



*The Sixth Henry*

CAROLINE  
WARFIELD

DRAGON  
BLADE

# **THE SIXTH HENRY**

**Novella**

Caroline Warfield



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# **PART ONE**

## **The Rose War**

Unbidden guests are often welcomest when they are gone.

—Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 1*



## CHAPTER ONE

*Lancashire, December 1818*

WRAPPED IN A heavy greatcoat and swathed with scarves against the cold, Henry Bradley, sixth of that name, attended his grandfather's funeral with a leaden heart. The chapel, tucked into the curve of a hill overlooking a river valley and surrounded in the spring by masses of brier roses, had served the Dukes of Roseleigh as a family chapel for generations. Today snow blanketed the roses, the hill, and the valley beyond.

Sitting in the front pew as was expected, he grieved the old man's passing, grateful at least that the suffering of the past few months had come to an end. Henry had no doubt the Almighty welcomed the old duke with affection, good man that he had been. Grandpapa had enjoyed a long and happy life marred only by the passing of his beloved wife and the premature deaths of two sons and his oldest grandson.

The latter three deaths were the reason Henry sat in the front pew where his cousin Harry should be, daunted by the weight of Roseleigh and its dependents. *The duke is dead; long live the duke.* Power and fortune had fallen on Henry Bradley, sometime rakehell, former soldier, more recently impecunious physician to a small village in Yorkshire. He could only hope it didn't flatten him.

The bishop, who had been invited up from Chester, the Episcopal seat for Lancashire, finished his chanting, and Henry rose to follow the casket to the crypt. Turning, he saw the mass of people filling the chapel, every one of them with some claim to his attention, assistance, finances, and care, and almost bolted.

The crypt, oddly, felt a bit less cold. Henry peered around at the tombs of his ancestors, landing on that of his great-grandfather. The family arms had been carved into one side of the marble slab covering it. A single carved rose adorned the other side. In the middle lay the proud name, Henry Bradley, 7th Duke of Roseleigh. Someday, he thought morosely, they would lay him here as well. Henry would be the ninth duke but the sixth Henry, there being a few Richards sprinkled in. He shook off the thought as the bishop droned on and bearers lifted the casket into the niche prepared for it. Grandpapa would need a slab to cover his tomb, and Henry would see to it.

Moments later the grand Roseleigh carriage pulled away with Henry and his Aunt Blanche, the senior member of the Bradley family. The lane to Roseleigh Hall had been cleared, and the journey was short but not, in Henry's opinion, short enough. Blanche had faced the loss of her father-in-law, her husband, and her son—taking with them her dreams of a duchess's coronet—in a few years. Disappointment had left her bitter. He suspected she had been born overbearing. Neither of her personal traits made for a pleasant ride.

“Whatever you do, see to the glasshouse! The roses will not sustain so cold a winter without care,” Blanche proclaimed, putting that demand right above her demand to keep her grand suite with its view of the valley, the necessity of sacking the impertinent butler, the importance of redecorating the blue drawing room before spring, and numerous other directives.

Henry nodded vaguely, sighing with relief at the sight of the Hall. Relief was short-lived. Other carriages followed on, and soon the throng from the chapel trailed Henry inside the crepe-draped door.

Givens, Aunt Blanche's impertinent butler, efficiently greeted one and all and directed them inside. Henry's sister, Mary, fretful in late pregnancy, leaned on the arm of her husband, Martin Scolish, Viscount Eckelston, who watched Henry avidly, eager to reap the benefits of the dukedom now

that Henry had succeeded. George Bradley, a distant cousin and Roseleigh's autocratic steward, moved to a corner with Howard Morton, Roseleigh's secretary, and Amos Jones, the head gardener, all three casting speculative eyes at Henry. Baron Wolfton, a neighbor with whom Grandpapa had a boundary dispute, glared from across the room. Various tenants, servants, and hangers-on all eager to speak to the new duke milled around. It was all too much. Even Bishop Bowyer, who would spend the night, deserved Henry's attention.

Roseleigh's inner core, a remnant of the medieval castle it once was, boasted a central hall with stone walls two stories high. A roaring fire gave off more light than heat in the massive hearth, the light reflecting off the miscellany of weapons that had been hung from the stone walls. A simple meal had been set up along one of them. Footmen took hats and bonnets, but no one seemed in a hurry to remove their outer garments. They milled about uncertain, waiting for someone to take leadership.

Henry looked around and realized, with a start, that that someone was him. He climbed two steps up the worn stone staircase that emptied into the hall, and a hush immediately fell. "Thank you, all of you, for coming to honor my grandfather. If Bishop Bowyer would be so kind as to say a blessing, please join us in a light repast."

The bishop raised his voice in a blessedly brief prayer, but still no one moved. Givens hovered by the food, shooting him pained glances. Henry sighed and advanced, allowing servants to pile pastries, ones he probably would not eat, on a plate. A footman approached with a hot toddy in a mug. *Praise God!*

Givens gestured toward the formal drawing room that opened to the left, and Henry followed, aware—not for the first time—that he might have the title but he wouldn't always give the orders. His sense of his own place in the universe was further confirmed at the sight of Aunt Blanche already seated in a plush chair near the fireplace, sipping a warm drink, a heavily laden plate beside her. She pinned him with her gaze,

and the temptation to take a seat at the opposite end of the room faded.

“I ordered the blue suite for the bishop, it being the finest available. Mary and Eckelston will have to make do with the lily room but can move over when he leaves,” Blanche said.

Henry waited for her to assign his quarters, but of course, she already had. His valise had been moved to the duke’s quarters as soon as Grandpapa’s remains had been removed. He couldn’t even sleep the first night.

“The kitchen will provide a late supper for those who remain once the rabble clears out,” his aunt went on. “I meet with the cook daily to approve menus.”

The new duke had begun to mentally list things needing immediate attention. “Dislodge my aunt” moved to task number one. Or at least, “Gain control of my own household.”

“You will focus on the estate, of course, and on the roses. It may be winter, but they take careful tending if we’re to put the Earl of Edgecote in his place in June.” Blanche ordered him around with no shame, as if he were one of her minions.

“The honor of Roseleigh lies in your hands,” she sniffed, certain, no doubt, that he was unworthy. “Jones will have to bring you up to snuff quickly.”

Of course she believed him unworthy. Her son, his cousin Harry, had been raised as the eventual duke. Henry had been allowed to fiddle away his early twenties before he settled on medicine. He was never expected to inherit. She never expected to be dependent on a nephew.

“Edgecote?” he murmured, trying to recall something about a competition.

Blanche’s glare turned to ice. “The fool’s rose was judged finest last year at the York Rose Show. We cannot let him win two years in a row. That honor is ours and has been most of the past twenty years. Your grandfather saw to it,” she said.

People began to filter in; others stayed in the hall or, he suspected, wandered into the dining room. Henry drank down his toddy, letting the heat warm his insides and the alcohol steel his nerves.

“If you’ll excuse me, Aunt, I should greet our guests,” he said, turning to a couple that appeared to be farmers, tenants no doubt, who were gazing about the room in wonder.

“They come to you. You do not go to them.” Blanche sniffed.

Henry ignored her and approached the couple. “Thank you for paying your respects to my grandfather,” he said.

The woman cast her eyes to her feet and pinked up. The husband said, “O’ course. Our duty. I’m wondering, Yer Grace, since we’re talking. The winter being fierce this year, if you’ve had a chance to speak to Mr. Bradley about the allotment of wood. An increase would be a blessing. If you’ve had time to think on it.”

“I’ll speak with him,” Henry murmured and moved on.

One gentleman assured him that he would continue to supply the Hall with groceries “as we always have, though, things being tight prices could change.” The vicar hinted funds for the village church would be welcome. Another tenant lamented that, with the late duke being ill, the annual roof inspection hadn’t happened.

Amos Jones caught his eye. “I know this isn’t the day, but if you have time tomorrow, let me show you the glasshouse and the state of this year’s roses.” He leaned in confidentially. “You’ll want to know Edgecote’s tricks, if we are to guard against his cheating.”

By the time he had worked his way through the throng two hours later, several people had wished him good luck with the blasted roses as if nothing else mattered. To his great relief, some people requested their belongings, preparing to leave.

Henry returned to the food table, which by then appeared as if a cloud of locusts had done their work on it, and piled a

few broken pastries and the sad little sandwich that remained on a plate.

Givens rushed over, his expression making it very clear that Henry had breached protocol. “We’d be happy to assist, Your Grace.”

“No need. And no need for supper. It has been a long day. I will just carry this up to my room. More hot toddy would be welcome, however.”

“I’ll have fresh prepared and send it up,” Givens said with a bow.

Henry sighed and smiled. “Thank you.”

He found Mary at the foot of the stairs. “I don’t see the bishop,” he said, juggling his plate.

“He retired early,” she said.

“I’m about to do the same.”

Mary looked stricken. “I hoped to speak with you at dinner.”

“I’m exhausted, Mary. Can it wait?”

“Of course. It’s just, I’m so proud of you. I made a decision today,” she said, patting her tummy. “If this is a boy, we will name him Henry.”

The new duke was horrified. He’d spent his youth being confused with his cousin, his uncle, and his grandfather. “Please don’t do that to the nipper. Call him Edgar, or George, or Algernon. Anything. We don’t need another Henry.”

She laughed. “Don’t be silly. It is a Lancaster County tradition. Did you know Aunt Blanche put us in some poky room?”

“I understand the blue suite will be available when the bishop leaves,” he said.

“Also, Martin wants to talk to you about a parliamentary position, but that can wait.”

*It can wait for years...* Henry had his hands full right here at Roseleigh. "I'll see you in the morning," he said. Would they decide to stay in residence? He wasn't sure what he hoped.

Through the drawing room door, he caught sight of Aunt Blanche on her feet and approaching him. He climbed the stairs quickly before she had time to confront him.

A brisk fire warmed his suite, the first benefit of being duke that he had appreciated all day. He put his plate on a table and sat next to it, allowing heat to seep in and clear his head.

Soon after, a scratch at the door presaged the promised footman. "Enter," he said.

Givens did so, one of his underlings in tow with a steaming pitcher of hot toddy, a porcelain cup, a plate with ham sandwiches, another with fresh biscuits, and a clean linen towel. Henry's mouth watered. He hadn't eaten all day and was grateful the butler had ignored what he'd said downstairs.

"Will there be anything else, Your Grace?" Givens asked.

"No. Thank you. This is excellent."

The old man left looking satisfied. He removed Henry's sad little plate of broken pastries as he went.

One sandwich and a cup of toddy later, Henry felt much more the thing. He poured another cup and went to the writing desk against the wall. He always found that, when confronted with a confusing or new situation, a bit of list making helped organize his thoughts.

He took a piece of paper and wrote, "Immediate Problems to be Addressed." Number one... As tempting as it was to make evicting Aunt Blanche his first priority, that was neither wise nor kind.

Number one—find the study and review records. Make it his own. While he was at it, he'd want to redecorate this bedroom to expel the ghost—or at least the memory—of his

grandfather. The workings of the estate, however, took priority. Perhaps he'd find something about the boundary dispute. He preferred to explore the work alone at first, but he would probably have to lean on his secretary for a while.

He tapped his finger on the desk. Number two—learn estate management, and how to adjudicate tenant concerns. George Bradley had given him space so far, but he ought to meet with him as soon as possible.

Number three—face all the official nonsense. He had to petition the lord chancellor to be confirmed in the title for one. He wondered if he could avoid going to town for official functions for a year or so, but doubted it. He'd likely be forced down to London when Parliament went into session. In the midst of that, he would have to deflect Eckelston's encroaching demands. They would keep.

Number four—the damned rose competition. If it had been vague in his mind earlier, memories had flooded back. As a boy he'd attended the fair in York with its annual flower show at which Grandpapa's roses frequently took first place. It had been the pride of the valley now that he thought about it, and he would dismiss it at his peril. "Meet with Amos Jones and get the lay of the land," he wrote. The sooner he learned the details, the sooner he could delegate it to someone else.

Number five—Aunt Blanche. "Toss out in the snow..." did not sound appropriate. He didn't see how he could live with the woman trying to order his house and his life, however. He wrote, "Pension off Aunt Blanche and find her a comfortable cottage of her own." Givens would probably help him do it or at least cheer him on.

He reread that last point. Someone needed to manage the household, however, so perhaps he shouldn't rush. He had to find someone else. Someone loyal to Henry himself. A partner. He sighed.

He picked up the pen and wrote, "Number six—find a wife."

Satisfied with his list, he wandered back to the fire. Mountains were climbed one step at a time. Henry would grow into the dukedom the same way. One step at a time. Heat flowed down with his toddy. *Problem number six may be my biggest challenge, but tomorrow I'll tackle number one.* He smiled to himself as he dozed off.



## CHAPTER TWO

HENRY ROSE AT dawn, tempted to shake off the cobwebs with a ride. Duty flooded in, however, and he recalled his list. He would dress and find his newly acquired study. As soon as his feet hit the floor and he fumbled about for water to soothe his throat, Carter, the stern and upright valet who had served his grandfather, appeared to assist in his every need. The man had a weary air, one Henry suspected owed much to both age and grief. Another problem needing attention but not yet.

On his way to his study, he passed Givens, carrying a pile of serviettes to the breakfast room. The old retainer blinked away a startled expression. “Breakfast can be served soon, Your Grace. Shall I fetch coffee or tea for you?”

“Do not rush the meal on my account, Givens. I will be in my study. Do alert me when Bishop Bowyer, my sister, or Viscount Eckelston appears,” Henry said. He suspected that would be a while. “Coffee would be welcome, however.”

The glow of walnut paneling and the smells of beeswax and old leather engulfed Henry when he shut the door behind him. Under all of it, his grandfather’s affection and wisdom flowed through him.

“You are a Bradley, Henry. You will make a fine duke,” the old man had rasped toward the end. “Be patient. You’ll grow into it.” There had been no other advice than that.

*Be patient.* “I’ll try, Grandpapa,” he whispered. “If they let me.”

The massive walnut desk had been placed at right angles to bank the mullioned windows set in one wall. Some long-ago ancestor had built bookshelves into the walls on either side of the entrance. A glass-fronted unit lay behind the desk to the right of a door. That door led to a storage closet with a

honeycomb of document niches above and drawers below. A quick check showed him that the wide drawers contained maps and the short ones, supplies.

Across from the desk, a large painting of Grandpapa and his two sons, one of them Henry's father, hovered above two leather chairs separated by a small side table. A door next to the chairs, directly across from the one to the closet, opened onto the magnificent Roseleigh library with its two-story windows, resplendent with sunlight flowing through them. Evenly spaced panels of stained glass added jewel tones to the beams. He shut the library door; that would be a pleasure for another day.

Just then Givens arrived with coffee service on a silver tray. He put it on the table and poured with great ceremony.

"Thank you, Givens. That will do. Alert me when the others come for breakfast," he said.

Givens bowed out with rather more obeisance than Henry found comfortable. Henry took his place behind the desk, studied the portrait for a long while, and stiffened his resolve. He began to sort through the drawers on either side. To his immense relief, his grandfather had been a careful man with organized habits.

On his left the top drawer had correspondence, much of it from family, both close and distant. Henry suspected they waited for answers that never came.

The lower left-hand drawer appeared to be dedicated to the old duke's work in Parliament. Folders were labeled with topics of great interest to his grandfather: the Corn Laws, civil disorder, the Catholic question, and so on. The one labeled Ottoman Empire intrigued Henry, but he had no time for it. The most urgent lay on top of the others; Petition for Inheritance, it read. He took that one out and glanced through it. "Thank you, Grandpapa," he whispered. The old man had known the day would come soon, and he'd outlined instructions for confirming Henry in his title. *That will ease*

*my way through problem number three, all the official nonsense associated with my accession.*

He set that one on the corner of the desk, sipped his coffee, and turned to the right. The lower drawer was dedicated to estate business. It had the current ledgers, and folders marked Jones, George, and Roses. The three of them covered problems two and four. He took out George, which as he assumed referred to George Bradley, his steward, problem number two, and closed the drawer.

The top, right drawer, less organized than the rest, held a mixed pile of things such as bills, missives from solicitors, investment opportunities, and notes. He suspected that drawer held things pending action on the duke's part. He went through them carefully. Among the motley collection, he found a summons from a solicitor in London on behalf of Baron Wolfton, the contentious neighbor. He put it on top of the folder of issues to discuss with his steward.

He also found a letter from the Earl of Edgecote, groaned, and put it unopened into the file labeled Jones. He would get to his head gardener and the matter of roses in due time but not today.

He rose to pour himself another cup of coffee. When a servant scratched on the door, he almost suspected Givens had assigned someone to hover out there lest the Duke of Roseleigh commit the great misstep of pouring his own coffee. Two months ago, he'd brewed his own in the cozy little kitchen of his bachelor establishment.

"Enter," he said. It was not Givens.

Howard Morton bowed and greeted him formally. "I wished to alert you that I have arrived. I see you are already at work. I assume you will need me, but Givens asked me to inform you that breakfast has been laid out in the family breakfast room."

"Thank you, Morton. I think I will meet with the steward first. Perhaps this afternoon?"

“As you wish, Your Grace.” Morton bowed out backward as if Henry were some sort of medieval princeling. Henry tried to control his irritation, and set out for breakfast, hoping to find George.

Eckelston rose and inclined his head. “Good morning, Your Grace,” he said.

“Stubble it, Martin. I was Henry when I saw you a month ago,” Henry said.

“That may have been well a month ago, but it is utterly unacceptable now. Given that Lord Eckelston is family, he might address you as Roseleigh, however.” Aunt Blanche entered behind him.

His back still to her, Henry rolled his eyes. “Very well, Eckelston. We’ll stay on a formal footing. For now. Has George Bradley arrived?”

“Mr. Bradley broke his fast in the estate office earlier and is at work as is his custom,” Givens advised.

“Thank you, Givens. Kindly send someone to inform him that I will meet with him in my study in one hour.”

“Very good, Your Grace,” Givens said, putting fresh coffee down in front of him. “May I ask your breakfast preferences?”

Aunt Blanche stood behind her chair, glaring at the old butler, while Henry answered him and a footman was dispatched to fill his plate. Givens then assisted her to sit and asked the same question.

“Don’t behave like an imbecile to impress the new duke. You know very well my preferences. I’ve eaten here every day for twenty years,” the old woman growled.



## CHAPTER THREE

LADY MARGARET ANSEL, eldest child of the Earl of Edgecote, loathed unexpected events that upended her plans. She certainly didn't plan to be stranded in a third-rate inn on the edge of the moors on her way to the Duke of Roseleigh's funeral, but stranded she was.

Snow and a bad axle dumped her there to brood. After two days, another delay occurred that morning. She stood staring out a dirty window in the public room, dressed for travel, reliving her departure from Dove Abbey, her father's words ringing in her ears.

"We owe Roseleigh nothing, girl! We aren't precisely friends!" he had shouted.

Margaret had held her ground and done as she pleased as she always did. She'd believed then, and still did, that old rivalries were pointless. People in both estates suffered from it. Paying respects to the old duke might help bridge the gap. Or so she thought.

Still, she didn't look forward to seeing Harry Bradley. Oldest son of the oldest son, he'd been bred to succeed and knew it. They met at least once a year at the York Rose Show and occasionally at other events in the northern counties. She'd found him both arrogant and frivolous with no concern for anything but his own comfort when they were in their teens. He didn't give a damn about the roses, their ostensible reason for rivalry. Roses were merely one more reason for Harry to preen over his superiority and lord it over others.

The only one who'd seemed to tolerate him as a boy was his cousin Henry, but the younger Henry was rarely around. Harry's father's death while he was at university had done little to improve his personality. He grew into a stern and

intolerant man who kept mistresses in Leeds and York and thought women ought to keep opinions to themselves. He'd have banned Margaret from the Rose Council, organizing board for the York Rose Show, if he could have. The last she'd heard of him, he had racketed off to the continent with some of his rakehell friends. With his grandfather's death announced far and wide, she was certain he would have scurried home.

The more she remembered, the more she suspected she had set out on a fool's errand, but pride kept her to her course once decided. She would not go back to her father and admit it had been useless.

"Ready, my lady." Her coachman stood in the doorway, hat in hand.

"Let's get on with it, then," she said, walking with determination to her coach.

They reached Roseleigh Hall late that afternoon, two days after the funeral. It would be rude to expect lodging. She had stopped in the nearby village and bespoken a room at the Red Rose Inn. Unfortunately, the friendly innkeeper turned cold when he saw her name and the white rose badge on her cap. The stupid rivalry infected people at every level. She expected cold water on her washstand and damp sheets when she returned.

Now Margaret climbed the steps to the rambling old Hall with a determined stride. The footman at her side rapped on the door, and it swung open to reveal a grizzled little man as old as the hills around them. He eyed her ensemble and the fur trim on her pelisse and gestured them in. He took her card and glanced up sharply.

"I have come to pay my respects to the late duke and convey the sympathy of my family. Unfortunately, the weather and a faulty axle delayed me from arriving for the funeral," she explained. "If I could speak to His Grace, I will be brief and then on my way."

“I’ll inquire,” the old man said. He escorted her to a finely appointed drawing room whose chief attraction was a brisk fire. She went to it to warm her frozen hands.

“What do you want here?”

Margaret turned at the sharp words to see a woman, gray-haired, well dressed, and straight backed, glaring at her from across the room. She recognized her as Lady Blanche Bradley, Harry’s mother. Margaret made a polite obeisance.

“A condolence call only. I meant to attend the funeral but was delayed en route,” Margaret replied.

Lady Blanche breathed in slowly, causing her nose to pinch and her chin to rise. Before she could unleash whatever it was she meant to say in response, someone else entered.

“Welcome, Lady Margaret. Kind of you to call,” the gentleman said. “Have you sent for tea, Aunt Blanche?”

Shocked, Margaret groped for a reply. “You aren’t Harry!” she said without thinking.

The man smiled sadly. “I most certainly am not. Henry Bradley, Duke of Roseleigh, at your service.”

Margaret curtsayed deeply. *Henry*. On the heels of relief came the realization that, if this amiable young man was the new duke, his cousin had died. “I’m—”

He waved her formal calling card. “Lady Margaret Ansel, daughter—unless I’m mistaken—of the Earl of Edgecote.”

Lady Blanche’s frown deepened beyond what Margaret might have thought possible. The old lady was grieving not only for her father-in-law but for her son. How awkward. Margaret could hardly congratulate the duke on his good fortune in front of the grieving mother.

“I—” She glanced back and forth between them. “I’m so sorry for your loss. I came to offer condolences. Apparently, you’ve had even more losses than I was aware of.”

Her words seemed to please the new duke but did little to settle the ruffled feathers of his aunt. He stepped to the door and spoke to the servant waiting outside it. “Kindly take the lady’s bonnet and pelisse and order tea sent,” he said.

The elderly butler doddered in and did as he had been asked, a courtesy that ought to have been done as soon as she’d arrived. The duke gestured to a chair near the fire, and Margaret sat. Lady Blanche took the wing chair on the opposite side and frowned at Margaret as if she had appropriated the lady’s favorite chair. Perhaps she had.

An awkward silence followed. Margaret had no idea how to break it, and the other lady appeared frozen in icy calm.

The duke glanced from one of them to the other and said, “I gather you’ve had some difficulty,” a comment leading to a safe topic.

Margaret gratefully picked up the thread. “I set out four days ago, meaning to attend your grandfather’s funeral, but underestimated the weather. The roads became impassible, and my coach broke an axle.”

“Why didn’t you simply go home?” Lady Blanche snapped.

“By the time we came to rest at an inn, it was closer to come on than to go home,” Margaret replied.

“Then you made a wise decision. This isn’t good weather for travel,” the duke said. “You are of course welcome to stay until the weather improves.”

*Welcome?* “You are kind to suggest it, but I’ve bespoken a room at the Red Rose Inn,” she replied.

Lady Blanche sighed. In relief, Margaret assumed.

“Surely you will be more comfortable here than at the inn,” the duke said.

“Your Grace, if I may say, this soon after the funeral, it is hardly proper to—” Lady Blanche began.

“Not at all, Aunt. At least not under these circumstances. The weather shows every sign of another storm. We can’t leave a well-bred young lady to the mercies of an inn. What would her father think of us?” the duke said.

Lady Blanche snorted. “But I doubt this particular lady would be so comfortable under the roof of the Bradley family.”

*She snorted!* Margaret fought to keep from laughing.

The duke waved his aunt’s comment away. “Old nonsense. I never did understand it. Besides, aren’t we branches of a single family? Related somehow, generations past?”

“Much too long ago to have any meaning today,” Lady Blanche said sourly. Given the woman’s attitude, Margaret wonder if the breach was so very long ago.

“So will you accept?” he asked.

The urge to slam the front door of Roseleigh Hall behind her almost upended Margaret’s common sense. If the weather resumed its onslaught, more days in an inn was a dismal thought. It would be uncomfortable for her servants as well, particularly in the light of the poor service she expected at the Red Rose. She would be better off here. Besides, it would irritate Lady Blanche. That was reason enough.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I would be honored.”

He smiled back, and the room warmed with the strength of it.



HENRY RETURNED TO his desk, satisfied that he had behaved as a proper host, and sank back into his study of the plan for spring husbandry left by George. His peace lasted almost an hour.

Mary barged in without knocking. “What were you thinking, inviting that woman in?” she demanded.

Henry set the papers down with a sigh. He had been struggling with formulas regarding acreage and yields. He

frowned at his sister. “Lady Margaret? She’s a perfectly acceptable personage and seemed pleasant. I can’t turn her out in this weather. If that is the only purpose of this visit, I would appreciate—”

Mary flounced into one of the plush chairs. “Aunt Blanche is in a tearing temper. She’s hard to bear as it is without you consorting with the enemy.”

“Enemy? Don’t be ridiculous, Mary. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have—”

“Aunt Blanche says you haven’t even given Jones any of your time yet. She says you need to rethink your priorities.”

Torn between frustration over Mary’s complete lack of understanding of his situation and their shared irritation with their most difficult relative, he focused on the latter. “Since when do you care what Aunt Blanche thinks?”

“Never! But, Henry, the roses are your responsibility now.”

*Roses again.* Henry gritted his teeth. “Roses? I have sheep to shelter in the fiercest winter in a decade, a summons from Wolfston’s solicitors, a drunken groom causing a ruckus in the village, spring planting to plan, two tenants in a dispute over fields, and four more tenants worried about fuel. The fourth housekeeper in five years just quit. There is more to learn than I studied in university. I have no time for the damned roses. I probably won’t until spring, and by then I’ll be dragged down to London to prance around in ermine while they confirm me to be what you all already think I am—the Duke of everlasting Roseleigh!”

“But that’s exactly it, Henry. *Roseleigh*. The Roseleigh rose matters. I want to bring little Henry to the flower show some day and show him the family heritage,” Mary said, patting her belly.

“Little Algernon will see them in his time. Jones can manage it. He grows the blasted roses,” Henry said, disordering his hair in disgust.

At “Algernon,” Mary rolled her eyes. “But you know Margaret Ansel came to spy. You must know.”

“Our guest is *Lady* Margaret. Has she said she came to spy?”

“Of course not!”

“Has she mentioned roses, red, white, pink, or otherwise?”

“No, but—”

“Has she rifled through my files when my back was turned?”

“N... How would I know? You should protect Grandfather’s secrets.”

“I wouldn’t know where to look or what’s hidden away about this rose business. It doesn’t matter. She can’t. I have the keys.”

“If you’d let Jones...,” Mary started.

Henry waved her words away. “Don’t judge Lady Margaret until she gives you reason. Please, Mary. Aunt Blanche will say and do what she pleases no matter what I say. I’m asking you to be a buffer for our guest. Do you hear me? Guest.”

Mary tried to rise and sank back, casting a Henry a pathetic glance. He rolled his eyes and came around the desk to hold out a hand and help her rise. He peered down with a smile. “It won’t be much longer, will it? Little Algernon will be running around the ancestral pile in no time.”

“Try to show some dignity. You’re Roseleigh now, Henry. Aunt Blanche may be a formidable old tartar, but she isn’t wrong.” Mary heaved a deep sigh, one Henry thought belonged on the stage. “Very well. I’ll be so sweet that Lady Margaret’s teeth will ache, but I’ll stick as close as a Scottish thistle. If she goes anywhere near the glasshouse or Jones’s workroom, I’ll have her out of here on her aristocratic bum and her white rose badge with her.”

“You have a glasshouse?” A muscle in Lady Margaret’s cheek twitched, as if she was holding back anger. Or laughter. She stepped further into the room. “A Scottish thistle?”

Henry wondered how long she had been in the doorway.

Mary blushed deeply. “Our aunt expressed some concern. She—”

“Let me guess. She thinks I’m here to steal the family secrets, the Blood Red rose? Or is it to be Cardinal this year, or Ruby Queen, or—but wait, you wouldn’t tell me, would you?”

Her eyes danced. Definitely amused, Henry thought. He really ought to go to Mary’s rescue, but he was inclined to let her flounder in some well-deserved discomfort.

“I. We. That is, you must admit...”

“That people at Edgcroft would behave as rudely as you all have if you turned up unannounced? I fear that is likely. All for this foolish feud. Can we call truce, Lady Eckelston, and allow your brother to continue grappling with the strands of his newly acquired duchy?”

Lady Margaret understood his predicament better than anyone at Roseleigh Hall. Henry smiled at that. She smiled back, and something around his heart gave a squeeze. *Foolish feud indeed.*

“I actually came to ask if I might make use of your library while I’m waiting for the weather to turn.” Lady Margaret leaned confidentially toward Mary. “If I confine myself there, you won’t have to worry that I’m prowling about seeking to uncover your secrets.”

“Of course. I’ll show you.” Mary walked to the door.

“We’ll leave you to your work, Your Grace,” Lady Margaret said with a graceful curtsey. “You have much weighing you down.”

*How could she know that?* he wondered. He longed to follow her to the library. He turned back to his desk instead.

Perhaps he would have five minutes after dinner for something other than sheep, pigs, turnips, and corn. And roses.



## CHAPTER FOUR

THE FAMED ROSELEIGH library did not disappoint. Soaring a full two stories, it contained books lining three walls, broken in the center by a balcony reached by stairs on each of the two ends. One of the book-lined walls sheltered a fireplace—an Adam, she suspected—with a valiantly, if ineffectively, burning fire. She wrapped her woolen shawl tighter.

The fourth wall had a foundation of low bookcases over which soared three towering mullioned windows, their blocks of clear glass were interspersed with frosted and stained-glass panes. Each of the panes of colored glass was a five-petaled rose—red, of course. The Bradley family wasn't shy about proclaiming their prizewinning ways.

Chairs and tables broke up the broad room into conversational groupings or, more likely, comfortable spaces for reading. Upon closer examination, she noticed that the shelves on the wall facing the windows were open on the lower half to accommodate a nook of sorts. Not wide enough for seating, it created a shelf on which were presented recent newspapers and magazines.

The dark paneling above the shelf featured a grid of nine paintings, each eighteen inches square. She gave a wry laugh. They were, of course, paintings of roses. In this case, the most famous of Roseleigh's winners in the York Rose Show. Small metal plates on the bottom of each proudly revealed its name. *Passion's Dream*. *Her Majesty's Ruby*. *Scarlet Princess*. *Bradley's Cardinal*. And of course, *Blood Red*, the queen of them all. In recent years, Roseleigh had been breeding for dark red. Perhaps they had gone too far. *Midnight Wine* had lost last year to Margaret's father's *Innocent Sprite*, a lovely little ecru-white province rose with tight blossoms, to the earl's everlasting delight.

She scanned the publications and found them a predictable collection of political and horticultural titles. She picked up *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* with a fond smile. Her most recent article, a description of the precious *Anemone pratensis*, more common in the north than previously believed, wouldn't be published for another month. What would the Bradleys think if they knew? Since it wasn't about roses nor in her true name, they would never notice. She set the magazine back down and gave it a fond pat.

Margaret was surprised to find that the bank of shelves to the left of the nook was devoted broadly to agriculture and horticulture rather than merely to rose cultivation, although all the classic titles and some surprising, more obscure titles on rose cultivation also caught her eye. The collection had been assembled with great care, by someone who knew what they were doing. They had every edition of Abbé Rozier's *Cours complet d'agriculture*, including the latest. From what she'd heard moments before about his woes, including spring planting, the duke could benefit from that one. *Dare I point it out?* She wondered if he read French. If he was to continue the family tradition, he would be well advised to learn. The best modern books on rose cultivation were in French.

She ran her hands over familiar titles, pleased to see the latest edition of H. C. Andrew's *Monograph of the Genus Rosa* as well as his other horticultural writings. A lower shelf held annual editions of *Le bon jardinier*, the great French almanac. The books near to hand were current and practical. She cast her eyes upward, wondering what obscure treasures, ancient and foreign, regarding roses and gardens, she might find on the upper levels.

"If you are looking for novels, they are hidden on the top level to the right," Lady Mary Eckelston, her Scottish thistle, said as she waddled in.

*Caught snooping?* Margaret grinned. "What is to the left?"

Lady Mary waved her hand airily. "Who knows."

*The treasures must be shelved there, above the horticulture collection.* An itch to explore overtook Margaret, quickly squashed. The very pregnant Lady Mary might feel obliged to trail up the stairs after her.

The duke's sister continued, "There are fine-art prints to the right of the windows, though, and ladies' magazines just below them. History on the other side."

History would do for a long afternoon in the library. Margaret scanned the shelves, slipping past books from ancient Rome to Britannia to West Africa until she spied a stretch of books just above eye level dedicated to Lancashire. She pulled off a general history of the Lonsdale Hundred and another on the Ribble Valley, both of which dug deep into prehistory for their starting points. She replaced them and settled on *Lancashire: Summary History and Description*.

She glanced over at Lady Mary impatiently paging through *La belle assemblée*. A summary history seemed to promise a skim along the high points, perfect for what promised to be a distracting time.

Margaret adjusted a chair near enough to benefit from the fire but turned so that it also received the sun beaming down from the windows. The smile she sent Lady Mary felt a bit tight, but her shadow had become tiresome. *In any other household, I'd guess they thought I planned to steal the silver. They guard their roses as tightly as Castlereagh guards state secrets. As if I know nothing and need their wisdom to cultivate ours.*

She set her eyes to the book and refused to glance around again. She plodded through sheep and cotton, sea and sands, mills and fields, rewarded when she came to descriptions of the great houses. She paged over to Roseleigh. An artist's conception of a Norman keep, the central block of the house, decorated the first page. The conqueror's minion Henri Bradleigh, appointed Earl of Roseleigh, had built it as a part of the Norman campaign of terror. Soon she was absorbed in various sides in assorted conflicts and their impact on the

family fortunes as well as the house. The Bradleys seemed to land on their feet no matter what happened.

At some point, she must have dozed off. When she opened her eyes, the sun had sunk too low to warm her chair. Lady Mary was gone. She blinked twice at the man leaning on the mantel, Roseleigh himself. Watching her. She realized to her horror that sometime in the afternoon, her slippers had come off; her feet were tucked under her skirts, and her gown was askew. She froze.

“I—That is, I’m sorry if I woke you. I came in for a book,” he said. She found his discomfort at being caught out ogling her reassuring. She sat up slowly and wrapped her shawl around herself, crossing her arms while she tucked her toes in her slippers.

*Reassuring and adorable.* His hair was mussed as if he’d run his fingers through it in frustration. His waistcoat was crooked, his cravat askew. He had obviously come directly from his desk, hadn’t seen to his appearance, and hadn’t expected to find her. He hadn’t left her or made his presence known either.

“I, ah, I’ll just...,” he stuttered.

“Take your time, Your Grace. It is your library.” She bit back her grin. When she stood, a bit of mischief overtook her. She stretched, her arms up over her head in a most unladylike move. If the man was going to look, she may as well give him something to see.

When their eyes met, his were dancing. “If your reading put you to sleep, perhaps I should take care. I’m too busy for a nap.”

“Fetch your book, then, and be quick. I can recommend a few.”

His brows rose.

She smiled sweetly and walked to the shelves covered with agriculture, husbandry, and horticulture. She handed him Rozier’s *Cours complet*. “How is your French?”

“Well enough, madam.” He took the book from her. “Agriculture, Lady Margaret? Are you an expert in estate management?”

“My dear duke, you would be surprised.”

He caught his bottom lip in his teeth and studied her face before he said, “I begin to think nothing you do would surprise me.”

His dancing eyes did strange things to her midsection, and she found she couldn’t look away.

Lady Eckelston chose that unfortunate moment to return. “Henry! I didn’t expect to find you here.” She darted glances between the two of them, both disheveled, hair disturbed, and cheeks pink.

*Oh dear. Lady Eckelston is leaping to unfortunate conclusions.* Margaret feared a scandal was brewing.

“I’ve pored over planning until my eyes crossed. I need a walk. Lady Margaret was about to join me,” the duke said before Margaret could think of a diversion.

His sister cast a suspicious glance at Margaret. “In the snow?”

He gazed at her, brows raised in challenge.

“Don’t be silly, Lady Eckelston. You won’t want me near that glasshouse of yours. He meant to give me a tour of this great pile of a house.”



THE SIGHT OF Lady Margaret Ansel, shoeless and curled up like a puppy, asleep in his grandfather’s library poleaxed Henry. He couldn’t breathe; he gaped at the sight like a foolish schoolboy who’d never seen a woman before. Henry knew he had never seen one quite like this one: tall and lithe, strong and confident, clever and aware. To that list, he added alluring. Enthralling. Beautiful.

When she'd woken and he had been caught intruding on her privacy, he had frozen in place, too mortified to speak yet too fascinated to turn his back as a gentleman ought. He stuttered some monosyllables without knowing what he meant to say.

Now he found himself swept along with Lady Margaret on his arm, delighted if a bit uncertain how he had managed it.

"You've already seen the great treasure of Roseleigh, the library," he said.

Her amused lift of a brow shot through him. "Not the glasshouse?" It was a challenge.

"That is a treasure of a different sort," he replied.

"One you don't plan to show me," she teased.

"Why, Lady Margaret, it is a good distance from the house. I wouldn't risk your slippers on the walk." He returned her teasing grin.

She opened her mouth to retort to that bit of nonsense but obviously thought better of it. She fell back on history instead. "I gather this was originally a Norman keep," she said.

"It still is, at least in part," he laughed. "You saw the entrance." He led her back there. "This great block of stone walls is the center core of the house. I think it is meant to remind all and sundry what great medieval warriors we were," he said.

"Were or are?" she asked.

"Bradley men do their service to king and country in every generation. I did," he said, pushing memories away.

"Harry didn't," she said, using his cousin's given name.

*What sort of relationship did she have with Harry if she made free with his given name?* An unexpected rush of jealousy lent bitterness to his voice. "The heir couldn't possibly be sent into danger. Ironic, isn't it?" he replied.

“Lady Mary told me what happened. Irony is him killing himself in some damned fool attempt to jump a fallen tree without making sure what was on the other side.” She shook her head. “Typical of him. Too arrogant, too impulsive, too impervious to advice.”

“Ah. You knew him well.” *Not fond of him, then.* Relief brought a smile. Henry had been fond of his cousin but knew his faults all too well. He didn’t like to think that Lady Margaret might be blind to Harry’s character.

She gave him a peculiar glance under her lashes. “Well enough. We both served on the York Rose Council. He tried to have me removed.”

“Why would he do that?” Henry asked.

“He said that a woman didn’t belong on the council. The truth is I challenged his opinions too many times. He didn’t succeed.” She spoke while peering around at the weapons adorning the walls of the medieval entrance. “Is that halberd as old as it looks?” She touched one finger to the particularly nasty weapon. Less decorative than later examples of the type, it had a sharp ax on one side, a viciously jagged hook on the other, and a sharp point for jabbing on the end.

“If you think it looks five hundred years old, then yes, it is. Grandfather told me it is the pride of the collection. Some early Bradley carried it into battle.”

“Richard III was cut down by a halberd,” she murmured.

*As well read as she is intelligent.* “Only if they knocked him off his horse first!” he retorted.

“Grim era. As interesting as the ancient stones are, I don’t think I would have cared to live in the keep.” She shuddered. “When were the changes made?”

“The set of drawing rooms on one side and the wing on the other that houses guest rooms now were added under the first George. Building continued through the last century, culminating in the massive construction across the back.

Family suites parallel the guest wing, and major public rooms were added. You've already seen the library and dining room."

"When was the glasshouse built?" she asked.

He refused to be baited on that subject. "Let me show you our modest ball and music room. The floor is particularly lovely."

Lady Margaret duly admired the parquetry in the ballroom, and Henry admired Lady Margaret. She swirled in a silent dance all her own, taking in the crystal chandeliers and wall sconces, the musician platform, and the French doors. He didn't know what she imagined, but his mind's eye saw her. In his arms. Her attention entirely his.

The heat in her smile when they continued gave him cause to wonder if her thoughts had been similar. He might have been mistaken. "I read there is a gallery of family portraits."

"Above us. I'll show you the family stairs."

"If it is part of the private family quarters..." she demurred.

"Not at all. In fact, it opens onto the upper level of the library. There are sitting rooms as well upstairs." He led the way.

The stairs let out into the gallery, which ran the length of the George I build and the older portion of the house. "Then where are the ducal quarters?" she asked.

"My rooms are—" He made a vague gesture, meeting her eyes. "—beyond." He swallowed hard. "The, ah, pictures are roughly chronological. The oldest are, ah, at that end."



## CHAPTER FIVE

MARGARET REMEMBERED HENRY as a lanky, half-grown boy running wild in York while his cousin Henry strutted through events like the princeling he was. Even now, she found it hard to picture Henry as the Duke of Roseleigh. And yet his confident masculinity drew her. She found his faint flush at the mention of his private quarters charming; something deeply feminine inside her responded to his obvious attraction. It would give her father palpitations.

They began in the middle, among lush paintings of men in armor and women with plunging necklines and voluminous gowns. She peered at each, searching for this Henry's rugged good looks in their faces but finding little. "Not much family resemblance," she murmured.

Henry, who appeared to know them well, introduced each as a so-many-times great-grandparent or -uncle, sometimes with a naughty story.

They moved toward the beginning and came to a few sixteenth-century courtiers in Tudor doublets and hose, necks bound in ruffs. And the ladies... "It is a wonder they could move, much less dance, in those boardlike bodices and farthingales," she murmured.

"But dance they did if what the histories tell us is true. Their headdresses look like they are in boxes," he replied, eyeing her as if imagining her head wrapped in one.

She tipped her head coyly, and he laughed. They came to men in flowing robes and big hats, grim-faced next to wives with hair bound by linen strips under stiff head gear. "Those must be the lot who lived in the keep," she said.

"No doubt. Damp and cold." He grinned, and her heart took a leap. "Look at this one. The keep itself, seat of the Earls

of Roseleigh, fierce defenders of Norman sovereignty in this part of the island.” He indicated a small painting of the ancient castle, executed in a strong hand and portrayed with a stormy sky behind.

“That looks like the illustration in the book I read.”

“It has been much copied. Last of all is the grandson—or perhaps great-nephew—of its builder, Adolfus Bradleigh, the second Earl,” he said.

“We have a copy of his portrait in our gallery,” she murmured.

He cocked up an eyebrow. “Should I be surprised? Maybe not. I’m sure both of our families sprang from two of his branches.”

She gazed at him directly. “Do you know when we went our separate ways and why?”

“It is in the natural order of things for families to expand into different directions, isn’t it? At some point, a younger son must have been rewarded with a title. Henry VIII sold enough of them.” He paused, glanced back at the line of paintings, and bit his lower lip as if considering the matter. He’d revealed that endearing habit before. “Are there any others you have copies of?”

“None, though a few bear some resemblance in the sixteenth century. Perhaps you’re correct,” she said.

He offered his arm. “Shall we go to the other end and take a look at the most recent ones?”

She studied the passing generations as they walked to the other end. They came to what she suspected was the early Georgian time, perhaps when work on the manor had flourished. Roses began to appear; she’d been watching for them. From that point, every painting had one, or a vaseful, or an entire bush, usually in shades of red. She gazed at them sharply and was certain. Every one. She stopped in her tracks and walked back. “There. That’s where it starts. Can you see it?”

He peered at the painting of the third duke. After a moment, he shrugged. “Still little resemblance.”

“He’s holding a red rose. Every painting from this one on has roses,” she said.

“Are your family’s the same?” he asked, his warm eyes boring into her.

She couldn’t have lied if she wanted to. “I have no idea. I’ve never noticed. Perhaps we take them for granted.”

“Perhaps we do,” he replied. “Do you think this is where the competition began?”

“Competition? You mean feud, don’t you, Your Grace?” she said bitterly. “Sniping, cheating, gloating...”

“I didn’t realize how bad it had grown until I became Roseleigh. I’ve heard nothing since the day of the funeral but roses. Roses and, frankly, cautions about your father and your family.”

“As a child, I found it amusing, a little friendly competition. Then I began growing them. When my father realized the quality of my work, he began pressuring me to create winning cultivars. From the time I first attended the York Rose Council, I’ve been horrified by the cutthroat competition. Since our two families win the bulk of the time, it is always engendered or fed by one or the other of us. Your cousin Harry—” She bit back her words.

“What about him?”

“It is not good to speak ill of the dead. Suffice to say he liked to win. By the way, the flower show dates to the 1750s. I would guess the feud began soon after,” she said.

“Feud.” His brows drew together.

“What would you call it?”

“War?” he suggested.

She chuckled ruefully. “Perhaps. You’re the head of your family now. How do we call a truce?”

“I may be the duke, but I doubt if I could stop it. Would your father listen?”

“Not likely.”

“There we are, then. Let’s go back down, and I’ll show you my favorite painting. It is in my study. I suspect it has roses. I always thought the roses everywhere were a play on our name.”

She reached over and put a hand on his arm. “It probably is. I’ve heard my father complain that your title gave your family an unfair advantage.”

His eyes met hers, and he covered her hand with his. “Do you suppose you and I could declare our own truce? Do you think the others would follow?”

He swayed a bit, and she thought he might kiss her. When he turned away and led her in the direction of the stairs, her heart sank.

*Don’t be a ninny, Margaret. You’ve been here less than a day. Besides, that way lies heartbreak and no end of conflict. She didn’t care. She really wanted his kiss.*



HENRY STARED INTO his shaving mirror while Carter, the valet he’d inherited along with the title, stood stoically behind him, waiting to finish grooming him for dinner.

His familiar features always struck him as unremarkable, yet he’d caught Margaret—Lady Margaret—studying him several times the day before. She looked for family resemblance, of course; that must be it. There wasn’t much. Henry got his looks from his mother. Bradleys passed on many things, but their features were not among them.

Did she find him pleasing? For a moment at the top of the stairs, he’d thought so. He certainly found her so. He had almost kissed her. Wouldn’t that just fuel the feud?

He turned and let Carter see to his unruly hair and create a masterful knot in his cravat.

*Would a kiss do harm, Henry? Surely not. And what if it led, as such things do, to more? Would a relationship between you cause dissention? Or would it heal old conflicts?* He wouldn't have thought about it before, but now he wondered. Problem number six still loomed over Roseleigh: Find a wife. If he'd drawn up a list of the qualities he wanted in a partner, he suspected Lady Margaret would fit the bill perfectly. It was too soon, but worth considering. He went down to breakfast with a spring in his step, whistling.

Aunt Blanche held court at the head of the table, Mary to one side and Eckelston to the other. *Did they all hasten down to face me as a group?* His aunt glared up at him. "Roseleigh. I didn't expect you; I thought you'd eat in your office."

He bowed respectfully. "As you see, I decided to eat with family."

"You haven't met with Jones yet." Aunt Blanche got down to grievance quickly.

"I have had too many other things to do," he said, nodding to Givens, who made haste to pour his coffee while he sent the footman scurrying to fill a plate.

His aunt sniffed. "You had time to parade that woman around the manor."

"I did indeed. Lady Margaret had been left on her own all day. I thought one of us ought to make her welcome," he said.

Aunt Blanche pursed her lips and frowned at him. "From what Mary told me, you made her very welcome indeed."

Mary blushed and kept her eyes on her food. What was that about? He had to think for a moment, but then he remembered his disheveled state, Margaret's disarranged gown, and the look on his sister's face when she'd come in. *Oh dear. Scandal already and I haven't even done anything.*

“I notice our guest isn’t here this morning,” he said. “She must be sleeping late.”

“Up with the birds, that one. I told her the snow is melted and the weather improving. I suggested she leave this morning while she can,” his aunt said. She raised her chin in self-satisfied defiance.

Henry threw down his serviette and pushed himself up, both hands on the table. “Suggested? I won’t be surprised if you have footmen assigned to assist her out the door.”

A flash of disquiet crossed his aunt’s face so quickly he may have imagined it. He didn’t wait to find out. He was out the door, his breakfast uneaten.

He found his guest’s quarters in an uproar. He did not, of course, enter her room. He spoke to the maid at the door. “Kindly ask your mistress if I may have a word.”

Lady Margaret’s face appeared over her maid’s shoulder. “Spoke to your aunt, did you?”

“Listened, more like. I apologize for my family’s rudeness. Please don’t leave.” He wasn’t certain that was proper; he didn’t care.

She glanced at the maid, who scuttled discreetly away. “I never intended to stay at all. If the roads are clear and the skies no longer threatening, I am best advised to be on my way.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“That I should leave? Yes.”

“That the roads are clear,” he said, holding his breath.

Her brows rose slowly, and a naughty grin bloomed as slowly as a rose. “It never hurts to be careful.”

“Perhaps we should investigate. We could walk,” he said.

“Outside?”

“I’ll give you a tour of the Roseleigh gardens,” he said. *She’ll need her imagination. Snow covers everything.* He bit

his lower lip.

She raised a finger, and for a moment, he thought she meant to touch his mouth. “You did it again,” she murmured.

“Will you go?”

“How can I resist Roseleigh...gardens?”

Within minutes, she was dressed in her warmest cloak and sturdy boots. Her soft bonnet, he noted, had a white rose badge created in skilled needlework. He glanced at it pointedly, lips twitching. He winged his arm, and with a pause while a footman fetched his greatcoat, they were on their way.

Gardeners had cleared paths through both the formal and the casual gardens, leaving the plants under their warm blanket of snow. He led her to the eastern rose beds. Mounds of snow lay over the bushes, some of which were higher than his shoulders.

“The roses are arranged by variety. This bed features various damask roses, for example, and on our other side is a bed of various Gallica roses. As you can see.” He bit back a laugh and his joke.

“But, Your Grace, your roses are all white! I would not have expected that at Roseleigh. When did you begin breeding white roses?” she asked, batting her eyes in faux innocence.

“Threatened that we might steal your thunder, Lady Margaret?” he asked.

“Flattered, I would say!” she replied.

He sighed dramatically. “Alas, under their fine white coat, you would find a riot of color come May—maroon, pink, every possible shade of red—but no white.”

She shook her head. “Such a pity, to cut your joy off that way. Come to Dove Abbey. The shades of white will astound you in their variety. But no red.”

Henry sobered. “It truly is a pity. The whole thing has reached ludicrous proportions.”

“Would you come, then?”

*Yes.* The word was on the tip of his tongue. He sighed. “Not this year, not next spring. Roseleigh needs me, and Parliament will likely demand my presence to confirm me in the title. I may not even make it to York next June, or I would say I’d see you then. Someday, perhaps.”

Was the regret in her eyes real or a reflection of his own? “Someday, then. It would go a long way to put period to this stupid feud.”

He loosened his arm, letting her hand slide down until he took it in his, and they continued their walk. Without conscious thought, his feet carried him, still grasping Margaret’s hand, beyond the taller bushes and the stand of trees. To the glasshouse on the south-facing slope.



## CHAPTER SIX

DISAPPOINTMENT THICKENED IN Margaret's throat. *Did you really think he would come to Dove Abbey on the basis of an informal invitation? His family would have his head.*

Neither one of them had much to say after that. Wrapped up in her own emotions and conscious of the sensations flowing from her hand wrapped in his, she paid little attention to their direction until he led her past the mounded snow of the gardens to a path through trees, skeletal in their winter sleep. The well-trodden ground told her this path led somewhere important. Her heart quickened.

Roseleigh was situated on the north side of a slope. He led her south, through a walled garden she assumed to be the kitchen garden, and over the rise, and there it was, Roseleigh's magnificent glasshouse glittering in the sun.

There he paused, his gaze filled with pride, and she couldn't fault him. The central block rose two stories high, long wings stretched east and west, a shorter one south. The center and long wings were made of glass from the foot-high foundation, a palace of crystal. The south wing was brick halfway up. Taken as a whole, it made Dove Abbey's modest glasshouse look like a potting shed.

"Come," he said. "Let's get warm."

Snow disappeared as they neared the place, revealing paving stones all along the glasshouse. When he opened the door, the same stones continued to form the floor of the central conservatory. It was, as she expected, more orangery than palm house, filled as it was with fruit trees. A tall apple tree sat in the middle, surrounded by small ones she thought were apricot, pear, and orange. Berry bushes lined the walls.

“The west wing grows pineapples, herbs, and vegetables for our table. Would you care to take a look?” he asked.

Margaret couldn't reply. She stared up at the gracefully arching glass ceiling and the bountiful trees. “Miraculous,” she murmured.

As she circled the conservatory, she could feel his eyes following her. He stood patiently by the door to the west wing, arms folded. When she approached, he held out his hand, and she gave him hers. He searched her face with tender concentration. He had promised warmth, and Margaret felt the heat of his eyes and hand.

“You're flushed,” he said without breaking eye contact. “You must be too warm.”

She took back her hand and unwrapped her scarf. Her fingers went up to unbutton her cloak, but he got there first, removing it and folding it over his arm. “There is a coal-fired steam heater at the far east end. You'll have noticed the iron grillwork along the floor. It isn't there for decoration.”

She hadn't. She studied it now, peering along the length of the west wing. The grill work ran the entire way down the center. It circled the central conservatory. She leaned over and gasped when she felt the warmth rising from it. “A modern marvel,” she said.

“It is that. Grandpapa was always fascinated by progress. And of course, updates came to the glasshouse first before the manor.” He shrugged ruefully and held out his hand again. “Shall we look at pineapples?”

She glanced back toward the east wing. The door that she noted was shut she was certain housed rose cultivation. She nodded and let him lead her in the other direction. A gardening assistant watering an herb bed bowed to them. Beds of fresh vegetables pleased eye and soul. “No wonder meals at Roseleigh are so wonderful.”

“A brilliant cook doesn't hurt,” he replied. “Kitchen staff work out here as well.”

The pineapples smelled wonderful, and their appearance amazed her. “We haven’t tried to grow them,” she murmured.

Henry turned to the worker. “Edward, see that there is pineapple at dinner tonight.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the boy said.

“Now you have to stay,” Henry said, turning to Margaret.

“You’re very sure of yourself.”

“I am. I’m a duke. It is part of the job.” He ran a hand across the back of his neck. “How I wish that were true. I had only the vaguest idea how much Grandpapa carried on his shoulders. Now it all falls on mine.”

“I know. Family pressure and feuds don’t help. I should leave,” she said.

“Please don’t. Our walks are the most relaxing times I’ve had since they called me home six weeks ago. You’re the only person who doesn’t want something from me,” he said, grasping her hand more tightly.

*Do I want something from him? Surely not, or at least not what his aunt fears.* She found she very much wanted the feel of his hand holding hers. She wanted his kiss. “I’ve enjoyed them too, Your Grace, but I can’t stay forever. I should go.”

His free hand cupped her cheek. “Are you sure, Margaret?” he whispered.

*No good can come of this.* “Maybe one night. I’ll leave in the morning.”

He glanced sideways at the gardener studiously concentrating on the planting beds, before dropping a kiss as tender as it was brief.



*I CAN GIVE myself one morning,* he thought rebelliously. The pleasure of a beautiful woman, her hand in his, soothed his

weary soul. It wasn't a stroll through a park or even a garden, but the Roseleigh glasshouse came close.

At least it would if they weren't staring at lettuce and eggplant. He picked up the pace back toward the center. With sun pouring through the roof, and surrounded by trees, he could imagine they were at Hyde Park—or at least a country orchard. They came around the center with its stand of trees and found Jones posted in the entrance to the east wing with a pained expression. He bowed correctly when they approached.

“May I have a moment, Your Grace?” Jones asked.

Henry gestured Lady Margaret toward an ornate bench between the berry bushes. “This will be brief,” he said. The smile she returned warmed his heart.

Jones stepped back into the east wing of the glasshouse and pulled the ornate glass door shut, scowling at it as if it was Lady Margaret. “I had hoped to meet with you before this, Your Grace. Did Lady Blanche forget to convey my requests?”

“My aunt has been vociferous on your behalf, Mr. Jones, but as you can imagine, there are many seeking my attention. I simply haven't gotten to it yet.”

The little man rocked up on his toes, huffed out his chest, and gazed up at Henry directly. “Cultivation efforts are of primary priority at Roseleigh, Your Grace, as I'm sure you will realize when you have been in place longer,” he said.

“I am inclined to put seeing to the well-being of my tenants ahead of my flowers, Mr. Jones.”

Jones gave a dismissive sniff. “You may not be aware, but that woman is not at all the thing. She should not be here.” The man gave Henry the impression that Lady Margaret's presence in his domain shocked him to his toes.

Henry ignored his discourse on Lady Margaret. “What is so urgent that you must speak to me immediately? Is the grass breaking? Mold running amok? Weasels tunneling under the floor?”

Jones blanched, as if any one of those disasters would give him palpitations. “I should say not! We care for the glasshouse and its contents punctiliously. It is vital, however, that we have the support and attentive care of the Duke of Roseleigh.”

“I repeat, Jones, what is it you wish to show me so urgently?”

“You must be informed about our current cultivation effort, the rose we will announce in York in June. You must understand our processes and challenges in order to...”

“Give you the respect and attention you crave?” Henry asked. It was unnecessarily cruel.

Jones turned a shade of maroon that struck at Henry’s conscience. He had let irritation override his sense. *You’re not everyman now, Henry. The words of a duke cut deeply.*

“Very well. I will lay aside tomorrow afternoon. The entire time is at your disposal. Will that work for you?” Henry asked.

Only slightly mollified, Jones nodded. Henry would have work to do if he wanted to soothe this man’s feelings. He wasn’t entirely sure he cared. The pompous gardener grated on his nerves. Henry peered down the east wing, searching for something else to say. A wooden wall closed off the end. “Am I right in assuming that is your laboratory, Jones?” he asked with a gesture toward it.

“Of course, Your Grace! It is vital that it be kept private. I would beg you not to walk your guest around it,” Jones replied.

Obviously, the walls were glass. A walk around would be as good as a trip through the door. Already sick of all the secrecy, he was tempted to do exactly that. Henry’s irritation with Jones and with the entire competition over the benighted roses grew. He swallowed the reprimand on the tip of his tongue. There was no point in antagonizing the man until he knew more.

“The rest of this wing is devoted to flowers. Would it be possible to give our guest a tour? You could explain your

various triumphs.” Henry regretted that last comment, one sure to bring out the head gardener’s worst.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Jones replied through tight lips.

Henry opened the door and beckoned his guest. “Lady Margaret Ansel, may I introduce Mr. Amos Jones, Roseleigh’s head gardener.”

Jones inclined his head in an obeisance that was almost proper and murmured, “Honored,” under his breath.

“I’m honored, Mr. Jones. Your fame precedes you. I read your article in *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine* last summer. Well done, as always.” She gazed around in awe at the long gallery lined on both sides with roses of various sizes and shapes, most of them red, sometimes bordered by smaller plants.

Jones preened a bit. “We maintain a collection of our most successful cultivars in this gallery of the glasshouse. For our own use. Occasionally—rarely—we share the hips with discerning breeders who request seeds.”

Lady Margaret’s eyes widened, and Jones looked entirely too smug. Henry didn’t understand the byplay, but the lady smiled sweetly. “I won’t expect you to share with the Earl of Edgecote’s daughter,” she said.

Jones gave a slight bow, a smile teasing his lips. “Actually, my lady, I would be happy to share the seeds of Blood Red, the queen of our collection, with you.” He set action to words, clipping three orange rose hips from the plant.

“I’m most grateful, Mr. Jones,” she said. “I know you guard your generational charts closely, but I don’t suppose you would share the parental cross for Blood Red.”

“Why, Lady Margaret,” Jones said coyly, “that would be telling.” What was the man up to?

They walked the length of the wing down one side. Margaret asked questions Henry didn’t understand or care to. He preferred listening to her demonstrate expertise while

flattering Jones. The man became quite vociferous when encouraged to show off his knowledge.

Margaret gave the firmly closed door no attention at all when they reached the end. Jones turned to the other side, speaking confidentially to Henry, leaving their guest briefly next to a small shrubby bush with bright-red single-petal blooms, one Jones hadn't bothered to mention. Moments later, she swept up the other side and joined the conversation.

"May I say, my lady, you ask excellent questions. For a woman, you are quite knowledgeable. You must spend time with your father's expert staff," Jones conceded with obvious generosity—and no little pretension.

Lady Margaret's face became a mask of humility. Henry suspected he might be the only one who caught the gleam in her eye. "My dear Mr. Jones. I bow to your superior status, but I must make a confession. I am my father's expert staff. I am Edgecote's head rose breeder."

Color drained from Amos Jones's face. "You? A woman is Edgecote's breeder? Did you create Innocent Sprite?" he gasped, shaking with outrage.

She bit her lip and tipped her head down. "For my sins, yes."

Henry intervened quickly before Jones could explode. "We best be on our way, my lady," he said.



AN HOUR LATER Henry escorted Margaret to her traveling coach with her maid and a hamper of delicacies from Roseleigh's kitchen and orangery. She had changed her mind, and he couldn't convince her otherwise. He extended a hand to help her up.

"Are you sure I can't persuade you to stay?" he asked.

The pleading in his voice warmed her heart almost as much as the feel of his hand—holding hers much longer than

needed—warmed the rest of her. She definitely needed to leave before they became more entangled.

“Jones will have told all and sundry that I bred the rose that took the crown from Roseleigh last year. It was a knife to his heart. I best leave, or you’ll have time for nothing else but rescuing me. Thank you for your hospitality, and for showing me Roseleigh’s magnificent glasshouse.”

Moments later she sank against the cushions, and the coach pulled away. It was just midday, and they could make good time before dark. Her mind swirled in circles, and plans began to form. Her father would, of course, be furious.

She opened her reticule and pulled out the rose hips wrapped in a scrap of lace, Blood Red’s offspring. She would germinate them, of course, but given Jones’s generosity, she felt certain they would not breed true. There’d be color anomalies or perhaps disease-prone seedlings. She rewrapped them, put them in a drawer of her traveling desk, and reached into her pocket, pulling out three little cuttings, two with rose hips attached.

A slow smile came over her. Jones had given her just enough time to grab her small pruning knife from her reticule and cut them from the shrubby little rosebush with the bright-red single-petal blooms, the one Jones didn’t bother to describe. The mother plant of Roseleigh. The variety behind their many successful crosses. She was sure of it. She wrapped them in a piece of tissue, labeled it MR, and put it in a different drawer. She would find a way to keep the rose hips moist when they stopped.

What she had in mind might take a season or two to manage, but she looked forward to it with relish. She wondered if Henry would reconsider her invitation. She wondered if he would welcome her back. After today, she wondered if he would forgive her.

## **PART TWO**

### **Henry's Sixth Problem**

For thou hast given me in this beauteous face a world  
of earthly blessings to my soul.

—Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 2*



## CHAPTER ONE

*York, June 1819*

THE DUKE OF Roseleigh, duly confirmed in his title, strode through the York Rose Show with confidence and grace, his eyes scanning the crowd. He reached the council table, and the staff scrambled to their feet to bow and welcome him.

“Your grandfather is sorely missed, Your Grace,” the master of the Rose Council, Martin Grey, said, eyeing the black armband on Henry’s sleeve. “May we hope you will attend our spring meeting next March with Mr. Jones once your year of mourning is over?”

*Spring meeting?* Henry groaned inwardly. How much of his life would these roses take? He handed over the entry papers Jones had meticulously prepared.

“The Earl of Edgecote will attend, of course,” the master continued. “One wonders if his new head rosarian will be up to snuff.”

*Rosarian? Of course—one who cultivates roses. Edgecote has a new one? What about Margaret?* Henry panicked momentarily. It was the thought of seeing her again that gave him motivation to come. It was on the tip of his tongue to demand that the sycophant explain what he meant, but he held back. The man’s entire purpose in mentioning Edgecote was to pressure Henry into attending his blasted meeting. Henry wasn’t about to reveal his interest in Lady Margaret Ansel.

“Jones manages ably. I will, of course, discuss the council with him,” Henry said, accepting an owner’s badge and ribbon with an inclination of his head.

Grey spoke before Henry could walk away. “We hope half mourning won’t keep Lady Blanche from the Rose Ball this

evening. We so look forward to seeing her every year. Do you know if she plans to attend?"

*Napoleon's army couldn't keep her away.* "I believe she plans to attend at least briefly. She assures me she will not dance but simply put in an appearance. I promised to escort her."

They had come to an agreement, Aunt Blanche and Henry. She would continue to consult with Jones in matters having to do with roses and the glasshouse, and Henry would escort her to York for the Rose Show and Ball. Aunt Blanche for her part would remove herself to a comfortable cottage ten miles from Roseleigh as soon as they returned. It was ready now. Henry had made sure of it. In the meantime, Mary would oversee his house, though she pouted about leaving her husband in London before the Season ended so she could accompany Henry home.

He returned to the Roseleigh box on the garden grounds.

"Is all well? You submitted our entry?" Aunt Blanche asked. "What did Martin—Mr. Grey—have to say?" She blushed—a faint pink but definitely a blush.

*Well, well.* Now that he thought of it, there'd been something wistful in Martin Grey's question about Aunt Blanche. Whatever it was, Henry planned to encourage it. "He asked if you were going to attend the Rose Ball. I assured him you would put in an appearance."

Aunt Blanche frowned.

"Pity we can't dance. I've never been to the Rose Ball," Mary said. Aunt Blanche's frown deepened.

"There will be other years," Henry sighed. "I understand Grandpapa also attended some sort of spring meeting. Something about planning the June show. Are there parties then too?"

"Of course!" Aunt Blanche snapped, her expression calculating.

“You are obviously welcome to attend. My presence is expected, I gather. I was informed the Earl of Edgecote will be there.”

Mary bounced in her seat. “That reminds me. I heard a bit of delicious gossip in the ladies’ withdrawing room an hour ago. That daughter of his—the one that claimed she came for Grandpapa’s funeral—parted ways with Edgecote after she went home.”

Aunt Blanche frowned and pursed her lips tightly. “Unmarried ladies of breeding do not ‘part ways’ with their father’s house. It isn’t done, even if they are a bit long in the tooth as Margaret Ansel clearly is. Besides, I assumed that she gleefully shared every secret she managed to pry out of Jones with Edgecote. I expect her here preening over her accomplishments.”

“That’s the thing. She isn’t even here this year, and the rumor is she maintains an independent household. She’s at least twenty-five; she came of age over winter and came into a bequest from her grandmother.” Mary leaned in and whispered, “Edgecote was reputed to be furious with her.”

Henry’s mind raced. His hope of seeing her that day disintegrated. “Where?” he asked.

“Where did I hear it?” Mary asked.

“Where does she live?” Henry asked.

“Northumberland,” Mary responded.

“Disgraceful!” Aunt Blanche spat at the same time. “I knew that woman was not at all respectable. Her behavior at Roseleigh was—”

“Unexceptional.” Henry glared her into quiet. He’d gotten adept at that in the past several months.

Mary shot a knowing glance at Henry but kept quiet. She stood and pointedly avoided glancing at Aunt Blanche. “I am going to look in on the baby.”

By “look in,” Henry suspected she meant feed. Mary had taken the unfashionable decision to breastfeed, one Henry applauded and Aunt Blanche vociferously disapproved. “Kiss little Algernon for me,” he said with a teasing grin.

“You may kiss Henrietta yourself this evening before the ball,” Mary retorted. “Your niece loves it when you do.”

*If I go to the ball.* With assurance Margaret Ansel would not be in attendance, he wasn’t entirely sure he would go. He sighed. Of course he would go. He had agreed to escort Aunt Blanche.

Jones rushed over just then, and he had no more time to consider the matter. Judging had begun. Following Jones and a shockingly fluttery Aunt Blanche, he discovered the winners were to be announced at the ball. He had to attend.



MARGARET, IN A plain gray dress and dark cloak, slipped into the York Assembly Hall through a back door, then the offices, to the recess between the offices and the kitchen, where a narrow door opened to the grand assembly room and a musicians’ gallery had been nestled between the columns. She flattened herself against the wall and ignored curious glances from the musicians. From there she could hear the announcements and perhaps see the raised dais at the far end of the room, where the council officers would sit.

She had come to hear the results, unable to stay away. She’d managed a quick look in late afternoon when the crowds had thinned and the cream of society had already returned to their lodgings to prepare for the ball. The Edgecote rose, a washed-out white, had none of the life she’d put into Innocent Sprite, with its faint blush of peach in its heart, the previous year. Father disapproved of that blush. He’d pushed the gardeners back to bright white.

Staring at her toes, she berated herself for the tenth time. Coming to York had been a terrible idea. She’d walked out of

her father's house in January to his irate disapproval. If he saw her here, he'd chastise her publicly and cause a scene.

The music continued, soothing her jangled nerves until she saw something that made her heart speed up. Henry strolled past the musicians with some delicate flower of York womanhood on his arm. At least he wasn't dancing. *Of course he isn't—it is less than a year since his grandfather's death.* She wanted to pull the little miss's hair out.

Margaret's heart sank. Could she be so jealous of some debutante she'd never even met? Over a man she'd spent one lovely afternoon and one even lovelier morning with? Of course he would look over the current crop. A duke required a wife and heirs, and he would inevitably look for a young woman of breeding.

*You're an earl's daughter, for heaven's sake. Perfectly eligible. If only you weren't too old, too tall, too intellectual, too busy about your own project.* Perhaps she could finish what she'd started on time for next year and she would come and enter on her own. *Then... But by then, he will likely be married.*

He strolled past, and she absorbed him with her eyes. *You should have told him what you did and why. You should have told him what...*

He walked by again. Odd, that. She didn't have time to think about it. The speaker called for attention. There was a flurry of movement and a hum of voices. She couldn't hear as well as she'd hoped. They always began with fifth place. She strained to hear, and then she was sorry. Edgewise's Shining Light came in fifth to tepid applause. The others went by in a blur, and then...

"This year's prize rose is La Reine Rouge, the Duke of Roseleigh's entry."

*Of course it is! The council lacks imagination.* She shook her head. One more red rose. She slid along the wall, around the corner, and back the way she'd come.



WITH HIS ATTENTION on Margaret skulking behind the musicians, Henry almost missed the announcement. Jones hurried to the dais, preening and bowing. A shove from Aunt Blanche sent Henry forward too.

Much bowing, hand shaking, and congratulating kept him at the dais longer than he would have liked. He pushed the ribbon and certificate into Jones's eager hands and made his way through a crowd keen to congratulate the new duke, avid debutantes batting their eyes, and disappointed competitors pretending to be noble in defeat. When he reached the musicians' gallery, she was gone.

He had seen her as soon as she slipped behind the clarinet players. No one else had noticed her, and she seemed eager to avoid that, so he had suppressed the urge to seek her out then and there. He'd been patient long enough.

He went through to the recessed hall between the offices and the kitchen but saw no sign of her. The kitchen lay at the front of the building, and he doubted he'd find an outside door there. Certain she'd come in through the back to avoid being seen, he hurried down the corridor of offices and out into the back street, searching in all directions. Nothing.

Discouraged, he considered returning to the ball, but he couldn't leave any woman alone on the streets at night. Guessing that she would be staying in one of the respectable, but lesser, inns across the river rather than in her father's town house, he set off toward the river at a run. She would have to take a ferry, the lone bridge being at the other end of York.

His guess proved correct. He reached the bank just as a ferry, Margaret on board, pulled away. One great leap landed him on it.

"That'll be extra for the rocking!" the boatman complained. Henry paid him what he asked.

Margaret sat at the stern, her body tense.

He sat down next to her. “Afraid of a scold?”

“Better you than my father, I would guess. I meant to stay in Northumberland, but I couldn’t resist hearing the announcement. Foolish start.” She relaxed a fraction.

“Foolish is walking alone in the city at night,” he said.

“No more foolish than you leaping into the boat,” she retorted tartly.

“Fair enough.” He grinned.

“Did the entire world see me sneak out?”

“Only me. I’d have come directly, but I was being assaulted with applause,” he said.

“I heard that. Let me add mine,” she said.

“You don’t sound particularly enthusiastic. I’m sorry Edgecote didn’t do well.” Her subdued reaction intrigued him.

“Don’t be. This year’s entry was terrible. I worked hard to breed in the peach blush in the heart of Innocent Sprite, last year’s winner. Father had it bred out. As to the council judges, they have no imagination. Red a decade ago. Red two years ago. Red again. If they have their way, it will be red next year.” Her shoulders sagged.

Henry puzzled over her words and her discouraged tone. He suspected her breeding program had an abundance of imagination. He groped for a way to ask.

“Northumberland? Why? Do you enjoy dark, damp winters?” he asked.

“Northumberland because that is where my house is. My grandmother left it to me,” she explained.

“Is it a comfortable house?” he asked, genuinely curious.

“Very,” she replied.

They reached the far bank and clambered out.

She peered up at him slyly. “But it lacked a glasshouse.”

“Pity, that.”

“I made do. Glass can be built into a leaning bed on a south-facing wall,” she told him. “Why did you chase me? I’m perfectly capable of seeing myself home.” She nodded at a man emerging from the shadows. “My footman.”

He had in fact pursued her to see to her safety. Or so he told himself. “I haven’t seen you since December. I wanted a word. Where are you staying?” He took her hand in his.

She let him. A nod had her servant fading back, and she led him up a shadowed street. Joy rose in his heart at her trust. They came to a corner, and she indicated a well-lit hostel across the street. “My inn.”

He pulled her back into the shadows, wrapped one arm around her waist and kissed her well and firmly.

“What...,” she sputtered.

“That’s why I followed you. Unfinished business from your visit to Roseleigh. I’ve longed for it ever since.” He kissed her again more tenderly.

After a moment of hesitation, she responded, her hand coming up to slide into the hair at his temple. His exploration of her mouth grew more intense, and he ran his tongue across her lips until she opened to him. At his entry, she froze, and he stilled. Then she moved on a moan and began to imitate his actions. He leaned back against a brick wall and pulled her against him, his arousal tight against his belly.

When she gave a gentle shove, he loosened his hold but didn’t let go.

“You are kissing me on a public street,” she whispered.

“So I am. Thank goodness for darkness. But yes, this isn’t the place.”

She sighed and leaned her head against his chest. “This will never do.”

“Do you think your father would let me court you properly?” he whispered in her ear.

She stiffened and pulled away. “Never. Nor would your aunt and sister tolerate it.”

“They have naught to say about it. Neither does your father. You’re of age, are you not?” He cupped her cheek with his hand, startled to realize it shook. “We need to put an end to this ridiculous feud. Maybe I can convince the Rose Council to disallow red roses,” he said with a smile.

She started. “I hadn’t thought of that. It might work. No plain red or white. Perhaps a temporary ban. You might be able to convince them. Then I’ll—”

“You’ll what?”

“Come back next June. I’ll show you then. I’ll be here whether I’ve succeeded or failed. We can talk again then. If you still want—”

“My dear Lady Margaret, you are no dewy schoolroom miss. You can tell very well that I want you. I will want you next summer too. But why wait?”

She kissed him then, a swift salute, before pulling back. “We’ll see how you feel next June. I have something to finish. It means too much to me. I need another year.”

“Another year.” He tried to rein in his galloping attraction. “If you need a year, then a year you shall have.”

He tried to pull her close, but she wiggled away. “If you start that again, I won’t leave. I’ll let you toss me over your shoulder and have your wicked way. But I’ll regret it. I know I will.”

He sighed deeply and tweaked a lock of her hair that had come loose. “I’ll give you your year, Margaret. But I will be waiting in York next June, and I’ll expect you to keep your word whether you succeed at what you’re doing or not.”

“I promise,” she whispered and darted across the street. Her loyal servant emerged from the shadows and followed her.

Henry turned on heavy feet to return to his so-called triumph and the Rose Ball.



## CHAPTER TWO

SUMMER FADED INTO fall, and Henry still lay awake night after night thinking of Margaret. His life as Duke of Roseleigh had settled in comfortably. His grandfather had left him a prosperous and well-run estate, and Henry took pride in caring for tenants, managing investments, and overseeing operations with his stellar staff. He even looked forward to the next parliamentary session, confident there was good to be done there.

Aunt Blanche had moved into her new home with less fuss than he might have expected, pleased to represent Roseleigh on the Rose Council. Henry suspected Martin Grey might have something to do with her contentment. Jones, thrilled with another win, went about his work in consultation with Aunt Blanche, happily with little impact on Henry. Mary and Eckelston had been convinced to return to their own home, a process made easier with the expectation of another child. He missed little Henrietta though. He enjoyed teasing Mary by calling her Algernon.

He also missed Margaret. Henry went about his work with confidence and efficiency, but the days loomed long and the nights longer. The truth was he as lonely. He still hadn't addressed problem number six—find a wife. Or, to be accurate, he felt certain that he had found the one he wanted, but had yet to secure her hand.

December brought holidays. Mary, Eckelston, and the wee one came to brighten Henry's days. Aunt Blanche contented herself with a brief visit and even acknowledged with a sniff that the household staff managed well enough in her absence. "You need a wife, Henry. See to it this spring," she ordered as she left. For once, Henry agreed with her.

Twelfth Night passed, and Henry, alone again, sank into gloom with little to look forward to in the long months ahead except the spring meeting of the everlasting Rose Council. His presence, Aunt Blanche and Jones insisted, would be vital. He had also promised Margaret he would request a moratorium on red or white rose winners.

Winter seemed to drag interminably, but like all darkness, eventually came to an end. March came timidly into life. Restless and in need of both exercise and time alone to think, he decided to ride to York for the meeting. The true goal wasn't banning red. No. While it would be wonderful if the minds of the judges should broaden to consider the full palette of colors, the far greater goal was to end the ridiculous feud and court Lady Margaret Ansel without family interference. That was a matter for Lord Edgecote, Aunt Blanche, and the others who continued the nonsense.

Those were Margaret's goals too. At least, he hoped so. He meandered slowly, lost in thought, seeking the best way to approach the council.

*You need help, Henry. You can't do this alone.* He needed Margaret. He came to a fork in the road and took the way north, to Northumberland.



MARGARET STOOPED TO enter the makeshift glasshouse she'd had built against the side of her carriage house. She added wood to the stoves at both ends and thought of Roseleigh's heating system with envy. Footmen could be trusted to keep the fires burning, but she preferred to do it herself twice a day. The modest space required crowding, but it met her needs. Seedlings at various stages, spaced correctly, filled beds. Healthy examples of her sturdy parental cultivars were at the far end of the little room. Her cuttings had taken root quickly. She used both the Roseleigh and Edgecote heritage samples as well as two older cultivars for size.

Bed three, in early bloom, had produced single-petaled pink blooms. She would have to burn the samples as she did all her failures. She would freshen the soil and try again.

Bed seven held her current hopes. The small plants, which had germinated two months before, had tight white buds. In a day or two, she would know if she had succeeded in her primary goal.

The lush blooms in bed five, a dark raspberry sort of pink with gray overtones, pleased her; she would keep them. They weren't what she'd set out to do, however. She continued to strive. In two beds, seeds had yet to germinate. In three, sprouts and young plants as yet had no sign of budding. There was time. The York Rose Show was still six months away.

"Lady Margaret? Wilson sent me to fetch you." Jeremy, her youngest footman, carefully closed the door and came around the flap designed to keep cold air out.

"What is it, Jeremy?" she asked.

"A gentleman has come to call, my lady. A duke." The boy's awe vibrated in his words.

*Duke. It can only be Henry.* Her heart raced, and her thoughts skipped between delight and irritation that he hadn't allowed her the full year she'd requested.

"Send Miss Mullens to the drawing room, Jeremy, while I clean up." Her mother's cousin Ellen Mullens, a quiet, contented sort of woman, had come to be her companion. She met Margaret at the door to the drawing room with a serene nod.

She found him pacing the room, dressed for riding and obviously weary from travel. Even travel-stained with a day's growth of beard, his attractiveness made her senses tingle. "Tea, Wilson, and sandwiches too, I think. His Grace must be hungry."

He spun toward her at the sound of her voice, his avid gaze devouring her. *Hungry indeed.*

She curtsayed properly and introduced Ellen, who scurried to a chair in the corner and picked up her needlework. Margaret held out a hand. "Come, sit. Tell me why you are here."

"I'm on my way to the spring meeting of the Rose Council," he replied.

She raised a sardonic eyebrow. "You're taking a circuitous route. Unless you spent the winter in Scotland."

His amused grin went straight to her heart. She had no resistance to his good humor.

"I made a promise to you that I'm not sure I can keep. I imagine myself standing up in front of that group (Aunt Blanche plans to attend, by the way) and demanding a ban on red roses. They'll think I've lost my senses," he said.

"Even if you frame it in terms of respect for the creativity of the northern rose breeders?"

"I thought of that. Even Jones must be tired of red, red, red. But our real goal is a truce. We need to convince your father above all. He might agree to a ban on red, but to be fair, we'd have to ban the pure whites. He won't have it," he said.

Tea arrived. The speed with which he grabbed a sandwich confirmed her suspicions about his hunger. She took her time preparing to serve the tea, giving herself a moment to consider what he'd said. "You actually plan to go through with this," she murmured.

"Ending the everlasting feud, yes. Competition is good. If we broaden that competition, it would take pressure off our families and leave the two of us..." He paused, catching her eyes, his hand holding a sandwich halfway to his mouth. He put it down.

"The two of us where exactly?" she asked.

"Free to pursue courtship. Publicly."

She glanced over at Ellen and down at her hands. "I don't think the judges' problem is the color."

“What is it, then?” he asked.

“You,” she retorted.

“Me? I know next to nothing about roses, even my own. I like them, but—”

“Yes, but your entry comes under the aegis of a duke. No one wants to offend a duke. Worse, your title is *Roseleigh* for goodness’ sake. The odds are stacked in your favor as soon as you enter.” She handed him his tea.

He sipped it, frowning. “I could refuse to enter. Would that help?”

“Probably not. But it might if you made a show of wishing the judges to be broader in their thinking,” she said. “Humble pie?”

“I’m good at humble.” He preened when he said it, making her laugh. He devoured another sandwich.

“Why did you come here?” she asked.

“I told you. I need your help. This meeting will set the rules for next June. I have to make some sort of statement, but what kind? And I need to win over your father, but how?” He sank back, his gaze fixed on her face.

Margaret tapped one finger on the arm of her chair. *A statement*. Did she dare? Her fantasy had been to waltz into the contest in June with an entry that would set tongues wagging. Maybe now would be a better time.

She returned his gaze. *Oh, how I’ve longed to see him.*

“I have no idea how to soften my father. If I did, I would have done it long ago,” she said. “But a statement is an idea with merit. I may have something that may help, but it isn’t ready. Can you stay for a day or two?”

She’d shocked him. Shocked and pleased. She could see it in his expression. A woman in an independent household did not ask a single man overnight.

“Why, my dear Lady Margaret. Are you attempting to compromise me?” His irresistible amused grin accompanied his words, and her face heated.

Ellen, in her corner, gasped and looked up, her gaze skittering away quickly.

Margaret’s lips twitched together. “You are horrifying my companion, Your Grace! What you imply would certainly put a period to my father’s objections, but no. Not that. What I need to show you won’t be ready for another day, and there is no respectable inn within ten miles of here. You’ll stay.”

“Of course I will.” His heated gaze set her insides on fire.

She pulled her eyes away, stood up nervously, and yanked the bellpull. The butler entered so fast she knew he’d been hovering. “Wilson, kindly take His Grace to the large guest room. He’ll be with us for a night or two and will want to dress before dinner.”



## CHAPTER THREE

HENRY KEPT MARGARET laughing all through dinner. He even gave Ellen a fit of the giggles over his description of Roseleigh's mischievous potboy who'd gotten his head stuck between two chair rails while crawling under the table to snatch gingerbread. It had taken copious amounts of soap to free him and earned him two days of bread and water. "Though, I suspect several people in the household were sneaking him food." If Margaret had a guess, Henry was chief among them.

"How is your sister's baby?" Margaret asked.

"Little Algernon flourishes," he said.

"Did she really name him Algernon?" Margaret asked.

He chuckled. "*Her* name is Henrietta, over my objections. Thank goodness she wasn't a boy. I fear for the next one. Our family has had entirely too many Henrys. 'Algernon' is my little protest."

He went on to describe the delights of a baby, crawling well, just pulling herself up, the joy of all and sundry. "Even if teething did keep her out of sorts when they visited, I adore her."

"Your family sounds close," she said.

"Very. We had a contented childhood. The whole family cares for one another—even Aunt Blanche in her own crotchety way," he said with a wistful glance at her.

"I envy you that," she murmured, and his gaze narrowed.

After dinner, Margaret described her seven siblings, a contentious bunch, under Henry's questioning, beginning with her brother Paul, the heir, three years younger than she and

“rather too self-important just now. He has a good heart though, and I have hopes he’ll even out.”

“And the youngest is six? How delightful! Children are a blessing. I’ll look forward to meeting her. What is her name?”

“The poor girl is called Ethelberta. We call her Birdy,” Margaret said.

“She’s a sweet child if a bit insecure about herself,” Ellen put in.

*Henry would do Birdy a world of good, Margaret thought. He will be a wonderful father one day.*

At a lull in the conversation, Henry closed his eyes.

“You must be exhausted, Your Grace,” Margaret said.

His slow smile made her heart speed up. He didn’t open his eyes. “I’m merely resting my eyes.”

“Up with you. We’ll all turn in early. Hopefully tomorrow I’ll have something to share.”

He sat up brightly at that. “I’m awash in curiosity about this project of yours. It is what had you haring off to this sweet little house in the wilds of Northumberland, isn’t it?”

She rose, and he did too. “It is one of the things; freedom is a great attraction, insofar as a woman can hope for freedom.”



MARGARET’S COTTAGE WAS a square building, three stories in all, with the more public rooms below stairs. The sitting room in which they’d enjoyed their after-dinner tea was on the first floor up. When Ellen scurried into a room on that same floor to the rear of the house, leaving them alone by the stairway, Henry realized they stood next to Margaret’s own bedroom. He’d been given a room one more floor up. *Wise, that.*

He took her hand in his and kissed her fingers.

“Good night, Your Grace,” she whispered.

“Enough ‘Your Grace,’ Margaret. It was well enough in front of your companion, but you know my name. I want to hear it on your lips.” He tugged her hand, bringing her closer, raising his eyebrows in a challenge.

“Henry,” she said.

“I like that. Say it again,” he said, lowering his head, bringing his mouth within inches of hers.

“Henry,” she breathed.

She leaned ever so slightly forward when she said it. It was all the invitation he needed. He captured her mouth with his in a kiss as intense as it was gentle. One hand came up to cup her face, and his thumb caressed her cheek. She opened for him then, and the kiss heated. As her breathing sped up and she moaned under his ministrations, blood drained from his brain to pool in his male organs, aroused and on full alert.

His arm snaked around her back to pull her flush against his body with a groan, and they sagged against the wall. No, not the wall. A door. The door to her bedroom.

“Henry,” she said again, against his mouth this time.

He captured it in his and whispered back, “Margaret. My Margaret.”

She stiffened just the slightest bit, but he loosened his hold and moved back just enough to allow air between them, and to study her face. “Not yet,” she murmured, her eyes on his.

It took a moment for his brain to process her words. “Not yet,” he repeated. “But soon.” He took a step back. “If I don’t go upstairs this minute, you will be forced to marry me and quickly. I won’t take away your choice. We’ll talk tomorrow.” He left before he could change his mind. It may have been wishful thinking, but as he climbed the steps, he thought he heard her deep voice echo, “Soon.”



AFTER A SLEEPLESS night, Margaret rose at dawn, dressed in one of her older gowns, and put on her gardening smock. She had time to work before breakfast.

Plagued by heat from Henry's kisses, and the acute awareness of him just above her, she'd stared at the ceiling most of the night, wishing her gaze could penetrate the wood and plaster. The foolish man had nattered on about taking away her choices, yet he'd fled up the stairs. She wasn't sure whether she regretted her "not yet." She suspected if he'd given her a choice there in the hallway, she'd have flung open her bedroom door and dragged him in.

She wanted him, of that she had no doubt, but he was wiser. They needed to proceed carefully. If he'd stayed, they would have been boxed in.

"More's the pity," she muttered to herself as she ducked into her glasshouse.

Yet she was certain he wanted her just as much. As a woman who had aged past the marriageable stage, who had frightened off the ninnies who'd courted her at nineteen, who had resigned herself to lingering spinsterhood with only her roses for company, she found his desire overwhelming. Somehow, she had attracted the notice of a handsome young duke, the greatest catch in the united kingdoms. Far better than that, she had attracted the attention of a man who liked and respected her. One who gave her choices. She couldn't stop smiling.

She picked up a trowel, prepared to loosen soil in several beds, but another joy awaited her in bed seven, stopping her in her tracks. The first of the little white buds had opened most of the way.

"I knew I'd find you here, in your haven." Henry's voice rumbled through the glasshouse and vibrated in her body. Standing in front of the door he had carefully closed, his hair mussed and nightly stubble on his chin, he took her breath away. She cursed the impulse to run out here in her old smock,

her head bound in a scarf, before dressing for breakfast. *What must he think?*

He glanced around him, studying her operation. “This is where you work your magic?” He peered at her, his face solemn. “And keep your secrets.”

Fixed in place, her trowel still in her hand, she came to her senses. “Yes!” she exclaimed joyfully. “Yes, on both counts. Come and look.”

He came so close she could feel the warmth radiating from him as he leaned to see where she pointed with her trowel.

He breathed in slowly. “That rose is—”

“—striped. Red-and-white striped,” she said, grinning with delight. “Exactly what I set out to do a year ago. With a little help from Roseleigh’s roses.”

“It looks like a gift wrapped for a lover,” he murmured. “Red ribbon on white paper. The perfect blend of our families’ passions.”

He lifted his head, and his eyes bore into hers. A smile began in the corners of his mouth and, she suspected, deep in his soul. It bloomed into an expression of joy so great it filled the glasshouse as well as her heart. When he opened his arms, she went into them without hesitation. He kissed the side of her head and whispered in her ear, “You did it.”

She wiggled a bit to peer up at him. “Do you think it will motivate the council?”

“Perhaps. It will most certainly send our families the message we mean to give them. A joining of red and white.” He dropped to the dirt floor, sliding down her front and sending waves of longing through her. “Will you marry me, Margaret? That’s the best end of the feud. Marry me and join our families. We’ll take your roses and announce our betrothal in York and—”

“Yes, yes, yes. Of course I’ll marry you,” she cried, pulling him to his feet and giving him a great smacking kiss.

“You’ll come with me to the council meeting in York? We’ll ambush them with striped flowers and our love, taking family and observers alike off guard. We’ll have their attention, and they’ll have to listen then!”

She pulled off her smock. “We will rock York rose society to its foundation,” she murmured, “but first kiss me, Henry. I can’t get enough of them.”

Long moments later, when the scarf he’d pulled from her head lay on the ground and she was breathless with passion, he tickled her ear with his tongue before asking, “What did you mean about help from Roseleigh’s roses?”

“Ah.” She pulled away. “I stole your rose hips. And a cutting.”

“But I saw Jones give you hips from Blood Red,” he said, adorably puzzled.

“He gave them so freely I suspected the seeds wouldn’t breed true. They didn’t; it was too hybridized. I did get a lovely peach damask from them though. No, on our way past the heritage rose at the end, I made cuttings behind his back.”

He wrinkled his brow, confused.

“The scrubby, dense little bush at the end with simple deep-red flowers. I suspected it was Roseleigh’s foundational red. I was right.”

“Devious as well as clever. I’m a lucky man,” he said.

She poked his arm for that.

He ducked on his way out of her little workshop, her hand in his. “If you hadn’t said yes so quickly, I was prepared to bring out my big weaponry.”

“And what is that?” she asked as they made their way to the house.

“Marry me and you’ll have the Roseleigh glasshouse,” he said.

She grinned at him. “What makes you think I wasn’t aware of that? Your library too, Your Grace, compelling attractions both.”

He stopped right there on the path and took her in his arms to kiss her, pouring passion on her so strong it curled her toes in her half boots.

“Oh yes,” she sighed. “And that too.”

He leaned in and kissed her again.

They made it to breakfast eventually, entering hand in hand. Ellen looked from one to the other. “Are congratulations in order?” she asked.

“Oh yes. For what you see and much else.”

“Joy, Miss Mullens. Joy now and always,” Henry added.

They described Margaret’s triumph and explained their plans.

“But how marvelous!” Ellen said. “What do you plan to call it?”

“The Peace Rose,” Henry suggested.

“I have a better idea. Remember how you described it? We could call it Gift for a Lover.”

“Good,” he mused. “Or perhaps Love’s Gift.” He raised an eyebrow in question. When a smile lit her faced, he kissed her, and that confirmed it. They would ambush both families and the Rose Council with Love’s Gift.

# **PART THREE**

## **Love's Gift**

My crown is in my heart, not on my head.

–Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 3*



## EPILOGUE

*The York Rose Show, six years later*

RICHARD BRADLEY, VISCOUNT Lansdale, aged five and a half, ran to his father, filling Henry with pride. “Papa, Ned has escaped nurse’s attention because Algie made a mess and she has to go back to the town house with him. Ned is crawling under the tables. Aunt Birdy is trying to catch him.”

Edward Ansel Bradley, now four years old, had proven to be as adventurous as his brother Richard was reserved. Henry wondered about Algernon’s personality, which had yet to emerge fully. Strong-willed, he suspected.

“Come quickly, Papa. Mr. Jones will have a fit,” Richard urged.

“Worse, Dickon. If anything happens to the roses, Ned will have your mother to deal with,” Henry said, putting down his ale and nodding to his father-in-law, Martin Grey, and the other gentlemen in the refreshment tent. Grey had married Aunt Blanche the year after the great rose ambush and Henry’s marriage, making Henry and Margaret’s life much more peaceful. Grandsons, as it turned out, had finally won her father over.

His son pulled him by the hand toward the entry displays. Margaret and Amos Jones had proven to be a formidable partnership once they’d made their peace. Not only fixtures of the York Rose Show, they published widely, had developed a brisk business in supplying seeds and cuttings to enthusiasts, and were working on a book. Margaret had become a force to be reckoned with on the Rose Council.

When they reached the tables, Mary and Birdy had Ned in hand, each of his in one of theirs, two of Mary’s children at their feet. Henry grabbed the boy around the waist and threw

him in the air. “Bedeviling Mr. Jones, are you, Ned?” he asked, taking him in his arms.

“No, sir. I just wanted to see the Roseleigh rose, and there were so many people crowding around I thought I could get there faster under the table.” Ned laid his head on Henry’s shoulder. “The Rose Show needs an omnibus to pull people around. Or one of those steam locomotives.”

*Heaven help me*, Henry thought. Ned had inherited his mother’s creative energy.

To Henry’s relief—and everlasting joy—Margaret hurried up, with Jones at her side. “We’re all registered,” she said.

He leaned over and kissed her, Ned wiggling between them. Not to be left out, Dickon inserted himself between them as well. Jones bowed with a grin and took himself off.

“Isn’t it time these little rogues had their tea? And maybe a nap.” Henry waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

She gave the shoulder not full of mischievous boy a gentle smack with her fist, but the gleam in her eyes told him she had the same idea. He put Ned down, and they walked, the four of them hand in hand.

“Besides, we’ll need our rest for the Rose Ball,” she told him.

“How so?” he asked, though he knew the answer.

“I plan to waltz with my husband. Twice.”

“Shall we have three dances?” he asked.

She grinned back. Scandalizing York was their custom, after all.

The End

## About the Author

Award winning author, Caroline Warfield, grew up in a peripatetic army family, and the need to travel never left her. After a varied career (largely around libraries and technology) she retired to the urban wilds of eastern Pennsylvania with her Beloved to be closer to family and to write. She remains a traveler and adventurer, enamored of owls, books, history, and beautiful gardens (but not the act of gardening).

Caroline calls her books family-centered romance, and this one is no exception. Family makes her characters what they are, for better or worse, engenders motivation, creates the hurdles they must overcome, and sets them on their path to their own happily ever after and families of their own. Phillip and Nan are no exception.

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