

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.

Three

| A Preferred Stranger |

Rachel accepted the help of the conductor as she stepped from the private coach onto the landing of the main station in her home city of Boston, Massachusetts. Brushing the wrinkles from the rich green corduroy of her traveling habit, Rachel couldn’t keep herself from examining the comings and

goings of those still disembarking. The gentleman wasn't among them.

The first day he had separated himself from her Rachel had respected his desire for distance. The second day, however, had brought about the decision to not allow a strategic friendship to be tainted. Inquiring after him to the conductor, she had been informed that the gentleman had disembarked at the final stop the previous evening. Now a momentary wave of confusion darkened her emerald eyes, an accompanying impression of isolation causing her to release a soft breath. Then she was able to distance herself from the situation, much like closing a door in her mind, and turned to a nearby porter to offer him the claim tickets for her luggage. The young man tipped his cap toward her before beckoning to several of his workmates and then disappearing into the throngs of people in search of her things.

Stepping away from the train to the waiting carriage from the Samson estate, a growing intensity of dread settled within, encouraged by the previous notion of isolation. The gentleman's presence at the meeting with her father would have been a much-needed support— Rachel tightened her hold on her reticule moments before she stepped up into the carriage. *Rachel, how will you last as heir to the Samson estate if you are unable to face your own father without the support of a man?*

But how could she last as heir without the same?

The carriage lurched forward, heightening the flutter of dread as well as the confusion to the gentleman's reaction to her identity. She could easily make inquiries at the station where the gentleman had disembarked the previous evening. *And certainly Lynette would know who the gentleman was.* After all, his friend had not only been invited, he had waylaid Mr. Traxin for the better part of an hour. The specifics of such Rachel wanted to know in great detail. Yet why she should go to the trouble of seeking him out when he had excused himself from her with such... finality? *Due to the fact there was no inappropriate action on his part directly beforehand,* she reminded, momentarily clutching her fan before flicking it open and somewhat stiffly fanning herself. Time and again he had demonstrated respect, intelligence, deference, maturity.... Rachel snapped the fan closed while briefly pressing her lips together. She refused to allow the distance when he continued to journey to the forefront of her mind as ally and comrade. For whom but he had demonstrated understanding that did not elicit but the mildest suspicion?

Absently tapping the fan against her palm, Rachel simply could not allow the mystery to continue. *I must understand his reasoning!* For as far as she knew, the Samson family had few enemies. Her father personally tended that fact believing the best way to cultivate wealth was to cultivate partnerships rather than competition. Rachel gave a brusque nod and immediately began plotting the step-by-step plan to locate the gentleman. Too soon, however, the carriage creaked to a halt and broke her reverie. Expression blank and thoughts and emotions carefully controlled, she loosened her tight hold upon her fan and accepted the footman's help from the carriage.

Drawing her immediate attention was the massive three-level mansion of her familial roots. Located on a large plot of land near Boston Commons, the mansion stood as her father's resolution to be the best. Everything from the carefully laid oak floors, the tightly mortared stone of the chimney, and the finely woven tapestries imported from around the globe had been specifically consigned for the Samson estate.

Rachel took in an unnoticed breath and stepped forward, ascending the stone steps that led to the front porch. As she crested the stairs, the large white door with the oppressive brass lion-head knocker opened to reveal the family butler.

“Good morning, Miss Rachel,” he greeted, his thinning gray hair and bright blue eyes a welcome familiarity. “I hope your journey was safe and pleasant.”

“Thank you, Oliver. It was.” While Oliver didn’t seem as tall, Rachel noted that everything from his suit to his highly polished shoes was the same. Her lips twitched as she handed him her gloves and hat.

“It’s nice to have you home again, Miss.”

Offering him a smile and a brief incline of her head, Rachel passed to move deeper into the front hall. Memories by the dozens pressed at her, demanding her attention the same moment she attempted to usher them away. When Rachel paused at the foot of the stairs leading to the second story, she could almost see the past visions of herself and her childhood friend sliding down the railing.

“Excuse me, Miss.”

“Yes, Oliver?” she asked absently, unable to look from the scenes of a past so distant.

“The master has requested your presence in the study as soon as you’ve freshened yourself from your trip.”

Rachel blinked, drawn back from the visions of her child to the present requirements of duty and expectation. She looked to the butler as she drew her control more completely around her. “Thank you, Oliver.”

He bowed and turned to make his way down the hallway that led to the kitchen toward the back of the house.

That title of “Master” acted as a presentiment to the possible expectations that she would be held to: a deference to his role as head-of-household. An expectation she had decided to overcome. Rachel stared up the second-story stairway for a brief moment longer before she turned to cross the hall to the doorway of her father’s study. After a light knock and a brusque “Enter,” Rachel opened the door to step inside.

Situated directly off the main hallway for easy access, it was a true businessman’s office. Nearly the entire wall to her right had bookcases filled to capacity with law books, economic nonfiction, and histories of past successful tycoons. Included, also, were biographies from every imaginable walk of life. On the wall to her left hung letters from prominent businessmen and board members, framed and carefully positioned beside photographs of these same people with her father.

Hand momentarily gripping the brass handle of the door, Rachel forced herself to release it and

move toward the center of the room. Dark leather chairs were grouped opposite her father's desk and a dark burgundy oriental rug adorned the black walnut hardwood floor. Drawn burgundy velvet curtains heightened an effect of a dragon's cave, reminding her of times as a child when she had lived in dread of the room.

Ushering the memories away, Rachel calmly greeted, "Hello, Father."

Situated as he was leaning against the corner of his dark desk, Henry Samson was an attractive and athletic 54-year-old businessman surrounded by an aura of brusque intensity. With pepper-black hair and hazel-green eyes, the persona she so clearly saw now had certainly helped build his empire. Rachel, however, remembered a different side to his character. One that had chased monsters from under the bed and behind the curtains. One that had spoken to her with gentleness and kindness—

He looked up, and his eyes widened in shock as he straightened. "Good God! Rachel? You've grown!"

Then he stepped forward to embrace her, the action causing Rachel to momentarily stiffen. The warm welcome had been unexpected when compared to his past actions. Especially that of barring her return for her mother's passing. Yet when Rachel breathed in the intermingling scents of gourmet coffee and tobacco, the sudden surge of pleasant memories caused her to return his embrace. Eight years had been such a long time and the familiar scent and warmth took her back to the happy times before—

He wanted you to become someone else.

Eyes snapping open, Rachel almost violently dragged her mind back from the visitation to the past. In fact, her arms dropped to her sides so quickly that it caused her father to pull somewhat hesitantly away. Then he cleared his throat, stepping back while motioning to one of the leather chairs positioned in front of his large desk. Rachel accepted.

He intensely regarded her as he once more leaned against his desk. "Did you have a pleasant trip?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good, good." He retrieved his pocket-watch from his vest and checked the time, the action causing Rachel to arch an eyebrow.

"Is something wrong?"

Returning the watch to his pocket, he once more focused on her. "Why do you ask?"

"You gauge the time." *Certainly he wouldn't schedule an appointment with a client for the same day as my arrival.* Yet she knew better than anyone that her father prioritized business before all else.

"Nothing is 'wrong', per se," her father answered vaguely. "A meeting had been scheduled for yesterday and I haven't yet received word as to the reason for their absence."

“A meeting you say?” Rachel repeated, curiosity and interest shuffling the haze of irritation easily away. “New client?”

One side of her father’s mouth lifted in a somewhat sardonic smile. “Our relationship is a bit more complicated, unfortunately.”

Her eyebrow arched at his continuing ambiguity. “How so?”

Lowering his focus to a box on the front left corner of his desk, he chose a thin cigar. “I hadn’t had a chance to inform you of all plans quite yet.”

The cold hush of suspicion lifted the hairs on the nape of her neck. “What plans would those be, pray?”

“I intended to have the two of you meet over lunch. Then he and I were to discuss the situation during supper.”

Although presented calmly and matter-of-fact, the specific word of “situation” didn’t sound at all safe. Especially when it would apparently involve her person. “Why not now?” she posed, her tone firm yet respectful. “If I am at all involved, I should know beforehand.”

“Of course,” her father allowed with a slight incline of head. “Hence the shared meal.”

Rachel felt a stronger surge of irritation. She had never tolerated obscurity or ambiguous answers from her classmates or the student government. Direct responses resulted in direct action. Besides, politicians were profuse enough, serving mostly to stagnate government and delay any true progress. Her stand had always been that the school did not need to take it upon itself the training of more.

Gathering back her calm after a brief mental warning, Rachel attempted a different approach. “This is appreciated, I’m sure, but would it not be best if I were fully informed as to what type of complicated relationship you and the gentleman share that affects my person?”

To Rachel’s surprise, her father paused for a long moment before finally answering, “I’m not free to discuss it at the moment.”

Her eyebrow twitched as she continued to regard him. Her father did the same, and just as calmly. Finally, Rachel spoke while performing an absent open-and-close action of her fan. “Father, the point of my training was to prepare in me a mind perfectly capable of not only managing complicated relationships, but to know how best to utilize them. What would be the point of eight years of study if I am not given cause to use said training?”

He didn’t respond.

“If you truly wish me to be a part of this business,” Rachel continued, easily holding his hazel-green examination, “then you would do well to tell me of this and other complicated relationships so that I can be better prepared to manage them.”

Her father silently puffed his cigar several times before stating, “He’s your betrothed.”

Stiffening, Rachel’s grip tightened on her fan so completely that a wooden brace popped. “What?”

Henry Samson’s calm and complete scrutiny of her countenance didn’t waver. “The son of a friend, we’ve had you two promised since you were born. You’re to be wed the end of this month.”

For only the second time in her life, Rachel felt completely and absolutely abandoned and betrayed. “Wed?” she repeated, voice hushed as her hands gripped the fan.

“Arranged marriages are common,” her father informed, “and as I’m not about to let any jackanapes come and meddle his way into our business affairs, it was deemed necessary here.”

Shock dwindled, indignation sparking in her eyes as her focus moved sharply to her father. “Business affairs?” Rachel repeated coldly. “Is *that* what this arrangement is to you? A *business* transaction?”

“You’re my only child, Rachel, and I’ve every intention of managing your affairs to their best capacity.”

“My affairs regarding men are none of your concern,” she informed, her tone under strict control. “Neither is the man I might choose to marry. I shall marry whom and when I choose. Not before, not after, and certainly not when you deem me ready much as a trainer with his mare.”

“Rachel Byron Samson, I will not accept that—”

“Just as I will not accept a man of your choosing for my husband,” Rachel insisted firmly. “Whether he is the most wealthy, the most highly qualified, or the most intelligent matters little. This particular choice has no relevance to that of our business practices.”

His hazel-green eyes sparked. “You will accept this match, Rachel, or you will no longer be included in the matters of this family’s business practices.”

Rachel’s face paled and her calm shattered as she sharply stood. “You have no right!”

“I have *every* right. If you do not marry whom I choose, I shall write you out of my estate. Love and familiarity are luxuries the rich cannot afford. The thought of business comes first. Always.” He motioned sharply toward her. “You are this family’s only hope for the future and I will not see that go to waste.”

Eyes flashing, Rachel tilted her chin upward as defiance and independence rescued her calm. “So I am capable of running the business but cannot choose my own husband? I am amazed at the weight of trust you place upon me, dear Father. How shall I meet the expectations?”

Her father briefly pressed his lips into a thin line. “Don’t take that tone with me.”

“Tone?” Rachel asked, incredulous. “You bend and manipulate my life as if I were an object or possession and worry on my *tone*? You have *no* right to control me as if I were still a child, and I refuse to kowtow whenever my opinions collide with yours. I am no longer a child of fourteen, Father! I am a grown woman who has proven her worth in the realm of business. A *woman* who continuously demonstrated her prowess in major investments, graduating with high honors. You invested in my training, so you had best expect that to include an independent will and mind.”

With that, Rachel turned on her heel and strode for the door, exiting the room to make her way upstairs. When she slammed into her own room, however, her step faltered and she could only blink in shock and horror.

French porcelain-faced dolls leered at her with smiles as forced and shallow as those she’d seen in New York and Paris. The pink ruffles and lace of her canopy bed ridiculed her assumed role of an heir, reminding her of that air of femininity which doomed her to be viewed as another empty-headed heiress. Innocent watercolors of a three-person family mocked her. Small chairs and well-dusted tea sets seared images of laughter and good times into a numbed heart. A heart of business.

“How—” Rachel nearly retched as she clutched the doorframe. “How can he believe *this* is who returned?”

For the child she saw in the room would never be welcome in the world of business that she had decided to conquer.



Brown eyes glared out the carriage window as the gentleman nervously tapped an empty pipe against his leg. When Miss Rachel Samson discovered her father’s plans... *I can’t let this happen. Not like this.*

He sat forward, running a hand through his raven-black hair before irritably chewing the end of his pipe. *When we meet, I’ll simply tell her...* He grimaced. *Tell her what exactly, old man?* A scowl darkened his brown eyes to black as he glared ahead. An objection had to be voiced, he knew. *But what will you say?* Anything said to her father would likely be waved aside as if from a child. As Rachel had said, no one questioned Henry Samson.

The gentleman scoffed, taking the pipe from his mouth to slip it back into the inner pocket of his suit-coat. *I’ve seen her more in the past few days than her own father in these last eight years! Is it not, then, my... my duty to protect her? As a gentleman? As a... a comrade?* He gave a brusque nod and a mumbled, “By God it is,” as the carriage pulled to a halt outside the Samson estate. Stepping down, he took a moment to straighten his charcoal jacket, mumbling, “Courage, old man. Courage,” before making his way to the front entry. There the family butler accepted his hat and gloves. “Good morning, Oliver. How have you been?”

“Very well. Thank you, sir. Yourself?”

The gentleman smiled. “Doing well. Doing well.” He motioned down the hall. “Available?”

“Yes, sir. Just.” Oliver led the gentleman forward. “How was your trip?”

The gentleman cleared his throat as Oliver opened the study door. “Very interesting, and let’s leave it at that.”

“Yes, sir.” Oliver bowed and closed the door behind him.

Henry Samson greeted the gentleman with a scowl and an irritably voiced, “Robert, what do you think you’re doing?”

Robert swallowed his reluctance and summoned his resolve. He refused the offered chair. “Mr. Samson, we need to have a talk.”

One eyebrow twitched as Mr. Samson prompted, “Regarding?” The action reminded Robert greatly of the man’s daughter.

“Your daughter.” *Dear Lord, give me the words*, he prayed, barely restraining a grimace at his predicament.

An eyebrow rose as Mr. Samson adjusted his position against his sturdy wooden desk. “And?” he pressed, crossing his arms.

Robert cleared his throat. *Careful, old man*. “I ask for your permission to court her.”

Mr. Samson sharply straightened. “You *what?*”

Lifting his hands, Robert soothed, “Mr. Samson, hear me out.”

“Hear you out, Robert? What in *blazes* are you talking about, ‘permission to court?’” Mr. Samson scoffed. “You know as well as I do a betrothal is in place. What’s the point of—”

“The ‘point’ is that she *deserves* this choice,” Robert interrupted firmly. “If you force this path upon her, you will only press her to stand against everything the betrothal signifies of today’s society: control, submission, dependence.... You’ve had her trained and taught to be dependent upon one person: Herself. *That* has ingrained in her suspicion of practically everyone around her. If you persist in this betrothal, you will only jeopardize the relationship between husband and wife *as well as* father and daughter.”

Mr. Samson narrowed his gaze as he watched Robert’s expression. “Robert Trent, what have you done?”

“Nothing, save kindle a friendship with a highly intelligent woman.”

“And how did you accomplish this when she’s been abroad?” he prompted.

Feeling his ears burn red, Robert cleared his throat. “We rode together the first two days of her

journey home.” *No need to confess life at the party.*

“Robert—” Mr. Samson clenched his jaw. “Robert, you were told not to interfere.”

“Not to interfere?” Robert repeated, incredulous. “I offer her friendship and support and it’s interference? She confessed a feeling of camaraderie—the first she’s likely had in years—and it’s *interference?*” Robert scoffed. “Good God, man! Your daughter deserves truthfulness. If this negatively impacts your plans, so be it!” Robert pointed roughly toward older man. “Mark my words, sir. Should you tell her of this betrothal, she will despise and mistrust everyone involved, likely yourself as well. What good will come of that?”

“When I want your opinion I’ll ask for it,” Mr. Samson warned in a dangerously calm voice. “Until that time, you will abide by the plans in place while keeping any opinions you might have to yourself.”

“Mr. Sa—”

“Robert, I suggest you leave and gather your senses. You are dangerously close to jeopardizing your future.” Then he turned away, moving around his desk to sit within the large leather chair and see to the business papers and reports scattered about his desk.

Robert tightly clenched his jaw before storming from the room, slamming the door behind him. “Good *God*, what a stubborn fool!” With his daughter likely the only casualty. It was unthinkable the choices the man had resulted to in order to supposedly protect his family legacy. “And warning me on my opinions? The man’s a pompous a—”

“Sir!”

Robert slowly turned at the call by a very familiar voice. As suspected, Rachel descended from the second story, the appearance of her inviting a lump of guilt to settle in the soles of his shoes. Her eyes were as bright as he remembered, and a slight smile caressed her lips. A seldom-seen expression, if he remembered correctly. Robert swallowed hard. *No escape, old man. The time has come for confessions.*



Rachel had stood within the doorway of her room for several silent minutes, unable to think or feel anything until she heard the slamming of a door. The unexpected jolt caused a twitch as her attention shifted from the haunting memories to the recognized voice that sharply stated “Good *God*, what a stubborn fool!” At that, her head snapped up and she moved swiftly from the doorway to see, as expected, the gentleman from both party and train. Standing stiff and stern in the hall, his expression was dangerously angry. “And warning me on my opinions?” he grouched. “The man’s a pompous a—”

“Sir!” she called, hurrying forward and barely taking the time to gather up her skirts for the possibility of missing him yet again. The gentleman slowly turned, expression showing an emotion that Rachel could only label as... *guilt?* A little breathless as she reached the bottom step, Rachel

moved toward him while voicing, “A pleasant surprise, I must say. How in the world did you know to find me here?” She found herself hoping the welcome in her tone would let him know that no offense was taken from his sudden departure from her company at their previous meeting.

His apparent uncertainty was ushered away with a somewhat forced smile as he reached out to accept her offered hand, bending over it in a formal bow and meeting her green gaze. Hesitation shone clear in his brown eyes. “In actuality, I...” Yet his voice faded as he straightened, sending a glance over his shoulder toward the door of her father’s study. When he focused once again on her face, his eyes continued to show seriousness. “Is there a place where we can speak more privately?”

“Of course.” Rachel motioned further down the hall. “There are the back gardens to the left.”

“Perfect.” The gentleman offered his arm, which she accepted. “My confession is liable to be... upsetting,” he finally admitted.

Rachel examined his expression, unable to restrain the detachment that always came when an outcome was unknown. “I see.”

“In fact, I have but just come from a meeting with your father regarding it.”

“You—” She halted, retrieving her hand from his arm as she faced him, the suspicion flaring. *Rachel, do not judge him prematurely, nor place upon him any offense he might have unknowingly committed*, she warned. Gathering her control tighter, Rachel calmly asked, “Why?” while preparing herself for the answer.

Looking once more to the study door behind him, he then motioned ahead toward the main hall. Rachel inclined her head and stepped along beside him. “When you identified yourself as Rachel Samson...” he began.

“You must have more than a passing familiarity with my family and its businesses,” Rachel supposed as she watched his profile. His hesitation to continue the confession struck another thought as well. “Then your reaction aboard the train was due to the fact you knew of the betrothal.”

The gentleman halted, his jaw clenching before he shifted his focus to her face. “How much did he tell you?” he asked slowly.

Her chin tilted. “That he has had me promised to a man I’ve never met. To the ‘son of a friend.’” Keeping firm control of her tone, she held his gaze. “You knew and yet did not tell me. Why?”

The gentleman moved his focus to the intersection between the main and back halls that led to the gardens. “I was afraid. How did I go about the duty without hurting you? I still don’t know.”

The tension around them heightened, Rachel could plainly sense it, and caused the gentleman to fist his hands at his sides. *Rachel, he was not at fault*, she told herself. *He should be allowed further explanation*. Especially since he presented, again, an extreme regard for her feelings in the matter. Motioning toward the garden, the gentleman followed after a moment’s hesitation. She descended the marble steps into the garden, moving to stand near a three-foot marble bench situated under a large oak

tree. Rachel did her best to loosen her stiff form, knowing that would clearly show her agitation. Yet the hurt at her father's manipulation would not be ignored. Nor would it be completely ushered aside.

"I made a final decision only this morning," the gentleman confessed, standing beside her.

Rachel could only remain silent and distant, unable to voice any type of assurance that she didn't hold him to blame for his choice. How would she have confessed the same knowledge if their roles had been reversed? *You should not allow the silence to fester*, she admonished.

"Should it make a difference for you and your future," he said before she could speak, "I asked his permission to court."

Her gaze swiftly met his. "You what?"

The gentleman softly cleared his throat, uncertainty again noted in his expressive brown eyes. "Miss Samson, my decision to remain silent is a regretted one, to be sure, and I had hoped to persuade your father to... to allow you this choice."

"A choice? For what? For a normal courtship when this... this other has been deemed suitable to sire the Samson grandchildren? For persuading me to fall in love with a stranger so that he might gain monetary stability for our future generations?" Rachel scoffed and faced forward.

"Miss Samson..." He released a deep breath. "Miss Samson, what type of gentleman would I be if I had not attempted some course of action?"

Raising a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose, Rachel admitted, "I appreciate the thought, sir, much as my attitude doesn't show it, but..." She faced him again, knowing that her calm was almost chilled. "If I don't follow through with this betrothal, he threatens to write me out of his inheritance. One that I've trained and studied these eight years to have. This result leaves me with no place to stand against him."

Clenching his jaw, the gentleman seemed to flinch in body as well as expression as he held her gaze. "Miss Samson..."

But there were no words he could have said that would alleviate the damage done. Rachel had finally come to see that her life was not truly her own.

"Miss Samson," he attempted again, "the protection of your future must have been his intention."

"Whatever the goal," she informed, tone cool as she looked away, "the choice that should have been mine has been stolen, thwarting my training for independence. Henceforth, this man will stand as a living ridicule to my hard work."

The gentleman ran a hand through his hair, releasing another deep breath as he whispered, "It can't be," while turning away from her.

Shaking his head, he moved to sit upon the marble bench near the oak tree. Rachel followed, lowering herself beside him as he stared somewhat blankly at the ground, his arms resting lightly upon his legs. His reaction intrigued her, for he didn't know so much about her or her character that the knowledge of this betrothal would cause him to be so troubled.

"Sir, why does this decision cause a reaction such as a proposal of courtship to a stranger?" When he didn't look up nor seem to intend a response, she pressed the point. "Where is the benefit to you in taking on my father's wrath? The Samson estate and holdings are vast, yes, but I may very well have lost the right to th—"

"I did not propose courtship to gain your wealth, Miss Samson," he finally said, his brown eyes more guarded when he met her gaze. "As I said before, you deserve this particular choice perhaps more than any other. This one decision affects not only your future, but that of the family you're destined to have. There should be no manipulation involved. No ulterior motive that taints such a beautiful thing as 'family'."

Rachel blinked at him, the totality of his answer impressing her even more of his true character. Then, when held against his responses of honor and responsibility on the train.... *"My conscience refuses me your company. I've taken liberties and do not deserve your attention."*

A decision made, Rachel pulled her embroidered kerchief from the wrist of her sleeve and presented it to him. "Sir, whether or not my father approves, your attentions are accepted."

The gentleman lowered his gaze to the kerchief, saying nothing.

"I *won't* accept this betrothal," she intoned firmly. "I know nothing of this other man—his passions and politics; his persona or trustworthiness. How can I ally myself with a stranger whom my father deems worthy when I haven't been given the opportunity to have that worthiness exhibited?"

"I—" The gentleman didn't lift his focus from the kerchief, his hand still not accepting the soft material. Finally, he lifted his gaze to meet hers. "Are you certain? I offered, yes, but.... Miss Samson, I don't wish you to feel obligated to accept. It should not simply be a lesser painful option."

"It *is* the lesser painful option, for what I've come to know of you invited... trust." Rachel reached out to take his hand, placing the kerchief within the warm grasp. The gentleman blinked and stared down at the dainty cloth. "Even now you display more strength of character than my father, both in your initial offering and in your hesitation to accept. Therefore, if my father has determined that I should marry, than *I* shall choose the man to whom I will give my affections and my position. That choice is you."

"Miss Samson, I only offer—"

"You offer courtship, yes," Rachel interrupted, "yet all I have to offer is engagement— No. All that is available to me is a classification of 'betrothal'. To save my independence and my own self-respect."

The gentleman regarded her for a long and silent collection of moments until, finally, his lips tilted upward in a lopsided and very boyish smile. “Again, Miss Samson,” he tucked the kerchief into the side pocket of his suit coat and presented a hand, “I hold you only to courtship at this point and time. Holding you to anything more when you’ve not had the appropriate time to gauge my person puts me into a classification I would rather not be. One that your father seems to be content to have to himself.”

Firming her hold on his hand, she inclined her head. “Very well. Courtship then, though I doubt another shall be adequate to the task of ‘husband’.”

His smile twitched. “Even I might be found lacking. And, with that said I suppose I should introduce myself, as no one else seems able to take up the duty.”

Her lips lifted into a very slight expression of amusement. “I could title you ‘sir’ for the remainder of our acquaintance.”

Chuckling, he gave her hand a single, firm yet gentle grip before releasing it. “While ‘sir’ is charming in its own way, the name is Robert Leonard Trent, of Virginia. But please, call me ‘Rob’ or ‘Robert’. All my friends do so.”

Rachel inclined her head. “You realize, of course, that in all proper form the title of ‘Robert’ shouldn’t be spoken until *much* later?”

“Yes, well, in addition to being arrogant my father would feel obligated to tell you I’m also classified as a rogue. I almost never do that which is deemed ‘proper’. Instead, I show a definite tendency toward following my heart more than common sense. That has ushered me into trouble more times than Father would like to admit.”

Standing, Rachel studied him as he did the same. Then she motioned toward the house, Robert following beside her. “Very well. Robert, then. Yet only should you call me Rachel. Turn-about is fair play.”

“Of course, as I lean toward doing my best to please the ladies.... Within reason, of course.”

Rachel’s lips twitched slightly, amazing her at how easily the action came. *When was the last time I enjoyed someone’s company to this extent?* She couldn’t recall.

The two ascended the stairs of the back porch. However, Robert halted her before entering the house, his hand gently enfolding her upper arm. “Miss Sa— Pardon me. Rachel.”

She faced him, noticing a return of the uncertainty and caution she noted before. “Yes?”

“Should your father restate his ultimatum....” Robert released a slow breath. “Rachel, I only offered to court to save you the loss of a freedom I take very seriously. I have enough wealth to my name that I can support you with or without my father’s approval, or yours, should the end of our acquaintance result in marriage. However, it isn’t my intention to separate you from what is

rightfully yours.”

The reiteration of so many honorable characteristics intrigued Rachel to an even greater extent, especially after her life experiences to that point. “Thank you for that,” she told him, “yet my training has been in independence and aggression. To know myself, what I want, and then have the tenacity and courage to pursue it. So I *will* have this choice, even should that separate me from the legacy that was previously set aside.” She tilted her chin upward. “I shall make my own legacy.”

Robert regarded her for a long moment, his expression still serious and deep in thought. Then the lines of his handsome face softened and the smile reappeared. He bowed with a regally stated, “Miss Samson. It is my honor to serve.”

Curtsying low, Rachel restrained a sardonic smile as she intoned a dignified, “Sir.”

Robert held open the back entry door for her. “Did you have a pleasant morning, at least?”

“Better than expected, with obvious exceptions.”

Conceding the point with a slight incline of head, Robert fell into step beside her. “I truly am sorry that I didn’t finish the trip with you. As I said before, my conscience wouldn’t allow it until I had resolved what to do.”

“While it tweaks my temper that you didn’t confess all at the moment I introduced myself, I suppose I can understand the reasons for it,” she confessed. “I once showed a tendency toward speaking too soon, often embarrassing myself with a showing of temper. I’ve since come to realize that waiting is often the best policy.” Too many years had it taken to learn that lesson.

Robert chuckled. “I shall do my best to remember that as a warning. As well as the fact that your eyes sparkle when you’re preparing to lash.”

A single eyebrow arched upward while she sent him a questioning glance.

Again, Robert sounded his attractive baritone chuckle. “I apologize.”

“For what, pray?”

“For my forward behavior. I should wait until tomorrow, at least, to allow you time to recover from a less-than-wonderful journey and revelation. Especially when such resulted in two men being thrust upon you.”

Amusement rose within. “Then I suppose it would be forward of me to admit that your quips are the help to recover?”

Robert laughed outright, drawing yet another mild expression of entertainment from Rachel. However, when her father stepped from his office into the hall, her body tensed and she halted. The action was so swift that it caused Robert to touch her briefly on the back as he came to stand beside

her.

“Rachel, it’s time to speak of details regarding arrangements before this foolishness continues,” her father informed as he approached. His hard stare swept over them both.

“ ‘Details’ of what, Father?” she asked coolly. “I’ve told you I won’t marry this ‘son of a friend’. It doesn’t matter that you’ve had us betrothed. You didn’t consult *me*, therefore I don’t recognize the contract.”

“Whether *you* recognize the contract or not, Rachel, matters little. Understandings have been made. My friend has quite the fortune, as well as the business sense to hold and increase it. His son has that same tendency, though a bit more... unorthodox.” He sent Robert a dark glare. “And you, who were told not to involve yourself. Yet at the first opportunity you interfere—”

“He did nothing, Father,” Rachel informed coolly, “other than voice an acceptable offer of future attention. I’ve told you: I *will not* accept this previous arrangement. I know nothing of his character. You wouldn’t expect me to begin a business partnership on those grounds much less a marriage.”

“Don’t take offense at the pairing. Both of you have been trained with what is required and beneficial for this life you’ve been born into. You’ve also proven yourselves bright and determined to follow through with whatever challenge has been placed in front of you. So, this future has been specifically tailored to that.”

“I will not be controlled,” Rachel insisted firmly. “If that attitude is rewarded by striking me from your will, so be it. For what good was my training if you don’t trust it?”

Henry roughly motioned to Robert. “So you choose him? This rogue with the sweet words and idiotic notions of chivalry?”

From the corner of her focus, Rachel noticed Robert’s form stiffen. She reached out to lay a hand on his arm as she stared somewhat coldly at her father. “What I have discovered of Mr. Trent has invited trust, with these ‘idiotic notions’ a great motivator toward that end. I know nothing of this other and refuse to marry a man who doesn’t show resilience enough to stand against you. Mr. Trent, however, has shown courage and resolve to spare, and *his* attentions will remain acceptable—”

“You know nothing about him!” Henry snapped. “For all you know he could be using the situation to gain the upper-hand and forever have the ability to control you, your opinion, and your inheritance!”

Robert took a menacing step forward, any further action once more halted by Rachel’s hand upon his arm and a cool voicing of “Robert,” as she focused briefly on his taut profile. She immediately focused on her father. “If the only course is researching his ethics, family background, and stability of wealth to prove he isn’t the conspirer you believe, so be it. I shall prove to you and justify to myself the truth of his qualifications as beau, suitor, and prospective husband for the end result of providing you your heir.” Rachel tilted her chin upward. “When I do, you will inform the other that he is not the intended for my hand.”

Her father glowered down at her a moment before shifting his hard stare to Robert. “You will regret this decision, Trent.”

“I will *not* regret the decision to be honorable.”

Briefly clenching his jaw, Henry finally muttered, “Fine,” in a tightly controlled tone. “But you will be responsible for any and all correspondence to your original intended, as well as to the Board explaining this breach of contract: verbal or not. I hope they are as forgiving of your blatant rebellion as I am, for they don’t appreciate contracts being broken for the sake of pride.”

Then he turned to stalk toward the front entry, slamming out of the house without coat or hat.

“‘For the sake of pride?’” Rachel repeated. She sounded a slight scoff. “That was the pot calling the kettle ‘black.’”

At Robert’s continued silence, Rachel shifted her focus to him. He had retrieved a pipe from somewhere on his person and now mercilessly bit down upon it while glowering at the front door.

“I don’t understand why Father has taken an instant dislike to you,” Rachel admitted. “You have said you know him, and even now he mentioned that he had told you not to interfere. Had you confronted Father before I returned from Europe?”

If possible, Robert’s glower darkened as his jaw clamped down on the pipe with a click. “Father wouldn’t allow it.”

“Allow what? Your meeting with my father?”

“Or my contact with you,” he grumbled. “It did not matter that my conscience was about to drive me mad. It did not matter that the manipulation would prove more harmful than advantageous. They had come to an agreement and that was all that mattered.”

Intrigued, Rachel inquired, “‘They?’”

Robert withdrew the pipe from his mouth, frowning down at it as he crossed his left arm tightly under his right elbow. “All of them, with you and your betrothed powerless to do anything.”

Rachel blinked. “He doesn’t wish the match?”

“Oh, he had resigned himself to it,” Robert said through clenched teeth, “after conversations with his father proved nothing.” He scoffed. “He has supposedly been trained for independence in the controlling of a business as powerful as your combined families, and yet he can’t stand against his own father.” He clenched his jaw tighter. “You’ve shown more spine than he, risking even your legacy.”

Rachel regarded him, watching intently as his jaw muscle twitched. It seemed to heighten his dramatic good looks and the powerful line of his jaw. The determination and irritation that exuded

from him nearly set his short-cut straight black hair on end, shifting something within Rachel's person that such a man would be so moved for... her. Even going against his father's wishes. Who knew what risk *that* had taken for his own legacy?

Releasing a deep breath, Robert scrubbed at his scalp as he stared down at the still empty pipe in his other hand. "Ah well. Choices have been made and now I'm at last prepared to face the consequences." He focused on her. "There is no turning back now, Rachel."

She held his gaze, her green eyes emerald with determination as her chin tilted upward even more. "I don't turn back in anything."

"Yes, well, that was before you decided to welcome *me* into your life." Again, the boyish expression of handsome mischief. "Although 'welcome' is freely used, considering the circumstances."

Fighting back the amusement with a surprising desire to be irritated, Rachel looked away. "Circumstances are what we make of them."

"Here, here. I agree."

The hair on the nape of her neck rose on end as he continued to watch her. When she met his gaze and didn't look away, his expression showed respect and... something she didn't recognize. At least, not in conjunction with her.

Then he smiled and presented a hand. "I had best go and leave you to the adventure of trying to find a new place in an old home."

She accepted his hand, tensing a bit when his thumb made one light stroke of her knuckles.

"Unless you would care to have brunch?" he offered, releasing her hand.

"Thank you for the invitation, but I need time to myself." Yet what the time alone would prove or uncover, she didn't know. Of late, time in solitude only gave rise to regrets.

"Of course," Robert said. "There is much you still need to do in order to settle yourself. I've no wish to intrude onto that."

They approached the door, Oliver arriving a moment later with Robert's hat, coat, and gloves. To Rachel's surprise, reluctance to see him go directly contradicted the reluctance to have him stay.

Robert accepted his things with a smile for the butler before facing her. "May I call tomorrow?"

Again the reluctance shifted, but she forced it aside. "For coffee, of course."

His smile relaxed a bit as he hung his coat over his arm. "Then I shall see you tomorrow." He placed his hat onto his head, tipping it toward her. "Rachel."

Rachel couldn't stop the twitch of her lips upward as she bid, "Robert," and felt odd that it didn't feel odd to say it. Then he had gone, leaving Rachel to stare at the door in muted and numbed shock of her situation. "And so it's done," she mused.

Turning from the front door, Rachel stepped forward to rest a hand on the balustrade at the base of the stairs, staring up toward the second story with a deep sigh at the memories, tears, and laughter. Once again remembering the child she had been and comparing her with the woman she had become. Yet strangers both. Now, to protect her independence she had welcomed another.

"One stranger over another," she observed. Then her hand momentarily tightened its hold. "But at least the choice was mine."