

# Four

## | Tortures Past |

Rays of the morning sun infused Rachel's bedroom with warmth and brightness, unseen as she stared at the frills of the pink canopy overhead; numb. That numbness had steadily grown throughout the previous day as she had taken to the task of ensuring the complete arrival of her luggage from the station. She had also set about the delivery of varying gifts to their neighbors, family friends, board members, and select others that would hold a strategic place in her acquaintance. She could not, however, procure a different room.

To her chagrin, most of the household was in the process of assorted minor renovations to prepare for the expected parties in order to celebrate her now cancelled betrothal. As Rachel had not yet decided whether or not she would alter the date of the expected nuptials in regards to Robert, she had resigned herself to what some sentimental females would have classified as a "torture". They would have likely also viewed the room as a ridicule of her attempts to move beyond an image of a shy girl that would never again exist.

With reluctance Rachel admitted that she seemed to be expected to live the girl's life of subservience. Trained to be firm, she was now to bend to her father's wishes of a betrothal. Taught to be independent, she was to relinquish that for society's view of head-of-household and deferment of authority. Trained to feel nothing for no one, she was now to behave as a proper and genteel woman of society.

"How ironic," Rachel mused. There sounded a knock at the door. "Enter."

A chamber-maid no more than fifteen years of age entered, appropriately dressed in a black ensemble with a crisp white apron. She curtsied, her pretty face holding a sincere smile. "Good morning, Miss," she greeted brightly. Her tone perfectly matched the lightness of the sun glinting off her raven hair.

Rachel turned her head away. "It is," she replied, although she supposed her tone was overly calm to be convincing.

"Did you sleep alright, Miss?" the maid asked. She opened the door from the bedroom to the connecting bath beyond.

"Yes, thank you."

The maid returned, still smiling, and turned down the covers. "Your bath is ready, Miss."

Rachel slipped from the bed and into the plush robe the maid held ready, wondering at the numbness she felt within. She didn't understand the reason for the feeling of isolation, and it was

different than her usual calm. Eyebrow arched, Rachel followed the maid into the bathroom and accepted her help into the claw-foot tub.

“It’s to be a bit on the chilly side today, Miss,” the maid informed as she took up a sponge. “So just let me know if you’ll be needing some extra firewood for your room, or a shawl. I’ll get it for you right quick.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, and your father’s got himself an appointment. He asked me to tell you he wouldn’t be back until after lunch.”

Rachel’s eyebrow twitched. “Very well.”

“And Mr. Trent dropped a note off this morning saying as he’d be back for coffee a bit later. Came by in the wee hours, he did. On his way from town, I imagine, though he didn’t say as to what he was doing. A nice gentleman he is, Miss. And so handsome and charming—” The maid sounded a soft gasp. “I’m sorry, Miss.”

Rachel focused on the girl, observing her wide eyes and fearful expression. “What’s wrong, girl? What have you said?”

“I-I shouldn’t be chattering on like that, Miss.”

Focusing ahead, Rachel sounded a soft scoff. “Chatter as you wish, girl.” There were items to be discovered from the off-hand remarks of others. Those facts and clues that revealed truths most would attempt to hide. A different side to men and women than what was commonly known. The more rarely confessed difficulties of a business or family. The challenge, of course, was differentiating between rumor based on spite and supposition based on fact.

The maid resumed her chit-chat hesitantly at first, and then with more ease as Rachel neither scolded nor ignored. It revealed little of use. However, it did inform that Mr. Robert Trent was a somewhat regular visitor of a local orphanage, with his attendance occurring once or twice every six to eight months.

“Why would a resident of Virginia interest himself in a local orphanage of Boston?” Rachel had asked.

But the maid couldn’t say.

Bathing completed, the maid helped Rachel into her robe while still chattering on of a local festival held the beginning of April one week previous. While dressing Rachel in a dress of ivory and cornflower blue, the maid spoke of the coming summer celebration that next July. And while leading Rachel to her vanity she confessed that she hoped there would be a dance at the city hall before the spring season was over – apparently a new event instigated by the most recent mayor. For some reason Rachel found the whole situation amusing.

Then a voice from her past softly greeted, “Hello, Miss,” and the smile faded from Rachel’s lips.

Rachel turned, her focus immediately drawn to the slender woman of Rachel’s same age the woman’s hazel eyes glimmering with tears and welcome. The curls of the woman’s red hair were pinned at the nape of her neck and had hundreds of pleasant memories flashing into Rachel’s mind of fun and affection that burned through the numbness and invited a warmth of... belonging. Yet the training wouldn’t allow Rachel to do much more than reservedly smile. Even as she stood and gracefully stepped toward the woman, a small part desperately wanted to run to her and sob into her shoulder; as she had done so many times in years passed. But Miss Samson only held her friend at arms length, easily resisting the press to embrace her.

“You’re even more beautiful than you were before,” Rachel observed. “And your hair...” She fingered a loose tendril of red. “I *am* glad it’s as brilliant and unruly as I remember.”

Maggie offered a teary smile the same time she self-consciously lifted a hand to her pinned curls. “You always were the one who loved it more than me. I never cared much for being called ‘carrot’ and ‘fire-top’.” Then she suddenly laughed and pulled Rachel into a tight embrace. “It’s good to have you home,” she whispered, apparently not aware of Rachel’s somewhat awkward return of the embrace. When Maggie pulled back, she offered a sad smile. “Please forgive me for not meeting you at the train. I was needed to help with an ailing child at the orphanage. I didn’t get back until just this morning.”

Rachel waved it aside, a brief thought to ask after Mr. Trent fading in and out of her mind as she guided her childhood friend from the room. “Of course, Maggie. To be truthful, I didn’t expect to see any familiar faces. Certainly not that of my ‘maid’ and childhood confidant from years past.”

Maggie looped her arm through Rachel’s as they made their way down the second-story hall toward the main stairs. “Your papa and mama were dears to keep me on once you’d gone. I but wish your papa had thought me old enough to go with you to France and get us both into mischief.”

“As do I,” Rachel admitted. “Mischief making would have settled well with me there.”

Smiling, Maggie gave Rachel’s arm a squeeze. “So what mischief can we make now that your father won’t scold?”

“I do believe I am expected to be respectful now, Maggie,” Rachel reminded, steadying her step down the stairs with a hand on the railing.

Maggie sighed. “Ah well. I guess trouble-making went out the day Toddy and Mr Parson hooked harnesses together.”

Halting, Rachel’s expression went almost too blank as she focused on her friend. “Todd?”

The woman gave Rachel’s arm a friendly pinch even though her eyes altered their perception of the other woman. “If you’d have written more, I could have told you. Or made him tell you hisself. The big ox. He kept saying as how you’d have written if it was to be. Since when did Toddy Richards get

philosophical? But there he was, just smirking at me and telling me to mind my family, meaning my place here, and leave him to his.”

The woman shrugged, once more drawing Rachel down the main staircase. “I never did see him pine away for you, but I’m of the mind he did. In his own way. Todd was always the hushed one when it came to feelings. That’s why I was a bit taken aback when you confessed he’d said he loved you in the back orchard. Remember?”

Yet Rachel could only remain silent through the memories and remembrances from years passed that assaulted her senses and her calm.

“You were but fourteen and just told you’d be off to France.” At the foot of the stairs, Maggie faced Rachel with a mischievous twinkle in her hazel eyes. “You should stop by Mr. Parson’s and give Toddy a shock.”

Not understanding the cool that seemed to drop upon her, Rachel informed, “Unfortunately, I’ve engagements and requirements of my time that don’t allow the escape today.”

Maggie gave Rachel’s hands a squeeze. “You take what time you need, as I’ve plans to redecorate your room after I’ve unpacked your trunk in the guest room I’ve smuggled aside for you. You’ll want to have all your wits about you when we get to it.”

Rachel’s eyebrow arched. “Pardon?”

The woman regarded Rachel for a moment before very slightly shaking her head. “Oliver didn’t tell you?”

Intrigue lifted the eyebrow slightly higher. “Tell me what, pray?”

“We’re bringing down those things from the attic that your mother promised you. I put off the decoration of your room until you returned so that you could have a hand in it. Your papa suggested it.” Maggie crossed her arms. “Didn’t he say something when you came home and saw nary a thing had changed?”

Rachel blinked, her mind and tongue shocked silent.

Sniggering with hands on hips, Maggie shook her head. “Men!” Then she once more took hold of Rachel’s arm to give it a fond squeeze. “Remember the fun we used to have dreaming the plans for your room?”

Struggling to gather her wits back enough to answer, Rachel calmly stated, “I do,” at the same time she attempted to reason why her father would neglect to mention the proposed change.

Maggie drew Rachel into another embrace. “It’s so wonderful to have you home, love.” Then, after placing a sisterly kiss upon Rachel’s cheek, Maggie motioned upstairs. “I’ll be seeing to things. You wander.”

Rachel stared after her friend. *“I never did see him pine away for you, but I’m of the mind he did. In his own way. Todd was always the bushed one when it came to feelings—”* With a press of lips, Rachel ushered the thoughts of Todd away and proceeded farther down the front hall to the sitting room to the entry’s left. Todd was part of her past. A past she had set aside the day she had journeyed to the port in New York. *He’s to stay there, Rachel,* she instructed. For there was no time to entertain thoughts of a childhood sweetheart when she had yet to secure her future life-partner.

Yet, pausing in the doorway of her mother’s sitting room, Rachel couldn’t help but allow a brief revisit to memory. She simply could not keep them distant. Not when they brought to mind the comforting presence of her mother, the safety of a whole family, and the love of a father— Rachel stepped from the doorway with a somewhat sharp motion, making her way toward the writing desk in the north-facing window. Slowly lowering herself into the straight-back chair, she found herself gently touching all those articles within the nooks and crannies belonging to her mother. The action seemed to close a distance that had gaped since she had heard of her mother’s failing health. Bringing, also, the regrets.

Pressing her lips into a thin line, Rachel gathered up a pen and stationary while reminding herself of the duty that had brought her to the sitting room in the beginning. *Be about your business,* she scolded. *You’ve a verbal contract to undo.* A verbal contract that she herself would have expected to be honored if roles had been reversed. Rachel frowned down at the Samson family watermark, tapping her finger against the desk in a steady rhythm of mild irritation. *How best to approach the refusal of a betrothal? State the truth and he’s liable to sue for Defamation of Character or Breach of Contract.*

Rachel scoffed, “Breach of what contract,” in a near hiss.

Based on what Robert had said the previous day, she was quite certain the man had only agreed to the betrothal to save him the repercussions. That fact made Rachel want to deny the betrothal in the gentleman’s presence, risking a suit for a momentary surrendering to her pride. Unfortunately, she knew too well such would have been unacceptable behavior; for her and for what it could do to the family reputation.

Rachel scoffed again, this time inking her pen to begin the refusal.

*Sir,*  
*It has come to my attention that we were to be wed in one month's time upon the arrangement of our parents. This letter is to inform you that the joining of our two families by marriage is quite impossible. I have promised myself to another and am unwilling and unable to withdraw from the engagement.*  
*There is no ill-will intended on my part by this letter, only a statement of intention. I recommend that you also make other plans for your future, for I will not be included in them.*  
*Respectfully,*  
*Rachel Byron Samson*

She set down the pen in an air of finality, folded and slipped the letter into an envelope addressed simply as ‘Previously Betrothed’ and then sealed it. “That is that,” she mused as she pushed from the writing desk. Unfortunately, now she had taken on the duty of wooing and courting a stranger, doing her best to also secure her position as heir even though she flouted her father’s wishes. It was

a daunting prospect, and not without a little irony that she – A woman! – would likely perform a great portion of the courting. *Daunting prospect or not, this is my future.* And she had dedicated herself to a less blind pursuit of that future thanks, in part, to her debates and discussions with the gentleman on the train.

“Robert,” Rachel reminded herself yet again. “Robert.”

“Yes?”

Rachel focused her attention sharply toward the front entry where Robert Leonard Trent, of Virginia, leaned against the doorjamb. His lips were lifted in what could easily be described as a “boyishly handsome smirk” and hinted, again, at his impish character.

“Mr. Trent,” Rachel greeted with a brief nod.

“Miss Samson,” Robert returned, straightening. He tossed his gloves into his hat and then set it onto the hall table. “This morning finds you well?”

“Quite. Thank you.”

Upon his entrance into the sitting room, Rachel’s attention was immediately drawn to a thorough examination of his attire. A finely tailored pin-striped suit of charcoal set off his tall frame as well as his athletic physique. Rachel was now certain he stood six feet and two inches in height. In fact, his physique had her draw the presumption that he had played quite a few sports at University. *Hm... Rugby?* While specifics would be impossible without conversation, she decided he had most definitely had a somewhat extensive history in equestrian sports simply by the way he carried himself.

“Would you care for some coffee?” she posed, motioning to the coffee table and a pair of overstuffed chairs near the western window. “While I haven’t yet requested it this morning, I believe I sensed the aroma a few moments ago. Oliver should be bringing it momentarily.”

Robert’s lips twitched. “I thought I recognized that delightful scent. So, yes, I will have some coffee. Thank you.”

Lowering himself into the chair opposite, Rachel noticed his examination of the sitting room in its entirety. The room held a writing desk at the northern window, a pair of chairs at the western window overlooking the side-garden, a piano-forte opposite, and a wing-back chair on the eastern wall near the piano-forte with a bookshelf very near. The flooring was hardwood oak, none of it hidden by rugs as was a popular custom in homes. Her mother had loved the sound and sight of the wood. Rachel had always been partial to the simply furnished room as a child, due mostly to the fact it had been her mother’s favorite.

Robert’s only reaction was a slight lifting of one eyebrow. When he focused once more on her, he smiled. “How was your first evening home?”

Rachel, sitting in the chair across from him, calmly regarded his expressions in both countenance and eyes while cataloguing them into a more complete understanding of his person. “Quiet, for the most part. Uneventful, save that of necessary organization when one returns from abroad.”

“Ah.” Robert gauged the room again, specifically the wingback chair with the tall bookshelf beside it, before again meeting her gaze. “And your morning?”

One eyebrow arched at his continued pleasant tone, although it seemed slightly detached. “Somewhat more adventurous. Yourself?”

Waving it aside, Robert simply said, “Errands and appointments,” while yet again examining the room; the piano forte this time.

“Mr. Trent,” she finally inquired, “something not to your liking?” If such was the case, her father would be personally affronted.

He met her gaze yet again. “Pardon?”

She motioned to the room’s contents. “You gauge the room rather intensely. Something amiss?”

“No, I should say not,” he assured, and the lopsided tilt had returned to his lips. He retrieved the previously seen pipe from his inner suit-coat pocket, performing yet another perusal of the room as he bit upon it. “I...” He sent the writing desk an extended glance while absently worrying the pipe in his teeth. “While I know it will sound absurd, I feel as if there’s something... special in this room. Although ‘in’ isn’t the word. More similar to... around. An aura, or very nearly.”

Allowing a slight smile, Rachel’s eyes wandered the room. “Yes. It does.” Then she again met his gaze. “This was my late mother’s room of choice. I spent hours at a time with her here.”

Robert very slightly nodded as his focus shifted between Rachel and the room. “Very nice,” he approved, almost absent-minded. Then he motioned to the piano forte while standing and moving toward it. “Do you play?”

“Not any longer. My studies abroad did not allow time for practice.” Though Rachel wasn’t certain she regretted the loss of the ability more than having to admit that she was not proficient.

“Too bad, too bad,” Robert said, standing over the instrument long enough to play a few chord progressions and a single-hand scale before running his hand along the top and acknowledging it to be a “Beautiful instrument.”

Rachel’s eyebrow arched with intrigue, which she had begun to notice as a common occurrence in regards to him.

Leaning against the piano forte as he faced her, his unlit pipe once more between his teeth, he regarded her with yet another controlled expression of mild pleasure. Too similar to the shallow pleasantries of those in Europe and New York, it began to grate on Rachel’s nerves.

“Did you have a pleasant morning?” he inquired.

A question already asked and answered, the repeat caused Rachel to lose interest in any type of pursuit of witty discussion. So, she shifted her focus to the paper on the coffee table, which she retrieved and opened, and simply answered, “Yes, thank you,” in a tone she knew would welcome neither conversation nor attention.

The slowly heightening tension in the room due to her silence and inattention could clearly be noted, and she felt no compunction to ease his mind. *He chose his course of behavior this morning. Why should he not reap the penalties as well as the rewards?* Their conversations on the train had been delightful and invigorating, and she refused to be of the mind that they couldn’t continue simply because now they knew each other’s identities. It was ludicrous.

Robert cleared his throat and adjusted his position before almost cautiously returning to the overstuffed chair across from her. Before he could speak, however, Oliver entered with their coffee tray and settled it onto the coffee table between them. Rachel, who continued to be in what she supposed could be classified as a difficult frame of mind, simply offered a calm, “Thank you, Oliver,” without lifting her gaze from the paper. She could feel Robert’s scrutiny, knowing that he more than likely did his best to identify her temperament as well as what was to be done to counteract it, and felt some mild amusement when he attempted to have a pleasant conversation with the family butler – attempting to include her, of course – as Oliver performed his duty.

*You shouldn’t receive such delight from putting others at a disadvantage,* she half-heartedly scolded. Yet she was forever amazed at the different perceptions people had of the same attitude. At her extreme calm and disinterest some people reacted with nervousness and mindless chatter; others tended toward irritation and brusque conversation of subjects in which they themselves were most highly informed. Still others resorted to humorous anecdotes in order to draw out some emotional reaction. When she refrained, they would usually retreat to a person more easily controlled.

Thus far Robert had quite often reacted differently than what she had expected. So, she found herself curious as to the possible response to this particular aspect of her character. *If we’re to wed – which she intended at the present time – he should know, fully, the type of person he will be contracted to.* Then he would no longer be ignorant of the possibility of their future together. Arrangements could be made.

Rachel’s brow dipped. *Arrangements, Rachel? Affairs and mistresses are certainly of a lesser value than ‘arrangements’.* She very nearly scoffed.

“And what plans do you have to keep you company while I’m safely parted to my own amusements?” Robert finally asked, and while his tone was still pleasant there was something in its flavor that hinted at a deeper truth to the emotion.

Curiosity pressed her to continue with the distance and detachment, so she simply offered a delicate wave of her hand before turning the page of the paper. Once more, silence descended. Rachel could continue to sense his scrutiny, and because of that kept her countenance strictly controlled. He then leaned forward to pour himself a cup of coffee, mildly surprising her when he did not offer to do

the same for her. One side of her lips twitched in amusement, but she smoothed it away without trouble while waiting for the detachment to tweak anything that might have hinted at a possible temper in him. Most often men wished to be center to a female's attentions, and in Rachel's experience manipulating tempers was... enjoyable.

"You're more than welcome to come along," he finally proposed. Then he chuckled. "I find myself partial to your company."

In normal instances the flattery would have caused an internal comment of "Oh dear Lord", or some such other display of strained patience. However, there was an underlying hint of mischief to his tone that caused amusement and began to work past the nerve-grating from his previous pleasantness. So, she decided to offer a bit more than she had up to that point.

"Plans have previously been made for my morning," she answered vaguely, adding, "though I thank you for the invitation," without lifting her eyes from the paper, nor offering more than a voice filled with calm politeness.

"Ah," Robert intoned after enjoying a sip of coffee. "An adventure?"

*An intriguing way of drawing me out of myself*, she admitted. Still, she didn't lift her focus. "I doubt many would categorize this particular plan as an 'adventure'." Robert's focus continued to be as deep and yet non-invasive as before. The only bother she received from it was a slight rise of the hairs on the nape of her neck. It was as if his scrutiny served to unsettle her the same as her detachment unsettled him. They both played the other, which caused Rachel a subtle smirk that was easily hidden away.

"A plan that isn't categorized as adventure, yet it is adventurous enough to not allow me into the knowledge of it," Robert observed with slow deliberation. Then he set aside his coffee cup. "Intrigue and mystery abound in this conversation, Miss Samson, and I demand an accounting."

Yet his tone was not so firm as to be truly demanding. It reeked of a sportive air that drew her even more from her previous irritation at his shallow pleasantries. In fact, it caused Rachel to glance toward his countenance from under her lashes to gauge his persona and attempt to categorize his intent. A quick action, yes, but not only did he catch it with his brown eyes, it caused a lift of his eyebrow as well as a twitch to one side of his lips.

*Rachel*, she scolded. She hadn't been the first to show reaction in years, and yet the fact that he had caused it didn't invite irritation.

He motioned toward her. "That was your original intent," he observed in feigned shock. "Now I'm tempted to forgo my remaining errands so that I can solve the riddle."

"Riddle?" she repeated, fully meeting his gaze while deliberately continuing to restrain any expression of amusement. "Mr. Trent, don't be absurd."

"You deny it?" Robert scoffed. "Miss Samson, such a--"

A loud thump sounded from outside the sitting room and brought immediate thoughtful silence from him. Rachel only shifted her focus once more to the paper as he continued to regard her.

He finally observed, "I do believe the activity upstairs has something to do with the mysterious adventure."

Turning the page of her paper was her only response.

"Come, come, Miss Samson. Be sporting and give a reaction at least."

Following an urge, Rachel lowered the paper long enough to lift a hand to the collar of her blouse and widen her eyes in an expression of true innocence seen in others her age. "Why, Mr. Trent. I've no notion *what* could be happening upstairs." Then she discarded the feigned expression for one of calm and detachment while resuming her scrutiny of the financial pages.

Robert stared, slack-jawed to Rachel's satisfaction, before bursting out in an attractive and welcome sound of laughter. Rachel's lips twitched upward.

"You realize, of course, that I'm now forced to solve the mystery myself," he informed as he stood. Then he offered her his hand. "Come along, Miss Samson. You've begun this little intrigue, so you might as well witness the remnants of it."

Again Rachel volunteered nothing as she finished the article. She even took deliberate care and time with the folding of the paper before setting it onto the coffee table in front of her and accepting his help to stand. She then preceded him from the sitting room, allowing nothing to show on her expression save calm, due to his continued sidelong scrutinies. Once they began their ascent to the second story, Rachel noted that the men had brought down a majority of the items for her room to leave the hallway cluttered and choked.

"I see by the light in your eyes that the subject of this adventure stands very close to your heart," Robert observed as they halted at the crest of the stairs. "Might I hazard a guess?"

Rachel inclined her head, though she didn't face him as she continued to watch the men ferrying articles of furnishing into some semblance of order.

"You are plotting a renovation of your room," Robert offered after a moment's pause.

Rachel finally sent him a sidelong, albeit slight smile. "You are correct, sir."

Shrugging, Robert retrieved the pipe from his inner suit-coat pocket. "It stands to reason you would wish a change from the past to the present." He absently rubbed at and examined the pipe chamber. "An acknowledgment of a change. An outward showing of who you've become."

Rachel's slight smile vanished as she focused on him in undisguised surprise.

He didn't comment. He simply inquired, "Might I be of help?" while giving a return of the lopsided

smile.

Yet again the unexpected question drew a slight reaction of surprise. “‘Help?’” Rachel began to see that she would need to forever expect the unexpected from him so as to save herself the annoyance and frustration of constantly being taken by surprise.

Robert looked to the door of her room while motioning toward it. “Ushering aside the past can present a challenge.” He once more focused on her. “I will gladly help wherever I’m able.”

Regarding him in thoughtful silence, Rachel was unsure whether she should take him at his word or.... She looked back to the busyness of the men and chamber maids. *What man would be interested in the remaking of a woman’s boudoir? Even Father, who seeks to control all that is beneath this roof, left it to me upon my return.* She had no idea how to categorize or accept Robert’s offering. Surprisingly, there was no suspicion, but the confusion at why he would wish to help wouldn’t be ignored.

“I see,” Robert finally said.

Rachel once more focused on him, noting that his smile was the same as before though her silence should have caused at least a mild reaction of affront.

“You would rather have the adventure to yourself. Very well then. I will leave you to it. Goodness knows I would likely have made an ass of myself anyway.”

Then he gave a slight bow and wink before turning away. This time Rachel had noticed a slight darkness of regret which ushered in guilt at denying him the opportunity to participate. Certainly it was preposterous to have a stranger help in the redecoration of her room; taboo to society, in point of fact— Rachel, who forever rebelled against society’s demands, stepped after him. “Robert.”

He halted and turned, the small smile on his lips causing her to wonder if she had indeed seen the previous expression. Even his baritone voice as he responded, “Hm?” didn’t seem at all regretful or disappointed.

A sudden reluctance to share this personal aspect of herself battled against the constant memories of comradeship shared with him, but she forced herself to continue with the decided action. “Thank you for your offer; however, I wouldn’t want to take you from your excursion.”

Robert’s smile changed at that, albeit slightly. It seemed to... soften. “While I appreciate the thought, this particular escape can be postponed. I would much rather offer my help where it’s needed.”

Holding his gaze, Rachel noted that it appeared as truthful as previously remembered. A truthfulness that, to be honest, she didn’t know how to react or respond to. “Thank you.”

He stepped closer, holding her gaze as his smile altered to one she couldn’t classify; one that made her experience a muted sense of panic as his baritone “My pleasure,” was voiced in a way that, again, made her doubt he meant the word in simple context value.

Rachel forced herself to look away and step forward into her room, Robert following. She noticed, however, that he didn't enter until after a moment's hesitation at the doorway.

Maggie appeared from the adjoining bathroom, then, approaching the pair with a smile and a bright expression of excitement. When Maggie focused on Mr. Trent, her expression changed to that of recognition and surprise. "Why, Mr. Trent!" She then sent Rachel a glance, causing Rachel a wave of intrigue. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Robert also sent Rachel a sidelong look, which had Rachel's eyebrow arching upward, and then somewhat absently retrieved his pipe from his suit-coat pocket. "Yes, well, certain situations and acquaintances made it impossible to stay distant."

Maggie smiled slightly, not noticing Rachel's more intense scrutiny of them both. "I guess that's one way to be looking at it—" Then the excitement returned to her expression as she focused once more on Rachel. "Oh, Rachel! I think your framed poems would look wonderful on the wood paneling beneath this wallpaper." She motioned to an open portfolio on the steamer trunk at the foot of Rachel's bed. "I've been looking through them and can't decide which I love best."

Robert moved his gaze from Maggie, to the portfolio, and finally to Rachel's profile. "You write in verse?" he asked, and his tone sounded more than a little amazed.

Stepping forward, she closed the black portfolio, shutting away all the images and memories that were paired with the writings. "Not any longer," she informed more cool than calm. Then she turned from the trunk and made a slow perusal of the room and its furnishings. "Where should we begin?" There were so many distinct possibilities.

Behind her there sounded a male clearing of the throat, and when Rachel and Maggie focused on the originator they noticed Robert's ears to be a definite shade of pink. Rachel viewed his discomfort with amusement. *He doesn't seem very much at ease in a lady's boudoir, does he?* Giving great credit to his character.

"With risk of sounding horribly... forward, as well as offering an opinion that likely is completely faulty..." Maggie and Rachel exchanged glances as Robert came to stand by the pale-pink canopy bed. He pointed to it, expression twisted in a grimace. "I believe *this* would make a stupendous beginning."

Rachel arched an eyebrow and delicately crossed her arms. "How do you propose that, sir?"

Maggie hid a giggle behind a quickly raised hand.

"Simple," Robert began, undaunted. "We dismantle it while Oliver finds some capable young men to carry it out."

"While that is a commendable proposition," Rachel acknowledged, "why don't we, instead, ask those same capable young men to do the dismantling while we pack away my dolls and books? It would be a more efficient use of our time, don't you think?"

“Perfectly lovely idea, Miss Samson,” Robert said, bowing. “I yield to your organizational prowess.”

Maggie sniggered and sent Rachel a sidelong glance, who waved his comment aside while restraining an expression of amusement. *Much better than his pleasant persona, I must say!*

Robert rubbed his hands together in boyish fashion and faced the bed. Then he sent her a sidelong glance and leaned slightly toward her. “Are you certain you don’t wish the atrocity burnt? How did you stand all the frills as a girl?”

Focusing on the bed, Rachel heard the giggles and whispers of childhood exploits into imagination and dreams— She turned away without a word.

“Although,” Robert began again, this time his tone thoughtful, “considering my experiences with young ladies of fourteen and younger, they all seem to reminisce of castles and knights, and princes holding balls. Perhaps the frills are the essence of that romanticism. Goodness knows *I* dreamt of suits of armor and jousts.”

Restraining a smirk, Rachel gestured to the empty trunks that waited outside her room. “Mr. Trent, could you drag those trunks inside?”

“Drag?” Robert straightened, lifting his chin while putting his shoulders back in such a way that broadened his already impressive stature. “Men do not drag. They lift and carry.”

Eyebrow arched, Rachel intercepted Maggie’s twinkling gaze as Robert stepped to the first of the massive empty trunks to lift it with ease.

“Maggie, it appears Hercules has met his match in this one,” Rachel quipped, mildly impressed. Nor would she be surprised if he had little trouble lifting a great many things.

“Yes, Miss,” Maggie acknowledged with feigned shock and amazement. “It seems so.”

After Robert had set the trunk within the center of her room he straightened, remaining slightly hunched as he pressed a hand to his back and shuffled toward the door. “All right, we drag.” Yet he exited the room while sending a wink Rachel’s direction.

Encouraged by Maggie’s laugh, Rachel surrendered to an outward smile as the two followed him to the second story hallway. When Robert began to actually drag a chest into her room, she laughed. “Robert, dear Lord. At least *attempt* to take the matter seriously.”

“Where is the fun in that?” he quipped as he continued into her room.

“Good God,” Rachel sighed, not wanting to admit that his impertinent behavior was the most amusing she’d experienced since she could remember. She turned to Oliver. “I need you to find some young men to disassemble my bed and relocate it to the attic.”

“Of course, Miss.” He moved away to do as requested.

When Rachel turned back to her room, she noticed Robert and Maggie standing in the center holding one of her French porcelain-faced dolls. Shrugging aside the initial wave of an unclassified negative emotion, Rachel made her way to Robert's other side. "I see you have found Babette."

Robert raised his scrutiny from the doll held within Maggie's hands. "Babette?" he repeated, and he said the name in such a quiet voice that it had Rachel examining his expression.

Maggie looked up, drawing Rachel's focus. "Rachel, wasn't this the first doll your father brought back from the Continent?"

"Yes." Rachel absently straightened the doll's pale blue skirt as she continued to keep the memories and recollections at bay. "*Babette, cet est Monsieur Trent et Mademoiselle Kelly.*"

"*Bonjour, ma petite. Comment allez-vous? Etes-Vous désespère sans votre amie, non?*" Robert asked, his perfect intonation causing Rachel to regard him with slightly widened eyes.

"*Vous parlez François, Monsieur Trent. Bon. Très bon,*" Rachel praised.

Robert met her gaze, smiling. "*Est-ce que tout le monde?*"

"No, Robert," she countered, her lips tilting upward in a very slight smile of amusement. "That isn't true, and you know it."

"What isn't true? What did he say?" Maggie asked, giving Rachel's arm a pinch.

Rachel softly laughed. "I'm sorry, Maggie. I commented that Robert speaks French very well, to which he replied 'Doesn't everyone?'"

Maggie focused on him, her green eyes mirroring her bright smile. "Mr. Trent, you know very well that I'm not as book-learned as you and Rachel."

The accusation only elicited a wink from Robert before he turned and made his way to the windowseat for the other dolls. "*Je suis étonnant, oui?*"

At Maggie's hiss, Rachel translated, "He said that he's full of surprises," while watching him with an expression of amusement. "But we already knew this, didn't we, Mags?"

Giggling, Maggie stated, "I had an inkling," as Rachel admitted to herself that the surprises and shocks were one of the most intriguing facets of his character. Not only did they have her curious as to what could be the next surprise, but they continued to bring him to the forefront of her attention though she had come to crave solitude.

Maggie moved to stand beside him. "Mr. Trent, where did you learn to speak so beautifully? You speak as good as Rachel."

Wrapping one of the many dolls in paper, he carefully set it aside. "My mother. She was French. She

spoke to me in both English and French as I grew. Father encouraged it, knowing that the extra knowledge in the business world would help later in life.”

Rachel made her way to one of the dressers, transferring the clothes within to the second trunk. *Another preparation for the world of business. Another quality that secures him as appropriate for the role of “husband”.* She felt his glance but didn’t meet it.

“Perhaps we could converse upon occasion?” he offered, his tone sounding almost cautious.

Gathering up a few of the wrapped dolls, Maggie pleaded, “Oh please, Rachel. I love hearing it, and maybe you could teach me? You know I’ve always wanted to learn.”

Finished emptying the dresser, Rachel sent her friend a smile and moved to begin packing away her books. “I’ll do my best, Mags, but I’m afraid it isn’t as easy as it sounds romantic.”

Maggie’s expression brightened. “Oh how wonderful!”

Robert chuckled. “It seems she doesn’t hear the truths in your warning, Miss Samson, and woe to her when she realizes her mistake. Although...” He regarded Rachel while pausing the duty of lowering a pair of dolls into the trunk.

Rachel held his gaze, eyebrow arching as she adjusted her hold on a pair of books. “‘Although?’” she prompted.

“Hm.” Robert placed the dolls into the trunk and then pointed toward her before thoughtfully stroking his chin. “I’m of the mind that you would find a way to not only make the act of learning intriguing, you would make the challenge an attractive game.”

Her arched eyebrow twitched the same moment Maggie laughed and confessed how right he was, immediately offering an anecdote of when Rachel had taught Maggie to write calligraphy and poetry. Rachel found it odd to watch him listen to the anecdote. While she would have preferred Maggie to remain silent, the opportunity reminiscing brought about was an unexpected treasure trove of mild insights into his character. In fact, Rachel had to admit that the opportunity was unable to be categorized. Not only did Robert pose questions and chuckle at what seemed odd moments, he sounded and appeared genuinely interested. Even displaying what could be considered rapt attention. Rachel watched him while absently tapping her fingers on the topmost book. Something about his attention... unsettled her, and Rachel was determined to understand why.