddenly tight with determination. “If we are to achieve what we need to, then we must put you and Lord Ladeston under the same roof.”

“How? How can you accomplish such a thing?”

“With art.” Miles smiled, yet it was no warm expression. If anything, it was cold and made Rachel back up dangerously close to the edge of the dock, one heel out of the river. “We shall invite a party to our country estate. Once there for a few days, we can seek to put you and Lord Ladeston together as much as possible.”

“What?” Rachel stepped forward. “Surely you cannot mean to invite scandal!”

“If it comes to it. But first, we shall try proximity.” Miles clapped his hands together, rubbing them as if he was discussing some great business deal that excited him. “Alicia

can come too, as you seem unable to do anything without her presence. We'll invite others so it will not be so obvious."

"You shall have to invite the Duke of Hurbex too."

"What?" Miles jerked his head toward her.

Rachel tried to keep her voice level as she answered him, amazed she had managed to find her voice at all at that moment.

"He is the Marquess's dearest friend. If the Duke is not invited, then the Marquess may not come at all."

"Well, we shall see about that."

As Miles walked away, Rachel slowly followed behind him.

Why do I hope so much that the Duke will be invited?

CHAPTER 7



“This is madness.” Luke jumped down from the carriage, glancing back as Robert followed behind him. “Robert, why did we say yes to this?”

“You said yes too,” Robert reminded him.

He tried to shrug his tailcoat off at the same time as stepping down from the carriage and ended up getting his foot caught in the material. He fell off the coach step, and Luke hurried to steady him, grabbing his shoulder and setting him firmly on his feet.

“Thanks,” Robert said self-consciously, tossing the tailcoat over his shoulder.

“I only said yes because you did.” Luke stepped away, taking his first proper look at the Earl of Brauncold’s country estate. “Like I was going to let you come alone into the viper’s nest.”

“What was that?” Robert called, stepping around the carriage as others rolled up the driveway.

It seemed that the Earl of Brauncold had invited a relatively sized party to the estate. Three other carriages pulled up behind their own, and the people inside climbed down. Between the carriages, footmen and maids approached, eager to help with the bags.

Far from looking at the house first, Luke looked at his first love—the gardens. All around the house, the formal gardens stretched out. On one side was a knot garden, with the summer flowers blooming happily in the hot sun. The wind bristled these cottage flower stacks, making the tall stems of the lupins, foxgloves and crocosmia dance together.

Beyond the formal gardens was a bank of trees and a large parkland escape. At this distance, Luke could just glimpse a lake that glistened in the sun, along with a Roman-style summer house. Between the house and the gardens walked two people, though at this distance, he couldn't see their faces.

What grounds to explore!

Luke allowed himself his first full smile of the day. At least whilst he was staying with the Earl of Brauncold, he could find happiness somewhere.

“Thank you, that’s most kind,” Robert said to the footman who took his and Luke’s bags.

“Robert?” Luke walked toward him, deciding now was as good an opportunity as ever to give his warning.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the door in the yellowstone fronted building open, and the Earl and Countess of Brauncold stepped out to greet their guests.

It will not be long before the Earl accosts Robert again.

“Yes?” Robert replied, walking to meet Luke on the drive, beside the carriage.

“May I give you one piece of advice before we begin this week at the Earl’s estate?”

“You like advice.” Robert laughed warmly. “When can I give you some advice in return?”

“I asked for your advice in business last night,” Luke reminded him. “We each have our skills, and business is clearly your great one.”

“What is your skill, then?”

“Noticing when someone is trying to con you.”

Luke’s words made Robert’s laughter falter.

“Trust me on this, Robert.” Luke took his friend’s shoulder and steered him away, trying to give them a moment of privacy before the Earl approached them. “Stay clear of Lady Rachel this week. I think it the wisest move.”

“You mean the Earl of Brauncold’s daughter?”

“Yes.” Luke frowned a little. “Robert, do you mean to say that in all the conversations we have had with the lady recently, you have not taken much notice of her?”

“No. Is that bad?” Robert winced a little. “Consider me preoccupied with other matters. I suppose many a gentleman would fall at the feet of such a beautiful woman, but not me, Luke.”

“Then I am glad to hear it.” Luke smiled with relief and clapped his friend’s shoulder.

“You noticed her, though.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You are not one of the men that will be falling at her feet, are you?” Robert asked with a smirk.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Luke turned away, making the appearance of offering to help the footmen with the last of the bags. Despite himself, he glanced at the house, wondering when he would glimpse Lady Rachel again.

The last few days, he had not managed to escape the thought of Lady Rachel as she had stood on that dock, asking if he had truly meant what he had said about her being beautiful.

Of course, I meant it. You would think she'd never been told that before in her life, by the way she looked at me.

Yet, despite how he searched for her, the windows of the house remained empty, as did the open doorway behind the Earl and Countess of Brauncold.

“Welcome, welcome, my friends,” the Earl declared with warmth as he clapped his hands together. “Come in, out of this great heat. We have prepared refreshments for you after your journey.” He beckoned to them all.

Lady Pipwick approached first, scurrying forward with her usual companions at her side, who flanked her like bees did a flower. Behind them was Mr. Jarvis, the ruddy-faced oaf who took up most of the front step as he approached the front door.

Others milled behind them, although Luke took his time, helping unload their last bags from the carriage. The footman eagerly took the bags from him with a smile.

“Luke? One thing more.” Robert hurried back to Luke’s side, not quite following the others yet into the house.

Luke caught a glimpse of the way Lord Brauncold looked over Lady Pipwick’s shoulder, clearly eager to watch Robert.

“What is it?” Luke asked, stepping toward his friend.

“You have warned me much against Lady Rachel. What is it that makes you so wary of her? You cannot think she is a lady

of scandal when she comes from such a family as this,” Robert hissed in a low tone, sudden panic in his eyes.

“Not as such, no.”

“Then what is it? What do you believe her capable of?”

“I believe her to be going out of her way to ensnare you in marriage, Robert.”

“Me? Pah! What an idea.” Robert laughed and turned away, but Luke hurried in front of him, cutting him off.

“Trust me,” Luke said, his tone low. “I know what she is up to. She is trying to charm you into marrying her.”

“Why do you object to a charming lady wishing to marry me?”

“If that was just the case, I would not object at all. Yet, you do not know one another. God’s wounds, I know the lady more than you do,” Luke said with sudden feeling, realizing how much he had learned about Lady Rachel over the last two weeks.

She had a knowledge of quotations and literature that intrigued him greatly, and something about the way she had leaned forward in the boat when they had discussed the great outdoors had fascinated him too. She had even declared that she knew how to swim! In his experience, not many women knew such a thing.

There's more to her.

“I believe she is trying to charm you to get to your money and your position. I fear it, Robert, and I will protect you from such a woman if it is the case—”

“Wait, wait.” Robert held up his hands. He looked around, clearly checking that no footmen or maids were close enough to hear their conversation. “Do you have any proof of such an accusation?”

“I...” Luke paused, watching as Robert’s brows lifted. “No. I have no proof.”

“Then this is just a feeling?” Robert smiled. “Luke, I am not quite the child that you need to protect anymore.”

“You’re no child, but you’re my friend. I’ll protect you as you protect me.”

“And, who has done that more, I wonder?” Robert folded his arms. “You don’t need to hit dogs with rocks anymore for me. Please, do not scare Lady Rachel away by launching rocks at her.”

They laughed together, the sudden humor taking Luke by surprise.

“Believe me, I will do no such thing. It is just...”

Words failed Luke. It was what he had done for so long, protecting Robert. It seemed strange to put into words why he did it.

What else would I do? He's my friend!

“Luke, in return for your advice, may I give you some?” Robert asked as he recovered from his laughter.

“What is that?”

“I am grateful for your protection and your concern. I always am. Yet, perhaps it is time you looked to your own happiness rather than my own.” Robert winked encouragingly. “It’s high time you thought of yourself, instead.”

Luke balked as Robert turned away and approached the house.

Lord Brauncold as good as swept Mr. Jarvis off the front step as he held open his arms in greeting to Robert.

“Ah, Lord Ladeston. How thrilled I am to see you again. How was your journey? Come in, come in. I trust you are well?”

Lord Brauncold asked that many questions, Robert didn’t even have a chance to answer any of them as he hastened up the steps toward the house.

Luke turned on the spot for a minute, scratching the stubble on his chin as he thought of his conversation with Robert and the

warning that seemed to be brushed off so easily.

He should be careful of Lady Rachel. Even if he has barely taken note of her yet, when trapped in the same house as her, much could change.

“Ah, here is my daughter. Rachel, come join us,” Lord Brauncold called loudly.

Luke jerked his head around, looking for her. She was not in the house, but in the gardens. Luke abruptly realized that she was one of the two figures he had seen walking between the great parkland and the formal borders, with Lady Alicia at her side.

Lady Rachel was windswept, with some of her dark hair falling out of her updo, temptingly. Her cheeks were pink from the wind, and the bottom of her gown was covered in dirt.

Perhaps some gentlemen might have been horrified to see such dirt, but not Luke. He couldn't quite stop the smile that crept onto his face as he looked at her walking forward, her pace now slowing, with the toes of her walking boots noticeable beneath her skirt.

In her hands, she held onto the spire of a lupin flower, running the tall petals through her fingers, almost lovingly. Luke's eyes continued to wander over her, taking in her full appearance, as he noticed something.

Lady Alicia was out of breath at Lady Rachel's side, and she brushed off the dirt on her gown, clearly not happy with it. In

contrast, Lady Rachel seemed in her element, and she hung her head more and more as she approached the house, as if she knew she was going somewhere she did not wish to be.

“Rachel?” Lord Brauncold called again.

Lady Rachel looked at her father, but as she left the formal gardens, she had to walk past Luke first. Her gaze quickly found his, and she stopped in front of him, curtsying deeply. He bowed to her, his eyes on the dirt on her gown and the way her hands fiddled with the lupin.

He longed to ask her what she thought of the flower, and if it was her favorite, as she had chosen to pick that over any other from the garden. As he stood straight, she seemed equally jittery in his own company, her eyes darting over him as her fingers shifted on the petals.

“Rachel?” Lord Brauncold, at last, achieved his aim of calling her to him.

She looked away and then glanced back at Luke, offering something he thought was rather like an apologetic smile. Unable to explain why he followed quite so closely, he hastened at her heel, following her into the house.

Luke stepped up, briefly amazed as he looked around the house at the efforts Lord Brauncold was going to for his guests. A server stood at one side, with hot cups of tea and coffee awaiting them. The other side of the hallway was taken up by footmen and maids, who were helping to carry trunks and portmanteaus up the stairs. Everything was attended to,

and Lady Brauncold was in her element, talking and wandering between her guests with a great smile on her face.

In contrast, Lord Brauncold was fixedly standing next to Robert, beckoning Lady Rachel forward. Luke followed, determined to interrupt any discussion before it could begin between Lady Rachel and Robert.

Standing beside them, Luke caught sight briefly of Lord Brauncold looking at him with a nervous smile, before it was gone, and he wondered if he had imagined it.

“Ah. Rachel, I was just telling Lord Ladeston about how fond you are of the grounds here. He is a keen walker too.” Lord Brauncold’s words made Luke smirk as he looked at his friend.

Robert often did go walking, but at Luke’s bequest. He’d rather stay home. He glanced at Luke, clearly sensing the same thing about Lord Brauncold putting words into his mouth.

“Thank you, My Lord.” Lady Rachel bobbed a curtsy to Robert. “I’d be most grateful, indeed, for your company sometime.”

“Would you?” Luke whispered to her with suspicion.

She looked sharply at him, plainly having heard him, though she made no further comment.

Lord Brauncold took Robert's arm and led him toward the far end of the room, encouraging him to have a drink. Meanwhile, Luke continued to stay put, staring at Lady Rachel. She had blushed pink, as if embarrassed by his words.

"Of course, I would be glad of his company," she said in a sudden rush. "Surely, you of all people, Your Grace, know that Lord Ladeston is delightful company."

"I know that. Yet, you know him so little, I wonder how it is you know that at all?" Luke cocked his head to the side, watching as she fidgeted, moving her weight from side to side. He looked down at her muddied gown, once more admiring the dirt and thinking of her walk. Mud wasn't something he usually admired. Today, things were different. "If you wish for a walking partner, Lady Rachel, choose another besides my friend."

"Should I choose you, instead?" Lady Rachel asked, with a sudden mischievous smile on her lips.

"Ah, now there is the real you," Luke whispered with a little appreciation as he went to walk past her, halting momentarily to lower his voice further. "And you'd find me hard to keep up with in the outdoors."

"Is that a challenge, Your Grace?"

"Perhaps," he whispered again before walking away, moving to his friend's side.

He went to Robert and hovered there, wary of whatever it was Lord Brauncold was talking about with him. It was an awkward moment, for Lord Brauncold's eyes shot to him. Whatever he had been about to say, he had changed his mind, and settled on a different topic, asking Robert about his journey, if he preferred to hunt or shoot, and how they'd have to do some hunting whilst he was staying.

Distracted, even as he stood by his friend, Luke looked away, toward Lady Rachel across the room. She had been approached by her mother, who was waving her hand not so subtly down at the dirty gown. Lady Rachel laid a hand on her stomach and hung her head forward, clearly concerned about the impression she was making. With no qualms about sending her daughter out of the room, Lady Brauncold waved a hand sharply toward the stairs.

It was a plain dismissal. Even though Luke could not hear the words, he judged from the way Lady Rachel nodded stiffly that her feelings had been hurt by whatever her mother had said.

The few smiles he had seen on Lady Rachel's face the night of the masquerade ball now seemed far away, indeed.

She walked up the main staircase, amongst the footmen and maids that wandered to and fro. Halfway up the stairs, she glanced down, and Luke feared for one minute that she would be looking at Robert, hoping to share a glance with him, but far from it. She stared straight at Luke instead.

When she caught him staring back at her, she turned around sharply and walked on. If anything, she moved quicker now, scrambling up the stairs as fast as she possibly could.

What game are you playing, Lady Rachel? If you're pursuing Robert, then why look at me at all?

“Yes, yes, we shall have dinner together tonight,” Lord Brauncold went on, urging Luke to turn back around and pay attention to the conversation. “I’ll be glad of your thoughts on some business whilst you are here, Lord Ladeston.”

“Oh, I...” Robert looked at Luke.

At once, Luke knew what Robert wanted.

“My friend doesn’t discuss business when he’s away for pleasure, Lord Brauncold,” Luke said with ease. “He prefers to keep such matters separate.”

Robert, who was always afraid of offending people, was clearly also not keen on being the one to tell Lord Brauncold such a thing. In contrast, Luke had no qualms.

“Yes, yes, I quite understand.” Lord Brauncold shrugged off the matter and gestured for Luke to take a cup of tea or coffee too. “Perhaps just a few minutes of your time, though. I’d appreciate it.”

“We shall see,” Robert said stiffly.

Luke waited until Lord Brauncold turned away before he caught Robert’s eye and shook his head. “If you do not want to

do business on a trip like this, then do as you wish, not as others want of you.”

“You’re always at my shoulder, aren’t you?” Robert laughed warmly.

“Always will be when you need me.”

Luke turned to the stairwell once again, fearing just how hard it would be to protect Robert from Lady Rachel whilst they stayed in the Brauncold house.

CHAPTER 8



“**H**ow interesting, My Lord.” Rachel leaned forward on the table, trying to show just how fascinated she was.

Her father had assigned their seats at the dinner table quite expertly this evening. Everyone was paired up around the long mahogany table, with a line of candles discreetly separating them from others across from them. Rachel had been placed beside Lord Ladeston, and opposite them was the Duke of Hurbex, with Alicia beside him. Despite the candles, the Duke’s superior height meant he could easily look over the flames.

He repeatedly caught Rachel’s eye, making it rather difficult for her to concentrate on her conversation with Lord Ladeston.

Why does he look at me so much?

“Go on, Lord Ladeston,” she said with vigor to the gentleman beside her. “You were telling me about some of your favorite poetry.”

Alicia and the Duke listened attentively from their side of the table.

“I am a huge fan of Wordsworth, and Robert Burns, of course. Their works summon such admiration for the natural world, and Burns goes one step further still, analyzing something of society itself.”

“How fascinating.”

“Anything to add to the discussion of poetry, Lady Rachel?” The Duke’s sudden question was clearly meant to provoke her. He lifted a wine glass to his lips and took a small sip, holding her gaze the entire time. “Any poems that you might have read by Robert Burns?”

“Well, I...” Rachel glared at him, knowing what he was doing. Any chance she had of seeming interested in Lord Ladeston was going to be thwarted by the meddling Duke. “I’d be more interested to hear Lord Ladeston’s favorites.”

“Would you, now?” The Duke’s smile grew broader.

“Yes.” Her voice became unnecessarily sharp, and he chuckled under his breath, clearly taking delight in pushing her further. Clearing her throat, she shifted her focus back to Lord Ladeston. “What are your favorites, My Lord?”

“It would be hard to beat *To a Mouse*, I believe. The ideas it calls upon are fascinating, how man’s dominion could be destroying the natural world, especially one so small and

fragile beneath us, yet we barely take notice of it.” Lord Ladeston smiled sadly. “It is an eye-opening piece.”

Rachel felt tongue-tied. She had never read it and, in all honesty, preferred plays to poetry, but she didn’t want either Lord Ladeston or the Duke to notice she had not read it. Perhaps more particularly, she didn’t want the Duke to know.

“I believe I have read it once, but some time ago. I agree with you in that regard—the way it calls the reader to realize what we could be doing. It is a moving moment.”

“That it is.”

“Do you remember any lines from it?” the Duke abruptly asked. He still had that smile on his face as he finished his meal and laid his cutlery down. “Come now, Lady Rachel, do not be shy. There must be something you remember from it.”

She snatched up her wine glass, trying to buy herself some time as she took a sip.

“Did you not say once that line about how a mouse lives in the present, and a man thinks too much of his own existence, was what captured you most?” Alicia’s sudden words made Rachel nearly choke on the wine.

Alicia has read the poem.

She offered a subtle smile between the candles, clearly helping her. Rachel reminded herself she’d have to thank Alicia later

for her endeavor.

“Yes, that’s the one,” Rachel said, lowering her glass. “It always captivates me, that line.”

“I thought you said you’d only read it once some time ago.” The Duke lifted a single brow.

“I now recall that I have read it more than once.” She put the glass down with a heavy thud on the table, angered at his provocation.

“How curious to suddenly remember it,” the Duke said, leaning forward and coming closer to the candles.

“Your friend’s words were so good to rekindle the memory.” She leaned forward too, so their faces were much closer, only separated by those candle flames.

“You have a great skill for memory, Lady Rachel. To pull the recollection out of nowhere.”

“And you have a great skill for causing trouble, Your Grace.”

He smiled, victoriously, even though she was the one who had made the insult.

Alicia cleared her throat and set her gaze on Lord Ladeston. “My Lord, perhaps it is best you tell us about more of your

favorite poems before our friends get into a real argument at this dinner table.”

At her words, Lord Ladeston laughed warmly and leaned forward, going into detail about the poems with her.

Rachel tuned out their conversation. She couldn't possibly concentrate on what Lord Ladeston was saying now when the Duke was staring at her in such a way.

“Why are you causing trouble?” she asked in a low tone so only he could hear her. “All I am merely trying to do is have a conversation with your friend.”

“A false one,” the Duke said, that mischievous smile still on his face. “You think I cannot tell it?”

“I was interested in what he had to say.”

“Only mildly so.” He shook his head.

The way he seemed to have read her made her hands tighten around the spindle of the wine glass all the more.

He does not know me, yet he seems to know what I think, regardless!

“Ah, I know that look.” He leaned forward even more, gesturing toward her.

“What look? This angry look?” Rachel tried to provoke him in return, but he only seemed to smile more. “I was hardly being subtle, Your Grace.”

“No, the look that suggests you are baffled that I have read you so well at all.” He chuckled. “Perhaps I know you better than you think.”

“Plainly, you do not. For you misjudge me.” She pointedly glanced at Lord Ladeston beside them.

The Duke took a rather hearty gulp of his wine, larger than any other swallow he’d taken that evening, before he chose to answer.

“I do not think I do misjudge you, but let me declare this to you.” He watched her with narrowed eyes. “I believe you like plays above poetry.”

She blinked, angered he had noticed that about her at all.

“How did you—”

“You and I quoted Shakespeare to one another the last time we met,” he reminded her.

“I’m surprised you remember it at all, for you disliked our meeting so much that night.”

“I do not remember saying I disliked the meeting.” He slowly shook his head. “Merely... disappointed by it.”

“Disappointed?” Rachel stiffened, her hand now in danger of breaking the spindle of the wine glass.

“For someone to act so false around me, so full of deception.” He paused and grimaced. “Ah, it’s a great disappointment, indeed. Do not have any false impression here, Lady Rachel. You will not marry at all if you believe you can ensnare a man with these games.” He downed what remained in his glass.

Rachel sat back, making the chair creak beneath her. She suddenly felt reduced to nothing, like the mouse in the poem they had been talking about. She wasn’t important enough.

Abruptly, the fact that she had little choice in the matter didn’t seem to count. All that mattered was the Duke looking at her, believing she would not marry at all.

Am I so unworthy of anyone’s good opinion?

She glanced at the head of the table, seeing her mother and father sitting together. They were both eagerly talking with those around them, having a good time, laughing and drinking. So often had she seen them in such a state, but with others, not with herself.

It was always the same. She was not worthy of their attention, and now, the Duke was telling her she was not worthy of a man’s attention either.

She crossed her cutlery over her plate and ended her meal, no longer having a wish to eat or talk. She sat back, her body very still, wishing the time would come for the ladies to retire from the room.

“Nothing to say, Lady Rachel? Everything I know about you suggests you would have some retort to what I have said,” the Duke said slowly, his head cocked to the side as he watched her.

“You have achieved your aim, Your Grace, into stunning me into silence,” she murmured, leveling her gaze at him. “Do not then try to draw me into another round of this game. I have no wish to partake.”

She swallowed the last of her wine too. When she put the glass down, she was startled to see that he wasn't smiling at all. His lips were pressed together in a flattened line.

“Now, ladies,” Elizabeth declared from the head of the table. “Shall we retire for coffee?”

Rachel was the first to get up from the table, and she determinedly didn't glance back at the Duke as she left.



“Insufferable,” Rachel murmured as she moved toward the two greyhounds that awaited her by the door as they always were at this time of night. “Not you two.” She softened her voice as she reached them both, petting them warmly. “You two are the kindest souls in the world that I know.”

She ruffled the ears of the grey and white greyhound called Pepper, and then the black hound with a single speck of white on his left ear, called Spot.

The greyhounds wagged their tails at her attention, lovingly.

She had purchased the dogs a few years back. They were one of the few purchases her father had allowed her to make without much questioning, though he had stipulated some rules with the purchase. They were not allowed above stairs and had to stay within the servants' quarters. It often meant she was not allowed to see Pepper and Spot as much as she would have liked to.

It made the moments she walked them in the evenings infinitely more precious.

“Come, let’s get out of here for that walk.” She latched their leads to their collars and led them out the door.

She had escaped the coffee in her mother’s drawing room as soon as she could and pulled a spencer over her shoulders to ward off the cold. Despite escaping the Duke and hiding in the drawing room, it had not been enough to forget the conversation. It had made her eager to come out and walk the dogs, for a chance to think of something else.

Striding out into the moonlight, they walked up and down the paths of the kitchen garden, before walking into the formal borders of the knot garden beyond. The whole time, the greyhounds strained at the leads, desperate to explore the night air. She laughed at them softly, loving the way they would sometimes look up at her, wanting to be petted.

“You two are the best company there is in this house, I do believe that,” she whispered, watching their tails wag together. “You hardly judge or care if I do not live up to expectations, do you? All you want is a little bit of happiness. That’s all.”

She sighed sadly, thinking how precious that happiness was.

They passed a fountain that had been turned off for the night, the water in the pool around a stone lion’s feet strangely still. As they passed down the other side of the knot garden, she tried to concentrate on the dogs, but could not. Her thoughts kept drifting back to the one man she was trying to avoid thinking of at all.

The Duke of Hurbex.

She saw that mischievous smile from dinner once again, and the way he had downed the claret from his glass as if he couldn’t stand being in conversation with her at all. She wouldn’t have been surprised if when they woke in the morning, she found he had taken his leave of this house overnight.

He hates me. I am sure of it.

For some reason, the idea that the Duke of Hurbex might hate her riled her even more. When she could not stop thinking of that handsome face, or the way he had read her so well, was the world so cruel as to make him hate her so?

Is it the world? Or is it my father?

As the dogs pulled her down a different path, apparently picking up a scent that they wished to follow, she imagined how different life could have been had her father not been so intent on her pursuing Lord Ladeston. What if she and the Duke of Hurbex had met more naturally at the masquerade ball? What then could have happened between them? Maybe he wouldn't hate her so much.

One of the dogs whimpered as she pulled back on the lead, and she halted, sensing the dogs had picked up a scent they did not wish to let go of now. She looked up, seeing that further down the path was a tall figure. Judging by the build, it was a man.

He was adjusting something in his clothes. Perhaps brushing off dirt or straightening out creases, she couldn't quite tell. Either way, the man was fussing about something and hadn't noticed her approach.

Rachel had no wish to see or talk to anyone when all she could think of was the Duke's hatred of her. She endeavored to turn the dogs around, to walk back the way she had come, but they pulled harder on their leads. Greyhounds were quick dogs anyway, but with two of them pulling her, she was in danger of falling over.

"Oh!" she gasped, dragged toward the figure.

He abruptly noticed their approach in the darkness and stopped wiping at his clothes. His head jerked up toward the pair of them, and he stepped forward. Moving out of the shadow of a tall oak tree, he stepped into the light of the moon. The silver beam shone down, revealing his face for her to see.

The brown hair was suddenly familiar to her, as was the tall frame and broad shoulders, and then his face came into view too. It was the same angular lines and the green eyes that she could not stop thinking about, that were now staring back at her.

“Your Grace?” she muttered as the dogs nearly pulled her over.

“Woah!” The Duke reached down and caught one of the dogs before Pepper could launch himself at him. “So, this is where you have come to hide?”

CHAPTER 9



“**Y**our Grace?” Lady Rachel muttered again as Luke petted the greyhound, urging it back down to the ground.

The other dog strained at his lead, coming to Luke’s side and sniffing his leg, wagging his tail and longing for a stroke too.

“You seem shocked.”

Luke stared at Lady Rachel as he continued to fuss over the dogs. Her jaw had fallen slack, and her eyes darted over him. In the moonlight, those eyes could not be mistaken. They had an intensity to them, mixed with pure panic.

“I noticed you were no longer in the drawing room when the gentlemen went to join the ladies. I did not expect to find you out here.”

“I... I come out most nights.” She looked down at the dogs. “This is Pepper and Spot. I like to be the one to walk them.”

“Nice dogs,” Luke said appreciatively, his eyes never straying her.

Before Lady Rachel had come along, he’d been fussing over his clothes, angered that there were creases where he had not seen them before. His need for perfection had been slightly shaken now. He looked at Lady Rachel, noting the mud on the hem of her gown.

For some reason, he realized that the sight of that mud didn’t bother him. It was perfect, just as the mud that had been right on her earlier that day when he had first arrived.

“This seems to be the first normal conversation you and I have shared,” she murmured, trying to rein one of the dogs in a little, though Luke didn’t mind and just continued to stroke the dog.

“Perhaps it is.” Luke nodded in agreement. “Do you walk alone here at night?” He stiffened. He knew it was a private estate, but there was something innerving to him about her walking alone, even with two dogs.

“Always.”

“Your father and mother do not accompany you?”

“Them?” She laughed softly. “No, neither of them has much time for dogs. Or walking, actually,” she added in a whisper. “Why are you out here, Your Grace?”

“Well, I didn’t have to stand guard over Robert anymore, with you not in the room,” he said mischievously, yet his words only made her look down, breaking their stare. “You looked that same way at dinner. As if I have spilled wine all over you.”

“I would have preferred it if you had,” she muttered, bending down to pull one of the dogs back from him.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your Grace,” she huffed and stood tall. “I understand you’re suspicious of me.”

“Oh, good, and here I thought I was being too subtle,” Luke jested, waiting for her to laugh, but she never did.

“Even if you’re suspicious, why do you have to be so rude to me?” Her question brought him up short. “I have not done anything to hurt you.”

“To hurt me?” he asked, stepping toward her.

“Yes.”

“Let’s see. How about trying to con my friend into marriage?”

“I never said I was!” Lady Rachel said loudly.

Both dogs turned back toward her, one of them whimpering at her loud tone in panic. She reached down and petted him on the head, clearly trying to comfort him.

The casual and easy care she showed the dogs touched Luke. He watched her attentively, wondering how she would be around the whippet they kept at home.

“I have been kind to your friend, have I not?” she reminded him.

Slowly, Luke nodded. He had to admit he hadn’t seen anything in her behavior toward Robert that was cruel.

“So, why must you hate me so much?”

“I don’t hate you.”

“You do.”

“I do not.”

Luke stepped forward. One of the dogs looped around him, the lead getting caught in Luke’s leg and drawing him even nearer to her.

“Pepper!” Lady Rachel hissed, trying to call the dog back. He came back to her, but simply looped the other way around Luke, trapping him completely. “Sorry about that. Wait, you said you don’t hate me?”

“No.” Luke shook his head. “Let me be perfectly plain, Robert is my oldest friend. I like to think I know him better than anyone. I know he’s a romantic soul, someone who longs for the happiness that comes from marrying for love. I will not see him be used. Not again.”

“Again?” Lady Rachel’s face blanched. “I am sorry to hear he’s been used before. What happened?”

“More than one thing.”

Luke was reluctant to go into the details. More than once, had he seen someone try to take advantage of Robert’s good business practices. Earlier this year, Robert had actually fallen in love with a woman who only wanted his title. As such, Luke was even more protective than before.

“Because I’ve seen him hurt more than once, I will defend him from anything.”

“Like a knight,” Lady Rachel whispered rather sadly, looking down at the dogs.

“If you like.” Luke shifted, aware she had used the exact words that he and Robert had used when they had been young.

“You describe him as the romantic soul, yet it seems like you are one too, Your Grace,” she murmured.

When the other dog, Spot, tried to run around Luke and join Pepper, Lady Rachel attempted to pull him back. It simply made the problem worse, and soon, Luke was trapped in by two leads.

“Nicely done,” he said with mock appreciation. She gave him a tart look, trying to pull the dogs back but failing. “What did you say?”

“That you seem romantic. You defend him like a knight, in one of those old Arthurian tales.”

Luke hesitated, stunned she was using the same words.

“He’s my friend.” His tone became somber. “I’ll defend him from anything, especially your traps.”

“There are no traps.” She shook her head firmly, the moonlight dancing in her eyes as he watched her. “So, what if I admire your friend? Is that anything to be ashamed of?”

“Aha, there, you see what you said?” Luke flicked his fingers at her. It somehow called the dogs tighter around them, unintentionally.

Luke was not prepared for being pulled even closer to Lady Rachel, yet they were inches away from touching now.

“What?” she said innocently.

“You admire him, you do not love him.”

“I do not yet know him well enough.” Lady Rachel swatted the hand he continued to point at her away. “Many marriages are built on admiration alone. It does not mean that love cannot come, Your Grace. Has every marriage you have seen in your life been one of love?”

“Well, perhaps not—”

“Exactly!” she declared with vigor. “What is so wrong with me pursuing a man I admire?”

“Do you admire him?” Luke crossed his arms in front of him, certain he was getting to the crux of the matter. “Or is this your confession that it is all art? It certainly sounds like you’re confessing to wanting to marry him.”

“No, no!” she said loudly, waving her arms in the air. She dropped the lead of one of the dogs, and he shot off. “No, Pepper!”

Spot tried to follow. As Lady Rachel tugged at the lead to hold onto him, Spot practically pulled her over. Luke stepped to the side and caught her waist, holding her up. They ended up fumbling together, struggling to stay upright.

“You can release me now,” she murmured after they had fallen still.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, aware that he had not released her so quickly because he was distracted.

She was too beautiful for her own good, and the way she had looked at him as they fumbled together could have fooled him into thinking that she saw him as something more than just an interfering acquaintance.

“I am not so artful as you give me credit.” She stepped back, reaching down to Spot at her side. “Come, Spot. Let’s find Pepper.” She walked off through the knot garden. “Pepper!”

Pepper barked but refused to come back, dancing between the borders and barking at bats that flew over the garden.

“Pepper, come back here now.”

When Pepper leaped past her and nearly knocked her over, she laughed warmly.

Luke watched from afar, his stomach clenching tight when he heard such a laugh escape her. It was completely natural, warm, and inviting. It struck him that he had seen that look rarely. Even when she had been with her parents, she had not been as at ease as she was now, completely satisfied with life.

Luke found himself following her through the garden, coming to catch up with her.

“I would have thought you’d have run the other way by now, Your Grace, just to be away from me and my *artful* ways,” she

said mockingly. “Pepper!”

Pepper barked tauntingly and jumped away, darting across a fountain and down another border. Spot tried to follow, and Lady Rachel dug her heels into the ground, holding him back. She laughed at the dogs’ behavior, clearly enthralled by them.

“Here, let me.” Luke took Spot’s lead from her, holding the dog still.

“You’re helping me now? I’m surprised you deemed me worth it.”

“I’m not a complete monster,” Luke said with a laugh, still delighted by the transformation in her.

If he could see her this happy all the time, he feared how in danger he would be from her. Forget her attention to Robert, he would be the man at risk.

“Thank you. Pepper!” Lady Rachel ran after the dog, having no qualms about chasing him through the borders with the skirt of her gown raised in her hands.

Luke laughed in bafflement as he watched her. Momentarily, she disappeared behind a high garden wall, and he looked down at the mud on his trousers. He reached down and tried to brush it off, with Spot sitting beside him, panting, his tongue rolled out.

“You don’t mind dirt, do you?” Luke whispered to the dog, who just blinked at him in answer.

“Oh!” There was a loud cry from behind the wall.

“Did you fall over?” Luke stepped forward, intent on going to pick Lady Rachel up if it, indeed, was the case.

“No. Let’s just say that Pepper is in trouble for this.” She appeared a moment later, having recaptured Pepper.

At once, Luke could see the damage the dog had done. He must have launched himself at Lady Rachel, for her gown was covered in muddy footprints, particularly over the stomacher and the brocade across the chest. Rather than wish to brush the dirt off, as Luke so often wished to do with his own clothes, he laughed at Lady Rachel’s predicament. She blew hair out of her face harshly and sighed as she returned to his side.

“I’m surprised I amuse you so much.”

“Perhaps I’m pleased to at least see you happy, Lady Rachel.”

“That I do not believe.” She halted before him as the dogs reunited, sniffing and licking one another. “From everything you have said to me of late, I truly believe you would be content to see me unhappy.”

“Far from it.”

“You told me inside that I was not good enough for any man to marry me!”

Luke’s hand slackened around Spot’s lead as he stared at her. He hadn’t realized that was what he had said. In his fury and in his game to provoke her, he’d clearly gotten a little carried away with his words.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s what you said. Thank you for looking after Spot, but I should return them inside now.” She took the lead from him and tried to walk away, but he pursued her, finding he couldn’t let her leave on such a sour note.

“Wait,” he pleaded, hurrying to catch up with her. “Please, believe me when I say that is not what I meant inside. I meant —”

“What? To get me to stop talking to your friend? Well, you achieved that aim too.”

“Yes, I suppose I did.” Luke scratched the back of his neck, suddenly feeling ill at ease. “Can I ask you something?” He stepped in front of her so suddenly, it forced her to stop and pull the dogs back a little.

“What?” she asked, staring down at one of the dogs.

“You’ve been so happy out here with these dogs. Why do you not smile like this all the time?” Luke gestured toward her,

noting that she at least looked him in the eye again.

“Life isn’t that simple, is it?” she whispered. “If only it was possible to command happiness and draw it to one’s being whenever we wanted.” She smiled a little sadly. “The world would be a happier place for it, I believe.”

“Indeed, it would be.” He sighed and shook his head. “It need not be a sad place, Lady Rachel. Not when such easy happiness can be found.” He pointedly reached down and petted each dog in turn. “Often, it’s the simple joys, which are the greatest.”

“I’m startled at their reaction to you. They don’t often like strangers.”

“Perhaps they are good judges of character,” he said playfully, standing tall again.

“Proud, indeed,” Lady Rachel murmured, a mischievous smile on her lips.

“Only a little.” Luke continued the jest, and they laughed softly together.

What is this feeling?

Neither one of them was retreating. They stood before one another, smiling, and so close that the dogs could no longer fit between them but had to sit on either side of them.

“Can I ask you something?” She broke the silence between them with her whisper.

“Of course.”

“You are so protective of your friend. Are you this protective of everyone you love?” She seemed intrigued to have an answer, her eyes watching him intently.

“I am,” he assured her, his voice deep.

“Admirable.”

“Is it?” He stepped toward her, not truly thinking about what he was doing. When she didn’t move back, but her eyes darted down to his lips, he saw it all.

She is thinking about a kiss, is she not?

Luke was tempted at that moment. Would it not prove what he had wanted to prove? That she didn’t care for Robert, after all? Yet, there was another reason he was tempted by a kiss too. He was thinking of what it could be like to indulge in a kiss with Lady Rachel.

When her eyes continued to dart between his lips and eyes, he smiled.

“See, Lady Rachel?” he whispered.

“See what?”

“How can I believe you want to marry my friend when you look at me in this way?” His voice had softened to something light, barely audible at all.

She gasped, and then the spell was broken between them, and she stepped back.

“I do not know what you mean.”

“Lady Rachel—” He was about to call her out on her lie. She had felt something too, he knew it, yet she quickly bobbed a curtsy.

“I should return inside. Goodnight, Your Grace.”

“Goodnight,” he called to her retreating figure as she hurried the dogs away.

Luke didn’t move for some time. He stood very still in the moonlight, watching Lady Rachel disappear with Pepper and Spot.

What would have happened if I had chosen not to open my big mouth, but had just kissed her, instead?

CHAPTER 10



Stop it. Stop feeling this way.

It didn't seem to matter how many times Luke concentrated on this thought, it did little to dissuade what he felt as he followed Robert into town with Lady Alicia on one side of him and Lady Rachel on the other.

That morning, their hosts had encouraged the whole party to take a walk into town for a wander. Some had stayed at home with Lord Brauncold, but many had come out with the Countess, including Lady Pipwick, who was walking alongside Lady Brauncold at the front of the group. A little way back was Robert with the two young ladies on either side of him.

Try as he might, Luke couldn't get rid of the envy as he watched Lady Rachel and Robert talk together. Today, they seemed friendlier together. It was easier for them to have a conversation.

Stop being jealous...

He increased the distance a little between him and the group in front, preferring to keep his distance as they reached the center of the town. When they halted, watching as many of the ladies went into a dress shop, Luke caught sight of Lady Rachel looking behind her. She seemed to be searching for him, her eyes repeatedly dancing across the distance between them.

Did I imagine that near kiss last night? Was it all in my head?

When she looked at him in that way, it was easy to realize he hadn't imagined it at all. She had felt that draw too.

She abruptly stepped away from Robert. Luke waited where he was, to see if she would come to him, and she did.

"I trust you have recovered from your mad chase of Pepper last night?" he asked her quietly.

"I have." She smiled sadly. "I have come to ask you a question if you do not object, Your Grace."

"As you wish." Luke nodded, urging her to go on.

"I am wondering why there are no insults today."

"I beg your pardon?" He stepped toward her, watching as her hands fidgeted in front of her even more at his approach.

"Last night, you took every opportunity at dinner to say something," she whispered. "Yet, today—" She glanced

pointedly to where Robert now stood with Lady Alicia. “You have not interrupted our conversation once. I am wondering why.”

“That is for me to know.” Luke sighed heavily, not wishing to confess the truth that he had been too envious to interrupt. “Disappointed not to have an answer?”

“Well, yes.”

He laughed warmly at her reaction.

“We do not always get what we want in this world, Lady Rachel.”

“I know that. Believe me.” Lady Rachel softened her voice and looked elsewhere. He followed her gaze, wondering what she had meant by such words.

Wait, is she looking at her mother?

He realized suddenly that she was. She was staring at her mother without blinking, as if there was something she wanted from Lady Brauncold but knew she could not get it. Luke parted his lips, ready to ask her more, when another interrupted them.

“Rachel?” Lady Alicia approached her. “Come join me in the dress shop. I’d be glad of your opinion.”

“Of course.” Lady Rachel smiled and went to join her cousin.

Luke moved toward Robert, intent on asking him why he was being so attentive to Lady Rachel this morning, but before he had a chance, Robert followed the ladies into the shop. Cursing, Luke followed them in too, but kept his distance, just as before. He stood in the corner, feeling strangely separated from the company he kept, as they wandered around the shop. He stood with his arms folded, trying not to elbow over any of the displays of fine materials.

Lady Rachel took time with her cousin and admired many of the materials that Lady Alicia held up against herself. When Lady Alicia went to talk with the Modiste, Lady Rachel circled the shop and looked for herself. Luke found it hard to take his eyes off her when she found a display of lace gloves.

In particular, she picked up a pair of cream gloves that were laced all over, apart from a thick satin hem at the wrist. They were particularly fine and would suit a ball well. What struck Luke the most was that when Lady Rachel picked them up, she had a true smile on her face.

It was a genuine moment, just as he had observed the night before in the moonlight how she had been truly happy with her dogs.

Not thinking much about it, Luke moved toward her, intent on asking her about the gloves, but before he could reach her side, her mother did.

“Not those, Rachel.” Lady Brauncold swiftly took the gloves out of her daughter’s hand and replaced them on the stand.

“What’s wrong with them?”

“Nothing.” Lady Brauncold shook her head. “They are fine gloves, indeed. It is just that you need something a little... plainer, dear.”

“I’m sorry?” Lady Rachel jerked her head toward her mother.

“Do not look at me like that.” Lady Brauncold laughed. “We must each dress for our own looks, and these gloves are suited to someone a little bolder in appearance. Here, try these on, instead.” She picked up a much plainer set of gloves that were just basic satin.

Lady Rachel took them from her and pulled one on her hand.

“Yes, they fit.”

“Perfect. Then buy those for yourself, dear. Leave the others for someone else.”

“Yes, Mother.” Lady Rachel smiled politely.

Luke was so dumbstruck that he didn’t move from his spot and just stared at the pair of them. He supposed it was lucky they had taken no notice of him watching them, or they would have seen his completely baffled expression.

As Lady Brauncold walked off, Lady Rachel's polite smile faltered. It was a subtle hint of what she truly felt. She was disappointed with the gloves. They were not the ones she wanted, yet she clearly did her duty as her mother had asked of her. She went to the till and purchased the gloves.

This is unbearable.

Luke wasn't sure why it bothered him so much, but he couldn't let the matter go. He waited until Lady Rachel left the shop behind her mother, with Lady Alicia and Robert following behind them, then he went to the stand and snatched up the lace gloves, taking them swiftly to the counter.

"These, please," he said, handing the gloves to the young girl at the till.

"Of course. Would you like them gift-wrapped?" she asked.

"Yes, please." Luke looked between the till and the door. He didn't want to take the gloves with him now, as it would be too obvious what he had done. "Could you arrange for these to be delivered to Lord Brauncold's estate, please?"

"Yes, of course. Who are they for?" the girl asked, then set about wrapping the gloves in tissue paper.

"Lady Rachel Nightingale."

"Would you like to send a card with it?"

“No.” Luke’s answer clearly baffled the girl, whose hands stilled on the tissue paper. “No card, thank you.”

Strangely, Luke wasn’t bothered about getting the credit for the gift. All he wanted was a chance to see that genuine smile on Lady Rachel’s face again.

This means nothing more. Nothing at all.

He thanked the girl one more time, then left the shop, following the others at a distance. When the group had finished their walk around town and were returning home, the heat of the day evidently got too strong for some people. Their pace calmed down, and many of the ladies put up their parasols or fluttered their fans. Robert and Luke took off their jackets and slung them over their shoulders.

While many people’s paces had slowed, Lady Rachel walked ahead of the others, her head lifted as she looked at the horizon. Her bonnet had slipped from place slightly, and the bow was undone, yet Luke strangely didn’t mind the lack of perfection. If anything, he found it more endearing. She was more perfect by those imperfections. He hurried to catch up with her and walked alongside her.

“Your Grace.” She looked at him sharply, startled by his appearance. “And here I thought you were keeping your distance from me this morning.”

“Perhaps I was attempting to a little,” he confessed in a whisper. “Our walk in the garden did reveal something to me last night.”

“What was that?” she asked, her eyes on him rather than the view ahead as they walked far in front of the others.

“That I have perhaps let my tongue run away with me at times. As much as I wish to protect my friend, I do not wish to hurt someone who has innocent motives.” He softened his voice, watching as she lifted a single eyebrow.

“It is just that you doubt my motives are innocent, do you not?”

“Well...” He needed not say anymore, as she laughed softly.

“You are relentless, Your Grace!” She sighed heavily and walked with a firm stride. He walked with her, matching her steps easily with his long legs. “May we talk about something else? Something other than your belief in my ill motives.”

“Very well. Choose a topic. Any topic. I shall try to participate. You must forgive me, though, if I take the opportunity to tease you where I can. It’s in my nature,” he reminded her.

“I had noticed.” She tapped her chin in thought, playing with the loose ribbons of her bonnet as she stared ahead. “You are fond of the outdoors then, Your Grace? You intimated as much before.”

“I am.”

Luke slung his tailcoat over his shoulder and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, trying to cool down in the heat. When Lady Rachel took off her spencer, he silently offered to carry it with his tailcoat. She handed it to him with a soft smile.

“You’ll find me most days having a walk on my estate, if not on another’s. I have a passion for Nature. It is my belief that we do not always admire it as much as we should.”

“Go on,” she urged, her attention apparently captivated, as she did not look around them at all now but continued to stare at him.

“I have a collection of plants on my estate that you’ll find nowhere else in this country. They are tropical plants. Some can still grow outside, they are hardy enough for it, but others have to be grown in the orangery. It is my greatest passion to see them bloom. They are perfect when they do.”

“Perfection,” she whispered softly. “That is something you seek, Your Grace?”

“Who doesn’t? Nature has a wonderful way of achieving such perfection. Perhaps a perfection not often seen in men.”

“Oh, men are far from perfect,” she agreed with a firm nod. “Mankind’s great weaknesses will always stop that. There’s folly, ignorance, and greed, which will always trip men up. Yet, Nature is not necessarily as perfect as you think. I love it too, but oddly, for the opposite reason.”

“Go on.” He mirrored her words from earlier.

“Well, take this, for instance.” She gestured toward an oak tree further down the path from them. “See the way the bark is twisted? It is not a perfect shape, is it?”

“No, I suppose not,” he acknowledged.

“It’s grown in knots and at strange angles, shaped by the wind and rain over the years. Yet, the leaves are luscious, and look, acorns.” As they passed under the tree, Lady Rachel took one of the acorns down and played with it between her fingers. “It still produces life, vitality, all of it, despite its struggles. And all of that came from a single acorn too.”

She held the acorn up between her forefinger and thumb. “That is the beauty in Nature for me. Survival, even when it is difficult.”

Luke abruptly stopped, looking at her as she admired the acorn with a smile.

“I feel as if I am seeing more of the true you, Lady Rachel,” he whispered. She nearly dropped the acorn in surprise, looking up at him. “Is this what your life is? Survival, even when it is difficult?”

“We are not talking about me. We’re talking about Nature,” she reminded him, walking on and encouraging him to follow too.

“Perhaps we are, yet you have opened a window into something now.”

He couldn't let this matter go. There was something unsaid here, something that explained her fascination in her true life.

He glanced back at Lady Brauncold as she talked animatedly with Lady Pipwick, wondering if what Lady Rachel had referred to had something to do with the strange conversation that he had witnessed between her and her mother in the shop.

“Beauty can come from hard times as well as perfection, Your Grace. That is all I was saying.” Lady Rachel shrugged, toying with the acorn before she offered it up to him. “For instance, would you call this beautiful?”

“Of course.” He nodded at the acorn. “It's perfectly formed.”

“But is it?” She turned the acorn around, revealing that on the other side, there was a divot in the shell.

“Ah, I see.” He laughed at her lack of triumph. “I suppose it's not so beautiful now.”

“Or does it have more character because of it?” she asked.

He walked alongside her, a little closer than before now, interested in her words.

“Are we still talking about acorns? Or are we talking about people?”

At his question, she smiled a little more.

“Perhaps we are talking about both,” she conceded, raising that smile from the acorn to look at him. “Gods will give us some faults to make us men.”

“Ah, Shakespeare.” He recognized the quote at once and returned her smile. “*Antony and Cleopatra*, if I’m not mistaken.”

“That’s right, Your Grace,” she whispered and lowered the acorn in front of her. Rather than carrying it for any longer, she tossed it into the hedgerow. He looked at her questioningly, waiting for her to explain herself. “It must have a chance to become a tree of its own, even if it’s as twisted and as misshapen as the tree it came from.” She shrugged, her smile dropping as she walked on.

For a second, Luke looked between the hedgerow and Lady Rachel, then he glanced back at Lady Brauncold.

There was something more to this discussion than just the beauty of Nature. It is something that Lady Rachel will not talk about very easily.

CHAPTER II



“Do advise me, My Lord.” Rachel smiled at Lord Ladeston beside her across the card table. With ease, he leaned toward her and tapped her cards, encouraging her to play in their game of cribbage. “Thank you.”

She put down the card and looked up to see the Duke staring at her from across the table, with yet another one of those mischievous smiles on his face. Despite calling such an expression insufferable before, for the last two days, she had found it strangely intriguing. He couldn't seem to lose the expression now as they played cribbage with Lord Ladeston and Alicia, far from the rest of the party, who were sharing drinks on the far side of the drawing room.

“You do not know what to play at all, Lady Rachel?” the Duke asked, that mischievous look never faltering. “You surprise me.”

“I am afraid cribbage is not an area I excel at. Fortunately, your friend is so kind to share his wisdom.”

“She's flattering, is she not?” Lord Ladeston laughed as he looked at her hand again, preparing for the next round.

“I had noticed.” The Duke held her gaze before he chose a card of her own and won a few points.

Rachel was irked at his success, for she had known deep down that she could have avoided him getting those points if she had played more tactfully. As it was, her act of playing dim was working to get Lord Ladeston’s attention, and it was an act she had to pursue.

Her father had come to see her earlier that evening and intimated that if she did not increase her attentions to Lord Ladeston, then he would do something drastic. Fearing what Miles could be capable of, Rachel had assured him that she would try harder.

“It is your turn, Lady Alicia.” The Duke gestured for Alicia to make a play.

Chewing on her lip, Alicia played her card, though Rachel could see she had no real enjoyment of it.

“I think I need a break.” Alicia played her final card and stood up from the table, moving to walk behind Lord Ladeston, where there was a small liquor table. She poured herself some dessert wine.

Rachel looked at her cousin, longing for her company back.

“It is your turn, Lady Rachel,” Lord Ladeston urged her. “You can do this one without my help, I am sure.”

“You have more confidence in me than I do myself,” she said with a soft smile.

“Does he, I wonder?” the Duke asked with that same playful smile as before. “To think, depending on what card you lay now, you could win or lose.”

“Is it that simple?” she asked, maintaining that dim act.

The Duke laughed, shaking his head at her. Something about that sound rumbling so deep made her shift in her seat. She had wanted them to sit beside one another, not opposite each other at all.

He can be very captivating sometimes, despite how irritating he can also be.

“Do you wish to lose, Lady Rachel?” he continued to tease her. “Just think, if you do, I will never let you forget it.”

“Will you laud it over me for the rest of your stay here?”

“Undoubtedly!” he said with vigor.

“He would,” Lord Ladeston agreed with a firm nod. “He’s never let me forget some of the times I have lost to him.”

I can't have that, can I?

Rachel had two possible cards to play. One would win, and one would throw in the game. Determined not to have the Duke laud it over her, she tossed down the winning card.

“I didn’t even see that card in your hand,” Lord Ladeston said with a slackened jaw, staring down at the cards in the middle of the small table.

The Duke tipped back his head and laughed deeply, then clapped his hands together. “Well done, indeed.”

Lord Ladeston stood and followed Alicia to get something to drink, leaving the two of them alone at the table.

“I won,” Rachel declared with satisfaction as she gathered the cards. “So, you can laud nothing over me now.”

“No?” The Duke laughed deeply, leaning over the table and coming closer to her, with his arms resting on the green felt top. She did the same, moving closer toward him. “Because strangely, I feel like I have won.”

“What?” She cocked her head to the side, pausing with her task of shuffling the cards.

“You dropped your act. I knew you knew how to play.” He winked at her. “All you needed was the provocation to win. It was all an act to get someone’s attention, was it not?” He cast a quick glance in Lord Ladeston’s direction. “You continue to do what I tell you not to, Lady Rachel.”

“I was enjoying his assistance,” she insisted.

“Ah, is that what it was? Then why look at me so much as you played?” The Duke’s mischievous smile grew worse.

“I did not!”

“You did.”

“Didn’t.”

“Ha! Are we to argue like children now?”

“Before we descend into further insults, come, you must start our next game.” She handed him the cards. “Let us play something, and this time, I will play as hard as I can.”

“Very well, we shall. I must say, I’m rather relieved to notice that you have barely acknowledged my friend’s absence.” He shuffled the cards, pausing only momentarily to clearly gauge her reaction as she noticed Lord Ladeston and Alicia walking to the other side of the room with their drinks in hand.

Rachel could follow. She could do as her father had asked and follow Lord Ladeston incessantly, or she could stay where she was and enjoy the Duke’s company. When the Duke dealt out some cards in front of her, she found she made no conscious decision, for the answer was an obvious one to her. She reached for the cards.

“What game are we playing?”

“Whist,” he answered swiftly. “Here are trumps.”

He cut the pack and lifted out a card that he placed to the side. It was the King of Spades.

They played in silence for a few minutes. Each one of them won a few rounds of the game but with no clear winner. When he caught the final round from under her nose, she slammed her hand against the table, and he laughed warmly.

“You see? This is the true you, Lady Rachel.”

“The true me?”

“Yes. You’re competitive.” The Duke raised his eyebrows, rather playfully. “It’s enjoyable to see, and you are a naturally happy person too.”

“Me? I have never been called that before.”

“Tell that to your smile.” He nodded at her. “Why is it you are not like this all the time?”

“What? This happy?”

“Not your true self.” He leaned toward her, halting her from gathering the cards by placing a hand over her own.

Rachel froze, stunned at how warm his palm was over her fingers. His hand was larger than her own, and he made her feel strangely safe with his touch.

“I’d say it’s as if you are hiding, sometimes.”

“I’m not hiding,” Rachel whispered, looking down at their joint hands. “It’s just...”

“Yes?” he encouraged her as she hesitated.

“Sometimes, we act the parts we know we should, do we not?” She took the cards and pulled her hand back from his, knowing that if her father caught a glimpse of the Duke touching her, he would be furious. “We do as we should, out of duty.”

“To please your parents?” the Duke asked, folding his arms across his chest.

“Just so.”

“I know what it is like to wish to please someone.” He smiled rather sadly. “I had more respect and admiration for my father than I could ever describe to you.” The whispered confession made her halt with the cards, staring at him. “And yet, my father was a man who wished me to be *me*. Always.” That smile grew. “He told me from a young age to follow the

passions and loves that I had in life, to be the man I wanted to be. Duty is a part of life, yes, always, but not at the expense of one's happiness."

"That's what he said to you?" Rachel blinked, startled by the words. It was not what she had been taught. For as long as she could remember, there was one phrase that had been said to her repeatedly by her parents. "There is nothing more paramount in this world than one doing their duty."

"Is that what they've said to you?" The Duke jerked his head subtly in the direction of her parents across the room. "Then I am sorry about that." He leaned forward once more, resting his elbows on the edge of the table. "It seems we have had quite a different upbringing."

"Perhaps we have."

Her voice was light, almost inaudible at all. This conversation with the Duke felt intimate, far too intimate and close for the public room that they were in. She should stop it, yet she could not. A part of her longed for it to continue.

"May I ask more about your father, Your Grace?"

"Of course. I'm always happy to talk about him."

"What was he like?" she whispered. "Was he a good father?"

"The best of fathers." The Duke grew animated as he took the cards from her and dealt out another hand for them. "He was

attentive in every way, and encouraging, but he was disciplined when he needed to be, and he taught me the value of hard work. He always ensured my education was the best. I miss him every day.”

“That is a beautiful description of a man, indeed.” Rachel sighed, feeling strangely envious. “Is this where you get your expectations of perfection from?”

“Ah. You had noticed that.”

She shrugged, not wishing to pry too much. Their discussion about Nature the other day had preyed on her mind, and she had wondered repeatedly at his need for perfection. It was then she had noticed more and more how he would sometimes pick at his own clothes, imaginary dirt, anything to dry and look that little more finished.

“You sometimes fidget and brush non-existent dust off yourself. Look at the way you deal the cards.” She smiled softly, pointing down at the precise way he had laid out their two hands. “I imagine that the way my gowns are often covered in mud from my walks must drive you mad.”

“Far from it.” There was a strangely serious tone in his voice now, one that caught her attention. “As you said yesterday... perhaps there is sometimes perfection in something that has more character, someone that isn’t quite so precise all the time.”

Rachel blinked, staring at him in amazement. “Is that a compliment, Your Grace?”

“A small one, perhaps.” He laughed softly.

She smiled at him and looked around, suddenly aware of how long they had been sitting and talking together alone. Her father would no doubt be disappointed that she had not followed Lord Ladeston. As Rachel sought out where Lord Ladeston had gone, her gaze found Miles.

He glared at her across the room, not taking part in the conversation that was happening around him. From how white his knuckles had turned, he must have been gripping his wine glass so hard he was in danger of shattering it. He abruptly left his seat and walked toward her across the room.

“Oh, no,” she murmured, looking back at the Duke.

“No, what?” The Duke tilted his head to the side. “Lady Rachel, what is wrong?”

“Nothing. I—”

She longed to stay with him, to have another game and to talk as they were, but there was no chance now. Before she could even summon more words, a hand took her shoulder and gripped her hard.

“Would you excuse us, Your Grace?” Miles asked, his tone dripping with false respect. “I need a minute alone with my daughter.”

“Of course.” The Duke offered Rachel an encouraging smile.

If only you knew, Your Grace.

As Rachel retreated from the table with her father, she looked back at the Duke more than once, wondering what he would make of it if he knew the truth of what her father was forcing her to do. That, after all, it was not she who had set her cap at Lord Ladeston, but her father pressuring her to do it.

He still might not understand it. Had he not described his understanding of one's duty as something entirely different from my own understanding?

When Rachel took too long to follow her father out of the door, he flicked his fingers at her. She followed him out, hot on his heels. Miles closed the door and then took her elbow, leading her down the corridor.

Flanked by candles on either side of the usually dark hall, the light felt too bright for Rachel. She shrunk away from the glare when her father released her at the end of the corridor. He marched around in a small circle, thrusting his hands into his hair agitatedly, then halting and turning back to face her.

“What are you doing?” he hissed.

“Standing in a corridor and talking to you.”

“Where did this insolence come from?” He stepped toward her.

Rachel struggled to hold her ground.

She had longed for his good opinion for so long, *craved* it, that now as he glared at her, she felt tears pricking her eyes. A few seconds ago, she had been in the company of a man who seemed truly interested in talking to her, in a way that only Alicia ever did before.

Was it so wrong to want to be back in his company? Was it so mad an idea to think more highly of the Duke of Hurbex than she had anyone else before?

“I apologize,” she whispered, knowing she could not get away with being so rude to her father.

“I wish to know why you are talking to that man at all.”

“He is a guest of yours. Would you have me ignore His Grace?” Rachel shrugged helplessly. “Besides, he is an interesting man.”

When her father’s eyebrows furrowed together, her hands fidgeted in front of her.

“Do not tell me you have developed some childish fancy for the Duke of Hurbex?”

“No, I—”

“He will not look at you. He’s too wary, regardless. Too suspicious everywhere he looks. Would you mess up our plan by trying to seduce a man who is too canny? Do not be a fool!” Her father snapped the words so harshly that she stepped back, colliding with the wall behind her. “Do as you are told, at once,” he snarled. “Start giving your attention to Lord Ladeston, as you vowed to do so. Do your duty as I told you before. Or I shall do something for you.”

“What would you do?” she murmured in fear.

Miles said nothing. He took a step back, his cheeks hollowing out as he breathed sharply in. He spun on his heel and walked back down the corridor, and toward the drawing room.

“Pa?” Rachel stepped forward to follow him, but when he still gave no sign of answering her, she fell silent.

When the door closed behind him as he returned to the drawing room, she no longer had a wish to follow. She stood still, not knowing what to do with her hands as she thought hard about what her father had said. She moved them to her hips, then folded them, then clasped them behind her back.

Who is he threatening? Would he trap Lord Ladeston and me in marriage?

She didn’t know whom to feel worse for if such a situation would come to pass. The guilt would be insurmountable when it came to Lord Ladeston, but it would be just the same when it came to the Duke of Hurbex. Unexpectedly, she’d feel as if she had betrayed him.

Stepping away, she left and headed through the house, hurrying to her chamber and deciding not to rejoin the party tonight. As she walked, a new fear settled in.

Rachel tried to imagine what it would be like to marry Lord Ladeston. She pictured herself at the altar beside him, trying to make her vows. Lord Ladeston would be perfectly nice and polite, holding onto her hand, but she somehow knew what she would do.

When she made her vows, she wouldn't be looking at Lord Ladeston. She'd be looking at the man beside him, the one who would no doubt take the role of his best man. She would look at the Duke of Hurbex as she said those words.

Oh, God. I'm falling for the Duke of Hurbex.

When she reached her chamber, Rachel flung herself inside the room. She didn't bother lighting her candles but was glad when she heard the sound of paws patting against the floor in the darkness.

Pepper appeared first, the greyhound hurrying toward her. As she sank down to the floor, she wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight as he barked softly. Spot came next, his nose nudging her arm.

Rachel let the tears fall as she held onto her dogs. Sometimes, her maid would sneak the dogs up here so her parents wouldn't know, and tonight, Rachel could not be more thankful for her maid's discreet efforts. The dogs brought her comfort that no other could.

Rachel curled up on the floor, with Pepper crawling ungainly into her lap and Spot nudging her arm repeatedly. The more she thought about Lord Ladeston, the more she didn't want to marry him, and the more that she got to know the Duke, the more she cared for him—more than she should do.

Oh, God, what am I going to do?

CHAPTER 12



“Robert? Robert!” Luke was trying desperately to get his friend’s attention as they marched through the forest, but to no avail.

There were many questions he longed to ask. In particular, he wished to know why for the last two days, Robert had spent more and more time with Lady Rachel and Lady Alicia. The fact that Robert was constantly at Lady Rachel’s side was making Luke increasingly jealous. It was a sensation that was foreign to him, and hating to suffer it, he was determined to get rid of the feeling, at once.

“Robert!”

“Watch out, Your Grace.”

Luke was swept to the side by Mr. Jarvis, who strode through the trees with three other men, all carrying guns as they tried to chase down the wild boar that had been seen on the land.

Hunting. What good does this do today?

Luke usually enjoyed a hunt for sport's sake, though he rarely ever made a kill, for he admired the natural world too much. He could see why Lord Brauncold had encouraged the spot today when the weather was so fine, but Luke was finding it increasingly irksome. All he wanted to do was talk quietly with Robert, but he couldn't get close to him at all.

Either Lord Brauncold occupied his time or one of the other gentlemen did.

"Robert!" Luke called again as Robert turned from where he was standing beside Lord Brauncold.

"Ah, Luke, there you are. Come, Lord Brauncold thinks he has an idea of where this boar could be hiding."

"Really?" Luke stopped on Robert's other side, looking at Lord Brauncold with interest.

If he knows where the boar is hiding, why doesn't he run off and shoot it himself? Why wait at all?

Conveniently, Lord Brauncold avoided looking Luke in the eye.

"Well, I'm not entirely certain, of course." Lord Brauncold laughed off the matter. "Let me see what the dogs have found. Give me a minute." He walked off to where Lady Rachel's two greyhounds had been brought along and were currently being held on leads by one of the footmen.

Luke ached as he looked at the poor dogs. Neither of them was a shooting dog, and they had clearly not been around many guns at all. Pepper hid behind the footman's legs, and Spot shook like a leaf.

Lord Brauncold plainly had no experience with the dogs as he muttered some words to the footmen about the dogs picking up the boar's scent and the footman just shrugged, equally none the wiser.

"Is all well, Luke?" Robert asked, turning his focus back to Luke. "You've been calling my name for some minutes now."

"I just wanted to talk to you about Lady Rachel," Luke hissed, looking around himself and making sure no one else overheard them.

"What about her?" Robert was distracted, looking down at his gun.

"Bloody hell, Robert." Luke snatched up the gun and flicked the safety back on.

"Ah." Robert winced. "Did I have it off again?"

"You were lucky not to shoot yourself in the foot then." Luke let out a shuddering breath, shaking his head. "Only flick this when you are ready to shoot."

"All right. I've got it now."

As Robert took the gun, Luke still watched for a few minutes, making sure his friend truly *did* know what he was doing.

Robert usually had no love for hunting. It was strange he had come along today, but Luke supposed it was at their host's insistence.

“What was that you were saying about Lady Rachel?”

“It's just that you and she have been spending an awful lot of time together the last two days.”

What Luke didn't say, but was in truth longing to ask, was why she had not spent so much time with him. The first few days, it had seemed impossible for Luke and Lady Rachel to avoid one another. Now, he was lucky to see her at all.

“What about it?” Robert asked, just as distracted as before as he looked down at the gun in his grasp.

“I just wondered why.”

“She's the daughter of our host, Luke.” Robert laughed.

“And that's all?” Luke's voice was tight as he asked the question. “That's all there is to it?”

“What are you really trying to ask me?” Robert lowered the gun and looked him in the eye.

I don't know.

Luke was tongue-tied, staring at his friend.

“Ah, Lord Ladeston, I suspect I am right.” Lord Brauncold appeared again at Robert’s side, clapping him on the shoulder. “Come with me, and I shall show you where I think the boar is.”

Luke looked around in amazement as Robert was led away by Lord Brauncold.

What on earth is the Earl up to?

When someone shot wildly into the trees, the dogs went berserk. Poor Pepper tried to hide in a bush, pulling the footman over flat on his face, and Spot started whimpering loudly, in danger of howling at the sun like a wolf would at the moon.

Luke hurried toward the footman.

“Here, you take the gun and I’ll take the dogs.” He helped the footman to his feet and promptly took the leads, handing him the gun instead.

“Are you certain, Your Grace?”

“Absolutely.” Luke bent down and fussed over the two dogs, trying to calm them.

Pepper hid between his legs, his tail curled up on the ground, and Spot buried his head in Luke's hands.

"You two should be at home with Rachel, should you not? Eh?" Luke whispered.

The dogs clearly recognized her name, for they both looked at him.

I did not call her Lady Rachel.

"She's attached to you, isn't she?" His soft voice made Pepper wag his tail, but Spot still could not manage it. "Come on, stay near me. Nothing will hurt you."

The dogs stayed close to his legs as he led them through the trees, trying to follow where Robert and Lord Brauncold had gone. It took some minutes to catch up with them, for his task was impeded by Mr. Jarvis and the other men stomping around and causing something of a ruckus in the trees. Angered that they could not find the boar, they started shooting wildly at other things instead.

"No respect for Nature, eh?" Luke whispered to the dogs, who walked close alongside him. "We need to get you two home."

Pepper whimpered, as if in agreement.

Luke halted when he caught a glimpse of Robert through the trees. Lord Brauncold was patiently pointing into a dell

surrounded by willowy trees. In the middle of a small grass clearing was the boar.

Lord Brauncold urged Robert to shoot, and Robert eventually took the shot after some minutes of rearranging his aim a few times. Robert's shot was perfect and took the boar down. One of the dogs howled, and Luke had to pull tightly on his lead, holding him back.

"There, there. Everything's all right." Luke bent down to the dogs and held them tight as they nestled against him, both trembling once again.

As Lord Brauncold praised Robert repeatedly for the fine shot, Luke set his eyes on the Earl. It was a strange thing to do, to point out where the boar was just so Robert could get the shot.

What are you up to, Lord Brauncold?

Robert was a poor hunter, and Luke knew it would have been unlikely for him to have made the shot alone. For some reason, Lord Brauncold was going out of his way to presumably make Robert happy.

"He's up to something, isn't he?" Luke whispered to the dogs. "I know he is." He stood up and pulled on the leads. "Come, let's get you home."

Luke left the hunt behind. Stepping out from the cover of the forest as quickly as he could, he crossed the open lawn and headed toward the house. The further away they walked, the more at ease the dogs became, and Luke's tension also

dissipated. As he walked, his mind dwelled on what he had seen.

Lord Brauncold was up to something, that couldn't be denied. Luke just had to question now if what the Earl was plotting had something to do with Lady Rachel's aims, or if they were acting independently of one another.

What if they are working together? What if we were all just invited here so that Lord Brauncold can push his daughter and Robert together? Surely not!

Even to Luke's mind, that seemed a step too far. He knew such things happened, perhaps more commonly than he was willing to admit, but he had no liking for the practice. It suggested a great underhandedness, indeed, and a manipulation of everyone who had come to their party.

"Something's wrong, I know it," Luke still mumbled to himself repeatedly as they reached the house. "Maybe I should be as worried as you two plainly are."

Spot whimpered loudly as if encouraging him to be so worried. Luke petted the dog lovingly on the head and stepped into the house.



Luke came down from his chamber with his hair still a little damp. After they'd returned from the hunt, he'd begged a maid to take the dogs to Lady Rachel, then had retreated to his chamber for a bath to wash off the dirt from the day. As he halted by a mirror in the hall, he adjusted his cravat, making sure it sat perfectly straight.

“Are you certain?” a voice called behind him with sudden panic in the corridor. “Lady Alicia, how long has she been gone?”

“An hour, at least.”

Luke turned around, seeing that further down the corridor, Robert had now also returned from the hunt along with the other men who had all filtered in through the entrance hall. Lady Alicia stood with her hands fidgeting, her eyes wide.

“What is going on?” Luke asked, walking down the corridor to go and meet them.

“It’s Lady Rachel,” Robert explained. “She’s missing.”

“Missing?” Lord Brauncold stepped forward. “What do you mean she’s missing?”

It was an odd reaction.

Luke had expected such words, but he would have thought they would be wilder. He could still remember the day when he had gone exploring the estate alone as a child and had fallen and hurt his ankle. He’d been told later that the moment his father had been told he’d not returned, his father had demanded a search of every inch of the estate.

His father had even searched the grounds himself in the rain and had been the one to find him in the end. By the time Luke

had been found, he had been drenched to the bone and shivering. His father had carried him in his arms back home.

In contrast, Lord Brauncold stared at Lady Alicia with what could have been described as passive interest.

“What has happened?” Luke asked, needing to ascertain the facts as soon as he could.

“Rachel went out an hour ago to walk the dogs. Since the rain has set in, she has not been seen.” Lady Alicia shook her head. “I am concerned. She will walk them far in the day, but she rarely walks them beyond the nearest gardens this late in the evening.”

“Is this, indeed, the case, Lord Brauncold?” Robert looked to Lord Brauncold for a second opinion.

Luke felt his hands ball into his fists when he watched Lord Brauncold nod mutely. It was plain that the older man didn’t know the answer to the question, yet he nodded along, regardless.

“We must look for her at once.” Luke snatched a frock coat off the nearest coat stand and threw it over his shoulders.

“I shall go,” Robert said, moving to the door.

“The more of us that go, the better. In this rain... I shudder to think what could happen.” Luke opened the front door and stared at the pouring rain. It came so hard that the puddles

were merging together, and each droplet was large, like needles sliding through the air, attempting to pierce the ground. “Lord Brauncold, can you give us more men?”

“I am sure she has not gone far.” Lord Brauncold shook his head. “She has the dogs to protect her.”

“From the cold?” Luke asked, raising his brows. “Too long in weather such as this, and one is more susceptible to infection, Lord Brauncold. Surely you have seen that?”

“I mean, yes, of course.” The Earl fumbled, looking strangely like a fish out of water. “Yes, I shall find more men. If you two go searching, I shall find the assistance.”

Luke looked at Robert, seeing the same perplexed expression he was certain must have been on his own face. They were both wondering why Lord Brauncold was not snatching up a frock coat and insisting on coming himself.

“Let’s go,” Luke urged, deciding not to wait any longer.

He stepped out of the door and into the rain. Robert followed him, pulling on a second frock coat.

“Where would she have gone with the dogs?” Robert asked, having to shout to be heard above the loud sound of the rain.

“You search the gardens nearby. These formal borders on the east side.” Luke pointed to the grounds where he had seen Rachel walking the other day.

Despite knowing she had been there before, he was strangely confident that she couldn't be there now. If she had been, she could have easily returned to the house with the dogs when the rain had set in.

Perhaps she walked further afield, trying to calm the dogs down after the hunt.

"I'll search the west side. Go," Luke urged with a wave of his hand.

They took off in different directions. Luke didn't bother to shield his head or face from the rain, he just kept walking. The rain came down so hard that the distance became murky and grey, one thing no longer distinct from the other.

Where the forest had once been, there were now just clouds, and as Luke clambered up a banked hill toward the extensive parkland, he wasn't sure where he put his feet at times. More than once, he stepped into what turned out to be a deep rabbit burrow that had filled up with water. He had to pull his boot back out again, with the muddy water reaching up his trouser leg.

Any other time, the sight of all that dirt and water would have upset him. He would have done anything to get away from it, including racing back into the house, but not now. Oddly, at this moment in time, the sight of that mess didn't matter.

All that mattered was the cold that seeped in through his coat, the rain that was running down the back of his neck and under his shirt, and the fact that Rachel was out in this.

“Rachel!” he shouted at the top of his lungs, trying to be heard, but there was no sign.

He could have turned back, but he didn't. He walked on into the misty rain, his eyes stinging as the rain pelted him.

“Rachel?”

CHAPTER 13



“Please, don’t worry, Pepper.” Rachel stroked the dog’s ears back again as she crouched down in the stone pavilion, trying to shelter herself from the rain.

Momentarily, Pepper looked comforted, with his tongue lolling out of his mouth, but then the thunder cracked.

Spot hid under Rachel’s skirts, knocking her off her feet and onto the stone floor as Pepper crawled into her lap.

“Oomph! You two are not pups anymore, you know. You can’t fit where you used to.” She pulled Spot out from under her skirt and looked out through the gap between the stone pillars.

The rain lashed the ground incessantly, never once pausing. The sky was covered in clouds as far as she could see, and she had no intention of taking the dogs out in the hope of making it home just yet, not with thunder on the horizon.

“I was trying to distract you both. Sorry about this,” she whispered, stroking the two dogs.

When her maid had rushed to her with the dogs, explaining that they'd been frightened by the hunting guns and that the Duke had returned them to the house, Rachel had been stunned. He'd not only taken the effort to care for her dogs but to return them to her.

I only wish he had done it in person.

She sighed heavily, knowing why he may not have done it in person. She had avoided him for the last few days, fearing just how strong her feelings for him were becoming.

“Do you reckon we can wait out the night here, eh?” she whispered to the dogs.

Spot whimpered, as if complaining at the idea, and Pepper shook as he laid his head on her lap.

“I know. It doesn't sound like the best of ideas, does it?”

Peering over Spot's head, she tried to see something of the lake in the distance that separated her from the house. It was a long walk back to the house from here. She'd hoped that bringing the dogs so far away from the forest and the guns would help to calm them, but then the storm had arrived from nowhere.

The lake was no longer visible, as the misty rain was so strong. Sighing heavily, she sat back, letting the dogs do their best to try and crawl into her lap, though they competed for the space and were far too big to even make it work. They butted

one another's heads out the side, then gave up and lolled together, with their heads on her lap instead.

She laughed softly, wondering how it was they could make her so happy when all else seemed lost.

The Duke was right about simple joys. Sometimes, they are the greatest.

She fussed over both dogs.

“Rachel?” The first call was distant and strained. She was certain she had imagined it, but when it came again, both dogs lifted their heads, clearly hearing the sound too. “Rachel!”

The shout was closer now.

She hurried to stand and stepped between the pillars. The dogs didn't follow her but stayed back, cowering from the rain, pressed together to share their body heat. Rachel stepped down the Roman-style pavilion steps, hurrying toward a figure that was calling to her.

The tall shadow moved through the misty rain with eagerness.

“Rachel?” he bellowed, turning back and forth, plainly not having seen her.

“I am here.” She waved her arm in the air.

The figure looked sharply at her. If she had been in doubt as to who that voice belonged to, that doubt was now gone.

The Duke was unmistakably running toward her, his pace fast with his long legs eating up the ground.

“Rachel?” he called, his face gradually coming into view.

Sodden to the bone, his brown hair pushed back from his forehead, he looked far from his usual self. The rainwater ran off his open frock coat, and his clothes, which were always so neat and tidy, with not a thread out of place, were now in complete disarray. His cravat undone, with the ends stuck to his neck, and the shirt was coming loose from his trousers.

“Your Grace?” she murmured as he crossed toward her, his pace eventually slowing. “What are you doing out here in this weather?”

“Me?” the Duke spluttered loudly, placing his hands on his own chest before he thrust them in her direction. “Are you out of your mind? Have you lost all good sense?”

“I beg your pardon?” She moved her hands to her hips, determined to stand her ground as he stopped in front of her. “Why, pray tell, am I out of my mind?”

“You go walking in all of this!?” As if in emphasis, lightning flashed over his head, and thunder cracked.

Rachel looked toward the two dogs, who cowered further inside the pavilion. “I hardly knew it was going to rain, did I?”

“Of course. You only saw massive rain clouds on the horizon.” The Duke waved a mad hand at the sheer extent of grey mist around them. “Are you so mad and desperate that you would do all of this to get Robert’s attention? That you would make him come and look for you in *this*?”

“What?” Dumbfounded, Rachel stared at him. “What did you say?”

“You’re just trying to get him alone, aren’t you?” The Duke stepped toward her, his anger palpable in the air between them. “Just as you did that first night at the ball. You would do anything to have his attention.”

“No!” she snapped, practically barking, even louder than the dogs.

The Duke plainly didn’t believe her. He shook his head and turned away, walking in a small maddening circle, his hands on his hips.

“You think I would do such an underhanded thing?” She didn’t need to hear his words, for in answer, he just looked sharply at her. “God’s wounds! Your opinion of me is that awful? Here I thought you were beginning to understand me more over the last few days.”

“Understand you?” the Duke said wildly, stepping toward her. “I understand nothing. One minute you’re close to me, you’re

charming *me*—” He thrust his hands against his own chest once more. “Next thing I know, you avoid me at every cost, and, oh, look where I find you. Out here, where you’re in need of someone’s help.”

“Do I look like a damsel in distress!?” Rachel waved her arms around her.

“Do you honestly wish me to answer that question?” he scoffed, his brows raising high as the rain continued to pour down on him, running off his brows and rolling down his cheeks.

“I didn’t ask for help. I do not need it. And I am not your damsel in distress. Not for you, the knight, nor the man you serve to come and rescue me.”

She backed up from him. She was so angry now, so fuming at the injustice of his accusation, that she couldn’t stand it anymore. She just wanted to be away from him, to be alone in the rain with her dogs again, far away from him.

“Why would either of you ever come to my rescue? Why would anyone ever worry about me? No one ever does. I wouldn’t expect them to.”

“*I* was worried!” he suddenly boomed as he stepped toward her. “Do you not get that, Rachel? I was worried!”

“You’re no longer calling me *Lady Rachel*,” she muttered quickly.

“If I was worried, why wouldn’t someone else be?”

Their voices were so loud now that the dogs grew panicked. Even with the thunder and lightning, they clearly didn’t like seeing Rachel in any amount of distress. They barked, stepping out from under the cover of the pavilion, and circled the pair of them repeatedly.

“I do not think I have ever known this anger!” the Duke complained, thrusting his hands into his hair and pulling on the wet tendrils. “Look at you, you could have been plunged into a river. Would you take so little care of your health? Would it matter naught to you at all?”

Rachel looked down. Her blue gown was, indeed, drenched through as was the spencer that was now stuck to her skin. Some locks of her hair that had escaped her updo were stuck to the sides of her face and her neck. Her boots had done little to keep out the rainwater, and she could feel the dampness between her toes.

“It doesn’t matter,” she insisted. “I was just taking a walk. I am familiar with this estate, Your Grace. Why would I need anyone to come looking for me? Why would I expect it? It is *my* home. All I wished to do was walk with my dogs. I didn’t need you, or your friend, to come and look for me.”

The dogs continued to circle them, their barking growing more and more manic at their shouting at one another.

“What?” The Duke seemed baffled. “This wasn’t a ruse?”

“What ruse?” She pushed hard at his chest, forcing him to back up, though as he stepped back, she followed him. For all her anger, strangely, she didn’t want to be away from him. “God, if you hate me so much, then rest assured, I will not bother you anymore.”

“What?” he said again, his voice louder now.

“I will leave you alone. You need not suffer my company, my attention—anything. And if you ever hear of me getting trapped by the rain again, then rest assured, I am not expecting you to come and rescue me. There, is that what you wanted?” She held her arms open wide. “You are free of me, Your Grace. I ask for nothing from you.”

“God, don’t say that.” He stepped toward her.

“Why ever not? You hate me this much!”

“Because I don’t hate you.” He bent down toward her. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“Then what is it you feel? Well?” She pushed at his chest again, determined to have an answer.

He didn’t back up from her, though and bent down even further toward her.

“Your Grace—oomph!”

She was so startled as he pressed his lips to hers that she staggered back. The dogs stopped barking, though whether they truly did or if she just stopped paying attention to their barks, she no longer knew. All she could think of was the Duke of Hurbex as he kissed her.

It was just a press of the lips at first, with her hands finding their way to his chest. She could have pushed him away. She could have forced him off her and demanded to know what he was doing, but she had no wish to.

She had imagined for too long what this could be like. She had thought of it too much to possibly reject him. When her hands curled around the edges of his waistcoat, anchoring her body to his, his hands found her waist.

He pulled her toward him, and their bodies melded together as he deepened the kiss. The way he ran his tongue over her lower lip, begging entry, sent a shiver up her spine that she knew had nothing to do with the rain and everything to do with his kiss.

Her palms were clammy despite the chill in the air, and when he angled their heads together, caressing her tongue with his own, she felt as if her whole body had been set on fire.

Please, do not stop.

How all their anger had culminated in this moment, she wasn't sure, but she couldn't turn back. She just wished to think of only the Duke and this kiss.

“Lady Rachel!” a sudden voice broke through their kiss. “Are you out here, Lady Rachel?”

Rachel pulled back from the kiss an inch, as did the Duke. They looked at one another, but they didn't release each other. His hands were still on either side of her waist, her body pressed to his, and her hands were on his waistcoat.

What do we do now?

CHAPTER 14



“Lady Rachel!” It was Lord Ladeston’s voice.

The Duke abruptly released Rachel and stepped back. Rachel did too, colliding with Pepper, who barked in annoyance. She reached down and grabbed his lead along with Spot’s, untangling them from where they’d been tied together. By the time she stood straight again, the Duke’s expression had changed.

He stared at her, his clothes still as wild as before, but his manner strangely still.

“She’s here.” They were the only words he shouted.

Lord Ladeston appeared over a ridge in the parkland and came toward them, running down the bank of the hill.

“Is everything all right? Are you well, Lady Rachel?”

“Yes, of course.” Rachel struggled to take her eyes off the Duke as she looked at Lord Ladeston. “We were only taking

shelter from the rain.” She gestured toward the greyhounds.
“That was all.”

“Ah, well. Everyone’s very worried about you, back home. I suggest we get you back.” Lord Ladeston elbowed his friend, clearly trying to urge him to speak.

“Yes, let’s go.” The Duke turned around, leading the way.

Rachel scrambled to catch up, pulling at the leads of Pepper and Spot, who weren’t particularly keen on the idea of walking any further in the storm. They continued to whimper and complain.

“Please, come on, you two,” she murmured, feeling awkward enough without them making this situation worse.

We kissed. Why did we kiss? Why did he kiss me? I know why I kissed him...

She’d found it hard to stop once it had begun. Suddenly, all the tension between them, all the flirtation, made sense, but it also made everything ineffably worse. No wonder the Duke hated her pursuit of Lord Ladeston so much if he liked her enough to kiss her.

“I’m sorry,” Rachel struggled to explain. “They are frightened of the rain.”

Wordlessly, the Duke stepped forward. He took hold of Pepper and lifted him in his arms as if he weighed nothing.

“Oh... thank you,” Rachel whispered.

The Duke still said nothing. He just gave her another one of those lingering looks that made her insides tremble with want.

How does he have this effect on me?

Reaching down, she lifted Spot into her arms, who was fortunately the smaller of the two and slightly easier to carry.

They walked on, with no words said between Rachel and the Duke, though she continually looked at him as he walked on Lord Ladeston's other side. She rather suspected that he had put his friend between them on purpose.

Does he regret it?

Rachel knew she probably should regret it. Had she not betrayed her parents' wishes now? Had she not defied them and refused to do her duty by being so enticed by the Duke of Hurbex that she had kissed him? Despite it all, she could not regret it. She kept pressing her lips together, thinking of that tingling sensation instead and the intensity of his kiss.

When they reached the house, the Duke walked in first, with Rachel following and Lord Ladeston coming in behind them.

“Ah, Rachel, there you are,” Miles said, coming toward her. He waved a hand at her, urging her to put the dog down. She did as he asked before he embraced her.

Rachel stalled, uncertain how to hug her father back.

He doesn't hug me. It's just not what he does.

She patted his back rather awkwardly, glad when he released her.

“I am glad to see you back safe and sound.”

His words were wooden, as if he knew it was what he should say in front of other company, rather than what he was truly bothered to say.

“Clearly, you are,” the Duke muttered nearby.

Rachel heard the wry tone, but neither her father nor Lord Ladeston seemed to notice it. She held the Duke's gaze as he put Pepper down beside her.

“I cannot thank you enough, My Lord, for finding my daughter.” Miles took Lord Ladeston's hand, shaking it hard.

“Actually, it was my friend who found her. I came upon them a minute or so later,” Lord Ladeston revealed.

Rachel looked between her father and the Duke, wondering if Miles would guess that there had been some intimacy between them at all.

“Then I am indebted to you, Your Grace.” Miles stepped toward the Duke and bowed deeply. He didn’t offer the same handshake, though. The lack of informality showed how little his opinion truly was of him.

The only sign the Duke gave of acknowledging his gratitude was a nod.

“As your daughter has explained to me, though, she was in no need of help,” the Duke said slowly.

“That’s right. We were merely sheltering from the rain, Father,” Rachel added.

“I quite understand.” Miles took her shoulder. When he gripped rather too tightly, she winced.

The Duke’s gaze jerked toward her, and she plastered on a polite smile, praying he had not seen that wince. His eyes narrowed as he looked at the grip her father had on her shoulder.

Does he suspect something?

“If you would excuse me, gentlemen, I shall arrange for a fire and a bath to warm my daughter through. I shall have warm drinks brought for the both of you, and anything you need, just ask.”

“Thank you, Lord Brauncold.” Lord Ladeston nodded and bowed.

The Duke didn't say anything at all.

Rachel took Pepper's lead from him, very aware that their fingers brushed together, before her father steered her firmly toward the stairs.

They hurried up the stairs together, with Pepper and Spot leaving trails of damp and muddy footprints behind them. The moment they reached the landing, Miles's grip turned harder.

“Ow! Pa, release me.” Rachel twisted her body around, the sudden pain sharp.

When Pepper growled, Miles finally released her.

They entered her chamber and stepped inside. She let go of the leads, letting Pepper and Spot dart across the room. They went to hide beside the open fire, where logs had recently been lit.

“Well done. Well done, indeed.” Miles rubbed his hands together.

Rachel stood very still. Her only movement was her hand on her sore shoulder, rubbing it incessantly.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked in a small voice. She had been certain her father would disapprove of making everyone come

and look for her.

“This was a good step forward.” He walked in a circle, continuing to rub his hands together. “You have established a deeper connection between the pair of you by making Lord Ladeston come and find you. Yes, it’s irksome that the Duke reached you first, but it is still something. Yes—” He paused, his smile appearing suddenly. “This is good progress.”

Rachel released her shoulder, realizing in shock that he hadn’t gripped her so hard in anger, but more in control. She wasn’t sure now whether to be even more unnerved than before.

“Well done.” He nodded at her briefly.

Rachel wished to smile. Wasn’t this what she wanted? Her father’s approval? Yet, her gaze didn’t linger. For some strange reason, she got no satisfaction from hearing the words at all.

“Oh, this arrived for you whilst you were out.” He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a parcel wrapped up in tissue paper. He offered it to her. “There was no card with it.”

“Thank you.”

Rachel sat down at the stool by her vanity table, wondering when her father was going to order that warm bath so she could warm up, just as he had said he would. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, he had quite forgotten such a task as he stood rubbing his hands together, his expression clearly calculating.

Slowly, Rachel unfurled the tissue-wrapped bundle. When the cream lace emerged before her, she sat staring at it, too stunned to even pick it up.

“What is it?” Miles asked, moving to her side and peering over her shoulder. “Gloves?”

“I saw these the other day,” she explained. “They were in a shop in town, and I was admiring them. Mother told me not to buy them, but I liked them.”

She was afraid to touch them with her dirty hands. She settled for running the tips of her fingers along the edge of the tissue paper instead, dancing near the gloves.

They were just as beautiful as she had remembered them being in the shop, finely made and intricate in their design. A small smile graced her lips, and she was truly grateful to whoever had sent them to her. Somehow, they had observed exactly what she had desired so much in that shop.

What she had never told anyone was that she had actually seen these gloves many times over the last few years. They had often been in the shop, but she had been so worried that her parents would say no to the purchase, she had never asked for them. The way she had admired them a few days before was just another example of what she had done countless times. On this occasion, Lady Brauncold had noticed and said one of the things that Rachel had feared she would say.

They do not suit me.

“Mother didn’t think they were right for me,” Rachel continued. “You said there was no note with them? No hint as to a sender?”

“Nothing. This is wonderful!” Miles clapped his hands together so loudly that both Pepper and Spot jumped on the other side of the room.

Pepper hurried to curl himself up into a ball on the rug, clearly having had enough of loud noises for one day. Spot curled up behind him and rested his head across Pepper’s back.

“Do you not see who these are from?”

“Of course not. I think that was the crux of the conversation,” Rachel murmured.

Another time, her father might have been angry at her wry tone, but he seemed too happy to even notice. He marched around her vanity table, rubbing his hands together, with a spring in his step.

“Clearly, Lord Ladeston’s admiration for you is growing. He must have sent you this gift.”

“Lord Ladeston?” Rachel’s lips parted. Something didn’t feel right about such an assumption. Surely, it was not possible.

Lord Ladeston hadn’t been anywhere near her in the shop when she had been admiring them. If anything, he had been closer to Alicia at the time.

A wild idea entered her mind. Rachel wondered if it was possible that the Duke had sent her the gloves. The moment she had the thought, she rejected it.

Even if he had given in to their kiss earlier that day, it meant nothing. He had made himself quite plain over the last few days that he was very suspicious of her. As he was so convinced that she was pursuing Lord Ladeston for the wrong reasons, he surely would not give her such a gift, especially one that meant so much to her.

“This is perfect.” Miles snatched up the gloves.

“Oh, careful, please.” Rachel hurried to stand.

The lace was so delicate that she did not want it torn in her father’s eagerness. He didn’t seem to notice she had spoken at all.

“Tomorrow, you must wear these at the ball we are to attend.”

“Ball?” Rachel stalled, half falling over the stool as she attempted to follow her father in his marching. Both Pepper and Spot lifted their heads as they watched her, clearly wary of her falling over. “Pa, I thought you said you were ending this week with a small dinner party?”

“Is that what I said? Well, plans change.” Miles smiled broadly. “I sent out invitations last week for a ball. Many more will come here in the country, tomorrow evening. It is the ideal opportunity for you to show Lord Ladeston that you appreciate

his gift. You must wear them tomorrow.” He dropped the gloves back down onto the vanity table.

Rachel stared at the gloves, now feeling slightly sick.

None of this was intended. She had simply gone for a walk, and her father had somehow mistaken it for her trying to seduce Lord Ladeston. Awfully, the Duke had made that same assumption. Now, Lord Ladeston may have sent her a gift, and what was strange, though she loved the gloves, she wanted nothing to do with them if they were, indeed, from him.

She’d rather leave them wrapped up in that tissue paper, unopened and forgotten. For if she put them on at all, it would feel like a betrayal to another.

What would the Duke say? Would he regret that kiss? Would he think of it at all?

“Yes, Rachel? Tell me you shall wear them tomorrow,” Miles insisted.

When she still didn’t answer, distracted by her own thoughts, he clicked his fingers in front of her face.

“Yes, I shall wear them,” she murmured in a small voice.

“Good. I shall leave you now. You might want to arrange for a bath. You smell after being out in all that rain and dirt.”

Miles left fast, leaving Rachel so shocked by his words and lack of care that she stumbled to sit down on the stool again.

As the door closed, Spot whined and lowered his face onto Pepper's back.

"I agreed with you, Spot," Rachel murmured, staring at the gloves on the table before her.

The fact it felt like such a betrayal to the Duke brought something sharply into focus for her, something that she could not possibly escape. Had she not cared for the Duke at all, she would have no qualms about wearing a gift that could be from another man. As it was, she felt sick just looking at the gloves.

"Oh, God, when did this happen?" She rose from the stool and walked around the table, moving toward her dogs as if they could somehow start talking and answer her. "When did my heart become so attached to the Duke?"

She knelt beside her dogs, and Pepper raised his head, pressing it in her hand for attention. She stroked him back, thinking of all that had passed since she had met the Duke.

It couldn't be denied that he was the one man she felt herself with. As if she didn't need to perform or do her duty but could be free. Was that what had made her so attached to him? Was it because he offered this sense of freedom?

She soon had to shut down her thoughts. Above the mantelpiece, a portrait of her mother and father stared down at

her. The intensity of their gazes told her something that she could not argue against.

My feelings do not matter. My duty comes first to this family.

She inhaled slowly, trying to summon some courage as she made a resolution.

The Duke of Hurbex can never know what it is that I feel for him.

CHAPTER 15



“How on earth did you find your way in here?” Luke laughed as he looked at the paws hiding under the table in his room.

He’d been behind the folding screen, bathing ahead of the ball, and had emerged to see the distinctive grey paws of the greyhound poking out from beneath the table.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice, eh?” Luke said, bending down as he reached under the table and petted the greyhound. “Can’t stay away, is that it?”

The dog panted, pushing his head into Luke’s hands.

“I know that feeling.”

Luke sighed and stood up straight, hearing the padding paws of the dog as it followed him through the room. He dressed alone, laughing when the dog tried to steal his boots and he kept having to playfully snatch them back. When the dog managed to leave a tiny mark on the heel of the boot, Luke rubbed at it for ages before he abandoned it.

Strangely, he was reminded of the damaged acorn that Rachel had held up to him, talking about how there was character in its imperfection.

“Maybe you improved it, Pepper.” Luke sat down on the coffer and pulled on his boots, with the dog sitting beside him.

Can't stay away.

Luke sighed, thinking of just how appropriate the description was to himself. For the last day, he had not stopped thinking of what he and Rachel had shared in the rain. That kiss had been intense, something he'd found impossible to resist. It was hardly his first kiss, but by God, it was the most memorable.

Each time he thought of repeating that kiss, his mind wandered to other things, and he had to remind himself that Rachel wasn't his to pursue. Besides, she had shown a much greater interest in Robert, as had her father.

Was I wrong in my presumption?

He wanted to believe he could be wrong. That his conviction in Rachel's aims was somehow a mistake.

That morning, Luke had tried to talk to Rachel on more than one occasion. He'd caught her staring at him over breakfast, clearly as caught up and fixated on the memory of their kiss as he was. He had no intention of brushing it under the table, and the fierce passion with which she had kissed him back showed how ill-suited she would be to Robert, in the end.

No. They had to talk about it, to discuss what it was they felt for one another.

A gentle tap at the door made the dog raise his head.

“Who is it?” Luke called.

“Me,” Robert’s voice answered. “Are you ready?”

“Nearly. Come in and don’t jump. One of Lady Rachel’s dogs is in here.”

Robert stepped in and laughed when he saw the dog. “He’s practically attached to you.”

As if in answer to the words, Pepper turned around and rested his head on Luke’s knee.

“I know.” Luke ruffled his ears. “He’s a good dog. God knows how he got in here.”

“From what I hear, the dogs have to avoid the master and mistress of the house.” Robert grimaced as he stepped further into the room. “Lady Alicia said that Lady Rachel is the only one who has a love for them in this house.”

“Can’t think why.” Luke stroked the dog again. “Soft as sugar in nature, these dogs. You’re ready for the ball, I see.” He tied the laces of his boots as he looked at his friend.

Robert did a slow turn in the room, holding his arms out with a laugh. “Will I do?”

The suit he wore was a fine one, rich in black hues, with the dark coppery colors of his waistcoat contrasting the impression well and complimenting the color of his hair.

“You’ll do,” Luke said, smiling sadly.

“Right, what’s wrong?”

“What?” Luke looked down.

“You’ve been in a strange mood all day.” Robert sat down in a nearby armchair and lit a candle from a tinderbox. As the evening drew in, the light was fading in the room.

“Have I?”

“Yes. You’ve been quiet. You wouldn’t go for a walk this afternoon either. We both know that is your favorite thing to do in the world. Are you going to tell me what is going on, or not?” Robert blew out the spill he’d used to light the candle, and slid the tallow stick further along the table, offering more light between them. “What is it, Luke?” His voice softened.

“It doesn’t matter.” Luke sighed and sat back, leaning against the wall beside him.

As if sensing something was wrong, the dog rested his chin on Luke's knee again and whimpered softly. Luke stroked his ears.

"Of course, it matters," Robert said with vigor. "Something's upsetting you. What is it?"

"If it becomes important, I'll tell you." Luke felt a tension in his chest. It was already important, but he couldn't possibly just blurt out what he felt, not when he stood the risk of hurting his friend.

Robert was the great romantic. He was always the one between the pair of them that had been that way. Out of the two of them, Luke believed his friend deserved to marry for love.

With how much Robert had increased his attention to Rachel over the last few days, what would he say now if Luke were to declare an interest in her? Would he be hurt? Would he vow it was the end of their friendship? Luke couldn't bear it! He'd already seen Robert hurt once in love. He couldn't let it happen again.

"Can I ask you something, Robert?"

"Yes, of course." Robert gestured for Luke to go on.

"Is there anything the Earl of Brauncold could want from you?"

“Want from me?” Robert laughed at the idea, shaking his head.
“Surely not. Why do you ask?”

“Just that he’s paying particular attention to you.”

Through his daughter.

The envy coiled in Luke’s stomach once more.

“We should get to the ball, Luke.”

“Tell me something first, my friend,” Luke persisted, softening his voice. “These last few days, I have noticed that your attention to a certain person has been increasing.”

“Ah, I see.” Robert shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Am I right in guessing that it is because you care for her? That you feel... something?” Luke wasn’t sure what words to use.

He tried to think of what it was he felt for Rachel but couldn’t put it into words. He liked her, and he certainly had an attachment to her that was probably not wise, but how deeply did it run? Could he turn his back on that connection? Was it even possible?

“Perhaps I feel something.” Robert shrugged. “Let us say this. At this stage, I do not know what I feel.” He shook his head.

“Ah, I see.” Luke wasn’t sure whether to be disappointed or hopeful. He sat forward, and Pepper lifted his head off his knee.

If Robert were to decide that he didn’t care for Rachel, after all, then there could be no harm in Luke pursuing her then, but he would have to wait. He would have to wait for the right moment and only consider courting Rachel once Robert had decided he had no interest.

That is if she would even consider courting me. She kissed me... yet why does she pursue Robert so intently?

A brief image flashed in Luke’s mind of the moment that Lord Brauncold had pointed out the boar to Robert. Not for the first time did he wonder if there was more at play here than just a young woman setting her sights on Robert’s fortune and position. Perhaps there was more to it.

“Would you tell me when you figure out what it is you feel?” Luke asked.

“Is it important?” Robert raised an eyebrow, clearly with curiosity.

“It may be.”

Luke stood and walked across the room, moving to collect the dark green tailcoat he had prepared for the evening. Pepper followed him and then sat at his heel as he pulled on the tailcoat.

“Then I’ll tell you when I know.” Robert nodded with a smile. “You’ll have to shake that dog off your heel before the ball. I don’t think Lord Brauncold would thank you for bringing him to the dance.”

“Shame. I’m sure you could liven it up, eh? Couldn’t you, Pepper?” Luke patted the dog, who barked as if in agreement. “Come on, then. We’ll leave the dog here and go down.”

Luke threw a cushion on the floor for Pepper. Quite happy to take it, Pepper sat down on his back and rolled around, making himself comfortable as they left.

“Whatever’s wrong,” Robert mused as Luke closed the door, “I hope it sorts itself out soon.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “I hate to see you troubled.”

“Hopefully, I won’t be troubled for long.”

Luke prayed it was the case. Just as soon as Robert sorted out his heart, Luke could figure out his own heart as well.



Rachel fidgeted with the gloves, pulling at the lace hem around her wrists. They really were very beautiful, much finer than she had even appreciated in the shop. She loved them, and yet despite that feeling, she also hated wearing them. The mere thought of wearing what could be a token of affection from the Marquess of Ladeston made her sick.

“Would you quit with your fidgeting?” Miles hissed in her ear as they stood in the middle of the entrance hall together, with

her mother on the other side.

Some of their guests had already arrived and, after being welcomed by the family, had gone into the ballroom, leaving them alone in the entrance hall.

“You know I did not wish to wear them,” Rachel pointed out.

Miles looked at her, his brows furrowing together as if he could not believe the fact that she dared to talk back to him.

“Pray, let me take them off.”

“Have you lost your senses?” he said firmly. “Keep the gloves on. I will not discuss the matter with you again.”

Elizabeth looked over at the gloves on Rachel’s hands and tutted, shaking her head. “They do not truly suit you, dear.”

“Thank you, Mother. So kind, as always.”

Rachel’s wryness went unnoticed by her mother, who looked away again as another couple walked through the front door, ready to be greeted.

Rachel sighed and stepped back, allowing her mother and father to do the welcoming. As she heard sounds behind her on the staircase, she turned to look.

Her eyes shot straight to the Duke of Hurbex, who was at the top of the stairs. His gaze found hers too. Not once did Rachel glance at the Marquess beside him. She only watched the Duke as he walked down the stairs. His eyes flitted down to the gloves on her hands. At once, she hid them behind her back, not wanting him to know that she had been forced to wear the Marquess's gift.

The Duke continued to smile, though, giving her hope that he hadn't truly noticed the gloves, after all.

"Ah, Lord Ladeston." Miles walked past Rachel, practically bumping her with his shoulder as he moved toward the Marquess. "So good to see you this evening. Perhaps you would be so kind as to escort my daughter to the ball?"

"Of course. I'd be delighted."

Lord Ladeston politely offered his arm to Rachel. She took it but still didn't look him in the eye.

She felt worse this evening about her father's ruse than she ever had before, though she was unsure which part bothered her more. Was it the plain underhandedness of trying to get one over on a business rival through marriage? Or was it the feeling of betrayal?

Betrayal. That is what it is.

As Lord Ladeston escorted her into the ballroom, with Miles and Elizabeth leading the way, Rachel kept her eyes on the

Duke, who walked on her other side. He seemed greatly humored by the way she looked at him.

As they stepped into the crowds, he lowered his voice to a whisper near her ear. “You should probably be looking at the gentleman on your other side, Rachel.”

“I have no wish to,” she confessed, her voice barely audible.

His smile grew all the more. “That’s rather what I hoped you would say.”

“Now, then. Shall we find a drink to toast this evening?” Miles took control of the conversation and clapped his hands together. “Come, let us find a drink.”

Rachel was relieved as Lord Ladeston released her arm. She didn’t even look where he went next but followed at the Duke’s side. His arm brushed hers as they walked next to one another, moving to the other side of the ballroom and the grand displays of glasses that had been laid out across the refreshments table.

Rachel reached for her glass first, but the Duke reached for the same one. Neither of them pulled back as their fingers brushed on the glass. She suddenly resented the feeling of the lace gloves even more than before, wishing there was no barrier between them at all.

“It’s yours,” the Duke insisted, pushing the glass toward her.

“Thank you.” She raised the glass as he chose another.

She looked around briefly, relieved that Miles and Elizabeth had been taken up in conversation by other guests. It gave her the freedom to stay beside the Duke for a minute longer still.

“What should we drink to?” the Duke asked as he raised his glass toward her. “The future?”

“A better future than the present, perhaps,” she whispered, and he frowned.

“I don’t know. There’s plenty I like about this present moment.” The plain flirtation as he pressed his glass to hers had her smiling once again.

“This moment, certainly,” Rachel murmured. “But there are other things in this house that hardly bring me joy. I suspect you know something about them, Your Grace.”

“Ah.” Luke looked knowingly over her shoulder, toward her father and mother. “Then I think you have provided us with a better toast. Let us drink to a future of freedom, how does that sound?”

“Freedom.” She smiled at the word, feeling excited by the prospect.

What could it be like to have a future where her father wasn’t constantly breathing down her neck? An existence where she did not feel the constant need to attempt to please her parents?

“I like that idea very much, indeed. To freedom.” She clinked her glass against the Duke’s.

“To freedom,” he seconded and lifted the champagne to his lips, sipping the bubbly wine. His eyes stayed on hers the whole time. “Your father is attentive to my friend. Far more attentive than I would have him be.”

“I know,” Rachel whispered, not wishing to glance back and look at the embarrassing spectacle her father was now making of himself.

“Yet, you are no longer staying beside my friend, I notice.” The Duke stood a little taller, his smile growing. “You stay beside me, Rachel.”

She sighed with a kind of contentment, realizing that she loved it when the Duke didn’t use her title, but just called her by her Christian name.

“Indeed, Your Grace.”

“Nothing else to say on the matter?” the Duke asked, stepping toward her a little.

It would have been all too easy for Rachel to persuade herself that they weren’t in the ballroom at that moment. They could have been somewhere far away, completely alone, somewhere much more intimate. As she recalled how close they had been outside the summer pavilion on the estate, the day they had

kissed in the rain, she bit her lip, wondering what it could be like to kiss him again.

His eyes darted down to her lips. Either he saw the action, or he was thinking exactly the same thing.

“I am where I wish to be. That is all I will say.”

She feared that her father would come to her side at any minute and demand she leave the Duke.

Pray, be distracted, Father! I am exactly where I long to be.

“He’s coming this way,” the Duke whispered.

“What?” Rachel flinched, realizing he had appeared to have read her mind for a second time.

“Ah, Rachel, there you are.” Miles stood between the pair of them, quite expertly placing himself in such a way that the Duke was forced to back up a little away from her. He rather hastily took a gulp of his champagne, and Rachel mirrored that action, finding her mouth dry. “Come, start the dancing for us this evening. I’ll find a partner for you.”

Miles looked around, clearly hunting out Lord Ladeston. To Rachel’s relief, Lord Ladeston was nowhere to be seen. In fact, she could see no sign that he was in the ballroom at all.

“Ah, well...” Miles paused, shifting his weight between his feet. “This is a little awkward. I thought Lord Ladeston could dance the first dance with you.”

“I’d be happy to dance with another, Father.”

Her audacious words had her earning his heavy glare again. She flinched, rather relieved that because of Miles’s position, the Duke could not see the strength of that glare.

“We can wait for Lord Ladeston to return,” Miles insisted, his voice firmer once more.

“There’s no need to delay the dancing just because my friend is absent.” The Duke downed what was left in his glass and set it on the table. “I am sure your other guests would only be too delighted to see the dancing begin. Perhaps I can step into the breach.” He offered his hand to Rachel, stepping around Miles. “Lady Rachel, would you care to dance?”

CHAPTER 16



Luke waited for the moment Lord Brauncold would step in to stop the dance. Surely, it was the exact opposite of what he wanted, when he had plainly fixed his sights so much on having Robert for a son-in-law. Before Lord Brauncold could say anything, though, Rachel placed her hand in Luke's and offered him a small smile.

Thank God.

Luke led her away, and he could only presume it was Lord Brauncold's knowledge that to step in now would cause a scene that prevented him from saying anything. After all, it was his ball, and he wouldn't want to be embarrassed in front of his own guests.

Luke escorted Rachel to the dance floor, aware as he did so that she repeatedly glanced toward him, as she had done all evening, that pleasant pink shade spreading across the tops of her cheeks. The way she kept biting her lip was reminding him of their kiss out in the rain, making him wish to repeat such a transgression.

As they reached the space cleared for dancers, Luke led Rachel into the very middle. It was the cue for others to

follow, and soon, many couples took to the space around them, waiting for the quarter of violinists to strike the opening notes.

As the three-beat music began, Luke smiled, recognizing the sounds of a waltz. He bowed to Rachel as she curtsied to him, then he offered her his hand, encouraging her to walk into his arms.

They both inhaled as they laid their hands on each other, his on her waist and palm, hers on his shoulder. He began the waltz slowly, moving in time to the music and comparing how different this dance felt to the first they had shared a few weeks ago.

Back then, Luke had felt nothing but suspicion and attraction to Rachel. Now, he felt something infinitely deeper, an affection he struggled to put into words.

As they danced together, they kept gazing at one another, as if something unspoken was passing between them. When they nearly collided with another couple, for they were so distracted staring at one another, he slid his hand further across her back, drawing her toward him, into the safety of his arms.

“You are very caring, Your Grace,” Rachel whispered under the cover of the music.

“Are we talking about the dance or not?” he teased her in a light voice, watching as her lips tilted up into a smile.

“Perhaps we are not only talking about the dance.”

“Then allow me to take that one step further.” He talked with ease now as he led her around the dance floor. “After your escapade in the rain, I was worried.”

“I did assure you I was fine,” she insisted.

“I know, but many a person would have fallen ill after walking so long in the rain. They’d suffer some heavy cold, maybe even a fever. Yet, you carry yourself in here tonight as if a drop of rain has not touched your skin.” He smirked. “Perhaps you have a stronger constitution than I first gave you credit.”

“Is that a compliment?” She laughed. “I am not particularly sure. Suffice it to say this, Your Grace. I am not some damsel in distress that was waiting for you to come and rescue me.”

“No?”

“Far from it,” she assured him with a victorious smile.

“A shame. I rather liked being the one to come to your aid,” he confessed, admiring the smile that pulled at her lips. “Let me push this care for you one step further,” he whispered, determined now for all barriers to come down between them. “Your father...”

Her smile abruptly faltered.

“Do you feel as if you always have to do what he asks of you?” he asked.

She looked down into the middle of his chest as if she couldn't bear to look him in the eye as she answered his question.

"It is a matter of duty, I suppose," she murmured softly. "Every young woman is expected to adhere to the will of her parents, is she not?"

"Is that what you feel, when it comes to your parents?"

"Of course." She raised her gaze, meeting his eyes. He no longer danced around the floor with such alacrity, but kept to the middle, letting others dance around them as he swayed her side to side. "I am hardly... *close* with my parents, Your Grace. Yet, they are my parents."

"Do you long for a different sort of relationship with them?"

His words must have struck a nerve, for she shifted a little in his arms, her hand gripping his shoulder a little tighter.

She must have struggled to say the words aloud, for she settled with nodding instead.

"That is something I can appreciate." His fingers splayed outward on her back as he held her near, wanting her to know that she was safe in his arms. "I was very close to my father. He was a good man. In my opinion, he was the best of men. After he passed, I have longed every day since to be close to him again, to have the conversations we used to share. Yet, it is not to be."

“Treasure the memories where you did have him, Your Grace,” she said softly. “Believe me, they are so valuable. I quite envy you for them.”

“I am sorry to hear that.” His hand slid against her own, so their fingers became entwined.

“What was he like, your father?” Rachel asked, tilting her head to the side as she looked at him, seeming genuinely interested.

“The best of men. He was honest, fair, and caring. He put me and those he cared about above everyone else in life.” Luke smiled sadly, missing his father greatly. “He had his faults, of course, like any man. He had business acumen—like Robert, in that regard—and just like Robert, he was a little too trusting.”

“In what way?” Rachel asked, her brow furrowing a little.

“My father could not always see when he was being conned. He went into business arrangements with the best of intentions and couldn’t see when men had simply gone into those dealings in order to steal his own fortune. When he neared the end of his life and I started to take over the business, I discovered how close he was to losing his whole fortune.”

Those were words Luke had only revealed to one other person in his life—Robert. To tell Rachel these secrets now felt as if they had crossed every boundary together.

“God have mercy,” she breathed. “I am so sorry. You managed to recover his fortune?”

“I did, though it was hard work.” Luke grimaced, remembering vividly the tough times he had been through when he had taken over the dukedom and the hard conversations he’d had to have with some of the less reputable businessmen his father had ended up embroiled with. “The fortune and the estate are safe now, but it was not always the case.”

His pace had slowed considerably now. Rachel was practically nestled against him as they swayed side to side, dancing more intimately than they had ever done before.

“It is why you are so eager to protect those around you, is it not?” she whispered.

“Yes. That and, well, I have always been Robert’s protector.” He smiled softly. “I have known for some time that Robert and my father are alike in some ways. With their good hearts comes a willingness to see the best in people. That is a virtue, one I envy them for, but it means the occasional naivety opens them up to being hurt. I will protect Robert to the death, Rachel. Come what may.”

To his surprise, she smiled fully.

“He is fortunate to have a good friend like you.” She blinked a few times, her eyes filling with tears.

“Rachel? What is it?” Luke whispered, his hand encasing hers more fully.

“Nothing.” She shook her head a little, forcing a smile as she blinked and tried to stop her tears from falling.

“Rachel.” Luke’s voice softened further, his panic rising.

“I am just feeling a little overwhelmed.” She breathed deeply, clearly trying to compose herself. “You have such care for those around you, Your Grace. It’s just... it’s not something you see every day.”

“You think not?” He smiled at the idea. “I’ve seen the way you care for those dogs you adore so much. Your cousin, too. Lady Alicia is always looking to you, and you’re always there for her.”

“She is there for me too,” Rachel said hurriedly. The passion with which she spoke was a testament to her belief.

“Even your keenness to please your parents.” Luke shifted them together, adjusting them so that he could whisper in her ear. “And I suspect it might be teetering on a *desperation* to please them.” He halted, fearing she wouldn’t like his choice of words. Yet, she said nothing in response, and her hand softened on his shoulder, as if all she was thinking of was their closeness. “It shows the depth of your own caring, Rachel.”

She smiled sadly as she met his gaze. “You are too kind, Your Grace. Kinder than you know,” she whispered.

He thought how curious these words were when he noticed the way she looked at the glove on her hand, frowning a little.

“They are far prettier on you than I was even expecting, you know,” Luke said softly. “I knew they were fair in the shop, but they suit you quite excellently.”

Rachel jerked her head toward him, so sharply that she almost forgot to follow him in the dance. He laughed a little as he led her further around the dance floor.

“I have startled you.”

“You bought me these?” she asked breathily.

“Indeed, I did,” he murmured gently. “I saw the way you looked at them in the shop. You quite fell in love with them, did you not?”

“I did.” She closed her eyes tightly. “Oh, God, you noticed that? I had no idea I had even been noticed at all!”

“Ah, well, I have been noticing you since you first mistakenly declared your heart to me instead of my friend.” He laughed and shifted them together, pulling her so close that his lips were practically at her temple. Her hand tightened on his shoulder.

“Pray, do not remind me of that night. I shudder just to think of the things I said.”

“Well, I am glad you agree on that, though I can hardly regret whom you made that declaration to.”

Luke was secretly relieved that Robert was nowhere near at this moment. Just to have another few minutes alone with Rachel in his arms meant everything.

“You are the only one who has ever truly noticed me,” she murmured so softly that he had to strain to hear the words above the music. “You noticed me in that shop when I was trying to be quiet and unseen.”

“I did.”

“Oh, God,” she sighed sharply.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Luke angled himself a little, the better to look her in the eye.

“Nothing and everything, I fear.” Her hand began to shake in his.

“Rachel?” he whispered. “Tell me, what is wrong?”

Yet, there was no more time for talking. The music had ended, and all the couples around them were hastily parting. Luke was forced to bow. Even as he tried to hold onto Rachel’s hand, she pulled it back from him, blinking madly as she held back more tears.

“Forgive me. Forgive me,” she said repetitively, hastening to curtsy.

She darted back across the dance floor with such speed that she bumped into another lady and had to apologize profusely before she hurried off again.

“Rachel?” Luke called and had to follow her.

He glanced around the room, trying to check that Lord Brauncold wasn't going to interfere again, but to his relief, the Earl was nowhere to be seen.

Luke followed Rachel through the ballroom. She reached a wide set of French doors and darted out, scurrying across the terrace that overlooked the garden. Luke stepped out of the door and closed it behind him. He didn't care that they were completely alone, that this no doubt would be scandalous if they were seen alone. All he wanted was to be alone with Rachel for a few minutes, to have the chance as they had been before, with no eyes watching them.

“Rachel?” he called to her.

Rachel halted partway across the stone terrace and turned back to face him. Those tears she had been able to stop were now running down her face, glistening brightly in the moonlight.

“What is it?”

He reached her, the pair of them halting in the middle of the stone terrace. On either side of them were potted roses, and beyond was the edge of the terrace, with a brick balustrade that overlooked the rest of the gardens. While Luke would usually admire Nature in this ethereal moonlight, tonight, he barely noticed it. He only had eyes for Rachel.

He reached for a handkerchief in his jacket pocket and raised it to Rachel's cheeks, drying her tears.

"Why are you crying?" he asked with some desperation.

"You do not know what you have done to me." She shook her head, her breath hitching. "Everything has changed because of you, Your Grace."

"Well, that is a relief to hear." He laughed softly. "Much has changed for me too since you came into my life."

She smiled through her tears, then looked down, as if she was ashamed to smile.

"I long to ask you something, yet I am afraid to whisper the words," she murmured.

"Then raise your voice and say it loudly instead," he teased her, somewhat relieved when her smile returned.

"That day in the rain... when you—when you kissed me." She met his gaze. "Why did you kiss me?"

“Why?” Luke smiled as he moved toward her. “Did you need to ask?”

He bent down to her again. He was inches away from claiming her lips again. He didn't care how illicit it was. Just to be near her again would be everything. Her hands flattened to his chest, and then her fingers curled around the lapels of his jacket, clinging onto him.

This feeling...

He couldn't help wishing she would hold onto him like that all the time.

“I kissed you because I wanted to. Because there was such heat and need. Because—” He was seconds away from telling her that he loved her, that he cared for her much more deeply than he had expected would ever be possible.

“No, don't say anymore,” Rachel suddenly said, hanging her head between them.

“What? Why not?” He pulled his head back an inch.

“Oh, God's wounds. Your Grace—”

“Call me Luke,” he pleaded. “It is my name, Rachel.”

“I cannot.” She looked up sharply. “You should leave me alone now. I... I think it's for the best.” Yet, she said the words

without any conviction at all.

“Why should I leave you?”

He took one of her hands from his jacket. He raised it between them and turned it over, pulling down the lace glove she was wearing an inch so he could kiss the back of her hand. She breathed in deeply as if that touch had stolen her breath. He dared to kiss her hand a second time, being more daring this time, prolonging the kiss for as long as possible.

“Luke,” she whispered. The way she said his name had him snapping his head up, meeting her gaze. “I cannot be near you. Not right now.”

“That would be easier to believe if you weren’t holding onto me so tightly,” he teased her with a smile.

“You are not helping!”

“Oh, I think I am.” He laughed and patted the hand that was still clutching his jacket. “Why do you not want me near you? Do I irritate you?” He winked. “Hardly surprising after all you and I have said to one another.”

“No. Far from it! I cannot be beside you right now because it’s so hard. It’s so hard looking at you, feeling this overwhelmed, knowing there’s something I want to say that I cannot say.”

“What is it? What do you wish to say?” he asked, lowering her hand between them.

“That—” Her breath hitched, and another tear rolled down her cheek. He wiped it away once more, this time with his thumb, his touch lingering on her cheek. She leaned into that touch, making his stomach quiver. “I cannot say it.”

“You can say anything to me, Rachel.” He bent toward her. “You know that.”

“Not this. I’m forbidden to say such a thing. I should not say it.”

“Forbidden things are so tempting, though, are they not?”

“How can you tease me at a time like this!?”

“For a chance to see this.” He pointed at the smile that had peeked through her tears. “Come on, Rachel. What is it you wish to say to me? Why do you not wish to see me at this moment, yet despite such words, you are holding onto me so tightly?”

“It’s because—” She halted once more, breathed deeply, and then looked down at their hands bound together.

Her hand shifted within his a little, the heat of her palm strong against his own, despite the chill of the evening wind that buffeted around them.

Her next words made his stomach clench so tightly, he was in danger of dancing for joy.

“Because I am in love with you.”

CHAPTER 17



“**Y**ou are?” The Duke smiled as if he could not believe his ears.

Rachel felt lost as she stared at him. The guilt was overwhelming, making her feel small, indeed. Hearing the Duke’s words this evening, the truth had hit her like a ton of bricks. How could she continue with keeping anything from him, when he had such a good heart? He deserved to know the whole truth, even if he was going to hate her for it.

“Rachel.” He moved an inch toward her, that smile taking up his whole features. “Why do you look so frightened when you are telling me something wonderful? Did you fear I would feel nothing in return?”

He feels something for me?

The knowledge that she might be able to earn his heart somehow made it worse. She closed her eyes as more tears threatened.

“What is wrong?” His hand found her cheek again, trying to dry some of her tears.

Luke... he asked me to call him Luke.

Yet, it was something she was struggling with. It made the two of them even more intimate than before, something she could hardly have the freedom to indulge in.

“Because no matter what I feel for you, how strongly I—” She paused and opened her eyes, her hand shifting to rest just beneath his tailcoat and on his waistcoat. Her palm laid over his heart, and she felt him breathe in sharply as if that touch had power over him. “I care for you,” she finished. “We cannot be together.”

“I beg your pardon?” His brows shot up. “You tell me you love me in one breath and then retreat from me in the next?”

“Not because I wish to. Believe me. God’s wounds, this is too awful.”

She had to put distance between them now. She backed up, releasing him and forcing him to let go of her. Taking a few steps back along the terrace, her eyes settled on his face in the moonlight. His eyes glittered, the green hue more noticeable than usual.

“Luke, you were right. You were always right about me.”

Luke said nothing. His head cocked to the side a little as he watched her, his eyes unblinking.

“It was always what I was supposed to do, seduce your friend.” Her voice grew quiet. “It was my father’s wish.” She hung her head forward. “For family, for duty, I had to do it.”

Silence stretched out between them. It seemed never-ending, as if she would be trapped in this moment forever, forced to stare into an abyss that never ended.

“I am so sorry.”

“Sorry?” Luke spoke, at last.

Rachel looked up to see he was leaning a hand on the stone balustrade, shaking his head.

“I knew it. I always knew it. But do you know something?” He took a step forward. “These last few days, I just didn’t want to believe it. I started to question everything so much more. Tell me this, Rachel, because you make no sense to me now. If you had your heart so set on my friend, why declare your heart to me at all?”

“Because my heart was not set on *him*. It was just what I had to do. It was my duty.”

“Duty!?” Luke scoffed, shaking his head once more. He leaned against the balustrade and folded his arm. “You realize how mad that sounds when we are talking about love at this moment? To hear you putting something as cold as duty above it?”

“You told me a few minutes ago how much your family mattered to you.”

She walked toward him, and though he didn't retreat, she was all too aware of the way he was watching her. He was like a spooked animal, prepared to jump away at any moment. She didn't dare reach out and touch him, in case it encouraged him to run away from her.

“My family matters to me too,” she mumbled.

“So, what your father asks of you, he gets, right?” Luke scoffed once more and tipped his head up, his eyes dancing across the stars. “God knows why you feel the need to do what that man says. I can hardly say I'm shocked. After being so certain it was your aim, since being in this house, I saw more and more that your father was up to something. I just—” He looked at her once more. “I didn't want to believe *you* were capable of it.”

“Luke, please—”

“No more, Rachel. No more.” He shook his head as if he couldn't bear to listen to another word from her. “You tell me you love me, and yet you still cling to your father's orders. No matter what happens between us, it would not be enough, would it?”

“That's not what I said.” Her breath hitched, and she cried more now, reaching for his arm. He looked down at her hand but kept his arms firmly folded. “I want you to know the truth. The truth of everything.”

“It’s a truth I’m finding very hard to understand, to sympathize with.” He sighed heavily, baffled. “Why does duty matter more than your heart, Rachel? Tell me that.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it!?” His voice was sharp.

“It’s about choice. Choice is not something I have. It’s not something I have been given,” she said in a rush. “You have the privilege of being a man. You have your own fortune, your freedoms, yet I do not. I have to do what my father says. I am under his command.”

“Everyone has a choice, even when you think there is none.” Luke’s voice deepened. “Good Lord.” He looked away, his hands shifting and his arms loosening from their folded position. “I have become my father.”

“Your father? What?” she murmured in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“The gullible man,” he whispered quietly. “It is something I have tried so hard for so long not to be. I should have trusted my first instincts about you. I should have held onto them. I just—” He sighed once more. “I truly did not want to believe it. I let that belief re-write my certainty. God, I’m a greater fool than I ever thought.”

“You are no fool,” she insisted. “Please, Luke. I am no monster. I just...” She didn’t know how to explain herself. The words died in her throat as Luke looked at her.

“I know you’re no monster.” His words were barely audible at all. He wouldn’t look at her now, and had turned away, staring into the distance across the garden. “I need time to think about this, Rachel. To think about what you said.”

“But—”

“Please. I need time,” he said again, then backed up from her.

Her hand dropped from his arm as he retreated. For a minute, he just walked backward, his eyes flitting to hers, then he turned on his heel and walked away.

Rather than returning to the ballroom, he headed into the garden and jumped down from the stone terrace and onto the lawn. His figure melded with the shadows, and he disappeared between the trees.

“Luke,” Rachel whispered, her voice shaking as she suddenly felt cold. The evening breeze whipped around her, making her whole body tremble.

What have I done?

She couldn’t regret telling him the truth. She knew she had to. She owed him that. Yet, to see the way he had turned away from her made her heart ache.

How on earth am I supposed to marry his friend, when I love him this much that it hurts when he walks away?

Rachel couldn't do it. She was confident in that. She could not possibly marry Lord Ladeston now.

Something Luke had said rang in her mind as she stared after him into the darkness, trying to trace where he had gone.

“Everyone has a choice, even when you think there is none.”

Could it be true? Rachel had never felt as if she had much choice. Everything had been orchestrated for her since the day she had been born. What she did in her days, what she learned, what she wore, everything! Her mother and father had left instructions with governesses and nurses of what she should do each day, right down to the minute she should retire for the night, even now when she was a woman and no longer a girl.

She looked away from the garden, her eyes resting on the lace gloves. She blinked. Seeing them as her fingers curled, she realized that these had, indeed, been a choice. They were gloves that she had desired, and though her mother had refused to allow her to purchase them, Luke had ensured she got them, anyway.

“Perhaps there's a way,” Rachel whispered.

She backed up across the terrace, looking for Luke one more time, yet finding there was no trace of him at all. She turned on her heel and headed back to the ballroom, scurrying in through the doors as quickly as she could.

Stepping into the ballroom, she was hit by a wall of heat. The warmth of the bodies and all the dancing was getting greater, and even with all the windows open, it was doing little to cool down the air. As Rachel walked forward, women around her fluttered fans in front of their faces. She found a discarded fan on a table nearby and snatched it up, doing the same thing in her need to cool down.

She walked through the crowds, looking for one person in particular—her father.

He'll be here, somewhere. He wouldn't dare abandon a ball and risk people whispering about him poorly attending to his guests.

She would speak to him now and let him know that she no longer had any intention of trying to seduce Lord Ladeston. She'd face Miles's wrath for this, and perhaps he would never forgive her for it, but at least then she would have one man's respect, respect that she truly craved—Luke's respect.

Rachel walked around the dance floor, where she saw Alicia dancing. Her cousin seemed distracted, constantly looking away from her dance partner and away from the floor. She seemed upset, the lines in her face growing taut as her eyes flitted from one thing to the next. Rachel paused with her fan as she looked at her cousin.

Something else is amiss tonight, it seems.

Seeing her cousin needed her, Rachel waited at the side of the dance floor. When Alicia was done with her dance, she thanked her partner and hurried to Rachel's side.

“Alicia? Is something wrong?” Rachel asked, taking her cousin’s hand.

“I fear so,” Alicia murmured. “Though I hardly know how to put it into words.” She chewed on her lower lip so much that she was in danger of drawing blood. “Oh, why is it so hot in here?”

“Take this.” Rachel offered up the fan she had in her grasp. Alicia took it and fluttered the fan in front of her own face. “Do you wish to leave the ball?”

“Yes. Can we go somewhere to talk?”

“Of course.” Rachel nodded. She had to find her father, but if Alicia needed her, then he could wait. The matter of Lord Ladeston, the concern of her own heart, would have to be paused for now. “Come, let us find somewhere to speak.”

She looped her arm through Alicia’s and led her through the ballroom, past the bubbling crowds and flowing glasses of wine, port and brandy. The scent of the liquor hung in the air, mixing with the scent of sweat, making Rachel feel strangely nauseous.

When she reached the door of the ballroom, about to escape with Alicia, Elizabeth appeared.

“Ah, Rachel, there you are.” Elizabeth intercepted the pair of them, standing in the way and blocking the exit. “Your father needs you in the library.”

“Oh.” Rachel looked back at Alicia. Seeing her cousin was on the verge of tears, she knew what her priority was. “Forgive me, Mother, but Alicia needs to get away from the ball. I shall see Father later, but first, I am going to accompany Alicia elsewhere.”

“Nonsense, I can take Alicia away.” Elizabeth took Alicia’s hand from her.

“But—”

“You have your orders, Rachel. Go to your father in the library. He has requested you join him at once.” Elizabeth’s eyes widened threateningly.

The lack of care in that look and the cold orders, as if Rachel was some infantryman in a battalion, made her jaw go slack.

“Come, Alicia. I’ll attend to you.” Elizabeth dragged Alicia away, but contrary to Alicia’s wishes, she was dragged further back into the ballroom.

Rachel and Alicia looked at one another as they were separated, but Rachel could not think of a way to get her cousin back. Instead, she felt helpless, watching her cousin be towed away.

So much for choice. I cannot make even the smallest impact!

Angered at herself, she marched through the door of the ballroom and out into the hallway. At least if her father wanted her, she was going to make herself clear now. She would tell him that all his deception, all his underhandedness, was worth nothing.

I will not marry Lord Ladeston.

Rachel found the library door and opened it, striding inside.

“Father?” she called out, aware that a few candles had been lit in the space.

“Oh, Lady Rachel. My apologies.”

That is not my father’s voice.

Rachel flicked her head around to find Miles was not in the library at all. Instead, Lord Ladeston stood in the middle of the room with a scrap of paper in his hands.

“Forgive me, but—” He paused and looked down at the paper resting in his palms. “One of the servants gave me a note from your father. He asked me to meet him here.”

That snake!

Rachel put it all together in her mind as quickly as she could. She and Lord Ladeston were completely alone, unchaperoned,

in a secluded place, at a ball. The implications, the scandal, were too awful to fathom.

“We are alone,” she pointed out, her eyes wide.

He clearly realized it at the same time as he backed up, dropping that note.

“We need to get out of here, now,” she said hurriedly.

He nodded in agreement.

She moved to the door, then realized that she could be seen escaping that way. If anyone was watching, as she feared her father might have set up a witness, she’d still be trapped in scandal. She backed up the other way and reached for the window instead.

“You are going out of the window!?” the Marquess asked in amazement.

“Do you have a better idea?” she hissed, pulling on the window and trying to open it.

The window slid up a little in the frame, but it wouldn’t open wide enough for her to possibly escape with her gown.

“Go out of the door,” Lord Ladeston urged. “Be quick. I can try and get through the window.”

She avoided him, giving him as wide a berth as possible as she darted past him toward the door. All she could think of was the contrast of how she felt in Lord Ladeston's company compared to Luke's. At this moment, she was scared, frightened of what was to happen if they were seen. She had never been frightened in Luke's company, not once. Even when they had been alone, she had been happy, hardly caring who had seen them.

As she moved away, she looked back, seeing Lord Ladeston attempting to fold himself up and climb through the window.

She turned back around and fled toward the door, but before she could possibly escape, the door handle turned before her. She backed up, avoiding behind hit by the door as it opened.

No...

“Here we are. Is it not a fine room?” Elizabeth's voice sounded clear.

She walked in, her hand gripping Alicia's wrist tightly as she was dragged inside. Behind the pair of them was a group of ladies. Amongst them was Lady Pipwick, who was the first to notice Rachel was in here.

Lady Pipwick smiled, then her eyes widened as they flicked toward the other person in the room. Rachel didn't need to glance back to know Lord Ladeston hadn't managed to escape in time. The shock was written all over Lady Pipwick's face.

“What is happening here?” Elizabeth hissed with sudden outrage. Her face was a picture, yet Rachel saw something else in that expression. There was the glimmer of a smile that Elizabeth suppressed fast.

She knew. She took part in my father's ruse to get us isolated here together, then caught.

“Lord Ladeston, what is the meaning of this?” Elizabeth demanded.

Rachel looked at her cousin, seeing the same fear on her face that she was sure was in her own. Subtly, Rachel shook her head. Alicia seemed to understand and nodded just once, yet it was the only form of communication they could have in this busy room, with so many pairs of eyes watching them. Alicia must have been able to guess it was one of Miles' schemes, without them needing to talk of it.

“Mother, it is not what it looks like,” Rachel said hurriedly. “I came to meet my father here, and Lord Ladeston was here, getting a book. Were you not?”

“Yes, yes, that's right. I had a headache and wished to take a few minutes away from the party,” Lord Ladeston explained. The heavy thud that followed suggested he had let the window drop down.

“Strange. You'll find no books through that window, My Lord,” Lady Pipwick commented with a great smile. “What a scandal this is, Lady Brauncold. A daughter caught alone in the company of a marquess. Oh! The whole of the ball will hear of this come the end of the evening. Scandalous, indeed!”

She walked back out of the room, giddy as a schoolgirl, with the other ladies following her.

No...

“You will make recompense for this, My Lord.” Elizabeth turned sharply to face Lord Ladeston. “I will not have my daughter ruined by scandal.”

Rachel’s whole body shook as the Marquess left the room, darting out and following the ladies.

God’s wounds. What happens now?

CHAPTER 18



Rachel rested her head against the cool glass as she stared out of her bedchamber window, down at the drive as the guests were leaving. With her legs curled up underneath her in the window seat, her body barely moved at all as she watched the scenes unfold. Beside her was a glass of port that she had brought up with her to calm her nerves, yet she left it untouched on the windowsill beside her.

Nothing can help me now.

She watched the drive as if it was the stage of some twisted sort of play, a theatre show, with the gossipers passing through, all laughing and finding great delight in the turn the evening had taken. Amongst those leaving, she saw Lady Pipwick. The lady grabbed everyone she could on the drive, repeating the tale of what she had seen.

She told so many people that Rachel began to fear everyone in London would know by the end of the week that she and Lord Ladeston had been found alone together.

This is absurd.

Rachel's hands shook in her lap, but she made no effort to stop them.

Earlier, she had seen Lord Ladeston leave. He'd darted to his carriage as fast as he possibly could, with the coach moving so fast down the gravel drive, it was in danger of skidding on the stones. Strangely, she had not seen Luke take his leave. Yet, by the way the carriages were thinning out, she judged that he must have left sooner.

Perhaps he left after he walked into the garden? Was he so desperate to get away from me that he left the house altogether?

She closed her eyes, feeling them well up with tears as she thought of Luke, fearing what he would think of her now when he discovered the truth.

He'll despise me. He'll hate me for this. Even though it was not my doing.

The thought that Luke could hate her made her stomach writhe in pain. She felt sick, and she raised one of her shaking hands to her lips, covering her mouth to try and quell that feeling as much as she could.

Soon enough, all the guests had left, and the last people to leave were the violinists. They seemed so eager with their own conversation that, with curiosity, Rachel reached for the window and opened it a slither, pressing her ear to the gap to try and hear some of their conversation. Scraps of words reached her on the wind.

“A night of scandal, eh?” one violinist said to another. “Pah! All these ladies and gentlemen are always misbehaving. They are not so high and mighty as they pretend to be.”

“Must be something in the wine at these events.” Another laughed. “They’re always sneaking off together.”

Rachel chewed on her lower lip, thinking of how she had been quite happy to be alone with Luke earlier that evening, confessing her love for him. Nothing had felt wrong about that moment, in contrast to the minute she had spent in Lord Ladeston’s company—everything had felt completely wrong about that.

“That’s another hasty marriage by special license, then,” a third violinist said. “You mark my words. The pair will be married within the fortnight.”

“You think so?” the second asked.

“Of course. The gentleman is a marquess, and the lady is the daughter of an earl. The *ton* will expect recompense and the protection of a reputation. Aye, I’m certain of it. They’ll be married soon enough.”

The words were quickly silenced as the violinists stepped into a coach. Rachel slammed the window shut loudly, so angered by their words that her breathing grew labored.

I will not marry him. I cannot marry Lord Ladeston.

She tried to picture it, tried to think of a life with Lord Ladeston where perhaps the two of them could be happy, but everything felt wrong. They'd sit side by side in a living room, unable to talk to each other, with so little in common and nothing to say. At dinner, they'd be equally quiet, the only sounds between them would be the chinking cutlery on their plates. Then, of course, there was the matter of the bedchamber.

Rachel was certain he would not visit her, and she'd be glad of it. She couldn't imagine sharing a bed with Lord Ladeston.

Her hands began to shake, realizing the implications of such a thing. She had always hoped that she would be a mother someday. If she became a mother, she'd be closer to her child than her parents had ever been to her. She'd show that child true love and devotion, yet now, such a dream seemed completely out of reach.

There would never be a child if I married Lord Ladeston.

"I cannot marry him," she spoke with sudden resolve.

She pictured herself walking down the aisle, toward a man that waited for her at the altar. Lord Ladeston and Luke stood together, one the groom, the other the best man. Yet, rather than Lord Ladeston turning to greet her, Luke did, with a great smile.

He is the only man I can imagine marrying.

Rachel moved off the window seat, her body suddenly alive with movement. She slipped her feet back into the shoes she had kicked off when she had taken refuge in her chamber. Pulling them on fast, she darted to the door and hurried across the landing.

With all the guests now gone, at least she could wander the corridors without people whispering and pointing at her. At least, it was what she had hoped for. When she reached the ground floor, she saw maids and footmen clearing the ballroom. Many lowered their voices, whispering to one another and looking her way.

This is unbearable.

Hearing other voices, Rachel passed by the ballroom and moved to the drawing room. She rather hoped to find Alicia, for she had still not managed to find out what had upset her cousin so much earlier that day. Yet, her cousin was not the one in that drawing room.

As Rachel opened the door, she saw her parents toasting one another with large glasses of brandy. Miles had shrugged off his tailcoat and had a great smile on his face, and Elizabeth looked ready to dance around the room, lightheaded and rather ditzzy in her drunk state.

“Are you two celebrating?” Rachel asked sharply as she stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. “That disgusts me.”

“Oh, tush, dear.” Elizabeth waved a hand at her as if she hadn’t used such strong words, but was misbehaving like a

child. "All will be well now. Your father has seen to that."

"It has worked well, has it not?" Miles laughed as he sat down in an armchair nearby. "I admit, I had my own doubts as to whether Lord Ladeston would believe that note at all. It turns out, I never needed to worry." He laughed to himself and took a large sip of brandy.

"Can you hear yourself?" Rachel walked forward, finding a strength in her voice she had not known was there. Something in her chest unfurled as she realized that she suddenly had the confidence to speak her mind.

It was a feeling she'd only ever had in Luke's company. Abruptly, she now had it with her parents too.

What happened to me? What changed?

"You have moved Lord Ladeston and I as if we were chess pieces on a board, there for your own amusement." She waved a mad hand at her father. He looked down into his brandy glass as if she was not speaking at all. "You disgust me. All of this. It's repulsive. You are marrying me off, harlotting me out, and for what?"

"Language, dear," Elizabeth said distractedly, moving to a decanter to top up her glass. "We do not use that language in this house."

"What? A harlot? It is what you are doing, is it not?" Rachel shot back, her voice growing louder. "You are pushing me on a man so you can control his business. It is all about money."

Every second of this has been about money and your own advantage. Who cares about your daughter, eh?"

She placed both palms on her own chest. "Who cares if I do not want to marry him? If he and I can only cordially get along? None of that matters as long as you have the money you so crave, does it?"

"For God's sake, Rachel, do not give me a headache now." Miles lifted a hand and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You'll find that's all the liquor you're drinking in your sick celebration."

"Rachel!" he snapped, his voice loud as he lowered his hand. "I do not know where you have got this new voice from, but I will not stand for it anymore."

"What can you do? Hmm?" Rachel marched toward her father, her hands on her hips. "There is nothing more you can do to me. You have signed my life over, have you not? In the effort to force him to marry me, you have ruined my name. Even if he refuses to marry me now, no other man would."

Her breath hitched as she knew in her heart that Luke would not come near her now. He was a duke. He would have to marry well, and a ruined daughter of an earl would not be enough.

"Why did you do this to me?" Rachel demanded.

“Because you were not doing it.” Miles matched her tone, his eyes glacial as he looked at her. “I saw Lord Ladeston in the garden with another woman. Fearing he was about to be ensnared by her, I had to act fast. What if he was going to marry someone else? No, it could not happen. I had to thrust the two of you together fast, before it could happen.”

“You embarrass me,” Rachel said, her voice quieter than his, but just as venomous. “I am ashamed to call you my parents.”

“Rachel!” Elizabeth gasped in shock. She put down the decanter on a table nearby along with her glass, making them both clink together.

“I am ashamed.” Rachel looked between them. “You disgust me with your manipulateness, and your lack of care.”

“Care?” Elizabeth repeated the word as if baffled by it.

“All I ever wanted to do was please you both. Did you not know that?” Rachel’s head flicked sharply around, her eyes barely resting on either of them for very long. “I wanted to make you happy. Dear God, every day of my life, it is something I have tried to do. When you told me it was my duty to marry Lord Ladeston, I believed you. I wished to please you, but why did I bother?”

She halted, but neither of them disturbed that silence. They both just stared at her open-mouthed.

“You have just used me in return. I was just born to be a pawn for your business, was I not? I wasn’t born because you

wanted me at all.” She spun on her heel and moved toward the door. “Know this. I will not marry him.”

“What!?” Miles spluttered. He leaped to his feet, and the unmistakable sound of him dropping his drink followed, the glass smashing against the floor. “You will marry him, Rachel. You will do as I say.”

“Why?” Rachel asked wildly as she reached the door, looking back to see that his face had turned crimson red. “Why should I do as you say anymore, when you treat me in this manner? No, Father, I will not do as you order me.”

“You shall!” Miles boomed.

Rachel flung the door open. She was about to step through when her mother’s voice sounded, much quieter, but with strong words.

“Would you leave this family doomed to suffer at another man’s successful business?” The cool tone made Rachel freeze, staring into the hallway. “That is what you would be doing. It would be heartless, would it not?” Elizabeth pointed out. “To abandon your parents now. No, Rachel. You must do this, for your family’s sake, to save this family and our fortune, you have no choice.”

No choice...

There were those words again.

Rachel glanced back at her mother, certain she had never hated her parents before as much as she did at that moment. She said nothing to them as she stepped out of the room and hurried down the hallway.

As she reached the staircase, the first tears came. In her mind, she kept seeing that wedding ceremony, with her walking toward the altar and Luke turning to greet her. Sometimes, she saw him smiling at her, other times, she saw his glare, his hatred of what she had done.

When she reached her chamber, she slammed the door shut and slid down, ending up in a ball on the floor. Her heart felt as if it had cracked into pieces, one shard because of her father, another her mother, and the third because of Luke.



“Woah, slow down, boy.” Luke flicked the reins of the horse as he rode up the driveway of Robert’s house.

It was raining, yet the air was hot and humid. Thunder cracked overhead, and the droplets continued to pour heavily on his shoulders, running off his top hat and down his neck.

As the horse struggled to stop, lightning flashed overhead, and Luke’s eyes darted across Robert’s house. All seemed quiet. Usually, Robert’s house was full of activity, but not today. There wasn’t a soul that moved in the windows, and shutters had been bound tightly against the rain.

Luke halted at the bottom of a long stone staircase that ran up the front of the house. He jumped down from the saddle and tossed the reins of the horse around the balustrade, thinking it

unlikely that a stable boy would come out in this rain to notice a horse was here at all. He steered the horse under the eaves of the house as much as possible and patted the animal's nose, then hurried up the steps, taking them two at a time.

When he reached the top step, he shrugged off his tailcoat and sodden hat, knocking loudly on the door. The butler, a man who was usually so attentive to callers, took his time in answering the door. Luke had to knock three times to get any answer at all.

As the door did eventually open, Luke apologized profusely for the state of his hat and coat, and also for dragging water in behind him, but he was still going to come in.

“Where is he?” Luke asked, his voice lower and deeper than he had intended it to be.

I have to hear what happened. I have to know the truth!

After his conversation with Rachel in the garden last night, he hadn't been certain what to think or feel. He loved her, and knowing that she loved him too was everything, but she was a woman torn between her feelings and her duty. The knowledge that he had been right all along in his suspicions of her somehow made it worse.

She frayed my trust in her, right to the very edge.

Every time she had denied trying to seduce Robert had been a lie. All of it!

“He’s in the music room, Your Grace,” the butler answered swiftly. “Forgive me for saying so, but you should know, the master is in a state.”

“Thank you. Perhaps some coffee would help him?” Luke suggested.

“Of course. I’ll bring some at once.”

As the butler hurried off, Luke marched through the house.

He knew what this was about and why Robert would be in such a state. The scandal sheet had been dropped on Luke’s card tray that morning. For the news to have graced the pages of a scandal sheet so quickly, the writer must have been at the ball the night before, and a print run must have happened early in the morning.

Everyone in London will know about what happened by midday.

Luke reached for the door to the music room and pushed it open, his harsh and fast movements slowing when he saw Robert’s position.

His friend was bent over the piano keys, his spine slumped. Robert was an excellent piano player normally, but at this moment, he played just one line of melody with his right hand, almost absent-mindedly. He gave the tune no commitment and frequently made mistakes, though he barely took notice and just carried on.

He was in a state of disarray. His jacket was nowhere to be seen, his shirt sleeves were messily pushed up to his elbows, and his cravat was absent too.

“Robert?” Luke called.

Robert looked up from the piano keys, breaking off his tune.

“You’re here. I wondered when you would come.” Robert attempted to sit straight, but it lasted for just a second before his spine slumped again. “Well? What do you have to say?”

“No. Don’t do that to me.” Luke marched through the room toward his friend, stopping on the other side of the piano. “I find the news in a scandal sheet and then come here to find you playing the piano as if your heart is on the very edge of despair? Let me hear the truth from you at once so I do not think the very worst.”

It could not have happened. I will not believe that Rachel and Robert did anything together. I cannot understand it!

“What the hell actually happened last night?”

CHAPTER 19



“That’s what I’d like to know.” Robert reached behind him to a table and picked up a whisky glass, knocking back half of the amber liquid.

“Woah, Robert?” Luke walked around the piano. “You hardly ever drink. You think drinking at this hour in the morning is a wise idea?”

“It feels it right now.” Robert tried to lift the glass to his lips again, but Luke took it away from him. “I was drinking that!”

“I noticed.” Luke returned the glass to the table when he noticed just how empty the decanter on it was. “How much have you drunk?”

“God knows.” Robert tried to play another line of music. Suddenly, the wrong notes made so much more sense.

“Come on, Robert. This isn’t helping anything.”

Robert flattened his hand on the piano and shrugged, his body swaying to the side. “What else will help?” he asked, his voice

strangely airy and light. “Nothing, Luke. I take it you read the scandal sheet, then. You saw... what happened.”

“I read the scandal sheet, yes.” Luke grabbed a nearby stool and dragged it forward, sitting down beside his friend. “But that doesn’t mean I know what happened.”

He couldn’t believe it, and he refused to. It didn’t seem to matter how angry and upset he had been at Rachel the night before. She had revealed that she loved him. He couldn’t believe her capable of ensnaring Robert so soon after their conversation on the terrace.

Before Robert could say anything more, the door opened, and the butler entered.

“I have brought that coffee, Your Grace,” the butler said with an encouraging smile.

“Ah, thank you, Phipps.”

Luke stood and moved the whisky off the nearby table, dragging it forward so Phipps could put the tray of coffee down. Robert looked at the coffee with a frown.

“I arranged for it to be brought. Looking at what you have already drunk, I think it a wise thing.”

Luke thanked Phipps one more time and waited for him to leave. The moment he was out of the door, Luke poured out two cups.

“Tell me, Robert. Tell me everything, please.”

“Very well.” Robert took the coffee cup and held it between his palms, staring down into it.

Luke could see at this close distance that his friend’s eyes were bloodshot. Clearly, Robert had barely slept at all.

“Last night, I was handed a note by one of the footmen at the ball. It was from Lord Brauncold. He wished for me to meet him in the library to discuss a matter of business.”

At once, Luke’s brow furrowed.

“I know, I know.” Robert held up his hand. “Naive of me to even consider discussing business at a time like that, but I genuinely believed it was true. I had also just had a conversation that had left me... shaken,” he whispered. “I needed to escape somewhere, so I went to the library.”

“And?” Luke leaned forward, impatient to hear more.

“As I waited, the door opened, and Lady Rachel walked in. That’s when things changed.” He grimaced. “She noticed we were alone and unchaperoned. She tried to escape, as did I.”

“She did?” Luke held onto that bit of information.

“She tried to force the window open, but her gown was too big for that to work. I tried the window, and she went for the door.”

She tried to escape. She didn't want to be there alone with him!

Luke nearly dropped his coffee cup. He turned it around in his hands, struggling to sit still.

“Then, her mother walked in, with her friends and Lady Alicia.” His voice had softened toward the end. “Lady Brauncold started demanding I show her daughter respect, make recompense for the scandal, as Lady Pipwick marched out, saying that the whole ballroom would hear of it soon enough.”

“Lady Pipwick,” Luke muttered darkly. “That is how the scandal sheets got hold of it so fast. She writes for the sheet, I am certain of it.”

“She didn't hold back with her words, did she?” Robert nodded at where he had dropped the scandal sheet into a box of sheet music nearby. “She was quite vivid in her descriptions.”

“It sounds like she was creative too,” Luke whispered, his hand tightening around his coffee cup, in danger of breaking it.

“I... I am going to have to propose, aren't I?” Robert asked, his voice quiet.

“What!?” Luke stood up abruptly. It shocked Robert so much that he stood tall, his jaw falling slack. “You’re going to propose to Rachel?”

“I have no choice, do I?” Robert looked distraught at the mere idea, shaking his head. “I do not wish to marry her. I feel nothing for her beyond respect, but the *ton* are vicious in their opinions. If I do not marry her, they will not forgive me or her for it.”

“No. No. You cannot do this.” Luke put down his coffee cup and started marching around the piano, pulling on his hair. “You cannot marry her.”

“Why not?”

“Because you cannot be trapped by a man who is forcing you to marry his daughter,” Luke said loudly, halting on the other side of the piano. “You have to deny him.”

“And to do so would be leaving Lady Rachel’s name to ruin. You know that as well as I do.”

“Yes, but...” Luke trailed off. He turned away and pulled on his hair.

He couldn’t stand this. He couldn’t bear the thought of Rachel marrying Robert. It disgusted him to his very core to think that Robert could end up kissing Rachel the way he had.

It is not the way things should be.

He turned sharply back to face Robert, realizing something he had said. The day before, Luke had suspected that Robert cared for Rachel, but Robert had just admitted he felt nothing more than respect for her.

“Please, do not marry her,” Luke pleaded in a solemn voice.

Robert’s head tilted to the side as he watched Luke. “There is more to this, isn’t it?” he asked. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“God’s wounds, this is not how I wished to have this conversation.” Luke walked around the piano once more, trying to return to his seat. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, finding he couldn’t meet his friend’s gaze. “I feared you cared for her, which is why I said nothing.”

“Lady Rachel? I respect her only, Luke. That is all.”

“Then I shall have to say something now.” Luke pushed his sleeves up, suddenly heated and nervous. “I care for Rachel. Deeply, Robert.” He looked up at last, meeting Robert’s gaze.

Robert slowly leaned back on his stool, his lips parting.

“You mean you...” He pointed at Luke, to which Luke nodded. “God’s blood. The tangled webs we weave, eh? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I feared you cared for her too. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you, not after all you’ve been through in love.”

“So, you were willing to sacrifice your own heart for mine?” Robert actually laughed in his tipsy state. He leaned on the piano keys, making them squeak out a garbled tune. “That’s taking our old analogy of knights a little far, don’t you think? Falling on your own sword like that.”

“You’re my dearest friend, I would not hurt you.”

“And yet, I could end up hurting *you*, when it’s the last thing I wish to do.” Robert shook his head and sighed deeply, bending his head forward. “I need more whisky.”

“No, you don’t.” Luke picked up the coffee pot and topped up Robert’s cup. “Drink this, instead.”

“I just can’t believe it’s come to this,” Robert muttered, lifting the coffee cup to his lips and taking a big gulp.

“It gets worse. It goes around in circles.” Luke tried to sip from his own cup, but he felt so ill, it wasn’t going down well. “Rachel told me yesterday that she loved me but that she was left without a choice.” He met his friend’s gaze. “I believe it is her father who has been pulling all the strings, in this regard. Take that note, for instance. He pulled you to the library quite easily, did he not?”

“He did. Oh!” Robert abruptly stiffened. “Now, Alicia’s rejection makes more sense.”

Luke blinked, certain he had heard his friend wrong for a second. When he realized his ears had not deceived him, he sat forward.

“What did you say? You said Lady Alicia? She rejected you?”

“Yes.” Robert looked down at his coffee cup. “You asked me yesterday if my affection for a lady was growing, and it is. For Alicia. She and I have had the chance to get to know one another over the last couple of weeks, and in truth, Luke, I have never met a woman like her.”

He smiled so genuinely that Luke’s heart thudded hard in his chest, happy for his friend.

“The affection I feel for her is stronger than I could possibly say. Yet, she kept retreating from me. There were moments where she seemed as caught up and as excited in my presence as I was in hers, but then, when we were around others, she’d retreat as if there was nothing there at all.”

“That explains why I didn’t notice there was anything between you,” Luke whispered in a rush. “She was hiding it?”

“Yes.” Robert nodded. “At the ball last night, I met her in the garden. I opened up to her, completely, and she said something about how she couldn’t go any further with this, for her cousin’s sake.”

“The twisted webs, indeed.” Luke stood once more, walking around the piano. He was restless, unable to stay still at all. “So, in all this time Rachel and I have been growing close, you

and Alicia have grown close too. The only thing that stops everything from being right is—”

“Scandal.”

That made Luke pause.

Yet, scandal can surely be avoided.

Luke shook his head. “We cannot let this happen. We cannot let the machinations of a man like Lord Brauncold control all four of us. That is mad.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Robert asked, his voice growing louder. “Forgive me, Luke. I know you not only like to protect me, but protect everyone around you, but what can you possibly do now? What can any of us do? Lord Brauncold has quite expertly backed me and his daughter into a corner. We have no choice.”

Luke nearly slipped as he walked. He caught the edge of the piano to keep himself standing as he looked at his friend.

“What is it?” Robert pressed.

“Just that wording. It was very like what Rachel said.”

We always have choices. We just have to find a way to make them.

Luke felt such anger bubbling in his stomach, there was no way he was going to let Lord Brauncold control him now.

“We have to do something.” He stood taller. “First things first, Robert, you are not to propose to Rachel.”

Robert slowly lowered the coffee cup from his lips. “You’re not making much sense, Luke. You confess to caring for this woman, but if I do as you ask now and refuse to offer her marriage, then she will be ruined.”

“She won’t be.”

“You’re still not making sense!”

“I have a plan, an idea that could work.” Luke walked around the piano and grabbed his friend’s shoulder. “Now, finish that coffee and go wash up. There are things you and I have to do if my plan is to work.”

“I wish I knew what the hell you are thinking, Gawain.”

The playful way Robert said the old knight’s name made Luke laugh.

“Trust me now above all other times. I think I can get you out of this mess.”

Luke clapped Robert on the shoulder another time and then helped him to stand. Yet, Robert swayed to the side and nearly

fell over. He would have toppled to the floor had Luke not caught him.

“Oomph. On second thoughts, you need to sober up before we do anything else.”



“Say that again.” Rachel leaned forward and took Alicia’s hand. It was two days after the ball, and at last, she had been allowed to be alone in Alicia’s company. “You care for Lord Ladeston?”

Tearfully, Alicia nodded. She leaned forward, raising a handkerchief to her face. “I know it should not have happened. I know that your father intends for the two of you to be together, I always knew it, and I knew too how much you felt the pressure of your parents’ expectations, that you wished to please them.” She looked up, with her eyes full of tears. “It’s why I tried to deny it for so long, even to myself.”

“Nonsense.” Rachel moved closer to her cousin on the chaise longue in her chamber and wrapped her arm around her shoulders. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. You care for a man, there is nothing wrong with that. Nothing.”

“Even when you and he were intended for one another?”

“Intended. What an odd word that is,” Rachel scoffed, shaking her head. “He and I are as ill-matched as chalk and cheese. Whereas you two...” She thought of all the times she had seen Alicia in Lord Ladeston’s company.

The two of them had always talked easier. There had been smiles between them, an ease that Rachel had never managed to feel with Lord Ladeston. Yet, clearly, Alicia had worked hard to keep the true depths of her feelings secret.

“I’m so sorry,” Alicia whispered.

“You have nothing to be sorry about.” Rachel held onto her cousin tighter. “I am the one who should apologize for my father’s behavior. He has damaged your chance of happiness as well as my own. I am so sorry for this, for all of it. This should never have happened.”

“What are we going to do, Rachel?” Alicia rested her head on Rachel’s shoulder, and Rachel laid her temple over her cousin’s head.

“I wish I knew.” Rachel’s voice grew quiet before they fell silent.

There is nothing we can do, surely?

Yet, even as Rachel thought the words, she made a plan in her head. If it came to Lord Ladeston proposing to her, she would not make him, Alicia, and herself miserable. No. She would stand at the altar and refuse Lord Ladeston there if it happened. Anything to keep the Marquess safe from her father’s control.

“What was that?” Alicia raised her head off Rachel’s shoulder.

“What?” Rachel asked distractedly, frowning into the distance.

The one comfort she had was that the Marquess hadn't called on her yet. Whilst he stayed absent, she could hold onto the hope that he wouldn't come, that, somehow, he would manage to evade her father's control, after all.

“It sounded like a carriage.” Alicia stood from the chaise longue and moved to the window. She peered out through the rain and then swallowed sharply. “It is the Marquess of Ladeston's carriage.”

“It is?” Rachel's voice was breathy as she sank down into the chaise longue. “He's come, then?”

No! Do not do this, My Lord.

“I cannot see his face,” Alicia said, pressing her face closer to the glass. “Not in this rain. God, when will this rain end?”

“It's the heavens crying their tears,” Rachel whispered. “I do not expect it to end anytime soon.”

Sounds followed within the house. Lord Ladeston must have reached the front door and had been let inside. Voices followed, and Rachel heard her father's voice. It was raised, and angry.

“He's acting his part again,” Rachel muttered. “My father will pretend indignation now, to push Lord Ladeston into a proposal.”

“This is so awful.” Alicia dropped down onto the windowsill.

“Agreed.” Rachel sighed. “If I refuse to come downstairs, do you think that will make it plain enough that I will not marry him?”

Alicia jerked her chin up. “Rachel? You have no intention of marrying Robert?”

Rachel softened when she heard Alicia use Lord Ladeston’s Christian name. It was a testament to the feelings between them.

“I have no intention of marrying him. I will refuse to,” Rachel asserted.

Alicia smiled, so suddenly that Rachel was warmed to see it.

A light tap at the door interrupted their conversation.

“Yes?” Rachel called.

The door opened, and the maid poked her head through. Pepper and Spot darted past her legs, and she yelped in surprise.

Rachel reached for her loving dogs as they approached her, fussing over them and stroking their ears. She had not been allowed to see them the last two days, and it had pained her.

She supposed it was her father's punishment for shouting at him.

"I have missed you both," Rachel whispered to her dogs as they stared up at her, their tails wagging.

"I am sorry, My Lady," the maid said from the doorway, "but your presence is required downstairs."

"Oh, dear," Rachel murmured. She had no wish to go, but Alicia stood.

"We have to go," Alicia said simply.

"Yes, you are right. No good comes from hiding forever, does it?" Rachel bent down and kissed her dogs on their heads, urging them to stay in the room. "Let us go."

It took a couple of attempts to keep the dogs in the chamber before she hurried out, with Alicia at her side. They went down the stairs together, heading toward the hallway.

From the front room, Rachel could hear her father's voice booming.

"This is hardly what I expected. I demand to know what is going on. At once."

He's truly acting the part now, is he not?

Rachel stepped into the room, with Alicia beside her. Her eyes darted toward the figure in the room. While she had expected to see Lord Ladeston, there was another.

It was Luke.

CHAPTER 20



Luke's hand tightened around his sodden top hat as he looked at Rachel across the room. She was shocked, plainly, for she stumbled as she came to a halt, her hands falling limply at her sides. Her cousin beside her seemed equally shocked, her hands raising to her lips.

“What is the meaning of this?” Lord Brauncold asked for what felt like the fifth time since Luke had arrived at the door and practically pushed his way into the house.

Lord Brauncold wanted him there so little that he'd even urged the butler not to take Luke's frock coat and hat, but to leave him holding onto the damp items.

“Yes, what is going on?” Lady Brauncold asked at her husband's side. She looked at her daughter, then at her niece, and back to her husband again, seeming quite lost and confused.

“I have come to deliver a message and ask something of my own.” Luke shifted his focus to Lord Brauncold, wanting to be certain that the Earl paid attention to his next words. “Lord Ladeston will not propose to your daughter.”

Silence followed these words. Lord Brauncold stepped forward, his whole body stiff, as his wife dropped down into the chair beside him. Apparently, her legs could no longer hold her up.

“Thank God,” Rachel whispered, breaking the silence.

Luke looked sharply at her.

She is relieved.

It was the proof he wanted before his eyes. He watched Rachel as her hands raised to her stomach and she let out a deep breath. She looked at her cousin, who lowered her hands to reveal the same smile that was on Rachel’s face.

“I do not understand.” Lord Brauncold found his voice. He moved toward Luke but stopped behind another chair, gripping the back so hard that his knuckles turned white. “Lord Ladeston would dishonor my daughter and then refuse to rescue her from scandal? What sort of gentleman is he?”

“Do not disparage my friend in front of me.” Luke’s voice darkened. “You and I both know that he is the best of men and has plenty of dignity and honor in him. It’s just that when faced with ruses and manipulation, he will not be made a victim to them. Rest assured, I have made certain of that.” He held Lord Brauncold’s gaze, wanting him to know that he knew everything of what he had planned.

“But what about my daughter?” Lord Brauncold asked in sudden outrage. “Her name will be ruined, her reputation—all

of it. How will she marry now if Lord Ladeston does not marry her?"

"I have another solution for that." Luke turned his focus on Rachel. She stood very still, her eyes on him and her hands still resting on her stomach as her chest rose and fell with her quick breaths. "I have come to ask for her hand, instead."

Rachel abruptly smiled. The transformation was so sudden that Luke felt a quivering in his stomach, as if a thousand moths danced beneath his skin. She stepped toward him, clearly intent on crossing the room to reach him. He took a step forward too, shifting his top hat to one hand and holding it down at his side, yet before she could reach him, Lord Brauncold stepped between them.

He stood in front of his daughter and then waved a hand at her, urging her back.

"I cannot permit this," he boomed. "Rachel, for God's sake, get out of this room."

"What?" Rachel murmured in surprise, trying to lean around her father and look at Luke again.

Luke sighed deeply. He knew this meeting wouldn't be easy, though he didn't understand why the Earl had put such a focus on his daughter marrying Robert more than any other. Now, he had to find out everything.

"You prevent her from coming to me, Lord Brauncold. Why is that?" Luke asked, his voice sharp. "Surely you can see in

your daughter's reaction that she does not reject the offer.”

“I do not reject it. I wish to speak. Father, step aside, please.” Rachel tried to move around the Earl once again, but he gripped her wrist and towed her back.

Luke stood taller, his spine feeling as rigid as a pole when he witnessed the way the Earl roughly handled his daughter. It was as if she wasn't a woman at all, not flesh and blood, but an ornament to toy with at his own wish.

“Release her,” Luke demanded.

Lord Brauncold gave no sign of listening at all. To Luke's horror, Lady Brauncold watched on with a frown, but she said nothing and made no step to interrupt the way her husband manhandled her daughter.

This is sickening to watch.

“I cannot allow this.” Lord Brauncold pushed Rachel behind him, turning back to face Luke. “I expect Lord Ladeston to come and do his duty. He *will* marry her.”

“Her reputation could be saved by marrying anyone at all at this moment. You know this as well as I do. So, I must ask, why reject my offer? Hmm?”

Luke took a step forward. Lord Brauncold actually moved back, as though intimidated by Luke's superior height.

“I am a duke, of a higher rank than a marquess. I would have thought any father so eager to climb the greasy pole of the *ton* would have jumped at the chance of a duke proposing to his daughter.”

“It is not that—” Lord Brauncold shook his head.

“Ah, then allow me to guess.” Luke dropped his top hat to the chair nearby, no longer caring if he left wet stains in this room. He caught sight of Lady Brauncold flinching as his hat landed on the cushion. To his disgust, he realized she had responded more to that than to her husband roughly grasping her daughter’s wrist. “Is it because my investments are different? That I do not have a business in shipping as my friend does?”

“Well...” Lord Brauncold trailed off. He shifted his weight so much between his feet, nervously, that his jowls shook.

“It is your own business too, is it not?” Luke continued. “You are in shipping. Did you hope to control your competitor by marrying your daughter off to him? Was that the aim?”

“You will leave my house. At once!” Lord Brauncold refused to answer. He walked around Rachel and marched to the door, flinging it open.

Rachel took the opportunity to cross the room toward Luke.

“Rachel!” Lord Brauncold barked.

Luke took her hand as she approached him and held it tightly between his own.

“Step back from him. Now. You will listen to me, child. You will listen and do as I say,” Lord Brauncold demanded, yet the cries seemed futile now, more like the desperate pleas of a toddler who knew he was not being listened to. “Step away from him.”

Rachel looked at Luke, a small smile on her lips, one of hope.

“Maybe Lord Ladeston will not marry her, but I will find another businessman who will. Someone *will* take her.”

“All of this for manipulation of capital, eh?” Luke sneered. “You disgust me. To think I am trying to make you my father-in-law... I shudder at the thought, yet it cannot be helped.”

Rachel’s smile faltered, and her hand fell limp in his. Luke realized that she must have presumed from these words that he was only proposing to save her name, and nothing more.

Oh, Rachel, there is so much I’d say to you now if I was free to do so.

“I will find someone else to marry her. I shall.” Lord Brauncold’s voice turned colder.

“I will not marry someone you choose.” Rachel flicked her head around. At the sharpness of the movement, Lord Brauncold fell still. “Any other man you would drag me to the

altar to meet, I would refuse. I'll deny the vows openly before God, the church, and all the congregation. You cannot make me marry a man I do not love, Father. Not now. Not after all you have done."

"What has happened to you—" Lord Brauncold marched toward her, but Luke turned himself and Rachel around, stopping Lord Brauncold from reaching her.

"It was all my father's idea," Rachel said in a rush. "You were right from the very beginning, about everything, except one thing. I did not want to do it." She shook her head. "What happened at the ball was not my doing. My mother told me my father wished to speak to me in the library, and I went, following his orders, as I shamefully have so often done."

She looked down between them, looking truly ashamed of her actions. "Lord Ladeston was there. He'd received a note from my father, asking him to meet there too."

"Be quiet, Rachel," Lady Brauncold pleaded, though it was of little use.

To Luke's relief, Rachel just kept speaking.

"He orchestrated it all," Rachel continued. "I had no hand in it. Please, believe me. I tried to escape the room, but I did not have the time."

"Rachel, I know."

Luke held her hand tighter. The certainty in his mind before was simply set in concrete now with her words. By her choosing to explain this to him, it was made plain to him that she was choosing *him*. She didn't want any more lies or ruses between them. Her decision to be honest showed what she truly felt.

"I suspected as much, but thank you for telling me."

"I wanted no part in it," she whispered.

Luke shifted the hold he had on her hand, entwining their fingers together.

"Rachel!" Lord Brauncold snapped.

Rachel flinched, but she didn't pull back from Luke.

The more Luke watched her, the more he realized that she had changed before him. In his eyes, she'd always had strength, from the first night he had met her, but perhaps that strength was something that had not always been as visible as it was now, especially when it came to her parents. Now, she was turning her back on their demands and their expectations.

She is making that choice.

"Let me make myself plain, Lord Brauncold." Luke winked, for Rachel's eyes only to see, then he angled himself to look at her father. "You will give your daughter's hand to me, and

your blessing, or the whole *ton* will learn of your manipulative ways and how you tried to con Robert into marriage.”

Lord Brauncold’s hands shook at his sides. He said nothing, his eyes darting between Luke and Rachel.

“Well?” Luke prompted sharply. “If you doubt my threat, then I can make it stronger. The word of a duke is heavily trusted and readily believed. I’m not a man to pull rank, but I happily will on this occasion. I shall make sure that everyone I meet, everyone I have ever known, will learn of your behavior. Believe me, the word of a duke will always be taken over that of an earl.”

The threat hung in the air for a moment, the silence only disturbed by the heavy breaths of those around him.

“Well, Lord Brauncold? Is there anything you wish to say to me now?”

“I...” Lord Brauncold looked at his wife. She said nothing, and she merely stared back at him listlessly. “You leave me no choice,” he murmured. “You may have her.” He waved a hand dismissively toward Rachel as if he was handing over a piece of cloth rather than a woman. “Now, leave my house. Give me that, at least.”

“As you wish.” Luke bowed his head and tightened his hold on Rachel’s hand, turning to whisper in her ear, “Come with me.”

He towed her from the room.

“Where are you taking her?” Lady Brauncold called in a sudden panic.

“To the garden to talk.”

“In the rain!?”

“Well, I am no longer welcome in the house, so I must choose somewhere, Lady Brauncold.”

Luke didn't wait around to talk anymore but led Rachel through the hallway and toward the front door. When they reached it, the butler appeared with a spencer that he thrust toward Rachel. Luke thanked him for his quick thinking and stepped outside, with Rachel following behind him.

“Luke? Luke!” she called, hurrying to catch up with him.

She called me by my name.

It made Luke's heart thud harder in his chest.

He didn't let up his quick pace until they were hidden between the formal borders of the garden, far away from the windows, where they could not be seen by her mother and father anymore.

“Luke?” Rachel called.

He turned back to face her, catching her waist as she nearly collided with him.

“I... I do not understand,” she said quickly, shaking her head. “First, let me say this. I’m so sorry. Oh, God, I would not blame you for hating me now. Truly, I would not. I am sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen.” The words escaped her fast, and she barely took a breath at all between the sentences.

“Rachel—”

“I never wanted this to happen like this. Please, believe me. I cannot believe you’d be willing to marry me now, just to save your friend from a marriage he did not want. The kindness in you knows no bounds, but I do not want to go into a marriage with you despising me. Please, allow me to explain myself better to you.”

“Rachel—” Luke tried to interrupt her again, but she was in such full flow that he couldn’t get a word in.

“I told my parents the night of the ball that I would not marry Lord Ladeston, but they did not listen. They would never listen. Not for one second. Oh, please, Luke, please, I could not bear it if you hate me now.”

“Rachel!” he said louder this time.

Rachel looked him in the eye, only momentarily pausing. When her lips parted, as if more words were about to come out, Luke took advantage of the pause.

He bent down toward her, pressing his lips to hers. The sudden kiss clearly startled her. She wobbled on her feet, her hands going to his biceps and holding on tightly. His hands softened around her waist, bringing her toward him, so she was nestled safely against his body.

When he pulled back, his whole body was tingling with excitement. The rain that fell down on them did nothing to dampen his spirits or his excitement.

“Do you say all of this now because you believe that I am doing this purely for Robert’s sake?”

She nodded, pressing her lips together. Her gaze darted down to his lips, as she clearly dwelled on thoughts of their kiss.

“Then rest assured.” Luke rested his forehead against hers. “I am asking you to marry me because, as you once said to me, my heart is yours. So completely it is, Rachel. The mere thought of you marrying Robert drives me mad.”

“It does?” A smile appeared on her lips, and her eyes filled with tears.

“No crying now.”

“These are happy tears!” she said in a rush. “You wish to marry me? Truly?”

“I do. If you will have me.” Luke realized he hadn’t actually heard a firm *yes* from her. He waited for it now, leaning back and raising her hand between them. He kissed the back of it while holding her gaze. “Marry me, Rachel?”

“Yes,” she answered without hesitation. “Yes, I will marry you.”

“Thank God for that.” He moved his lips to hers, stealing another kiss.

As her hands found his chest, he clung to her, wanting nothing more than to keep this moment going for as long as possible.

When she did pull back, he groaned aloud, not wanting it to end. She smiled up at him before it faltered.

“Do you forgive me? For everything that I did?” she whispered.

“Allow me to say something on that note. Something you said the other night at the ball has stayed with me.” Luke sighed deeply, replaying her words in his mind. “You were right when you pointed out that I have more freedom than you ever did. I didn’t have to abide by my father’s will, not in the fashion that you have done. What is more, I always had my father’s love. I never needed to strive for it. Whereas you, you were so desperate for approval that you were doing anything to have it.”

She closed her eyes, tilting her chin down.

“No, Rachel. That is no bad thing, believe me.” He moved his lips to her temple and kissed it briefly. “It’s a testament to your big heart. It is why you have nothing to apologize for to me, nothing at all. I am only sorry that you have been through all you have been through.”

“I cannot believe this,” she whispered, her hands raising up his chest, her fingers curling around the edges of his waistcoat. “You forgive me, and you want to marry me? I feel afraid that I shall wake from this dream at any moment. It cannot be true.”

“Ha! It is no dream.” He bent down toward her. “All is happening, Rachel, and soon enough, you and I will be wed. We’ll get you out of this house, and we can start a new life together, one where I make this promise to you. You will never have to strive or prove you are worthy of being loved. I love you, already.”

“Oh, Luke.” She reached up toward him, pressing her lips to his.

Luke wasn’t sure how long he stood there in the rain, kissing Rachel, but wild horses couldn’t have dragged him away.

EPILOGUE



One Month Later

“**W**hat do you think?” Luke stepped from behind the folding screen, turning in a circle.

“I think—” Robert paused and cocked his head to the side. “I think you are missing something.”

“What is it? What have I forgotten?” Luke turned in a mad circle, looking down at the rich dark green suit and the embroidered waistcoat.

Rachel had since told him how fond she was of his eyes and the green hue. She had complimented him so many times when he had worn green that he couldn't help choosing this color for his suit today.

What else would I wear?

He hurried to the mirror beside Robert, aware that his friend was smiling as he checked the suit.

“What have I forgotten?” Luke asked again in panic.

“The boutonniere.” Robert held up a small white flower in triumph. “There, put that in your buttonhole, and all will be sorted.”

“Thank you.” Luke sighed with relief and tucked the flower into the hole in his lapel. “Do you have the rings?”

“I do.” Robert patted the pocket of his tailcoat as he appeared behind Luke in the reflection of the looking glass. “I have to do my duty as best man, do I not? Soon enough, you’ll be doing the same thing for me.”

Luke smiled as he adjusted his cravat for what felt like the fourth time. He wanted everything to be perfect. Today, Rachel would be truly happy, and he didn’t want anything to mar that feeling.

“Not long now,” Luke reminded his friend. “Two weeks, is it not, until you and Alicia wed?”

“It is.” Robert practically bounced on his toes with excitement. “Her uncle was not best pleased when he first found out.”

“Ha! I imagine not.” Luke laughed raucously. He could picture very well what the Earl’s reaction had been when he had discovered that Robert was actually going to marry Alicia. “Yet, her parents are happy, are they not?”

“They are. They’re lovely people too.” Robert smiled.

After Robert had proposed to Alicia and she had accepted, the two had taken a trip down to the coast, where Alicia's parents were spending the summer at their country estate. There, Robert had asked for her father's blessing, which had been given without hesitation when they had seen how happy their daughter was.

"From what I hear from Rachel, Alicia has not stopped smiling since," Luke said, trying to leave his cravat alone as he stepped back.

"She has not." Robert smiled too. "All the arrangements are in place. Alicia is so excited that it feels as if there is nothing left to sort."

"I can well imagine that." Luke laughed with him.

The arrangements for his own wedding had come together fast, indeed. With the rumors swirling about Rachel and Robert, Luke had intercepted the news fast.

He'd used all his contacts in the *ton*, even those in the scandal sheets, to have new stories published. They cast doubt on the original tale of Rachel and Robert being seen together, going as far as to say that the original source of the story, Lady Pipwick, had invented the tale.

When Luke's and Rachel's betrothal had been announced, there had initially been whispers, but they had quickly died down. Soon enough, everyone had assumed the original story was, indeed, a lie or some awful mistake.

“Well? Are you ready?” Robert asked, tapping Luke on the shoulder. “You can stop fidgeting so much with that cravat now. Everything is perfect.”

“Thank you. Yes, I am ready.”

Luke followed Robert out of the room and crossed through his house. Hurrying downstairs, he found his servants all waiting excitedly in the hall. They offered applause and well wishes. Luke thanked them for their kindness and hurried out of the house, taking the carriage that awaited him on the drive with Robert.

They drove toward the chapel at the far end of the garden. It was tradition to marry in the bride’s parish, but when Luke had first suggested this to Rachel, he’d seen a frown appear abruptly on her face.

It transpired that Rachel was keen to turn her back on her old life and her old home. There was little she wanted to hold onto from her past, and marrying in that church felt strange, she had said. She wanted to feel as if she was becoming part of Luke’s family. To have married on her father’s estate would have felt too much like Luke was being claimed by the Nightingales. She wished to protect him from that.

Luke smiled as he sat back in the carriage, thinking of the very words she had said to him. Since their betrothal, clearly, he was not the only protective one out of the two of them. She cared for him as much as he cared for her.

When they reached the chapel, Luke hurried down first, with Robert following. They walked into the church to find it was

full already, with the guests spread about the pews.

Luke took up his place at the altar and exchanged a few words with the vicar, while Robert shared a few words with Alicia in the front pew. Sat a few feet away from Alicia, and sending her cold looks, was Lady Brauncold.

Luke settled his gaze on the woman for a few minutes, finding her as much a puzzle as he always had. One thing he was certain of at this moment was that she did not see her daughter as many mothers saw their daughters. She didn't so much look at Rachel with love as something more possessive.

I wonder if she ever truly loved Rachel at all, or if she has become this way because of her husband's influence.

Luke rather feared it was a question he would never have an answer to. He once more turned to face the vicar, who assured him that everything was ready for the ceremony, and they would shortly begin.

“Your father would be proud, indeed, Your Grace.” The vicar’s sudden words made Luke flinch.

“I beg your pardon?” Luke murmured.

The vicar was an old man, with a shock of white hair and wrinkled hands that clutched the bible in front of him. He had been vicar here even when Luke’s late father had been alive.

“To see you so happy.” The vicar nodded at Luke with a great smile on his lips. “When he came here to pray, he often talked about his fears for you, how he worried that your keenness to put everyone else before you might sacrifice your own happiness someday. I’m delighted to see you so happy, Your Grace. Delighted, indeed.”

Luke matched his smile, touched by the words. “Thank you. That is kind of you to say.”

The organ music struck up, and Luke cleared his throat, facing forward as Robert rushed to his side.

“Nearly missed it, eh?” Luke teased his friend, who laughed.

“I wouldn’t miss this,” Robert assured him. “Here she comes.”

Luke turned to face the church door as it opened. The first sight he had was of Lord Brauncold, that heavy glare and the dissatisfied flattening of his lips together. Luke could have laughed at the man’s sour expression. It was the same look that Lord Brauncold had worn ever since the day he had begrudgingly agreed to give Luke Rachel’s hand.

As Lord Brauncold stepped forward, he offered his hand to Rachel, and she took his arm. Luke softened the moment he saw her.

She wore a soft peach-hued gown, exquisitely made and cinched high at the waist before it fell to the floor in soft waves. The hem of the gown was embroidered with lace, as

well as the short sleeves of the dress. Around her throat was a gift that Luke had given her just the week before.

The short silver chain finished at the base of her throat with a locket. In the locket were two miniature portraits of them that Luke had commissioned. He was in one frame, and she was in the other.

As Rachel's eyes met his, she smiled fully, looking so giddy with excitement that he had to hold himself back from running toward her and snatching her out of her father's hands. Her brown hair was curled beautifully at the back of her head, and her lips were colored pink as she walked rather quickly toward him, perhaps a little fast for the music.

As she and her father reached Luke, Lord Brauncold passed her hand into Luke's. Luke looked down at her hand, recognizing the lace gloves that he had gifted her. It was a sweet touch, indeed, one of true sentiment.

Lord Brauncold said nothing, but walked quickly away, moving to join his wife in the pews. Rachel sighed contently as he left, allowing Luke to escort her up to the altar beside him.

"By any chance," Luke whispered to her under the cover of the organ music, "do you feel freer now that he has released you?"

"You have no idea how much," Rachel whispered back. "I am happier than I can say."

“Thank God for that.” Luke glanced around. Seeing that they were so ahead of the organ music, he took the opportunity to reveal something more to her, something he knew would bring her comfort. “I have found the perfect business partner for your father.”

“You are not trying to help him, surely?” she pleaded. “You owe him nothing, in that regard.”

“I know.” Luke smiled victoriously. “The business partner I am thinking of is a distant cousin of mine. He is good in business, strict, and dare I say it, controlling. He will be the perfect business partner for your father in that he will be able to keep an eye on him and watch his endeavors. Trust me, he will make sure your father doesn’t step out of line again.”

“You have thought of everything, have you not?” she murmured softly.

“Almost.” He lifted her hand and kissed the back of it through her lace gloves. “I like the touch you thought of, by the way.” He pointedly glanced at the gloves, seeing her bite her lower lip.

It was a temptation, making him think of the few kisses they had managed to steal this last month, away from the watchful eyes of their chaperones.

“I knew there were no other gloves I’d wish to wear today,” she confessed. “When I wear these, I feel truly happy.”

“I am glad.”

The organ music faded, and the vicar stepped forward, holding his hands in the air. The congregation started to quieten.

“Oh, I have one other surprise for you later, by the way,” Luke added hastily.

“What surprise?”

Yet, Rachel couldn't ask any more, as the vicar's voice boomed.

“Dearly beloved. We are gathered here in the sight of God, to join together this man, and this woman—” The vicar nodded at the pair of them. “In Holy matrimony. I have had the great privilege of being vicar here for many years, and I am delighted to see that the young Duke of Hurbex has found his Duchess.”

The vicar smiled at Rachel, his expression one of genuine happiness. “I am sure you will all join me now as we celebrate their union and wish them luck on their journey in life together. Now, let us pray.”

As the vicar began the first prayer, Luke didn't bow his head completely. Instead, he subtly angled his head to the side so he could look at Rachel. She was so excited that she could not bow her head either. Instead, their eyes met across their hands, which were clutched together.

The vicar is right. I have, indeed, found my Duchess.



“Please welcome Luke Hayward, the Duke of Hurbex, and his wife, Rachel Hayward, the Duchess of Hurbex!” As the vicar finished the words, the whole congregation erupted in applause.

Rachel laughed at the sudden sound as she turned to face Luke. The ceremony had passed so quickly for her. She had been so excited, wanting to hold onto each moment that had flown by.

She knew, however, that there were certain moments of the ceremony that she would remember forever. The moment they had signed the register, with Luke’s hand resting softly on her shoulder, that would certainly stay with her. The moment that he had slipped the wedding ring on her finger as well, saying his vows as he held her gaze.

She felt the strength of his commitment to her and prayed that he had felt the same when she had said her vows.

“Kiss!” a shout came up from somewhere near the back of the chapel.

Many laughed, and others seconded the chant. Rachel laughed as Luke turned to face her. Without hesitation, he moved his lips to hers, kissing her softly.

She sank into that kiss, feeling the same rush she always felt whenever Luke came near. As they moved back from one another, they both smiled ridiculously.

“Shall we, wife?” Luke offered his arm to her.

Wife. I am his wife now!

“We shall.” Rachel threaded her arm through his and let him escort her down the steps before the altar and then down the aisle.

Many people reached forward to congratulate Rachel. The person who grabbed her arm more than any other was Alicia.

“I am so happy for you, Cousin,” Alicia whispered. “To see you so happy.” She laid a hand on Rachel’s cheek. “It’s the way you should always be.”

“Thank you, Alicia. You are so kind.”

As Rachel released her cousin and walked on, she glanced back, looking at her mother and father. They sat in the pews, politely clapping, but did not stand to congratulate her.

She looked ahead again, just as Luke caught sight of whom she had been staring at.

“I am sorry,” he whispered to her. “About them.”

“Do not worry.” Rachel smiled, feeling strangely free of her parents. “I am looking forward to a new life now, one without needing to please them all the time.”

“Thank God for that.” Luke lifted her hand and kissed the back of it. “Come. I have that other surprise for you now.”

Excitedly, Rachel hurried with him out of the church. In the churchyard, they were suddenly accosted by petals. They both stopped and laughed as the tenants from Luke’s estate threw petals into the air and wished them well.

Rachel thanked them for their kindness as they walked down the church path. She had seen in the last few weeks that Luke took his responsibilities to his tenants as seriously as he took everything he cared about in life. He protected them and looked after them well. As a testament to what a good landlord he was, the tenants that had all gathered were smiling greatly, throwing a myriad of flower petals into the air.

As they reached the end of the path, an open-top phaeton carriage awaited them. A bark sounded, and Rachel stepped forward, suddenly realizing what her surprise was.

They stepped through the gate as the footman opened the door of the carriage. Inside were Pepper and Spot. Each of the greyhounds had their collars wrapped in white bows, to celebrate the occasion. Both hurried toward her, and the footman scrambled to hold them back, clearly not wanting them to jump up and get their—potentially—muddy paws on her gown.

“Pepper! Spot!” Rachel called to them happily. “You had them brought here?” she whispered to Luke, who smiled at her.

Since her betrothal to Luke, her father had tried to separate her from her dogs as much as he could. She knew what her father had tried to do. It had been a petty attempt to punish her for defying him. Yet, that control ended today.

“From now on, you do not have to be separated from them again,” Luke reassured her. “They can be in the house with us, anywhere you like. Trust me.” He winked at her. “I’ve seen how happy they make you.”

“And you,” she reminded him. “They have become quite attached to you.”

“As I said once before, they have good judgment of character.”

Rachel laughed with him as she stepped up into the carriage, taking the collars from the footman and assuring him that she had them. She sat down on the bench and stroked the dogs, urging them to be calm in the carriage. Their tails wagged so much that they kept thumping against the bench across from her.

Luke stepped up behind her and closed the door.

“Luke? Luke!” a voice called as Luke sat down beside his wife, wrapping his arm around her. Rachel leaned into him, pointing through the crowd that had gathered around the carriage at the man hurrying toward them.

It was Robert. He reached up to Luke in the carriage to shake his hand.

“I haven’t had the chance to congratulate you properly yet,” Robert said with eagerness. “I am heartily glad for you both.” He nodded at their faces. “May you be as happy as you always are now, Gawain.”

Luke laughed warmly at the nickname, and Rachel leaned into him further. She couldn’t think of a better name for him. He went out of his way to protect them all as much as he could.

“May you be too, my friend. See you at the breakfast.” Luke barely finished the words before the carriage jolted forward.

The dogs barked in surprise, then jumped up on the bench opposite them, laying across one another on the cushions.

Rachel reached for Luke’s hand and entwined their fingers together, just as the carriage turned at the end of the road, masking them from the view of the congregation that was still gathered around the church.

“Free, at last,” Rachel whispered in Luke’s ear. “To think all of this happened because I followed the wrong man out of the masquerade ball that night.” Her teasing made him laugh warmly.

“Thank God you did, Rachel. Who knew you were actually foreshadowing the truth that night, eh? That your heart would be mine, after all?”

As Luke leaned toward her for another kiss, she sank into his touch.

He is right. My heart is his, completely.

The End?

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EXTENDED EPILOGUE



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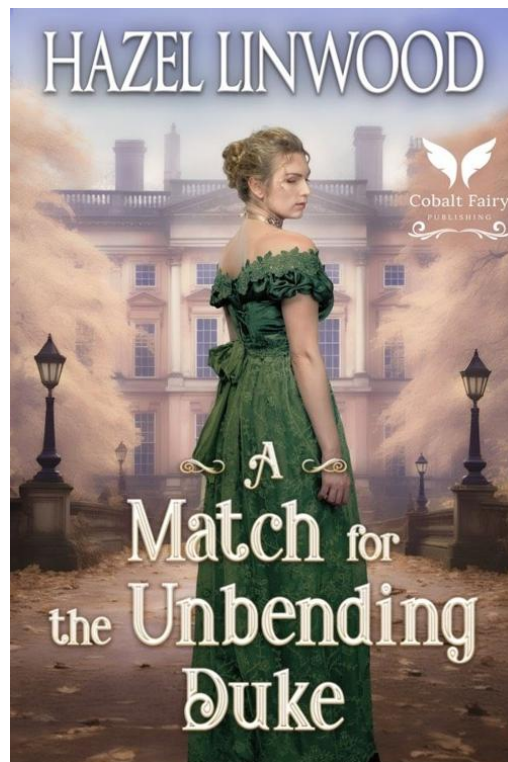
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PREVIEW: A MATCH FOR THE UNBENDING DUKE



Turn to the next page to read the first chapter of “*A Match for the Unbending Duke*” one of my best stories so far!



CHAPTER ONE



“**Y**our Grace?”

Selina Kendal stood by the door she had just opened, her gaze traveling the room. Tall bookshelves, and freshly cleaned floors, but neither hide nor hair of her sponsor, Her Grace, The Dowager Duchess of Wynten.

Selina withdrew from the room and shut the door behind her, a slight frown of confusion furrowing her brow. Granted, the Brigpool Estate was by no means small, but she had been searching for the Dowager Duchess all over already.

A warm draft blew her way as she continued down the hallway and she raised her slender, gloved hand to fan at her neck. *It is rather unusually warm today...* The heat seemed to be permeating the walls and floors.

A sound up ahead pulled her thoughts from the temperature and she looked to find a young, brunette maid leaving a room with a duster, mopping cloth, and a bucket. It seemed she was cleaning the rooms one by one, door after door.

Selina hurried her footsteps to meet her. “Oh, pardon me, have you seen Her Grace come this way?”

The maid looked up from opening the door to the next room down the hallway. “Indeed, Miss Knight, Her Grace has only just left the library perhaps an hour ago. She went down to the storage rooms after that.”

“Thank you.” Selina smiled away her slight discomfort at the way she was addressed.

She lived so well under the gracious care of the Dowager Duchess that she often relaxed, forgetting that she had many secrets. That was, of course, until moments like these when she was called by the name she had given when she arrived on the estate.

Try as she might not to get too comfortable in her new environment, she constantly had to remind herself that this was not her home and that the truth could one day be discovered. She could only hope that day did not come with its dangers.

Selina marched down to the cellars and into the store room, her mind wandering as to what the Dowager Duchess could possibly want in there, although there was no telling with her. She pushed open the doors, trying but failing to maintain her composure at the surprising sight of the Dowager Duchess climbing a stool to reach up.

“Your Grace?” she called out in alarm, her voice going an octave higher at the sight of her teetering dangerously on a stool. The Dowager Duchess, Grace Reid, was an old graying lady of three and seventy, known for her eccentric personality and youthfulness despite her age.

Her kind eyes and easy smile were the first to draw Selina in the night she met her. It had not taken much for her to trust the woman and she could see that the Dowager Duchess trusted her in return.

The two had grown quite close and her eccentricities often meant Selina had to watch over her and make sure she did not come to harm while having the utmost fun.

“Oh, there you are, my dear. Be a darling and help me with this,” she said, affecting her beautiful smile. Selina snapped out of her shock and to attention, hurrying to her. She had gotten used to not knowing what to expect from the old lady and now was no exception.

She quickly and carefully helped her down before getting on the stool herself, careful not to step on her gown. She looked up the shelf and turned around, clueless as to what she was supposed to be helping with.

“And what, pray tell, are you doing?”

“Oh, you see, my dear. I found this new recipe that requires, of all things, raw meat. Would you believe it?” she asked Selina, who wore an incredulous expression as the Dowager Duchess laughed as though she could not believe the absurdity of the situation. Selina sighed.

The woman had been quick to climb a stool so she clearly did not think it absurd enough. Selina also wondered why she had not just told the cook to get the meats for her instead of trying to do it herself.

“Raw meat is said to be good for the skin so I was planning to try some out,” she explained before Selina could question her. Selina narrowed her eyes at her. Her Grace had always been like this since the first week she got here.

She fought off a smile as she recalled that she had found the woman sprinkling gold dust into a pot of water to boil for tea on the first week.

The dowager loved to read but it always led her to be interested in more questionable activities which she then proceeded to try out. Nothing was too risky for her as long as she had it in hand or could purchase it easily.

“Your Grace,” Selina began in a tone that belied her disapproval of the idea. “I must express my concern for-” she was cut off by the older woman before she could express her disapproval.

“Oh please, you keep doing that.” The older lady waved her hands in circles as though disappointed in Selina’s constant need to shut down her many terrible ideas.

“And how many times do I have to remind you? It’s Grace, dear, just Grace. I believe we are close enough for such informality now, do you not?” she asked.

This was another thing that was unconventional about the dowager, the fact that she continued to insist, after the first two months, that Selina begin to call her by her Christian name, although Selina did not think she would ever be able to do so.

So far, she had been the dowager's companion for the past two years at the Brigpool Estate. In no way or form, would it be proper for her to do so, and it was even more improper for her to do that, considering she was posing as the daughter of a baronet which was way lower in station than the Dowager Duchess. If anyone were to hear of it, it would be a scandal, which was the last thing she wanted since it would draw attention to her.

“And once again, Your Grace,” Selina began. She let out an exasperated breath and placed her hands on her hips with a hint of drama. “I will have to decline your invitation to do so. I say, the title, Your Grace, is the closest to your name you shall ever get from me.”

The old lady scoffed at that, rolling her eyes at her and causing Selina to laugh. They had been over this topic countless times and on every occasion, Selina had refused, repeating the same words she had just uttered.

She knew the old lady had come to terms with the fact that she would never hear her name spoken from Selina's lips... Still, she was not one to give up so easily, not even when fighting a battle she had clearly lost before it even began.

Selina so enjoyed the banter with the dowager. She was glad to have found a friend in her and despite how much she chastised the older woman, she delighted in their conversations almost as much as she did her eccentricities.

She would miss adventures like this when it was time to leave as she knew the day would soon come when she needed to go her way. At that time, she would take the memories she had with the dowager, treasuring them all the days of her life. Still, for now, she was content to laugh and roll her eyes at the woman's persistence.

Selina eyed the woman fondly before turning around on the stool to retrieve the raw piece of meat the old lady was clearly still interested in. Just as her hands reached to grab the meat, Selina heard footsteps running quickly and heavily down the steps towards their direction.

She dropped her hands to the side, her brows furrowing as she waited for whoever it was to reach them. The Dowager Duchess had, just like her, turned towards the door, her face had a void expression as she also waited for the person to appear.

The door opened to admit one of the servants working on the estate. She was breathing heavily, her chest heaving as though a fox had just chased her skirts.

“Oh, do calm down, little one. Whatever seems to be the matter? What frightens you so?” the Dowager Duchess asked the servant, a look of concern on her face as she approached the young girl, her eyes taking her in to search for any injuries she might have sustained in a bid to reach them.

“Fire! There’s a fire, Your Grace,” she managed to get out after she had caught her breath for a little bit. Her hand lifted to point toward the fire although the ladies could not pinpoint the general location and the young girl was not in any shape to offer them a better description. Not that Selina thought they had the time for that.

“A fire, you say?” the dowager asked. She looked at Selina who had a frown on her face and had begun to step down from the stool. She was worried. Her mind recalled how warm it had been while she had been on the hunt for Her Grace. Had the fire been the reason for that?

No, she discarded the notion. Surely, it had not been burning for so long already. Someone would have noticed it and put it out immediately. Selina did not want to think about the damage that might have occurred if it really had been burning and left unattended for so long already.

She hurriedly walked out of the room, almost breaking into a run the moment her feet landed on solid ground, but she slowed to allow the older woman to keep up with her as she began to walk up the stairs.

“Oh my goodness,” she exclaimed, her hands flying to her chest in shock when she saw the thick cloud of smoke. “I passed through here just a few minutes ago and it was not smoked up like this.”

She was struggling to believe how fast this had happened. Surely, she had not been down in the cellar with the dowager for so long.

“They had to open the doors and windows. They have been trying to fan it down and stop it with water but nothing seems to be working because the fire was discovered way too late,” the young maid explained. The open doors and windows would explain the sudden smoke in the hallway.

“Oh dear!” the Dowager Duchess exclaimed, clutching at her neckpiece. Selina turned to her when she heard the tremble in her voice. It was strange to hear as nothing seemed to ever be able to bring the older woman down from the constant high she usually was on.

But, of course, she would be affected. This was her home and she had made so many memories here. Hearing that it was most likely going to be damaged because a fire seemed to have gone out of control and did not appear to be stopping any time soon must have been upsetting for her.

Selina looked at her worriedly when the woman held her fan over her face. She quickly sprang into action, ushering her and the young maid out of the estate into the open air. The dowager was an older woman and breathing in heavily polluted air could not be any good for her.

She breathed in heavily as she sat the woman on a small stool she had managed to retrieve on their way out the door. She stood beside her, resting her hand on her shoulder as they watched the servants rush in and out, actively trying to extinguish the fire.

This is really bad... Selina could see the smoke coming out of many windows which meant that it had spread even more since they ran out of the house. She could only hope that none of them would get hurt or worse as they fought against the fire.

Selina did not know how long they remained outside, watching the smoke rise from open windows before one of the servants approached them. His face was blackened in various areas by soot from the fire, and he had his hand over his nose still as he coughed. He stopped a few inches away from them,

not wanting to step any closer and Selina could not help but feel grateful to all of them. Despite the stress of the day, they still worried more about the comfort of the dowager.

“We have put out the fire, Your Grace, and the smoke is no longer choking nor will it sting your eyes if you wish to come in and inspect the damages,” he said and Selina looked up at the windows she had been watching before he came. He was right, the thick smoke clouds seemed to have dissipated. She looked at the dowager, waiting for her to make her decision.

“Yes, thank you, Silas.” She got up from her seat, suddenly appearing older than she had been in the cellar. Her steps had lost its spring and her eyes shifted about nervously, almost as if she worried terribly about what she would find. Selina, too, was worried but she took the woman’s hand in hers and squeezed lightly in reassurance before stepping away from her.

“How many rooms were affected by the fire, Silas?” she asked, still looking up at the house.

“Quite a few of them, Your Grace. There was very little that was not destroyed.” He seemed to be taking a mental inventory of the house, going through all that had been destroyed and what was left undamaged.

“Before we go in, I think it best you know that there is no way you will be able to stay in the castle for a while, at least not until repairs have been made. The study is compromised and so is the drawing room. The tearoom as well and the kitchen... there is also the...”

“Oh dear!” the Dowager Duchess exclaimed suddenly. “Indeed, there is no way we can stay.”

“There is also your health to consider, Your Grace. Although the thick clouds have dissipated, it will take a while for the smoke to completely leave the building,” Selina chipped in.

“That is true as well,” the dowager sighed deeply. “What manner of misfortune is this?”

“Well, it seems to be a great deal of damage and it will be a while before the building can be fixed,” Silas said.

Selina had been living here for so long, and everything was going well. In fact, she had become quite comfortable here but it seemed that her luck had finally begun to run out. Her brows furrowed as she worried about where she was to go during the time that the estate would require fixing. She did not have to worry for long as the dowager soon offered her a way out.

“Well, it seems we would have to move for the time being,” the dowager said, shocking her.

We? She plans to take me with her? Selina could not help but feel slightly emotional. It had begun to feel like the duchess was her guardian angel. The dowager had taken her in when she had stumbled up to her doorstep tired, hungry, scared, and with nowhere to go.

She had had no reason to help her and had not needed Selina but since there was really nothing she was doing for her that someone else couldn't do. She had clothed her and fed her, becoming her sponsor for no reason. It was not like the Dowager Duchess was planning to set up a match for her but still, she let her stay with her in her home, entrusting everything to her for as long as Selina was willing to stay with her.

Selina had always been grateful to this woman but perhaps she had not been grateful enough. Surely there was not enough payment she could offer after all that the woman had done for her.

“Your Grace, you are too kind. I do not know how to repay your kindness, thank you so much,” she began gratefully.

“Whatever for?”

“For keeping me in your plans even with the sudden situation.”

The dowager waved her off. “How could I in good faith do otherwise, knowing you have nowhere else to go?”

Selina once again fought to keep her expression blank as the older woman continued.

“A true pity, really, what happened to your parents,” she murmured. “I imagine they must have been rolling in their

graves when that cad they entrusted you to in marriage left you at the altar... I would also want someone to take care of my child if I were in their shoes.”

Selina swallowed uneasily and ignored the sting of guilt that hit her heart as the older woman recounted the story she had given when she showed up at the Brigpool Estate.

She had often been tempted to tell the truth. The Dowager Duchess had been wonderful to her ever since she stepped foot in her home and she often felt like she was betraying the kindness of the woman. However, there was more to consider than the desire to simply appease her guilt and ease her conscience.

Selina feared what would happen if they knew the truth about who she truly was. She could not bear to think of what would happen if she was sent away.

There was an even greater fear that stopped her from uttering the truth about her and that was the fear of putting this family in danger.

No, it is better this way... She would just have to continuously remind herself of her reasons whenever she felt like telling the truth.

“I am sure that my parents look down at us with the same gratitude I am feeling right now. Thank you for your care, Your Grace,” she said.

“Oh please, stop with it already. I quite enjoy your company,” the dowager said. Her eyes suddenly took on a gleam Selina usually noticed when she was up to something mischievous or remembered all the mischief she had gotten up to so far. “There are not a lot of ladies like you who would willingly put up with this old lady. You play along with most of my little whims and you do not seem to think me crazy.”

Selina smiled as the dowager laughed out loud, seeming to enjoy her own jokes. It seemed that she had recovered from the gloom over the fire that had just damaged her home and Selina could not help but feel guilty. Here was this woman who seemed to like her and enjoy her company, treating her

like she was part of her family even though she did not know her at all or the secrets she kept.

“Ah!” the dowager exclaimed, shocking Selina who immediately rushed to her, looking her over.

“Your Grace, what is it? Are you all right?”

“I just thought of my raw meat. I doubt it’s quite raw now,” she said, laughing heartily when Selina sighed heavily. Leave it to the dowager to think about something as inconsequential in a time like this.

“Oh please, do not let this get you down now. It is just another day and we shall move along as such.”

CHAPTER TWO



The day had been long and the evening came as a welcome respite to Morgan Reid as his carriage rolled into the Wynten Estate, coming to a stop in the courtyard just in front of the sprawling mansion.

The sun still painted the stone path as he stepped out of the carriage, but it lacked any heat, only caressing his skin like a warm hand.

“Welcome home, Your Grace.” Albert, the family butler, had come out to greet him, as he always did.

In some ways, it was a lonely welcome... reminding Morgan of how it used to be, standing at the entrance to the mansion with his mother watching Albert’s back on the path as he waited, head bowed, for the carriage door to open and reveal his father, the previous Duke of Wynten.

“Thank you, Albert. Where is Barbara?” No one stood at the mansion’s entrance where his little sister would usually stand, waiting for him most times.

“The young lady is having an embroidery class in the drawing room. She was not notified of your return,” Albert pointed out as he followed Morgan into the house. It seemed the old butler could tell that was what Morgan wanted to know.

“Ah, indeed, there was a new governess.” Morgan had almost forgotten, what with how little he had seen the lady’s face. She had been at the estate for a month already, but she made it her mission to avoid him, not even bothering that it was obvious.

He did not exactly have the best history with governesses for Barbara. They never stayed longer than a few months, and unfortunately, it was all his fault. For some reason, he did not understand, he terrified them all.

Morgan was a tall man with quite a broad frame, regularly maintained with boxing, riding, and fencing bouts. His stature, coupled with his mostly blank expression and strict nature, led to most finding his presence too intimidating.

This effect applied to both men and women alike, as such, Morgan did not have many friends. In fact, there was only one, Arthur Finch, and he found great humor in Morgan's plight of fleeing governesses.

"Perhaps if you smiled a bit more you would look less... annoyed."

His friend's words came back to him as he approached the drawing room. He did not understand how he looked angry, though, he kept his expression neutral all the time, and rarely did he even express displeasure explicitly.

His father had been the same and Morgan did not remember the previous duke having these problems. He was a proper duke, and raised Morgan to be the same, worthy of the respect they received.

The most he had seen his father smile had been around Barbara. It was a great contrast from the way the previous Duke had been with him, but he understood. Barbara was a child. He, on the other hand, had always been the heir to the Dukedom.

Even his mother had been strict with him, always reminding him of his duties and encouraging him whenever he wanted to rest.

His parent's training had come in handy five years ago when he suddenly had to take up the title after his father passed from lung disease. However, it had left him ill-prepared to care for Barbara when his mother passed from the same five months after.

He did not need anyone to tell him he was not enough as a parent. He did not know the first thing about children... he was hardly one himself. He was not raised to show his emotions and feared himself too cold for little Barbara who was only seven at the time.

His history with governesses started then, as he began searching for someone to help him.

It was a disaster.

One after the other, they all found reason to leave, sometimes with nothing but a letter stating their apology and nary a word exchanged in person.

Thankfully, his little sister did not seem perturbed by this constant abandonment. Rather she seemed to find it hilarious as well, almost like a game. Then again, she did not like any of her governesses very much.

Morgan attempted to force a pleasant smile on his face, keeping Arthur's advice in mind as he stepped into the drawing room.

His smile quickly became a grimace, however, when the first thing he saw was his sister sucking on her bloodied finger.

"Barbara!" he could not keep the concern from his voice as he crossed the room in a mere three steps.

His little sister's blue eyes lit up at the sight of him and she was on her feet in an instant, meeting him just as he reached the chaise lounge she was sitting on, and hugging his legs.

"Brother! Hello! I did not know you had returned," Barbara chirped as though her finger were not bleeding.

Morgan patted her awkwardly on the back for a moment, before taking her hand to inspect her bleeding finger. When he wiped the blood with his handkerchief, he was aghast to find several needle pricks, not just one.

His eyebrows turned down in worry, and he turned to the governess, not remembering to check his expression. The woman squeaked when he turned to her, jumping slightly.

“Lady Anne, might I ask why my sister is injured so?” Morgan asked.

The woman’s brown eyes were wide as the open end of a teacup and her chin trembled. “Th- that is how it usually is, Your Grace, the young miss is still learning... Injuries like these are common,” she struggled to say.

Morgan inspected his sister’s finger again, his frown deepening. *Such things are normal? Why would the ladies need to learn such a thing if it hurts them so?* He had not realized that behind the beautiful, embroidered handkerchiefs that fathers, brothers, and husbands showed off, were bloodied fingers like these.

“This is terrible,” he muttered. A new respect for the battles of women formed in his mind as he compared Barbara’s finger to the pain in his thighs when he first learned to ride and the black eye he got when he first attempted boxing.

He was still thinking when an annoyed screech made him raise his head in shock. He looked up to find Lady Anne red in the face, with her mouth wobbling and unshed tears in her eyes.

“I quit!” she screeched. “I can’t do this no longer!”

Morgan’s eyes went wide and he let go of his sister, his hands outstretched in an attempt to calm the upset lady. What did he do? Was he about to lose another governess? He had tried so hard though! It was only a month! This would be the quickest one yet.

“Lady Anne...”

“No! Never have I met a man as cold and cruel as you, Your Grace, berating me not to make mistakes and threatening to throw me out the very first day I arrived!” Lady Anne had enough.

Morgan put his hands down, his head falling to the side in confusion. *I threatened to throw her out? When?*

In his memory, the only thing he said to her when she first arrived was that many governesses had come before her and that they never lasted long when they crossed paths with him, so she should not be the same and work hard.

Wait... did she consider that to be a threat? All he meant was that the others were all scared and would all run away from him. He was trying to tell her that she should not be scared like them and just work...

He could see Albert massaging his forehead out of the corner of his eye. It seemed the old butler had put two and two together as well and understood what Lady Anne was misconstruing.

The governess was not about to stop her rant, however, it seemed she had made up her mind. She had her head in her hands, looking like years were taken off her life. Her frustration was evident in her eyes.

“It has been a trying time, but I kept telling myself that I could persevere! I could not even walk around the house for fear of being scolded. I thought I could avoid you all the time, but even that has been leaving me stressed! My hair is falling out!”

The woman snatched up her skirts and marched to the door. “Instead of me waiting for you to relieve me of my services, I will just do it myself before I go bald!”

With that, she hurried past Albert and stormed down the hall, leaving the three in shocked silence.

That's it... she's gone as well. Morgan placed his hands on his hips and heaved a heavy sigh.

A snicker reached his ears and he turned to find his sister laughing. “Goodness, that's the quickest one yet, is it not?” She looked around Morgan at Albert.

The old butler nodded curtly once. “Indeed, young miss. The previous lasted a month and two sennights, leaving the very next morning. Lady Anne has only been here for thirty days,” Albert said accurately.

Morgan narrowed his eyes at the two, his sister who laughed at her predicament and the old butler, who enabled her, keeping count of the days for her.

“This is no laughing matter, you two,” Morgan scolded. It was getting ridiculous at this point. Albert bowed and saw himself

out, leaving Morgan with Barbara.

Morgan settled heavily into the chaise lounge and Barbara took up the space beside him.

“It’s not really all that bad, brother. My education is going very well, despite all the breaks,” Barbara said, trying to comfort him.

It was true. His sister seemed to know that he worried about her education given how many governesses he had chased away, so she stayed on top of things and excelled. She read and practiced in her own time when there were no governesses.

“Still, little one, you need a stable teacher with you... a woman... now that mother is not here...” he said tentatively.

As she always did, Barbara frowned once he brought it up. “I told you I only need you! Those governesses will never be like Mother!”

She pouted and turned away from him.

Morgan sighed. Barbara always said he was enough for her, but he knew that was not true. She was all alone whenever he was out of the house, and that was most of the time. He knew it must be lonely. He didn’t want her lonely.

Despite how strict his upbringing had been, his parents had been present, so he was never alone.

Morgan sighed once again. He walked over to her and took her hand in his, his other hand smoothing her hair. The action had felt foreign to him in the beginning but he had long since gotten used to doing it.

“Do you remember after Mother died?” he asked. “You would cry at night and I would not know how to comfort you-”

“That is not how I remember it, brother,” she cut him off, removing his hand from her hair. However, she did not move from his arms.

“What I do remember are all the nights I felt too sad to go to bed, so I would come to your room to stay with you. You

would always pat my hair until I fell asleep.” She smiled up at him.

The corners of Morgan’s lips tilted in a smile. Yes, she was right. He did not forget about that. Although it was true, he remembered how uncomfortable he used to feel back then.

His discomfort had nothing to do with her, instead, it had more to do with the fact that he knew nothing about comforting a child, much less raising one.

“Yes, but I was still way out of my depth.” Morgan had done all that he knew to do, but even with that, he knew that he could have done better and that she needed a woman to help her transition into a proper lady and give her the care she required.

“I think you did a good enough job of it, brother,” she told him convincingly.

Morgan looked at her. He knew that she believed her words to be true but he also knew she was trying to show him they needed no external influence.

He wished he could give her what she wanted but, unfortunately, that was not what she needed, and it would be wrong of him to heed her wishes on this.

“Barbara...” he sighed regrettably, looking away from those pleading eyes. “You need someone to be with you when I am not there.”

“But Albert is-” she began but he cut her off before she could go any further.

“Albert is our butler, not your companion.” Morgan put some distance between them. He did not like to be strict with her but sometimes it was needed.

“I understand that you do not know much about the ton and their ways yet, but when you do you will see why I do these things.”

Morgan glanced over at her, expecting a response but she kept silent, refusing to look up at him.

“You say that these governesses can never be like Mother and can never take her place and that is quite all right. I do not want them to take Mother’s place.” He needed them to do the one job that he could not.

“All I want is for you to have the influence of a woman in your life. Someone who will teach you how to be a lady of your position properly,” he explained, trying to get her to understand his point.

“But I study and I practice everything that they teach me even when they are not here,” Barbara said, crossing her arms and stomping her foot in frustration.

Morgan raised his brows at the sight. This was the exact reason she needed a governess. Ladies did not stomp when they did not get their way. That and many more were the things a governess could teach her.

Still, he did not say that to her, instead he said, “I do not want them to not be here. I need you to have a governess that is present.”

Barbara dropped her arms and looked away from him for a moment before looking back at him again.

“I do not like that you keep worrying about me,” Barbara said. “Please stop worrying about me so. I am all right and I am not even that young anymore, I am growing up very quickly, see?”

She raised her arms as though to show him how much she had grown.

She was right, she had indeed grown. She was taller now than she was when their parents had died, even though it had only been five years. She was smarter as well, and a handful in some ways.

Instead of her words stilling him, it did the opposite. She was growing but not with the right guidance. He could protect her from whoever sought to harm her but that was the extent of his reach.

Morgan could not protect her from the harm the words and judgment of the ton could cause if she did not satisfy their

many expectations. Despite his disappointments, he was resolved to find her the perfect governess.

“I would have grandmother take care of you but she is too old to be your guardian,” he told her even though the thought had crossed his mind every time her governesses ran away.

“We cannot saddle grandmother with me. She has lived a long time and she deserves the rest. It would not be any different if I was with grandmother and if I was in the estate alone.”

Morgan nodded in agreement. Having their grandmother take care of her was the last resort if all else failed and he ran out of governesses, which he dreaded would be soon with how the situation progressed.

There was something else that Morgan considered a last resort. Getting married.

Perhaps it was time he looked into getting a wife during the next season so that Barbara could have a woman to look up to.

The thought caused sweat to break out on his forehead. Morgan was very busy, and that was the last thing he wanted to think of.

“Your Grace?” Albert said, rapping his knuckles against the door from where he stood just outside the open room. “A letter has arrived from the Brigpool Estate.”

“Ah, bring it here, please.” Morgan reached out for the letter, smiling at the excitement and eagerness in Barbara’s eyes.

“Is it from grandmother?” she asked, her eyes stuck on the letter as he peeled it open.

“Yes, it is from grandmother,” he said. As his eyes went over the content of the letter, the smile on his lips dropped.

Dear Morgan,

I trust you are doing fine, as is my darling Barbara. I will not beat around as to the purpose of this letter.

There has been a fire at the estate, so I will be coming to the Wynten Estate along with my companion until the damage has been repaired.

I will be seeing you soon.

Grace Wynten

“A fire?” he echoed, suddenly worried about the condition of his grandmother and the estate. She had not divulged any information about her health and, as such, he would have to wait until she got here to see for himself.

“Did the person who delivered the letter say anything to you?” he asked Albert.

“Only that the Dowager Duchess is fine. The fire did not harm her in any way and there were only damages to the property. Oh, and that she is already on her way here.”

“All right, thank you Albert,” he said, relieved. “Have the servants prepare a room for her. She mentioned that she has a companion with her, so have a space prepared for her as well.”

CHAPTER THREE



The sound of horse hooves clopping and the carriage wheels rolling on the ground reached Selina's ears, worsening the throbbing in her head.

Selina had been so watchful of the Dowager Duchess ever since they left the Brigpool Estate, worried that the sounds, coupled with the swaying of the carriage on the uneven road, would be too much for the older lady.

She did not mind the swaying herself, as it helped steady her and keep her thoughts from running amok. She quite liked the distraction.

Selina held on to her sun hat as she leaned out of the window to look out at the surroundings of the Wynten Estate when the Dowager Duchess notified her that they were in the vicinity.

Her mind was entranced as she took in the beauty that surrounded her. Lovely plains to one side, fields with colorful flowers to the other.

She looked at the children that ran around in the distance from the carriage, enjoying the beautiful day. She loved how carefree and unburdened by worries they all appeared to be. This was how it should be for children.

Leaning back into the carriage, Selina let out a sigh of contentment and happiness, with a smile on her face. The plains had reminded her so much of all the wonderful memories she had when she was still a child.

She could remember her mother's voice carrying in the wind as she pleaded with her to be careful while she giggled as she

ran around and rolled down the tiny hills. The memories filled her with warmth and she was glad these children got to experience it too.

Her eyes opened as she locked away the memory and she was startled when she saw the Dowager Duchess looking at her.

“Wynten is quite lovely,” Selina said, allowing a small smile to grace her lips. It broadened when the Dowager Duchess looked out the window with a smile of her own, almost as if remembering fond memories of her own.

“Yes, quite lovely indeed,” the older woman said in a quiet voice. She turned to Selina, regarding her silently.

“I should have brought you sooner,” she said finally. “I have a confession to make.”

Selina cocked her head to the side in confusion and worry just as the carriage rattled from the uneven path. She was curious about what the dowager could possibly have to confess to her that made her sound so grave.

“I am all ears, Your Grace, whatever it may be,” Selina said, doubting there was anything that could be so terrible as to cause her to worry herself.

“In the past two years since you have lived in my household, I have been to see my grandchildren four times so far,” she said and Selina nodded in confirmation.

That was true and so far, there was nothing in what had been said that invoked a need to worry about anything. Perhaps this was one of the dowager’s eccentricities she was about to confess to.

“And all of those times, I have never taken you along.” The Dowager Duchess sounded grave, as though she thought this wrong.

Selina had never even thought it to be a problem. In fact, she had much preferred it that way, knowing that the less she was involved with the family, the less trouble she was likely to bring to them should her life catch up with her.

She shook those thoughts out of her head. Now was not the time to dwell on any of that. “That is so, Your Grace, but I have never had a problem with it, I assure you. I always assumed you had your reasons.”

The old lady sighed. “It is because of the duke.”

Selina’s brows shot up towards her hairline.

“Does the Duke happen to dislike me for some reason?” she asked. Perhaps Her Grace had told the Duke about her and she had won his distrust. Had he been against the dowager taking her in?

If that were the case, Selina did not think it was a good idea to go into his home. That would only anger him and set him against her more.

“Oh goodness no. No, of course not.” The dowager took Selina’s hand in hers, patting it reassuringly.

“I assure you, it is nothing to do with you. The Duke does not even know of your existence,” she continued and Selina nodded, feeling relaxed.

For a moment, she had been worried that perhaps her nightmare of being turned away would actually happen but it was good to know that it was nothing to do with her.

“What I mean is simply that-” the dowager paused as though she did not know how to continue with her words.

“He can be quite misunderstood. He is not used to showing a lot of emotions. My son raised him quite strictly, so he does not act or react like most people do. Many find him to be intimidating and sometimes even downright frightening as a result.”

Selina watched as the Dowager Duchess moved her hands all over the place as she tried to explain what exactly she meant. She had never seen her so out of sorts or at a loss for words and it made her curious.

She had begun to try to picture the Duke in her mind and what was so frightening about him. Surely, if the dowager found it necessary to warn her, then he must be quite frightening.

Selina tried to ease her thoughts as the dowager struggled to explain the situation even more to her. She was certain that whatever picture she could come up with would be unfair to the Duke who had been judged terribly.

“He is a sweet boy. He always has been but he just does not know how to express himself and it causes people to misunderstand him without truly getting to know him.”

The Duchess was worried. More worried than Selina had ever seen her worry before, so she knew it was very important to her that Selina tried her best to not misunderstand her grandson.

“I was worried that there will be such a misunderstanding between the both of you which is why I never brought you along with me. However, now we have no choice in the matter as fate has decided, so you will have to meet him,” the duchess continued, bringing Selina from her train of thought.

“I did want to tell you though, that no matter how he comes across, do remember that he really means no harm, neither does he mean to be cruel or disrespectful although he will come off that way.”

“All right, I understand.” Selina nodded slowly.

How bad could the Duke, a grown man, be that his grandmother was so worried about him that she had to warn her beforehand?

Did this mean that she needed to watch her every word and action around him? Selina did not really mind it. She was to be a guest on his estate and as such, it was expected of her to make sure that there was no bad blood between her and the Duke.

Selina was sure that she could manage that. Besides, the dowager had been so good to her and she would not repay her kindness by causing her any grief.

“On the other hand, you are going to love my granddaughter, Barbara. If I were not so old, then perhaps she might have been staying with me and you two would have met. She is but

a child but she is ever so bright and charming,” the dowager smiled brightly.

“Well, in that case, I certainly cannot wait to meet them both.” Selina was struck by the difference in the expression of the dowager when she spoke of her grandchildren.

It was clear to her that the older woman loved them both, however, their contrasting behavior caused a very noticeable change when she spoke of either.

The dowager sighed and sat back, silent for the remaining short distance that was left of their journey.

Selina looked at everything as though she was tasked with memorizing all that she saw. The carriage rolled to a stop and Selina let out a deep breath before climbing down the carriage.

She looked around at the mansion, taking note of how neat and well-organized everything was. The household was clearly functional and well run, as there was not a thing out of place.

As the dowager made her way in, Selina followed her. There would be more time to explore what was to be her new home for however long it took to repair the damages at Brigpool.

They were met at the door by the butler.

“Your Grace.” He bowed. “I am glad to see that you are well. We worried for your health when we heard about the fire.”

“Ah yes, Albert. I am quite well indeed. Luckily, we were ushered out just in time. Unfortunately, there was not much that could be done for the house,” she waved her hands as though the issue of the fire was well behind her as Albert ushered them in.

“This is my companion, Miss Selina Knight. She will be staying with me.”

“Yes, it is lovely to meet you, Miss Knight,” the butler smiled kindly at her before turning to the dowager.

“The Duke is not here at the moment. He apologizes for not being around for your arrival but is soon to return.”

“That is fine. He has a lot to tend to. You can go on with your duties, Albert, I am sure we can carry on without you,” the dowager said. Albert bowed and walked away, leaving the duchess and Selina alone.

The dowager led Selina to the music room. “I’ll go find Barbara so I can introduce you two.”

The dowager did not wait for Selina to answer, rushing off and leaving her alone.

She stood there for a moment, her words abandoned on her tongue. *Well... I guess I will just have to wait here.*

She looked around the spacious room for the first time. *Must be great for acoustics.*

Her eyes widened when they caught sight of a giant harp in the corner. *Goodness, the Duke truly is affluent.*

Selina admired the harp and as she moved closer to inspect it, she heard footsteps coming from behind her. Thinking it was the Dowager Duchess returning, she stood up, facing the door to greet Barbara.

However, it occurred to her as the footsteps drew closer to the door that they did not sound like the dowager’s footsteps which she had come to recognize.

There were also no accompanying footsteps to tell that the person approaching had a companion. The footfalls were also too heavy to belong to a little girl.

Her brows furrowed as she wondered who it could possibly be. Perhaps a servant coming to bring her refreshments?

Her question was soon answered as a man appeared in the doorway. It took all her self-control to keep her jaw from falling open.

He was very tall and broad, easily filling up the doorway. It was quite domineering. His countenance was that of someone not to be messed with. If not for that, he was quite handsome.

He wore a rather scary look on his face and he almost seemed disdainful. She stood like a deer coming face to face with a

hunter as he regarded her, looking down at her like she was worth less than a page stained with ink.

“Excuse me, miss. Who are you?” he asked in a voice that matched the very description of him despite the politeness of his speech.

Selina curtsied. She was not certain who he was, but from his look, she assumed he was the Duke.

“My name is Selina Knight, Your Grace...” Selina had hoped that he would let her know who he was with her open-ended sentence but instead he looked out the door and back at her, his expression one of confusion.

“Pray tell, how did you get in here?” he asked instead, dismissing her indirect way of asking for his name.

Selina was slightly irritated by the tone he took with her. Why was he speaking to her as though she was a thief who had been caught in the act?

“I do not quite like your tone,” Selina said defensively. “I am the companion of the Dowager Duchess and I was brought in here by the butler.”

He raised his eyebrows, clearly not liking her response either. *Good! He should have thought of that before speaking to me in such a manner.*

“My tone, you say? Well pardon me for not taking kindly to finding a stranger in my own home,” he replied, not backing down.

Of course, he was the Duke. So, this was what the dowager meant when she said he could come across as prickly and cold. Right now, however, Selina was certain he was indeed being quite cold and that this was not just a misunderstanding on her path.

Selina frowned as she thought it seemed exactly what he intended.

“If you say that you are here as my grandmother’s companion, then what are you doing here all alone and why are you not with her? I would assume you would be in the presence of

your companion, especially in a strange place, would you not?" he quizzed.

"Goodness!" she uttered sarcastically. "My apologies, Your Grace. I did not realize that I was to be at her side on a leash as she dragged me across your estate in search of your little sister."

Selina knew that there was a bite in her voice. She had promised the dowager that she would be understanding, but she could not help it especially since he was so vexing. The man was getting on her nerves like no one else had.

Selina understood that she was a stranger and no one was fond of meeting strangers in their home. However, she had already told him who she was and instead of antagonizing her, he could have left her alone and waited for his grandmother to return.

He could have chosen to do so many things that would take him away from the same room as her while he verified that she was who she claimed to be, but he had done none of that.

She tried hard not to appear smug at the look of surprise on his face as he cocked his head to the side and regarded her incredulously with dark blue eyes. The Duke was clearly not used to being talked to in the way that she had spoken to him.

During their little squabble, Selina had been fighting a thought she simply could not get out of her head. Perhaps it added to the reason she was so irritated by him.

Now, as he stared at her with wide eyes, the thought occurred to her again. Despite her irritation and annoyance at what had seemed like an accusation and defamation, Selina could not help but note that he was the most handsome man she had ever seen.

It was too bad that his character was jarring, taking away from the beauty of the man. There was no way any woman would find him attractive with the ugly way that he spoke. His beauty was only on the surface and she did not care for such.

Selina tensed, prepared to retaliate as he opened his mouth to speak again, possibly to say something more irritating than the

last thing he had spoken but he was cut off by footsteps heading their way.

She did not know whether to be relieved or annoyed by the fact that she did not get to hear what he had to say. This time it was clear to her that it was the dowager's footsteps, accompanied with a lighter pair.

Selina allowed her shoulder to relax as the older woman walked into the room. She looked between them and Selina knew that she had sensed the tension between the two of them and judging from her warning in the carriage, she needed no one to tell her what had happened.

“Ah! Morgan, I see that you have met Miss Selina Knight,” The dowager said, walking towards him.” She is my companion.”

“Indeed, I have.”

Selina could see his teeth grinding at having to withhold whatever comment he would have uttered if the dowager and his sister were not present.

“Indeed, Your Grace. We have had the *pleasure* of meeting.” She gave him a sarcastic smile as she knew she had won this round. “Although, I would say the Duke could stand to be a bit more thoughtful towards his guests.”

Morgan's eyes widened in surprise, clearly expecting her to be meek now that his grandmother was present. Selina looked just in time to see the dowager's expression flicker between surprise, shock, and a feeling of dread.

Selina knew that although the dowager duchess would not reprimand her for speaking up for herself, she wished that they would have gotten along, but she could not help it if the Duke intentionally decided to be cruel. She would not stand for his cruelty.

“Ha!” The dowager belted out a peal of strained laughter, clearly trying to make light of the situation and dispel the tension. She turned to address the Duke.

“Morgan, I am sorry to come in on such short notice. The fire was really bad and the damage was extensive. There was not

much else I could do,” she expertly changed the subject.

Selina saw the Duke’s expression soften as he turned fully to his grandmother. It seemed the Dowager Duchess had averted the crisis for now.

Want to know how the story ends?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In case you love free books, you will find one that Hazel never published on Amazon. A gift to her followers! You can find it on her real Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/hazellinwoodauthor>.

Influenced by the extraordinary tales of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, Hazel Linwood has always adored the fairy-tale like romances of the past. The youngest of four sisters, she has spent most of her youth lost in the classic historical romances of her favorite authors. Despite her parents' efforts to persuade her to pursue a career in medicine, she found her heart's true calling in English Literature.

After obtaining her degree, Hazel worked as an English teacher. That was until she met her husband and decided to indulge in her secret passion...writing! When she isn't writing, Hazel enjoys spending time with her family, travelling or roaming the Texan countryside.

Embark on this journey of desire, decorum and intense love of Regency England. Let Hazel transport you into an era of pure, sincere love and charming lords that will take your breath away!

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