

One

| The Attraction of 'Not So Proper' |

“Rachel! *Darling.*”

The peaceful, lush greenery faded from focus as 22-year-old Rachel Samson turned, her burgundy satin gown shifting to rest upon her slender hips. “Good evening, Lynette,” she greeted calmly, her tone as distant as the expression on her lovely features and in her emerald-green eyes.

Dressed in garish gold satin, the approaching pale-faced brunette crossed the townhouse’s main room with white-gloved arms outstretched, the glass-like smile befitting the 19-year-old’s vacuous hazel gaze. “Your last night in The City has come and you haven’t yet wished us farewell!”

The open window to the gardens allowed a breeze, shifting Rachel’s natural curls of blonde. A lock captured by the simple strand of pearls was loosened by the deep rise and fall of Rachel’s bare shoulders. *Ob Lord*, Rachel thought to herself while offering a forced smile. “I didn’t intend offense, Lynette. Your father’s gardens drew my attention.” Giving a much-needed reprieve from the mindless banter that had run rampant.

The multitude of conversations thus far had scarcely held her attention, to say nothing of gathering even a morsel of interest. Such had little to do with the subject matter of those few ladies and gentlemen with whom she had conversed. The topics of fashion, the latest popular artist, or the most recent winner of the regatta or local derby didn’t interest her. That interest was made an impossibility by the specialized training completed these past years.

Lynette gave Rachel’s hands a brief squeeze as she continued to drone on about her father’s garden, wondering how it could have kept her so preoccupied when in the company of so many eligible bachelors. “They have vied for but a glance from you all evening,” she complained, her lips tilting downward in a pout. “It’s hardly fair.”

A common attitude of petulance among the ‘fairer sex’, Rachel had to restrain the cool quip that likely would have shocked the young socialite. “I only sought a brief respite, Lynette,” she stated instead. “The voyage from France was longer than I remembered.” Though she now wished that voyage hadn’t ended. The captain and first-mate had been much more forthcoming regarding a respect of her intelligence. “I suppose I’m but tired from the journey. And then to have had such a long list of engagements this past week....” It was amazingly exhausting to feign polite interest so as not to offend.

“You’re forgiven, darling, of course. I only want for you to have as much fun as possible before you’re once again on your way to the wildernesses of Oregon.”

Surrendering to a moment of annoyance, Rachel briefly tightened her hold on her Parisian fan

before correcting, “Boston, Lynette,” in a tone that was calm, if a little cool.

The Samson holdings consisted of several lumber mills and their respective railroad lines throughout the Northern California and Oregon forest lands, Oregon the most significant. Unfortunately, these facts cultivated the false belief that the Samson family resided in the same location.

Lynette didn’t acknowledge the correction. She only sighed with a continuation of what Rachel supposed to be an attractive expression of petulance. “I *do* wish you could have been persuaded to spend more than but a week. There were *so* many of us that wished to take you to the theater.”

Rachel opened her fan with a slight motion of her wrist, her movements practiced and graceful. “I really have no choice in the matter, Lynette. The train departs tomorrow morning.”

“Then Daddy and I shall do our best to amuse you tonight.”

Then Lynette gave Rachel a dazzling if slightly vacant smile before rustling away to soothe ruffled feathers before they had a chance to be mussed. Rachel watched her disappearance into the milling crowd of powdered chests and manicured nails while wishing, again, that she had already boarded the train journeying to her father’s estate. She had nearly reached her limit of patience toward the self-absorbed men and women that considered their wealth and status a right and not an... opportunity for societal growth. *A waste.*

Courtesy of articles written regarding Rachel’s return from study abroad, Lynette was one of a growing clique that had become infatuated with Rachel’s independence as well as the extent of her family’s wealth. The tenacious growth of Rachel’s following had swept New York City, multiple invitations arriving at the Samson family townhouse shortly after her arrival. Many had easily been refused, but there had been those few that demanded acceptance in order to build up the Samson name and importance.

This past week had been dedicated to that sole duty.

Another ringlet of blonde tickled Rachel’s neck as she returned her focus to the gardens beyond the full-length window of the main room. Rachel brushed it away with an absent gesture, still unable to understand the reason behind her title of “*crème de la crème* of Nouveau Riches society”, or why they touted her as “the toast of The City”. Lynette insisted that Rachel had even become considered the epitome of every man’s romantic dream.

Ridiculous, Rachel scoffed inwardly now, smoothing the deep burgundy of her satin gown as the chamber orchestra began playing yet another waltz. It briefly lilted across her attention before being shuffled to the back of her mind. *All these social and fashion raves prove that in society’s view a lovely face attests to nothing beyond.* It was a growing source of irritation, due mostly to the fact that she was powerless to change that view. Even when she proudly told of her graduation with high marks from the business college in Paris they smiled, nodded, and then inquired after the Parisian fashions or her fan! Her entire week had consisted of a non-ending collection of such inquiries and conversations.

Restraining a scoff, Rachel lowered her gaze to the fan in her white-knuckled hold.

“Darling, you *must* say hello to Mr. Traxin.”

What would now be the 14th gentleman to whom she “must say hello”, Rachel released a deep breath and a barely restrained, “Oh good Lord,” before she again faced Lynette’s excited expression.

At her hostess’s side stood a gentleman Rachel almost immediately classified as 31 years of age. Of average height, he had a smile and expression the exact duplicate of Lynette’s: overeager anticipation to impress. Rachel’s initial curtsy was polite at best, clearly showing her dubious response to his attentions, but Mr. Traxin didn’t take notice. Instead, his silver eyes measured her slim form and “entrancing” face, doubtlessly finding it pleasing to an imagination of future courtly visits. Again, she was judged and categorized by her appearance and not by what she could offer in mind and wit.

Her temper ruffled.

“Willard Traxin, this is Miss Rachel Samson. Rachel Samson, meet Willard Traxin.” Lynette fairly beamed with pride at what she had likely deemed “the perfect marital match”, brunette curls leaping around her neck in celebration as she glanced from Rachel to Mr. Traxin and back again.

“Mr. Traxin.” Rachel produced a gloved hand, which he accepted and raised to hover near his mouth. His thumb stroked it, the forward action of intimacy causing Rachel to withhold a shudder as she pulled her hand free. She gave him a tight-lipped smile. *Rachel*, she warned. *Your temper.*

“Miss Samson, it is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

That introduction spoken, Lynette excused herself to a far section of the ballroom before Rachel could press for her to stay. Momentarily tightening her hold on her fan, Rachel focused once more on Mr. Traxin.

“Miss Samson, it is a pity you must away so soon. It seems as if we’ve only just been graced with your presence. Surely your father wouldn’t begrudge you a moment of relaxing gaiety before demanding your presence at his side?”

Rachel’s cream complexion paled slightly as she very briefly pressed her lips into a thin line. “My father has demanded nothing from me save my best performance abroad,” she told him finally, her tone as cool as before while still being polite. “I have done this, investing eight years to the study of business as well as the perfection of its performance. Such is enough time to be separated from my father and my waiting responsibilities.”

Mr. Traxin’s ears tinged pink. “Why, yes, of course.” He cleared his throat and lightly tugged at his shirt collar. Then his smile returned. “You must have been disheartened to leave, Miss Samson. It’s such a lovely city.”

“Paris is indeed reputed to be lovely; however, my time there was not for the study of it.” She glanced away, and her emerald eyes sparked with unpleasant memories.

“But Paris! The city of love,” Mr. Traxin continued. “Why, Miss Samson, surely many an amorous

young man must have strived for your attention. You must have been the envy of every lady there.”

Rachel’s grip once more tightened on the fan. “Envy is not as pleasant an emotion as you would make it sound.” *Especially not in meal-faced daughters of families with newly acquired wealth*, she mused. Once again, their station had been abused.

He moved slightly closer. “I know of many other, more pleasant emotions...” Mr. Traxin reached out a hand to delicately caress a finger down her gloved arm, “Rachel.”

The showing of unwelcome intimacy was unexpected, and Rachel barely restrained a slap. Instead, she tightened her grip on her silk-screen fan until she heard a soft snap, bringing a hand up to also pinch the bridge of her nose. “Mr. Traxin, I suddenly feel quite ill.”

Concern sparked in his eyes, and he reached out to hold her elbow. “Oh, my dear.”

Offering a pained smile, Rachel assured, “I but need some air. Please, excuse me.”

He took her hand and, as before, caressed the top as he raised it toward his lips. “The pleasure was mine. I sincerely hope that I might find reason to visit you in Oregon, Miss Samson.”

For God’s sake. But rather than correcting his mistake and misleading him to think she would welcome his visit, Rachel simply inclined her head and freed her hand from his cold grasp. Then she gave a curtsy as slight as before and turned to work her way through the cliques of people spread throughout the room like chunks of rancid milk in a bowl.

Rachel exited the ballroom to the south, pushing through the French doors to enter the far side of the garden. Taking in a deep breath of the fresh air, Rachel tightened her grip momentarily on the handles of the doors before stepping forward and opening her fan with a graceful movement of her hand. Caressing the air about her face and neck, she allowed the aroma of flowers and grass to overcome the repugnant stench of stagnating wealth and refresh her calm.

The fact that she had needed to feign illness in order to have more than a moment’s reflective quiet sparked her temper, usually under such strict control. She would have preferred to voice a cutting and intelligent remark that would have clearly informed him of his less than welcome advances. However, the Traxin family was well known, and therefore her duty in continuing the positive advertisement of the Samson family made that option impossible.

“Rachel? Rachel Samson?”

Rachel turned, her fan pausing as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. “Lucy?” she queried the familiar figure approaching from behind. “Is that you?”

Dark-blue eyes twinkled with laughter within the lovely face of a woman Rachel’s approximate age, her reddish-brown curls swaying in the evening breeze. Dressed in an entrancing silver brocade gown, Lucy eagerly enfolded Rachel into an embrace. Then she kissed each cheek and gave a melodious laugh as she pulled back.

Destined to be filthy rich from the moment of her birth, Lucy Bond had never known hunger or cold. Even so, she had always held a heart of compassion. One that Rachel had never understood. After all, how could a pampered princess such as Lucinda Rochelle Bond of the New York City Bonds be anything but a spoiled brat?

Such had never been the case.

“I heard a rumor you were at this horrid party, but I couldn’t make myself believe it,” Lucy admitted. “You abhorred parties while at school. You rarely attended one.”

Rachel released her friend’s grasp. “You remember correctly.” Accepting Lucy’s offered arm, Rachel turned toward the garden path. “Unfortunately, I couldn’t refuse all invitations this time. It was simply a matter of correctly choosing which party would have the most benefit.”

Lucy giggled. “Oh, Rachel. Business to the end.”

An upward twitch to Rachel’s lip was her only response. Lucy, with her sense of humor, her view of life, and her very persona had been one of very few that had tickled Rachel’s amusement. It seemed that the months separated hadn’t changed that past fact.

“Have you heard from your father?” Lucy queried as they continued down the stone path.

Rachel’s focus shifted to the fan in her hand as she absently toyed with it. “I’ve heard nothing from him since Mother passed three years ago.”

“That’s odd. Have you sent a cable?” Rachel shook her head, which resulted in a shocked expression from Lucy. “But shouldn’t you let him know you’ve arrived safely ashore? Shouldn’t you tell him you’re on your way home?”

“If it mattered one way or the other, he would have contacted me.”

Lucy’s arm tightened around Rachel’s. “I pray that isn’t true.”

“Why would it not be? You know he wouldn’t allow my return for Mother’s funeral. My studies took precedence.” It had hurt to be refused that farewell.

“He must have had his reasons, Rachel. I remember those first letters from him—”

Rachel tightened her hold on her fan as she softly but firmly said, “Lucy,” in a nearly monotone voice.

Lucy sighed. “I wish I could go with you, Rachel.”

“That isn’t necessary. This first meeting with my father is the final test. I’ve learned nothing of independence and assertion if I can’t face him. If I am able to do that, then I am able to be his heir.”

“ ‘Heir.’ It sounds so . . .” Lucy wrinkled her nose. “It doesn’t sound right.”

Looking toward the woman, Rachel’s delicate arch of eyebrows dipped slightly. “Dear Lord, Lucy. Not you, too.” Rachel softly scoffed, releasing Lucy’s arm to somewhat stiffly stir the air with short beats of her fan. “Why does everyone suppose we are truly the lesser sex?”

“I didn’t mean that,” Lucy said quickly. “I but wish you had someone to help you. A friend who understands *and* supports you.”

Eyebrow twitching as she continued to examine the cobble under their feet, Rachel remained quiet.

Lucy once more took hold of Rachel’s arm. “When do you leave?”

“For home? Tomorrow morning.”

“You’ve been wanting to go home for a while,” Lucy observed softly. “I hope it’s all you want, and more.”

“Thank you.” Though what she hoped, wanted, and could realistically expect were a jumbled mess of ideas, memories, and suppositions.

Sighing, Rachel heard the approach of two men moments before she noticed their shadowed silhouettes. Rachel halted, pressing her lips into a thin line before facing her friend. “Lucy, let us return and make our excuses to leave. I spied a middle-class eating establishment of ‘questionable reputation’ on my way and would much rather—”

“Rachel, I can’t. I came with someone.”

Rachel’s eyebrow arched upward a moment, causing a blush to rise to Lucy’s cheeks. Rachel smirked. “Ah. Peter.” Peter Delacreux. Blessed with waves of dark hair and piercing gray eyes, girls by the score had swooned at the mere mention of his name. But his eyes had always strayed to the innocent loveliness of Lucy Bond.

Nodding, Lucy flushed darker.

Rachel glanced away. The men were closer, talking amongst themselves with an occasional burst of laughter. Rachel knew she hadn’t yet had time enough to gather her calm, and a spark of temper would negate the hard work she had invested this week in cultivating the reputation of the Samson name.

Pressing her lips together, Rachel noticed Lucy’s glance toward her and then the approaching men. Before Lucy could pose the question, however, the men grew aware of the two ladies’ presence and ceased their private conversation. As they drew parallel, the men nodded a passing greeting, their faces and identity hidden in shadow as they moved on without comment.

Releasing a breath of relief, Rachel absently accepted Lucy’s urgency to move forward.

“Rob, she was exquisite. Go introduce yourself.”

Rachel stiffened. *Good God. Can I never escape the prison of my “exquisite” countenance?* Already worn thin, she felt her patience beginning to fray. Lucy sent Rachel a sidelong glance.

“I will do no such thing,” the other gentleman informed. “My last intention this evening was to bother lovely ladies.”

Rachel reluctantly smirked. *Thank you, sir, for that.*

“I’ve never seen anyone so entrancing!” the other man pressed. His voice faint now.

“You still haven’t, old man. Her face was mostly in shadows.”

“I saw enough to know she was a vision,” he protested.

“A vision?” There was a pause. “Perhaps.”

Their discussion faded, and Rachel reluctantly laughed. “I would thank that gentleman for saving me the exhausting duty of entertaining him and his friend, but that would mean a conversation. I’ve had enough of those this evening to last two lifetimes.”

Lucy giggled. “Rachel... Surely it hasn’t been as bad as all that?”

Rachel once more opened her fan. “You’ve no idea the tortures I’ve withstood this evening, Lucy. Conversations of balls, fashion, and society have nearly bored me to tears. Had I seen you and Peter, I would have made my way to your side on pain of death.”

Once more Lucy giggled with an “Oh, Rachel.” Then she voiced a gasp and halted, turning toward Rachel to take both hands in hers. “Rachel, dear, *please* say you will be persuaded to come and visit me soon? Peter and I...” Lucy flushed and lowered her gaze.

“So, he has finally proposed.”

Giggling, Lucy raised her eyes to meet Rachel’s. “You don’t have to say it as if it’s a curse. I love him and he loves me. Why shouldn’t we be happy together as man and wife?”

Man and wife. It sounds as if one is saying “Master and servant”. “Best wishes to you both, Lucy, but I don’t believe I shall be able to visit for quite some time. I haven’t any idea what my plans will be once I arrive.”

“Will you try? I would so like for you to be my maid of honor.”

Rachel’s slight smile was more genuine this time. “Thank you, Lucy. I *will* try.”

Lucy’s face shone as she giggled. “It’s all so exciting, Rachel, and you should see Peter. He has a bit

of a dazed expression at times. If I didn't know better, I would believe that he didn't expect me to accept."

One side of her lips twitching upward, Rachel gave Lucy's hand a pat before she motioned back toward the house. "Then certainly you must return to him, Lucy. I need some time alone, and I don't wish to contribute to his loneliness."

Lucy laughed, giving Rachel's hands a fond squeeze. "Oh you silly." Then she smiled up at Rachel before embracing her, Rachel accepting the embrace somewhat stiffly. "It was nice to see you, dearest, and I pray your meeting with your father goes well." She pulled back and smiled. "God bless you, Rachel."

"Thank you, Lucy."

Lucy gave Rachel's hands one last squeeze before returning to the house. Rachel watched her go, turning away after Lucy's silver gown had faded from sight. "*Your meeting with your father...*" She absently pressed her lips together as she moved forward, her fan caressing the air around her. She didn't care for the fact that she didn't know what to expect. *I suppose I shouldn't worry, for that changes nothing and proves less.*

Rachel minutely frowned. Her own abilities and accomplishments seemed to prove as little, especially when viewed in direct comparison with Mr. Traxin's advances. *1886! This is 1886 and I'm still surrounded by such backward thinking as women being worth nothing more than the ability to bear children and give men pleasure! How in God's name am I to battle against that?* She refused to believe her father had purposefully set her up to fail.

"Watch your step."

Giving a slight start, Rachel looked to the left. A tall, shadowed figure leaned against the trunk of some type of tree. "Excuse me?"

The shadow shifted somewhat, and an arm emerged clothed in black with opal cufflinks and immaculate white shirt-cuffs. The manicured nails indicated a raised tree root a scant six inches from where she now stood.

Rachel moved her gaze back to the figure, unable to gauge his expression or intent due to the shadows hiding his face. "I thank you, sir, for the warning."

"You're very welcome," he said, his voice rich and nearly that of a bass in a church choir of memories past. "The host should have taken greater care with the lighting of these paths. My friend nearly took a tumble twice."

Her lips tilted upward. "Is that why you now lurk alone?"

The shadow chuckled and stepped forward, a great portion of his face remaining in the cover of darkness. "It only *seems* I lurk. I simply relished the silence before again entering the nest."

Rachel's slight smile widened, so she hid it behind her fan with a graceful motion. "You don't care for parties?"

"When one's wealth is flaunted? No."

Thank God. "I suppose the flaunting is, in itself, a sport to them." Rachel made a disgusted sound and looked away. "A waste of time and energy."

"Indeed," was all the gentleman offered in reply.

In fact, after this one statement the gentleman remained quiet. He didn't comment on the chill of the evening, the amount of stars in the sky, or how she supposedly "rivalled Aphrodite herself". The silence was a blissful change and invited a rather deep sigh from Rachel as she closed her eyes and drank it in. Why she didn't move on, she couldn't say. Why the gentleman didn't speak, she couldn't suppose. But the silence was welcome.

Then, to Rachel's further shock, he simply observed, "It seems you have need of solitude and silence, Miss, and into this separation I have no wish to intrude." When Rachel faced him again, he bowed, offering, "Good evening, Miss," before continuing down the walk, hands within the pockets of his trousers as he began whistling a simple tune.

Rachel arched an eyebrow as she watched him, surprised and relieved that he hadn't taken it upon himself to fill her supposed boredom. Lynette would have been horrified at the missed opportunity for fluttering lashes and pouting lips. Rachel's lips twitched upward. *Thank you, sir.*

"So *this* is where you've been hiding!"

Expression now blank, Rachel once more gathered her cooled calm firmly into hand before facing Lynette's approaching figure. *Good God, how much more of this must I endure?* But the clock pendent pinned to her bodice showed it only just shy of eleven, meaning a further attendance of at least one hour would be necessary for appearances.

Sighing, Rachel forced a slight smile. "I apologize, Lynette. I felt a moment's illness and had to retreat."

Lynette tucked Rachel's arm forcefully around her own before turning and leading the way back to the party. "Oh dear, not *ill*! Daddy will be horrified. You simply must stay with us this evening! Rest and recoup before leaving for Oregon."

Rachel nearly released a quick breath of irritation. *Rachel.* She gathered her calm back again. "I can assure you I've recovered, Lynette. The walk and air have done their duty."

"I *am* glad. Now you can dance and have the others green with envy!"

Oh good Lord... "Lynette—"

“In fact, charming Mr. Traxin has promised he won’t dance with another soul until he has shared at *least* two dances with you. He’s quite taken with you, dear. Isn’t that thrilling?” Before Rachel could respond, Lynette continued, undaunted. “I’ve set him to wait on the far side of the dance floor with the promise that I would fetch you and return straightaway. You should have seen his face, dear. It was fairly aglow with eagerness! I’m so jealous! I’ve but two beaux the entire evening and you’ve made the catch of at least five! You show such calm, making them wild with the want to impress you. You really must tell me your secret, dear.”

“Disinterest, Lynette.”

“Pardon?”

Rachel released a soft breath. “It was nothing.”

As the pair ascended the stairs from the garden to the French doors leading into the main portion of the party, Rachel couldn’t withhold the dread and mild panic. What she felt was as close to suffocation as she had ever encountered. *Yet how to escape without offending host and hostess?* No matter her intelligence or training, there were certain societal demands that even her forward-thinking instructors couldn’t countermand.

Premature withdrawals her case in point.

Mr. Traxin was spied at the far side of the dance floor, heightening the panic as Rachel almost desperately searched her repertoire of acceptable excuses to provide herself an escape. She even went so far as to search the sea of faces for Peter Delacreux and Lucy Bond. Unfortunately, they had most likely moved to one of the many other rooms of the townhouse. *Blast!*

Mr. Traxin stood, the action nearly sending Rachel into an act of self-preservation as simple as planting her feet. *Rachel!* She continued forward, lips pressed into a thin line as she reminded herself of the Traxin’s prestigious family and wide-spread influence. Not as influential as other families present, but enough to strictly limit her behavior.

“Ah! I’ve found you at last.”

Rachel and Lynette both halted and turned, Rachel giving a blink of surprise at the tall and handsome man approaching. No more than 26 years of age, there was a purposeful step to his stride and a look of apparent relief on his expression. The relief caused Rachel’s eyebrow to arch.

“I deeply apologize, Miss, for being so late. I’m afraid I took a wrong turn and wandered the house for this past hour without hope of rescue. However, I’m yet in time to share that waltz with you, as promised.”

The gentleman deftly extricated Rachel’s arm from Lynette’s and guided Rachel toward the dance floor, ignoring Lynette’s protests. Once on the dance floor, he smiled down into Rachel’s calm expression, her right eyebrow still highly arched, and smoothly transitioned from walk to waltz.

“Do I know you, sir?” Rachel posed.

“No, but I’m afraid my gentleman’s nature couldn’t allow you to fall prey to Mr. Traxin’s questionable charms. He hasn’t many, I’m afraid, and your expression showed that you had already withstood those few.” Brown eyes twinkled as he minutely adjusted his hold on her hand. “I didn’t intend impertinence,” he continued. “You seemed in distress, so . . .”

Rachel regarded his attractive face, his smile a bright white against the sun-darkened color of his complexion. To her recollection, she had never before seen a man so closely resembling the literary view of “handsome” while not appearing in any way conceited. *Square jaw. Straight nose. High forehead and dark eyebrows.* . . . Her arched eyebrow twitched. He also presented a clear persona of assurance that intensified the clarity of his dark brown eyes and his six-foot, two-inch height.

“You do realize that tradition dictates a proper introduction be made before any type of contact or conversation?” she reminded slowly.

The gentleman’s smile twitched. “Yes, it does. Pity that.”

“And why is that?” she queried, vaguely noticing that he danced with grace and certainty.

“Tradition will likely prevent me from having a nice conversation with an attractive lady of elevated intelligence when I’m bored.”

Rachel couldn’t prevent the smirk. “I see.”

“Come, come, Miss. Certainly you can’t be content to risk an injured foot to the likes of Willard Traxin, too certain of his own worth, when you have my charming persona in front of you.” His tone fairly laughed, though his expression feigned insult.

“I haven’t spoken enough with you to know one way or the other of your charms, sir, and boasting of them would hint at arrogance or conceit, which is less charming than what you seem.”

He chuckled. “Touché, and might I say very nicely delivered.”

The orchestra completed the waltz, but before Rachel could excuse herself the gentleman motioned to another man with the barest hint of a glance, sending that gentleman toward Mr. Traxin and waylaying his progress onto the dance floor.

Through the sea of faces Rachel couldn’t determine if she recognized the other gentleman or not.

“At the risk of sounding much the rogue, I’ve had my friend set to the task of . . . distracting dear Mr. Traxin long enough for you to attend the party for, say, another hour. Then you should be more than able to make legitimate excuses to pardon yourself and journey to your hotel.”

Rachel blinked in surprise.

The orchestra began again, and the gentleman smiled down at her. “Another dance, Miss? If you don’t mind the talkative companion?”

“I do not,” she admitted, a surprising feeling of relief softening her expression as she accepted his lead about the dance floor. “It’s rather nice to not be accosted with dimwits and society children.”

His rich chuckle sounded again, as genuine as before. “I’ve never before heard them described in quite such a delightful way. To whom do you refer?”

Rachel felt a twinge of guilt. “The poor woman. She tries so hard to be genuine. If not for her father’s money, I truly believe she would have been a rather deeply intelligent human being. She has an instinct regarding hospitality that I’ve seldom found. However...” Rachel glanced toward Lynette giggling and fussing over one of the more attractive bachelors. “Now her charm is her jewelry and her only beauty is the massive gaudiness that is her father’s mansion.”

The man threw his head back and laughed, gathering several pairs of eyes and inviting even more hushed whispers. “My dear girl, I do believe you speak of the very hostess of this party!”

She fought back a smile. “I admit nothing.” *Intelligent conversation at last!*

“As well you shouldn’t.” The man suddenly grimaced. “I was doomed to attend her party this evening the moment my friend arrived to retrieve me from the station day before yesterday. He conveniently neglected to remember to inform me until this morning, knowing full well that I had an appointment.” He sent a glance the direction the aforementioned friend had left with Mr. Traxin. “Which reminds me, the old man deserves a prank for this.”

Rachel softly laughed at the sour look that tightened his handsome features. “We’re a pretty pair, I must say. My mother would scold for being a prideful and uncompassionate gossip.”

Clearing his throat, the man sent her a truly abashed expression. “As would mine. I suppose we should stop while we have the opportunity. If we don’t, we’re liable to find the same words spoken of us.”

“Very well then, in the hopes of retreating to safer subjects, what has your impression been of New York?”

“Sprawling. Though originally here for only a single evening to visit said friend, these past days have ingrained in me a dread of highly populated areas.” He gave a slight pressure to her hand. “What of you?” His eyes twinkled with laughter and mischief before feigning horror. “If you say you are enthralled with the lights and gaiety of night life, I will perish.”

“I have found the people to be self-absorbed and self-important.”

He laughed and then feigned seriousness. “As tradition dictates, I assure you.”

Conceding the point with a slight nod, Rachel immediately admitted, “I must say, however, that this

enhances the enjoyment of the expressions of disbelief when I prove my intelligence is neither myth nor embellishment.”

His smile broadened. “Now you have me sincerely wishing that I could have rescued you earlier in the evening so that I could have borne witness. I’m certain it would have made a wonderful tale.”

Rachel waved it aside. “You would have grown weary of your gender exhibiting their lack of faith in the intelligence of women.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. My own patience has been put to the extreme test. Where you doubtlessly have young men wishing to coddle and protect, I have women overeager to wear my name. They know nothing of me and yet feel certain I am the beau they wish to have as their own.” He shook his head before sending a somewhat lopsided smile her direction.

“You were the gentleman in the garden!” Rachel realized with a flush of cheeks.

The man blinked in surprise. “Pardon?”

“The shadowy figure that warned me before I took a tumble.”

His faint smile returned. “Ah. I knew your form and stature seemed familiar.” The gentleman looked about the room before focusing again on Rachel. “It seems your separation was not as complete, nor as extended, as you would have hoped.”

Rachel nearly grimaced, which elicited a chuckle from the gentleman.

“Don’t despair, Miss. While I haven’t the ability to keep you separate from ‘society’s children’ the entire evening, I believe the absence of Mr. Traxin will... help.”

“He *did* seem to be more oblivious to the true effect of his attentions.” A brief twitch of eyebrows conveyed her annoyance at the memory of Mr. Traxin’s forwardness.

“Unwelcome, were they?” the gentleman observed. “Yes, I rather imagine they were. I’ve heard that he has a tendency of leaning toward more... intimate advances than what is appropriate.”

Rachel’s smirk returned as she held the gentleman’s brown gaze. “Much like a certain strange gentleman feigning knowledge of a lady’s person to elicit a waltz?”

“Touché,” he said, chuckling.

“However, due to the fact that you were acting in the best interests of said lady, rescuing her from several minutes of irritation and the risk of setting loose her temper, you are forgiven.”

He laughed.

When the waltz came to a close, the gentleman stepped back and bowed at the waist. “My thanks

for an enjoyable conversation. Unfortunately, I must go, as I've an early departure in the morning. With my friend otherwise occupied, I will be making good my escape.”

Then, bowing again, he sent a wink before making his way from the room. Rachel watched him go, crossing her arms while allowing a slight smile.