

## Two

### | Perspectives |

Occasional gusts of early morning wind shifted Rachel's traveling gown of emerald corduroy as the porters loaded her trunks onto the baggage car. Lynette dutifully wept her grief at Rachel's departure, the latter questioning their sincerity when the performance was clearly viewed by a wide collection of unattached gentlemen. For some reason, however, that morning Rachel found amusement in how... adept the woman was at utilizing her femininity to receive what she wanted.

In fact, Rachel smirked.

"I had *so* hoped that we could have persuaded you to stay with us," Lynette confessed. "When I think of all the parties that could have been planned for you."

"I appreciate your attempt to soothe my boredom, Lynette," Rachel offered, "but I've never been one for parties."

"Why ever not? You're radiant by candlelight, darling. And those gowns from Paris! Why, they make you a rival to Aphrodite herself!"

"Lynette, you only believe it due to the fact everyone else says the same."

Lynette protested, but the conductor's infamous "All aboard!" interrupted further comment.

Rachel turned toward the reserved coach and the porter waiting to hand her up.

Lynette followed, gushing, "Mr. Traxin was quite taken with you, Rachel darling. Be prepared to have a surprise visit from him."

*Mr. Traxin*, she inwardly scoffed. Outwardly, her expression remained as unmoved as her tone. "I doubt that, Lynette. He seems to believe I live in Oregon."

"Oh, Rachel," she giggled. "I really don't understand your humor."

*Yes*, Rachel thought with a slight sigh. *I know*. Her only respite the previous evening from the same misunderstanding had been the two waltzes shared with her "rescuer".

At the steps to the reserved coach, Rachel faced the young woman. "Thank you for your hospitality, Lynette."

Tears renewing their appearance, Lynette gathered Rachel's somewhat stiff form into an embrace. "Have a safe journey, Rachel darling."

“Thank you.” Rachel allowed a momentary cling before distancing herself. “I shall do my best to inform you of my safe arrival.”

“All aboard!” The conductor gave the final call as the porter offered Rachel a hand. “You be needing some help, Miss?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He handed her up into the coach while the conductor ushered Lynette from the area.

Giving one last wave of farewell, Rachel released a relieved breath and turned to enter the coach. Red velvet couches, lush red carpeting, lace curtains, exquisite mahogany tables, and elegant crystal chandeliers all brought back the memory of her departure eight years previous. Fourteen years of age. Alone. Doing her best not to cry though her father had se—Setting the finish of the thought firmly away, Rachel stepped forward while pulling off her short white gloves to toss them onto the oak table. Retrieving the provided *New York Times*, she lowered herself onto the red velvet couch perpendicular to the outward windows. She quickly bypassed the social pages and the too-large picture of her taken in the company of her alleged “friend and confidant Lynette Hatcher”, turning instead to the business section. *Confidant?* she queried, eyebrow arched. *How did they come to that conclusion? The girl doesn’t understand one word of anything save men, petticoats, and how to arrange a bouquet “just so.”*

“I see yet another possibility for rescue.”

At the recognizable baritone, Rachel lowered the paper to reveal the gentleman from the previous evening. The exclamation of “Dear Lord! You?” was spoken before she could restrain it, followed immediately by a hand raised to shield her mouth. *Rachel Byron Samson!*

Leaning against the leather chair situated directly across from the red-velvet couch, his expression showed amusement. Dressed in a suit of navy blue, the color served his height and extreme good looks very well. In fact, to Rachel’s surprise she felt a slight internal twitter, an emotion she hadn’t experienced in nearly ten years regarding a man.

“While, yet again, intrusion isn’t my intention, I seem to have stumbled into it.”

Recovered from the initial shock, Rachel motioned to the chair across from her. “I apologize for that outburst, sir. I was simply... surprised.”

“Ah. Thank you; I will have a seat. And there is no need to apologize, Miss,” he assured, lowering himself into the chair and somewhat carelessly tossing his own gloves onto the table with hers. “I must confess I would have said the same, especially since it seems I misunderstood a fact. You see, I was led to believe I had exclusive use of this coach.”

“How extremely odd. My family has had it reserved for three months.”

“Hm. Odd *indeed*. I wonder if I remembered the dates incorrectly—” He suddenly snapped his

fingers. “Yes. That would be the case. I was to leave *yesterday* morning.” The gentleman grimaced. “Only I was waylaid by my friend.”

Rachel smirked. “I seem to remember you mentioning a coerced attendance of a party.”

The gentleman chuckled. “How aptly put.” He motioned toward her. “If you’d rather not endure my company, Miss, I espied a friend of mine on my way to this coach and can most certainly impose upon him.”

“I’ve no qualms with sharing, sir, as there is room for us both.” Spending the three-day journey entertained only by old memories and rising questions did not appeal to her, especially when the intelligent conversation of their meeting the evening before was still so fresh.

“Wonderful,” he said. “I must say traveling alone is seldom as... amusing as traveling in company. Although this other friend has a tendency toward, erm, well, never mind. Let me suffice it to say that he has a few more bad habits than what a gentleman should admit to.”

Amusement continued to tilt Rachel’s lips upward, the emotion so surprisingly prevalent that she didn’t know how to categorize it. “You don’t intend me to believe that you haven’t your own ‘bad habits’, sir.”

“On the contrary. Everyone has a fault. In fact, my father would classify mine as arrogance.”

Her eyebrow arched. “I strongly disagree, and I pride myself on my accurate view of a person’s character. You present assurance, yes.” Rachel deepened her view of him as he looked to the task of adjusting his gloves on the oak table. “No. I would say that ‘arrogant’ is false.”

“While I appreciate the classification, I’ve come to find there are different levels of all character flaws, as well as character strengths.”

Curiosity and intrigue soared, as well as her infamous right eyebrow. “Explain, if you would.”

He once more focused on her, saying, “Certainly,” in an easy tone while just as easily holding what many had classified as her “soul-deep stare”. None held it long, and yet the gentleman didn’t look away until a continuation would have been forward. Then he simply lowered his gaze to a feigned scrutiny of his nails as he spoke.

“Certainty often blossoms to assurance, and both are considered positive strengths to a person’s character. However, should that assurance be tainted with a pride that is, in itself, twisted by self-importance, it very quickly becomes arrogance.”

Rachel absently caressed the air about her face and neck with a subtle beat of her fan as she regarded him. Classifying his expression, his words, and his body language as well as the tone in which he presented his argument. “Hm. I see.”

The gentleman once more lifted his brown eyes to meet her gaze. “Some say that is a male’s lot in

life: To be assured – or arrogant, depending on his pride – a good hunter, a better fencer, and intelligent regarding subjects of business. On the other hand,” the gentleman made a motion toward her. “It is often expected of the woman to be emotionally sensitive, self-absorbed, and pre-occupied with fashion and the art of capturing a beau as well as the size and quality of the gems adorning her neck and fingers.”

Rachel’s hand tightened on her fan until she heard a mild pop. *Rachel*, she warned moments before continuing the gentle pump of the fan.

The gentleman stroked his smooth-shaven chin with his thumb and fore-finger as he regarded her. “Quite a limiting expectation for society to force onto others, wouldn’t you say? Yet, when a person, myself being the prime example, think and live differently than society expectations, we are classified as arrogant. So I, upon many occasions, can be classified as arrogant or prideful, though such may not be anything more than a skewed perception.”

Rachel regarded him as intensely as before, admitting that it hadn’t been too many years distant that the same argument would likely have brought her to the brink of temper. It wouldn’t have mattered that he had simply stated a fact regarding society’s views of a lady’s role within it. However, the completion of her training had taught her that surrendering to an instant of anger would make her appear foolish, immature, and incapable. She hadn’t had a slip to her controlled calm in nearly six years. Yet this gentleman’s statement of fact had definitely ruffled more than a few feathers, causing her a bit of irritation at her own inability to keep herself from being baited.

The gentleman suddenly lowered his hand from his chin and sat slightly forward. “Miss, I humbly apologize if you took offense. That, yet again, wasn’t my intention. I’m not usually so... philosophical in regards to society’s views of male and female roles. I find that my stand on the subject is generally scoffed at. Or minimized.”

Calm once more firmly in place, she asked, “Your stand being what?” She noticed his scrutiny of her expression altered somewhat as he slightly shifted his position.

“Excuse my hesitation to answer, but I’ve no wish to risk continued offense with a too-quick response.”

“Noted,” she said simply, offering a slight nod.

He slightly smirked. “Yet you still wish an answer.”

“Correct.”

The gentleman grimaced. “Well, old man, see what crypt you’ve built for yourself...” Releasing a deep breath, he gave a slight shake of his head before retrieving a handkerchief from his pocket and offering it forward to her. One eyebrow arched as she leaned forward to retrieve it. “The monogram there. Whom do you suppose crafted it?”

Considering subjects of needlepoint and embroidery were not her forte, Rachel couldn’t tell if the

monogram of *R.L.T.* had been tastefully planned, delicately crafted, or appropriately positioned within the corner of the kerchief. She approved the deep blue of the thread against the antique white of the kerchief, however, and the very modesty of it seemed to make it more dignified.

Rachel lifted her gaze to meet his. “A sister?”

The gentleman’s lips twitched upward. “No. Only child.”

“Pardon me.”

He waved a dismissive hand before once more motioning toward the kerchief. “Another attempt?”

Rachel offered the kerchief back again. “I know nothing of these types of crafts, sir, so your question is somewhat pointless.”

“Not at all.” He accepted the kerchief, looking down at it with an amused twist to his lips before once more meeting her gaze. “I was curious one day and crafted it myself.”

Rachel’s eyebrow had never arched upward so quickly. “You jest.”

He chuckled. “I do not. My mother offered a few well-timed suggestions and directions, certainly, but mostly the task was done on my own.” He once more lowered his focus to the kerchief. “I must admit I receive a bit of satisfaction having it in my pocket, proving that even a man can perform a delicate task such as this.” He sounded a part chuckle-part snort as he lifted a hand for deeper scrutiny. “Large fingers made it very difficult without receiving at *least* half a dozen stabs.”

She smirked.

“However, self-pity isn’t my point. Oh... that was horrible. Excuse the pun.” He grimaced, immediately laughed, and then shook his head before continuing.

Rachel found the entire scenario intriguing and amusing, as most of the gentlemen in Europe had been too rehearsed to present themselves as genuine.

“The fact that you assumed the kerchief to be crafted by a woman would have been the... well... the point. That assumption proves society’s view of a female’s role within it. Unfortunately limiting all involved: Men and women.”

“Meaning I’ve become as tainted by society’s views as others,” Rachel observed, the fact causing irritation, as well as admiration at how deftly he had pointed it out.

“Considering it is impossible not to be... influenced by the surrounding environments, that fact shouldn’t cause too great of consternation for you, Miss. We’re all guilty of it. Even I myself instantly classified you as a lady of poetic nature when I first saw you in the garden last evening. Mostly, I believe, due to the extreme angst and distance in your expression. I generally only observe that in poets and artists. While I still haven’t yet classified your expertise, considering the paper there

beside you, I doubt it involves artistry of the... general sense of the word.”

Rachel sent a slow and thoughtful glance to the paper before once more looking to the gentleman’s handsome face.

He smiled, an expression that seemed to spend the most time on his face, and then motioned toward her. “But now I’d much rather escape to safer subjects, such as where you journey off to so early in the morning?”

“Boston.” Though why she should feel no qualms with a more personal conversation with a stranger met only once before Rachel had no idea. However, for the first time since arriving from Paris, she was blissfully free from suspicion. *I suppose that alone should cause suspicion.* She smirked.

One of his eyebrows twitched, but he simply said, “Ah. Highly refined and lovely city, that.” Then he further examined her expression before speaking again. “I’ve found myself there once or twice. The people are relaxed and compassionate. At least, in the circles *I* was subjected to.”

Yet another eerie coincidence. *Rachel, don’t be ridiculous,* she scolded. *Who hasn’t been to Boston at least once in their life?* “Family?”

He smiled slightly. “Of a sort.” The gentleman motioned toward her. “Have you been away long? Your fashion suggests you were most recently of Paris.”

Lowering her gaze to a brief glance of her traveling habit, Rachel felt her respect for the gentleman’s complete knowledge rise. In fact, the gentleman’s respect to her intelligence as well as her person encouraged within her a feeling of... camaraderie. *Intriguing.* Even more so being the fact that for the first time since arriving from France, she actually enjoyed herself. *What a relief after the torture of Lynette’s party!* A deserved relief, truth be told.

“Your contemplative silence causes me to wonder if my more personal questions have offended.”

Rachel met his gaze. “Not at all,” she assured in a tone a bit less calm than she would have liked. “I was merely in thought.”

“Oh? Regarding what? May I ask?”

“I had noticed of myself a growing dread of impending conversation,” she found herself admitting, “as well as a suspicion of their true intention. Since leaving Europe, yours is the first that hasn’t tweaked my temper more than but once. The change is welcome.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I must say, I’m honored.” Then his expression shifted to one easily classified as mischief. “My humor has a tendency of both causing dread and tweaking tempers. These conversations with you have been a welcome change as well. I haven’t been slapped once.”

Rachel’s lips twitched upward. “The day is still young, sir.”

He laughed, a sound that Rachel had begun to classify as unique, as she hadn't ever heard a sound as rich and full of mirth while not being offensive or overly loud.

Then he sat back in the chair, the amusement still plain on his expression, and motioned toward her. "So you've recently returned from Europe, and were apparently there for quite some time."

Her eyebrow twitched. "Oh?"

"Yes. There is a French lilt to your speech."

*Does he miss nothing?* It was a satisfying and yet oddly unsettling experience to be an "open book" with him apparently able to read the pages.

"What kept you in Europe for so long?"

"Studying." She lowered her gaze to the silk-screened fan, which she opened with a deft motion of her wrist and fingers. *Training. Changing.*

The gentleman remained quiet for a moment. When he asked "What were your areas of study?" there was a hint of caution to the tone.

"Business practices." She slowly looked up, feeling a vague hint of surprise at his somewhat guarded expression. "My father has no son, therefore I am his sole heir."

"Investments?"

"Yes. In the Pacific Northwest territories."

His lips twitched with a brief smile. "Ah. Where one's fortune evolves from few things: A successful trading post, logging, or railroad. There isn't much else."

Rachel actually chuckled. "True."

"Although I've heard of gold here and there within the central region of Oregon."

"Yes, and what a shame that they have resorted to dredging for this new wealth instead of preserving the state's natural beauty."

The gentleman's lips twitched. "Too true."

Motioning toward him with her hand, Rachel leaned slightly forward. "I ask you, do they not realize that changing the very direction of a river will thereby affect the nature and wildlife that lives there? How can they be so short-sighted? Can they not research a more... No. No, a *less invasive* procedure to harvest the gold?"

"Many times people don't realize the long-term effects of what seems such a simple happenstance."

Might I use you as an example?” Arching an eyebrow, Rachel inclined her head. “You are the heir to your father’s business. That simple fact has likely altered your future, as well as swaying decisions both past and present. This same fact has also likely prevented you from having any direct input into the direction your life has taken. Correct?”

Rachel arched an eyebrow. “That is the way of life for those in my position.”

“True, yet have you not found yourself wondering what your life perspectives might have been without that influence?”

“Why trouble myself when my social and family position determines what I am to do? There was no ‘decision’. There was a ‘fact’, as you yourself have observed.”

“This ‘fact’ was determined by your *father’s* wishes. What of *yours*? Were you consulted?”

Rachel’s eyebrow twitched. “Shouldn’t I naturally want to assume Father’s role?”

“Yes, that is to be expected. Yet were you offered that particular choice?”

“What does it matter?” Rachel countered. “I am the heir to my father’s legacy with a determined future. I can’t change it now that my training has been completed.”

“Yes. I suppose you’ve a point, and I’m certain you’ve succeeded where others might have failed, but entertaining the question is better than ignoring it.”

“Entertaining a question regarding choices I may or may not have had has no meaning at this point of my life, sir,” Rachel contradicted, and she didn’t understand why he couldn’t see the truth of it. “However, since you press the matter I shall answer. I chose to complete my studies. I chose to excel. I chose to be who I am.”

“Those are admirable, I grant you; however, those particular choices are not as important as those that would have been determined by *your* dreams and not those of your father. Self-honesty regarding dreams we held at one time often keeps us true to who we are and who we wish to be.”

Regarding him for a silent moment, Rachel finally admitted, “You sound as if you yourself must have given great thought to your own desires, dreams, and futures.” Silence descended and Rachel arched an eyebrow when he adjusted his position in his seat. “I see I’ve struck upon a... tender subject.”

He cleared his throat and adjusted his shirt collar. “I have given it some thought lately.”

“Truly? And what is this desire that causes discomfort?”

The gentleman’s expression changed to an almost reluctant smile before he chuckled. “To be quite honest, it’s as simple as: family.”

“Family?” she repeated, eyebrow lifting yet again. “At the age of 26 you consider family?”

“A family is a very precious thing. I love the idea of wife and children, believe it or not, and I want several of my own.”

“Wives? Or children?” Rachel prompted, green eyes twinkling and belying the seriousness of her tone.

The gentleman laughed. “Children, of course.”

Rachel’s fingers absently tapped upon her fan as she examined his amused expression. “Forgive me for being blunt, but that’s quite unusual for someone of your age and good looks.” His eyebrow rose. “The few handsome and wealthy men I’ve encountered wished to... enjoy their single time until they were compelled to marry and continue their family’s name by fathering a son.” Rachel smirked. “It’s refreshing, may I say, that you want a family for family’s sake.”

He smiled, the twinkle of his brown eyes growing even more noticeable. “Thank you for the compliment.”

Rachel’s lips rose slightly as she moved her gaze to an absent scrutiny of her fan.

“Now, before I once again embarrass myself...” The man gestured to the paper on her lap. “I don’t suppose you’re willing to relinquish one or two sections of your paper?”

“Take whatever you like, with exception to the business section.” He thumbed through the pages of the paper before handing her the requested pages. “Thank you.”

The morning passed quickly, with discussions on articles within their paper sections being the only conversation between periods of comfortable silence. Neither the gentleman nor she herself had introduced themselves by name, nor had they felt any qualms with the decision. The gentleman had even bypassed the society pages with a look of scorn when she had observed that he could have easily discovered her name and history.

*“One can seldom believe what is reported there,”* he had told her. *“It tends to be a collection of embellishments and sensationalism that should only be found in novels.”*

Rachel had found herself in agreement.

She also found the gentleman to be quick of mind and wit, and he wasn’t hesitant in the expression of a difference in opinion. In fact, Rachel found herself purposefully disagreeing with him simply to test his views. He never retreated from the challenge. Instead, he presented an admirable showing of detailed facts, doing so without minimizing her own opinion or intelligence.

Luncheon and dinner passed much the same, alternating between discussions regarding national business policies and how they had been affected by the Civil War, and discussions on foreign policies directly influenced by the presidency. The discussions were an unexpected pleasure for

Rachel, and they gave her an opportunity to expand what she had learned abroad while fine-tuning her ability to debate. The gentleman didn't seem to mind. Once or twice it seemed that his brown eyes twinkled with amusement as she relentlessly pressed a point home.

Too soon, both she and the gentleman were hiding yawns.

Offering a reluctant albeit slight smile, Rachel stood. The gentleman followed her lead. "Much as I've enjoyed our repartee, sir, we should both retire."

"Of course you're right, Miss. Forgive me for keeping you so late." Rachel waved it aside. The gentleman gestured for her to precede him through the coach to the sleeping quarters beyond. "Shall I meet with you tomorrow for breakfast?"

"I've little choice in the matter," Rachel quipped.

"On the contrary," the gentleman responded with feigned seriousness, "if I were to be a bother, you could have the conductor strong-arm me from the coach."

Eyes traveling from the toes of the gentleman's shoes to his well-kempt and shiny black hair, Rachel gauged his athletic frame against that of her memory of the elderly conductor's more bent one. "Oh yes. I'm certain he would have *no* hesitation."

Chuckling, the gentleman opened the door from the reserved coach to the sleeping compartments beyond. When she faced him, he continued to smile down at her, the expression being genuine while showing no mischief or amusement.

"Sleep well, Miss," he offered.

"Thank you, sir, and good evening."

Offering a bow, he then turned and made his way back through the coach, exiting after one last smile toward her. Once more Rachel found herself staring after him, arms crossed and a very slight smile on her lips. *He is so very... different.*

The men in Europe had focused solely on her wealth and beauty, using that as the basis for pursuit. None had given her the benefit of knowledge or wisdom. None had believed her to have anything save that same wealth and beauty. Rachel had declined many party invitations in Paris due to this very attitude. Those accepted hadn't been repeated, mostly due to stray hands and shallow words in shadowy gardens. Remembering their own encounter in a shadowed garden had Rachel wondering how different her Parisian experience would have been had she met him there.

Finally, Rachel uttered a quiet "Hm," and turned to search for her sleeping compartment.



The next morning Rachel couldn't classify the emotion she felt as eagerness, but she definitely didn't dread the prospect of sharing the gentleman's company. Neither had she resigned herself to the idea

of inviting him for a visit to her family's estate. In society's view such an invitation would seem improper due to the fact that they had not yet been formally introduced. Rachel sounded a quiet scoff as she reached out to sharply retrieve the previous day's paper from the oak table. The action revealed the gentleman's gray traveling gloves placed there the day before. Setting aside the paper, Rachel reached out to retrieve them, her thumb absently stroking the soft material as she thought back to their previous day.

"An expression of extreme reflection, and I without my coffee."

Rachel's eyes lifted from their scrutiny to meet the brown ones of the gentleman from the previous day. She offered a slight smile as he sat across from her. "Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Miss— Ah. I see you've found my gloves. I had begun to think I had left them in New York, forever lost." The gentleman retrieved them from her, his eyes attesting to the genuineness of the smile that tilted up each corner of his lips. "Thank you for keeping them safe," he said, his tone laughing but not in such a way for Rachel to believe he laughed at her. "I could have simply purchased another pair, I know, but these have been with me long enough to have become accustomed to my hands. It would have been a pity to break in another pair."

Rachel's slight smile blossomed a bit. "I'm only glad I had the opportunity to reunite you."

He laughed, adjusting his position across from her. "Regarding the expression... Heavier thoughts than usual? Or the same?"

Rachel moved her focus to her now empty hands before reaching out to the menus propped between the unlit candle-holders on the same oak table. "In either case, I've come to believe I think too much."

"Understandable under the circumstances, don't you think? You more than likely dread the confrontation with your father when you inform him that your goals for your life might have changed."

Forcing the face of her father from her mind, Rachel gave the gentleman a tight smile. "Nothing is ever a confrontation where my father is concerned. Only plain and simple facts." She examined the gentleman's face and expression therein. "I don't see why you interest yourself in my relationship with him."

"Because familial relationships are important," he explained. "Especially healthy ones. You've been abroad for many years and that time from home has likely made your relationship with your parents more... strained. Communicating a simple desire will begin the recovery."

Looking over the menus, Rachel momentarily pressed her lips together. "You don't know my father," she informed calmly. "Communicating differences of opinion would lead to disaster." For she still remembered the shock felt at his response to her request to return home— Rachel pushed it away.

“Expressing a unique opinion is *not* a disaster.”

Her brows dipped.

The gentleman cleared his throat. “Forgive me, Miss. Now I *have* offended.”

“No, you haven’t. I—“ Rachel released a slight breath before once more meeting the gentleman’s gaze. “The subject of my father is generally left alone. That is all.”

“Then I’ll leave the subject where it is and move along.”

“Thank you.” When Rachel again focused on the menu, the words wouldn’t form sentences. She raised her eyes. “Do you truly believe pressing an issue such as unique choice, whatever it may be regarding, is a stand I should take? Shouldn’t I choose my battles more carefully?”

“What battle could be more important than the one involving your future?”

“Even though the future currently set is all I’ve known?”

“Certainly you dreamed a previous future before your schooling? For example, when I was a young boy I dreamt of foreign grandeur battling in countries such as Arabia or Egypt. Now I’ve been trained to discuss business, law, or even cultures with dignitaries from these same countries.”

Rachel looked away. “The past and the dreams within it are not important. This path has been chosen, and this path is the one I follow.”

The gentleman examined her face before reaching across the table to cover her hand with his. Rachel met his gaze in surprise, both that he had made such a forward gesture and that she didn’t feel invaded at it. “Never forget that you have a mind and spirit that are unique to you. We may be servants to our station, but such does *not* mean we must sacrifice our independent views.”

“Who *are* you?” Rachel asked suddenly.

He smiled and gave her hand a gentle squeeze before pulling back and moving to tug the cord that would bring their steward. “An understanding stranger.”

Her lips twitched into their usual smirk. “How can we be strangers when you seem to have read all the pages of my life beforehand? You’ve left me at a disadvantage.”

Chuckling, he reminded, “I seem to recall you had a few of your own uncanny insights yesterday.”

Recalling those “uncanny insights” gave her a large amount of satisfaction, especially when remembering his expression of surprise and then amusement. To her own self they were minor victories. After all, she had been trained to pinpoint a person’s character, as well as their weaknesses, so as to make use of them. Yet he had congratulated her the insight she had into his character, even though how she had presented it would most often cause offense. People seldom cared to have their

weakness and strengths classified with calm and seriousness. *Perhaps that was why you presented it the way you did? To bait him?* Rachel smirked with the remembrance of titling him “*firm in your assurance*”, “*somewhat flippant due to your scorn of society*”, and “*determined to have all views of a subject properly conceded before yielding an argument, even should your stand be in the wrong.*”

“Yes. I suppose I did,” she finally said now.

Their steward arrived then, and they ordered breakfast before continuing their debates and discussions of the day before. There seemed to be an unexpected connection between the two. A connection Rachel hadn’t felt since leaving home. So once again she found herself entertaining the idea of inviting the gentleman to visit. To meet her father. To become a true friend and exchange names as well as ideas. *It would be nice to have an ally, wouldn’t it?* Her mind conceded the point, accepting defeat gracefully.

When the dishes had been gathered from their breakfast and the steward had left the room, Rachel decided the time had come to voice the invitation. “Sir, I must confess that I have what could be an uncomfortable question for you.”

The gentleman raised an eyebrow. “My curiosity begs you to ask.”

“I’ve found our time together enjoyable,” she began.

“With a beginning such as that, I find myself doubting the question to be as horrible as you initially made it sound,” he teased.

Rachel’s lips twitched upward, the action deftly hidden behind the graceful opening and lifting of her fan.

He motioned toward her. “So sorry. Please continue.”

“If your schedule permits when we arrive in Boston day after tomorrow, I would like to extend to you an invitation to stay with my father and myself. I understand that propriety demands a ‘proper’ introduction, but who is to say that my choosing to tell you my name is ‘Rachel Samson’ isn’t enough?”

The gentleman’s smile vanished and it even seemed his complexion paled. However, the reaction was so contrary to his previous attitude with her that she dismissed it as ridiculous.

“Our debates and discussions have convinced me that Father would not only approve my friendship with you,” she continued, “but that he would most likely offer you a position within the business.”

The gentleman’s eyes lowered to a scrutiny of his hands. “Yet if he didn’t approve? Would you continue said friendship?”

“That’s an unexpected question, I must say.” Rachel examined his suddenly guarded expression. “Have I *offended* you, sir?”

His focus lifted. “No, and I’m honored by your invitation, but...”

Confusion darkened Rachel’s emerald eyes. “Sir, please. Tell me what I’ve said and I will do my best to correct the insult.”

Taking in a deep breath as he stood to his feet, he softly said, “There was no insult. I—” He bowed. “Please forgive me my secrets and mysteries, Miss... Samson, but my conscience refuses me your company. I hope the remainder of your journey is more enjoyable.” Turning, he made his way toward the exit.

Rachel stood, moving after him with hurried steps. “Sir, wait!”

The gentleman halted, his hand clutching the golden handle of the door. *Rachel Byron, calm yourself before you look a fool!* She pushed away the confusion as well as a surprising feeling of muted panic when she came to stand beside him. His jaw was tightly clenched, his eyes focused intensely on his hand gripping the door handle.

“If I’ve not offended, at least tell me your name and where I might send future correspondence.”

“Miss Samson, I...” He looked toward her, his brown eyes dark. “I’ve taken liberties and do not deserve your attention, nor your letters.”

“Liberties?” Rachel repeated, shocked. “But, sir, you’ve done nothing. If anything, you’ve replenished my faith in the intelligence and chivalry of men.”

The smile offered seemed regretful as their gazes held. Then it slowly faded. “I apologize for the confusion and consternation, but—” Lowering his gaze, he shook his head. “Good day, Miss Samson.” Then he left the coach, closing the door quietly behind him.

Rachel cringed without meaning to, staring through the glass at his retreating figure. Then, when he had passed through the passenger car and entered the one beyond, she turned away to the dimmed brightness of the coach. Now she would be alone. Again.