

GRACE HITCHCOCK

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USA Today bestselling author

*My Dear*  
MISS DUPRÉ



AMERICAN ROYALTY  
BOOK ONE



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*For Dakota,  
My Heartbeat*

And he hath put a new song in my mouth,  
even praise unto our God: many shall see  
it, and fear, and shall trust in the LORD.

Psalm 40:3

# One

NEW YORK CITY  
NEW YEAR'S EVE, 1882

Willow Dupré twirled on the ice, spreading her arms and guiding her body around the other skaters on the frozen lake of Central Park. The crisp morning air nipped at her cheeks and brought life to her limbs that ached from the long hours working behind her father's desk, which was something she was unused to doing. Since Father's illness, the ice was the one place she could truly release the pressures of assuming the throne of her family's sugar empire, for there was no risk of gliding by one of her paunchy board members. Willow arched her arms above her head despite the seams of her sleeves digging into her shoulders, keeping her hands in her fur muff, and spun, loving the whirl of her short, fur-trimmed crimson cape about her, not minding the hairpins pulling loose from her stern bun, releasing her chestnut locks to tumble to her slender waist while her winter cap miraculously stayed firmly in place.

"My dear Miss Dupré!"

She started, nearly losing her footing along with her thoughts. She flung out her arms to balance herself and turned to find

a handsome gentleman she dimly recalled from a past season, stumbling across the frozen pond toward her in gleaming skates with leather straps over his boots that were far too loose to do much good. She allowed him to take her hand in his, scrambling to recall his name. *Kind eyes and impossibly deep voice.* “Mr. Friedrich Blythe.” She dipped her head in the place of a curtsy. “I did not know you skated.”

He chuckled and stroked the tip of his thick ginger mustache into a point and sent her a wink. “It’s hard to believe, for as you can see, I’m such a natural on the ice. But I haven’t skated since I was a boy. I heard that you enjoyed the sport, so I came in hope of seeing you.”

“Oh?” She gave him a tentative smile, unsure as to why Mr. Blythe would seek her out when he had not done so in the year since they had met. A giggling pair of children wove around her and brushed passed Friedrich, the light touch sending his arms to flapping wildly as he attempted to regain his footing. Willow strode forward and seized his coat sleeve, steadying him lest he knock himself to the ground with his floundering. “Hold on, Mr. Blythe! You won’t perish today.”

Laughing, Mr. Blythe slowly released his hold on her arms, his cheeks reddening. “Thank you. Well, uh, as I was saying, you cannot imagine my pleasure when I received one of your coveted invitations last night.”

Willow blinked, truly confused. Mother was hosting their annual New Year’s Eve party tonight, but those invitations would have been issued two weeks ago. “Invitation?”

“Yes. I happen to have mine with me, if you would like to see it?” Mr. Blythe withdrew a golden scroll secured with a lush, burgundy satin ribbon from his greatcoat and handed it to her, bobbing from the motion.

She slid the ribbon off and unfurled the scroll to read the engraved summons,

*To Mr. Friedrich Blythe, you have been selected to attend a*

*competition, along with twenty-nine gentlemen, beginning the thirty-first of December to win the hand of our daughter and heiress to our empire, Willow Dupré. Should you accept, you will court Miss Dupré alongside the other suitors in an attempt to win her heart and marry within six months.*

*What on earth?* Willow crumpled the invitation in her fist without reading the rest and shoved it into her muff, shivering. “I apologize for the confusion. This has to be a jest. My parents would never think of something so outlandish, so—” *Degrading.*

He chuckled, removing his stiff hat and running his fingers through his thick locks before setting his hat firmly in place once more. “Come now, Miss Dupré. You do not have to be coy with me. The city is already humming with the news.”

“But I am not playing the coquette, Mr. Blythe. I truly think there has been some sort of misunderstanding—”

He grasped her hand and lightly tugged, sending her skates into a gentle glide toward him. “Now, I know it is breaking the rules of the game to contact you before the ball tonight, so it is with the deepest remorse that I must bid you farewell, my lady, but not before I bestow upon you the first of many tokens of my affection.” Mr. Blythe wobbled into a bow and kissed her gloved hand and straightened, giving her a smile filled with hope as he withdrew a nosegay of withering white flowers with tiny golden hearts. “From my mother’s conservatory. My apologies for their state, which is due to my lack of foresight, but the sentiment of the white jasmine is what I hope to convey.”

“Extreme amiability?” she interpreted, remembering its meaning from Mother’s required hours of studying the secret language of flowers, including the ever-popular floral dictionaries. Sliding the small bouquet into her muff, she shook her head to wake herself from the haze of his charm. “So, this is not a hoax?”

Mr. Blythe’s grin faltered. “You mean to tell me that you truly did not know of the invitation to court you?”

“Absolutely not. I knew, of course, about a party tonight, but do you think I would have allowed *these* invitations to have been sent if I had known? Please excuse me, as I need to sort through this mess.” She dipped her head in a dismissive nod before gliding to the opposite side of the pond, weaving around the throngs of skaters going and coming from the three-storied skaters’ tent with concessions in hand, her focus on her things atop the park bench at the edge of the landing. Lifting her plain navy skirt, she tromped through a snowdrift, not minding the snow seeping through her stockings at the tops of her boots, and perched on the freezing bench to unfasten the buckles of the leather straps securing her skates. She tugged her feet out of her skating boots and slipped on her walking shoes. Gripping the skate straps in one hand, she marched down the park’s freshly shoveled path toward the Inventor’s Gate, leading to her home on Fifth Avenue. She would get to the bottom of this nonsense at once.

“But, as it *is* true, you will not be stopping the competition, even if it is a bit untoward, will you, Miss Dupré?” Mr. Blythe called, disappointment edging his tone as he trotted up behind her, his skates nowhere in sight.

She took a second glance at him, surprise fluttering to life in her stomach. *He is genuinely excited about the invitation to court me.* Willow drew in a breath and gave the handsome fellow her prettiest smile, adding a modicum of kindness to her reply. “I am certain the annual New Year’s Eve party will continue as planned and I will be happy to receive you. As for a competition, I can say with confidence that it will *not* occur. Now if you will excuse me, Mr. Blythe, I need to be on my way,” she finished and darted off, disregarding etiquette for once. Her neck burned with the shame of the rumor as she skirted around couples, street vendors, and children with their nannies pushing prams at tremendous speeds, taking chase after them.

“Willow! Willow Dupré!”

She caught sight of her dearest friend waving frantically to her from down the avenue, and at the darkness in Flora's expression, Willow's heart plummeted. *Father*. She raced to Flora's side, hopping over and around patches of blackened ice. "Is something wrong?" Willow panted, pressing her gloved hand to her side where her corset pinched her, preventing her from taking a full breath.

"Yes! Why did you not tell me about this competition?" Flora crossed her arms, the golden curls framing her face atremble. "I had to find out from Marcy Mae Lovett, who knew all about it because her brother, Archibald, received his invitation last night, delivered by one of your own servants."

"Is that all?" She released a nervous laugh, which turned into a groan that even Flora had heard of the fraudulent invitation. Willow motioned for Flora to continue walking with her. "I only just found out myself and am about to put an end to this rumor."

Flora's expression clouded before her eyes widened and she dodged a flying snowball, sending the three mischiefs responsible a glare that could melt the snow, and brushed off her immaculate sapphire cloak. "End? B-but think of the men vying for your hand. I am fairly green from envy that my parents did not think of such a thing for me. And as for it being a rumor, haven't you noticed the murmurs about the city of those who have not been invited to your annual party?"

Willow slowed, the whispers of the past weeks of socialites not receiving invitations now making sense.

"Aren't you at all excited at the prospect of having your pick from society's elite gentlemen?"

Willow resumed her frantic pace. Her parents had some explaining to do. "I would have been when I was a debutante nearly six years ago, but I'm twenty-four now and having all those men seeking me out for marriage is *exactly* why I must put an end to it, and the means of said courtship is mortifying.

Now everyone will think I need my parents to make a favorable match when the fact is that I am simply too busy to take the time to find a husband worth the taking.”

“After years of lessons at the university and working at your father’s side for the past few years, you need to take time for yourself. How else are you going to find a husband?”

“I don’t have time for a husband. This is the second Saturday I have had off from work since Father’s heart attack this summer. Monday was the first time the doctors allowed Father to set foot in the Dupré Sucré office, and even then it was only for an hour or so. I have a family and a business to support and I do not have time for this sort of thing.” She pulled the offending invitation from her muff and waved it in the air.

Flora snatched it away at once, clutching it to her chest. “Take care or you will lose it and have some *random* gentleman showing up at your ball.” She stuffed it back into Willow’s muff. “Take a breath and relax. The sugar refinery will be fine without you at the helm for the duration of this competition. Besides, your parents wouldn’t have issued invitations for a courtship if Mr. Dupré wasn’t recovering. It is time you cease thinking only about running the empire and turn your attention to having someone at your side *besides* your father,” she replied as Willow climbed the steps to the Duprés’ gray stone mansion at the corner of Sixty-Eighth, pausing to knock the snow from her boots against the doorframe. “It has been years since you have even looked at a man for anything other than a business deal, Willow. You have been labeled as New York’s wealthiest spinster.”

Willow gritted her teeth, suppressing her scathing riposte. “You know I prefer the term *bachelorette*.”

“Bachelor girl sounds utterly nonsensical, even in French, and it will never become vogue to be an old maid. You are a *spinster*, dear, and I am but six months from being considered one myself,” she added with a shudder. “Yet what am I to do

now when all the good ones will be snatched up in your competition?”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Fine. This spinster needs to get to the bottom of this ridiculousness, so if you’ll excuse me—”

“But I wanted to hear what your parents have to say,” Flora protested, kicking a hardened lump of snow from the top step, sending it toppling down to the sidewalk.

“You and I both know I’ll tell you all later,” Willow reassured her friend before slipping inside. After handing her skates, hat, and wrap to the footman, she followed the echoes of voices.

Willow found her parents seated in the drawing room, heads bowed together and deep in thought, while her twin sisters half her age, Philomena and Sybil, kept their gazes fixed on the chessboard in front of them.

“Do you know anything about this?” Willow asked as she crossed the room and dropped the crumpled gilded invitation onto her mother’s lap and planted her fists at her trim waist.

Father nodded to Mother. “You best tell her, Christine.”

Setting aside the abused invitation, Mother rose, clasped her hands before her pristine blush skirt, and sent Willow an apologetic smile. “Let us speak privately in the adjoining room. I would rather the girls not hear our reasoning, William,” she replied in a low voice, wrapping her arms around Father’s waist, assisting him up from the settee and handing him his cane.

*So, there is truth to the rumor.* Willow groaned and followed them into her mother’s private sitting room, waiting until Mother drew the French doors closed before asking, “Why would you do this to me? Do you know how humiliating it was to be told of this scheme by last season’s most eligible bachelor, *Friedrich Blythe*? He has grown a rather large mustache since we met, so I almost didn’t recall his name until it was too late. And what about our annual party? I have been reassuring our usual guests that their invitations must have gotten lost! And now I find out you have had an entirely different list in mind?”

“I do feel rather bad on that score. However, I sent round a note to our usual guests this morning, explaining things.” Mother took her by the arm, shushing her with an admonishing tilt of her brow, silently reminding Willow to choose her next words carefully so as not to upset Father. “Have a seat, dear, and we will explain everything.”

Willow rubbed her temples and stared at the fresco on the ceiling, attempting to gather her emotions. If she had not spent every waking moment buried in office ledgers, she might have noticed—she might have stopped this nonsense. “You both know I have no wish to marry at the moment, especially with having the company to run while you recover, Father. Why, then, do you two feel the need to marry me off in such a rush?”

Father rubbed his thumb over the intricate carved ivory head of his cane. “I know it seems sudden, but we received word from the doctors this past week and it was not what I had hoped to hear.”

Any anger she harbored faded at the mention of her father’s illness. Willow looked to the stooped man before her, amazed at how an illness could transform a person. Father seemed so much better than he had only last month, but of course he had seemed fine *before* the heart attack. *What aren’t you telling me?* “You will recover, won’t you?”

“The doctors say that I will recover, but not to the extent we had hoped. They have given me six months of working half days to retire or they fear I will suffer a second attack from the strain.”

Mother pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and balled it in her fist, blinking away her tears.

Willow sank down beside him on the mauve velvet, swallowing the lump in her throat. He would not wish to hear of her disappointment, her fear over his condition. He would only want for her to be level-headed. “Then I will take over,

of course, but this does not explain the need for me to secure a husband by June.”

“The shareholders do not approve of your taking over the business without me at your side to guide you, and with the doctors’ new orders . . . I am afraid that I cannot be the partner with you as we had hoped for all these years.” He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand as the fireplace crackled. “Which means, if the shareholders do not approve of your leadership, they may sell their portions to our biggest competitor, Wellington Sugar, who, as you well know, is always trying to lure them into selling him their shares in an attempt to gain a foothold in our family’s legacy and eventually take control. So far I have managed to keep the shareholders through their sense of loyalty and promises of wealth, but if Wellington manages to secure those shares, along with that last bit from your rather unpredictable cousin . . .” He sighed. “We stand to lose a great deal, as Wellington will gain majority if your cousin Osborne sells.”

Willow’s lungs became heavy, her breath catching with the weight of the threat. She reached out for Father’s hand, her first concern for his health and the second, closely after, of the sugar refinery her grandfather and father had spent their lives building. She thought of her little sisters and looked to her mother and father. She could not be the reason for the Dupré empire to fall. “I know I could do the job well. I have studied by your side for the past few years and taken classes at Cornell. I have journals upon journals of ideas on how to improve the company while bringing in even more profits. Surely the board will see—”

He lifted his hand, staying her argument. “You and I both know that you are as capable if not *more* than any gentleman. But businessmen wed all the time to secure their footing in the world. If you wish to be treated as a businessman, er, *businesswoman*, you must make certain sacrifices for the good

of the company. So, I must ask you, are you truly ready to wed someone in order to reign?”

Willow had longed to be treated as an equal since she was a young girl, and her father, forward-thinking as he was, had made certain to educate and train her to take over as he would have any son. And any son of his would have had to marry for the betterment of the business. She was no exception. “Yes,” she answered.

Her mother nodded in approval and patted Willow’s hand. “We knew you would be willing. However, we have always dreamed for you to have a union of love, like your father and I.” She sent Father a look that made Willow shift in her seat. “Which is why we have devised a plan, that is admittedly rather outlandish, for you to find the love of your life while satisfying the board’s demands,” Mother added as the sounds of furniture being moved around down the hall reached them.

“The thirty gentlemen callers,” Willow finished, a flicker of hope warming her. Surely one out of so many would be tolerable, maybe even attractive.

“Exactly. One of them will help you secure your future as queen of the sugar empire.” Father rubbed his hands together, betraying his excitement. “Now, your mother and I have personally chosen the thirty potential suitors from the families of New York’s elite Four Hundred set. You will have six months to select one of them to help you run the company, to be your king, your spokesperson if you will. You, of course, will retain control, but this will give the shareholders comfort at the thought of a man by your side, guiding you. Even though, in reality, he is merely your proxy and a male figurehead. And yet I am hopeful that the man you choose will be a partner to you in life *and* love.”

*A male figurehead?* Her anger flared at the backwardness of the situation. *The board is acting as if I am not able to hold property. This isn’t the 1840s.* “So, what do you suggest? I waltz

into the ballroom tonight and select the best male like a prize bull?” She snorted.

Mother sent her a pointed look. “That is not ladylike.”

Willow grunted, twisting her disheveled hair into a stern knot at the base of her neck and snatching one of Mother’s crochet hooks from the sewing basket beside her chair and sticking it through the knot to keep it off her neck until she could have her maid see to it. “How else am I supposed to feel?”

“Chris.” Father looked to Mother with a gentle smile, halting her correction, and turned to Willow. “No, Will. Not like a bull. During your six months, you will eliminate the men whom you discover a lack of connection with, until you have found the one you wish to marry, effectively ending the competition with a wedding.”

“In six months?” Willow repeated, doubt, along with anger and hope, churning her stomach.

“Yes,” they answered together, her mother’s pursed lips and her father’s white knuckles squeezing his cane further impressing upon her the seriousness of the situation.

“And if you need advice on whom to choose, we are always here to talk. Still, with matters of the heart, we understand that sometimes you need to speak to someone besides your parents, so we sent a note to Flora just before you arrived, asking if she would be available to offer you advice throughout the competition if you need it.” Sensing her turmoil, Mother placed her hand on Willow’s shoulder, offering her strength in that quiet way of hers. “Remember, in order for your father to rest his heart, you *need* to do this. Giving control over to your cousin is not an option . . . not after Osborne’s past actions.”

*For Father.* She could do it for him and his heart. She would earn the respect of the shareholders in time, but at this moment she did not have the luxury of time to garner the support needed to rule. A husband was her only choice. She straightened her shoulders. “Very well. Let the hunt for a king begin.”

“Wonderful.” Mother clapped her hands and rustled over to her desk, removing a thin portfolio and setting it into Willow’s hands. “Now, I wasn’t going to show you this, but since you are being so accommodating, it might help relax your nerves. These are the candidates in no particular order. If you wish, you can peruse their photographs, their names, and read over their short biographies before they arrive at eight.” She continued to rattle off her expectations for the evening while Willow sat staring at the portfolio that held her future.

“You can do this, Will.” Father patted her hand. “I hope you find one amongst the gentlemen who sparks your interest. Each one has been carefully vetted by your mother and I *and* our solicitor, so whomever you wish to wed is yours with our blessing. Granted, of course, the young man is willing.” He chuckled.

With false bravado, Willow flipped open the portfolio to find a stack of papers with a small picture glued to each page. The first was a stocky, dark-haired gentleman with a jovial countenance. Above him read *Harold Harolds*. She bit back a laugh at the banal name combination and scanned the paragraph under his picture. She turned the page to the next gentleman and the next, curious to see whom she would find, but before she was even halfway through the stack, the grandfather clock rang five times, and at its ominous reminder, her mother sprang into action, frantically tucking the documents away and sending Willow upstairs to transform from a prim businesswoman to an American princess.

## Two

*I wonder if my parents could have fashioned a more uncomfortable means of finding the love of my life.* Willow grunted and tugged on her cream gloves and twisted in the gilded looking glass, smoothing the satin front of the elegant powder-blue gown with small butterflies delicately perched in the cream tulle about her shoulders and at the bottom of her skirt where it melted into a ruffled lace hem. Atop her chestnut locks nestled a tasteful diamond coronet set in gold with a matching piece cascading down her neck and a delicate ring of diamonds encircling her wrist. She reached for her diamond chandelier earrings and tightened the screws, securing them so they would not fly off during dancing. No matter how nauseated she felt, at least she would sparkle in the candlelight and hopefully distract the guests from her pallid hue, which was exactly what her mother had intended.

As the minutes ticked past to the hour of her impending demise, Willow felt sick with what she must do to run the company she had dreamed of ruling alongside her father since girlhood. It was never meant to be this way. *Stop this*, she chided herself and mopped at her glistening forehead with a handkerchief. There was no sense in wallowing in self-pity. It was

her responsibility to the family and the people she employed to do what was best for the company. *But what of love, Lord?* She prayed and fought back the emotion clouding her throat and set about controlling her thoughts and hopefully with them, her sentiments. She would not risk the livelihoods of so many for the sake of a fantasy.

She strode into the hall, where Father stood waiting, handsome as ever in his black evening coattails with its satin lapels and crisp white bow tie as he leaned on his cane. He slowly crossed the hall, his cane thudding on the thick burgundy carpet. “You are exquisite.”

Willow dipped her head, her tears returning. He had never been so moved over a dress before. *But it is so much more than a dress. This is the beginning of his releasing my welfare into the care of another, of his retirement and of my ruling.* She straightened her shoulders and pecked him on the cheek in silent thanks.

“Shall we?” He offered her his left arm and rested so heavily on the cane in his other hand that she wondered how they would maneuver the stairs with every eye upon them.

Ignoring her misgivings, she placed her hand on his. She could do this. For the business. He guided her to the secondary staircase that led into the ballroom that Mother had built solely for the purpose of making grand entrances. Father paused at the corner of the long hall, the light from the ballroom splaying before them. One more step and all would see them.

“If you wouldn’t mind, keep your hand steady on my arm, Will. I am afraid that if I don’t take the stairs just so, we may tumble and ruin your mother’s well-laid plans for your grand entrance.”

She patted his arm. “Lean on me.”

“I always do.” He cleared his throat. “I am proud of you, Will.”

At his words, she exhaled a ragged breath. *Cease being so*

*emotional. You've made grand entrances countless times . . . the only difference is that your future husband is downstairs.* She schooled her features and nodded to her father, and they continued around the corner. Then at the sight before her, she stumbled over the hem of her skirt. The massive twin crystal chandeliers sparkled overhead, bringing light to the horrifying fact that the only female in the gilded ballroom was her mother. Unlike their usual balls where Willow could hide in the crowd, thirty gentlemen with ten footmen serving hardly constituted a crowd, so there would be no hiding tonight. Willow moved back, fully intending on retreating, but it was too late. One of the men had spotted her, and word blazed through the suitors, all of them turning toward her. She plastered on a smile, hoping it disguised her rising terror. She could face a hostile boardroom, but thirty wealthy gentlemen dressed in their finest coattails intending to capture her in the net of matrimony? She would rather confront the boardroom.

A footman in scarlet livery at the bottom of the stairs sounded her arrival with a blast from a trumpet, sending her cheeks flaming once again. She squeezed Father's arm. "*Mother.*"

"Keep smiling and nodding," Father whispered between clenched teeth. "This is only the beginning. I should have warned you that your mother is leaning wholly into the American royalty theme. She could not be dissuaded."

As if she could hear him, Mother motioned them toward a trio of gilded thrones upon a mahogany platform set along the center of the main wall. Willow's knees weakened, dread seeping through her bones. Of course, her mother would do this to her—any excuse to showcase their fortune and send a message to society that they were the wealthiest family on Fifth Avenue.

Releasing her at the bottom step, Father lifted his hand. "Gentlemen, allow me to present the lady of the hour, the future queen of the Dupré Sucre empire, Miss Willow Dupré."

The men cheered, and Willow kept her head high as she strode down into the mass toward the thrones. The gentlemen murmured their greetings, smiling and bowing to her as Willow passed and inclined her head to each. Taking the two steps up to the platform, she followed the red carpet to stand before the men and gave herself a few seconds for the applause to dim. If word returned to the boardroom that she had vacillated . . . She gripped her satin fan and stood straight. She must appear strong, capable, despite her desire to bolt to the nearest door and make her escape. *Please, Lord, let my voice not waver. Let me not bring shame upon our legacy.*

“Gentlemen, I believe you were all as surprised as I when you received the invitation for this competition.” She paused, their nervous laughter filling the gilded ballroom, and fastened her gaze on a redheaded fellow in the front. Friedrich Blythe grinned boldly at her, and she dipped her head to him in a silent greeting, causing the men around him to regard him warily. “I am honored you all have chosen to attend tonight, and I look forward to getting to know each and every one of you as my *potential* suitor.”

Amid the cheers, Mother glided forward in her gold brocade and satin gown, lifting her egret feather fan with a twirl to garner the men’s attention. “Throughout the evening, if my daughter chooses for you to stay, she will present to you a crown of laurels, which you may accept if you wish to continue on this journey with Miss Dupré.” She gestured to a table to her left, draped in an imperial purple cloth bearing the crowns.

*Crowns?* If only the earth would open and swallow her. Nevertheless, Willow kept on, displaying nothing but complete trust and support for her mother as the men murmured, some elbowing each other and clapping hands on shoulders while others shifted about, determination lining their expressions.

“Should you accept, you will then be invited to reside in the guest rooms on the third floor for the duration of your time in

the competition. Now, please form a line to Willow's right and introduce yourself to Miss Dupré and let us enjoy the evening before us." Mother turned, beckoning Willow forward once more, and she and Father assumed their seats behind her. Willow folded her hands around her fan and waited for the men to shuffle into a single file. The first gentleman strode forward and bowed to her, giving her a cheeky grin from beneath an unfortunate frizzled, thin brown mustache. "It's an honor to meet you, my dear. I am Lord Peregrine."

*A lord?* How did her parents manage to lure him to the party? Perhaps he was a titled gentleman with no funds to support his estates. She sank into a curtsy. "The honor is mine, Lord Peregrine. Do you reside in New York or are you only visiting?"

"Residing until the future is decided." His brows and mustache waggled up and down in unison. "Meaning until I find *Lady* Peregrine and then I can return to my estate in England, which is in need of a woman's touch. But given your business is here, perhaps an arrangement of sorts can be made."

*Fortune hunter.* Willow settled and spent the next few minutes listening to him regale facts of his social standing before tactfully excusing him and summoning the next gentleman, a Mr. Montgomery, who mumbled so low and quickly that Willow had a difficult time understanding anything but a smattering of words that she strung together for context. They conversed for only a few minutes before she met a dashing fellow, who introduced himself as Mr. Digory Pruett. Her head was already swimming with names and faces by the time she found herself laughing at charming Mr. Starling's parting jest and turned her focus to the man standing before her.

Taller than most, with broad shoulders and a fine jawline and high cheekbones that were accentuated by rather long, tousled dark hair that held an auburn tint, his bright emerald eyes pierced her own. His nose appeared to have been broken a time or two, but instead of diminishing his looks, it added to his aura

of power. She certainly had not seen *him* in the portfolio. Her lips parted, yet her mouth had gone dry, trapping any greeting.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Miss Dupré. I am Cullen Dempsey.” He bowed before her extended hand, the deep timbre of his voice that held a hint of Irish brogue drawing her to him. “I must say this was an unexpected honor your parents paid me, and I hope to be worthy of their attention.”

A smile caught at the corner of her lips. Handsome *and* polite. Maybe this process wouldn’t be as painful as she thought. “The pleasure is all mine, sir.” She curtsied as the music filled the air. She caught sight of his finger tapping against his pant leg, keeping perfect time with the dip of the violins. “Do you play music, Mr. Dempsey?”

He laughed and shook his head, shoving his hands into his pockets and rocking on his heels and back toward her. “Unfortunately, I do not, but I *do* enjoy dancing. My mother forced me into taking lessons as a young man to lend me a much-needed air of refinement, but little did she know how much I would come to adore them.”

“Oh?” This was the first gentleman she had ever met to confess such a thing to her, but she supposed if one was so fortunate as to possess the physique of a Greek god, one could get away with owning a love for dance and live.

“But I shan’t spill any more of my darkest secrets quite yet. If I may have the honor of the opening dance, I can perhaps tell you more?” He glanced over his shoulder to the remaining handful of gentlemen and added, “As soon as you greet the others, of course.”

Her heart did a strange little flip. Why was she acting like a nervous debutante? In all her twenty-four years, she could not recall reacting so to a man. No, it was only the excitement of the evening . . . that or it was Cook’s rich tray that Willow had consumed while she was dressing paying a call. “I look forward to it, Mr. Dempsey.”

He took her hand and bowed but did not kiss her hand as the others had done, and she was shocked to discover her disappointment. Her gaze trailed Mr. Dempsey's retreating figure, admiring his confident gait as he joined the crowd of men about the buffet table, until Father cleared his throat and announced the next gentleman, a regal-looking fellow only an inch or two shorter than the Irish titan, Mr. Dempsey.

He bowed to her, the streaks of gray in his ebony hair catching her eye. "Miss Dupré, it is wonderful to see you again. I hope you remember me as well as I remember you."

His rich tone, sun-kissed skin, and sparkling brown eyes brought forth a rush of memories. "Mr. Quincy? Of course! How could I forget the young man who fished me out of the ornamental water in Central Park? Your gallant efforts to help a twelve-year-old girl have not been forgotten by me or my friends."

"I was wondering if you would recall." He chuckled, handsome as ever, revealing a dimple in each cheek that she well remembered. "I hope you do not mind a man nearing forty paying you call tonight."

She grasped his hand in hers. "Your kindness turned a potentially devastating moment of my girlhood into a romance of legends that all in my circle of friends spoke of long afterwards. And since you are here, am I to assume correctly that your marriage to Miss Lexington did not occur?"

"Shortly after our engagement, her parents announced that they were moving to India and she went with them." He gave a short laugh. "Tired with me and my dull inclinations, I believe was her explanation."

Her heart burned against the insult inflicted upon the kind Mr. Kit Quincy of her girlhood fancies. "Her fickle and foolhardy choice is my gain. I am delighted you have joined us tonight."

He bowed and kissed her hand. "It does my heart good to hear that my age is not a factor."

“Never. Rather, it is a draw to me.” The moment the words left her lips, she realized how scandalously blunt she sounded. Feeling her cheeks heating already, she curtsied and motioned for him to pass. “Please enjoy some refreshments and find me later.” She greeted the next gentleman and the next until, at last, she found herself face-to-face with a familiar gentleman. Willow gasped. “Teddy Day?” She held out both her hands to him. “What a marvelous surprise!”

“The one and the same, though I go by Theodore these days. It is wonderful to see you, Will!” He pressed a kiss atop her hand. “Imagine my surprise when I received your parents’ summons.”

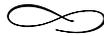
Theodore, the once-scrawny blond boy she and Flora had played with during their summers in Newport, had transformed into a masterpiece worthy of the Metropolitan Museum. *Pity I did not run into you sooner and we could have avoided this entire nonsense.* But even as she thought it, her gaze flashed to Mr. Dempsey and Kit and back to Theodore. “A good surprise, I hope?”

“Lovely, like you.”

She dipped her lashes at her childhood friend’s compliment, but could not keep her smile from betraying her pleasure. “I should be quite vexed with you for flirting when I haven’t seen you in nearly a decade,” she teased, giving his arm a playful little shove like the old days, but found his arm to be solid and corded with muscle. *Oh my.* She cleared her throat and stepped back into the safe arms of propriety. “What has been keeping you from visiting, Mr. Day?”

He grinned even as his brows lifted at the use of his surname. “Mr. Day, is it? I see I have a lot of ground to recover. I haven’t been by because my mother wanted to have me educated abroad in her country and I have only just returned from Paris to attend to my father’s riverboat-building business in New Orleans these past six months. I had planned on leaving the business

in the care of my older brother, Carlisle, while I summered in Newport this coming year, and I would have come calling on you then. Mayhap if I had returned to New York sooner, I would have stood a chance of garnering your attention. Now, I'm certain I am too late to request the first dance, but . . . ?”



Cullen could not keep his attention from returning to Miss Dupré, who was laughing with Mr. Day. When his mentor had managed to covertly secure an invitation through the Duprés' solicitor, Cullen had agreed to the plan, secretly wondering what was the flaw that had kept the heiress from marrying all these years. He took in the graceful curve of her neck and the bloom in her complexion that did not at all resemble the old-maid image he had prepared himself to encounter. After seeing her on the staircase, he thought perhaps her personality had kept her from wedding, but meeting her and watching her interact with the others, he found her to be kind to each man who approached her, even the ones with less desirable traits, like the unfortunate mouth-breathing lord, and when she laughed, the petite beauty all but spellbound him. *Nothing. Nothing is wrong with her.*

Watching her evident interest in Theodore Day as she laughed again and took his arm to descend the platform, Cullen felt an undeniable twist in his gut. He set aside his plate, upset at the sliver of jealousy lodged within him. He had only just met the lady, and yet he could not shake the desire to be the one causing her to laugh. He tensed, waiting for Theodore to move along so that he could steal her away, but as the last fellow in line, Theodore was in no hurry to leave her. And judging from the looks of the other fellows, they were either too petrified to interrupt or too busy enjoying the fine food. *Time to cut in.*

Cullen finished off his pastry, rolled back his shoulders, and snatched a sugar cube from the buffet table. Keeping it in his

fist, he approached her and dropped the sugar cube behind her at her hem. “Why? What is this?” he announced, drawing Miss Dupré’s attention away from Theodore.

She turned, her brow lifted in a question.

He bent down and scooped it up, opening his hand to reveal the cube in his palm. “You dropped your calling card, Miss Dupré.” Her lips parted, gaping at him. Did she find him foolish? Well, even if it was a silly jest, he was committed and so kept his expression somber.

Theodore rolled his eyes while Miss Dupré giggled into her fan and shook her head. “How utterly ridiculous, sir, but it is a good thing I dearly enjoy laughing and have little opportunity to do so at work.”

Cullen grinned, tossing the cube up in the air and catching it before depositing it into his waistcoat pocket. “’Tis a pity when one smile from you lights up the very room.”

Theodore moaned and moved closer to Miss Dupré as the stringed instruments began playing. “Did you find that line right under the sugar cube idea in a courtship book, Dempsey?”

Before Cullen could deny that claim, Mrs. Dupré tapped Willow’s shoulder with her fan. “I do believe it is time for you to open the ball, my dear.”

She nodded as her mother reclaimed her seat at the thrones and turned to Theodore. “Please excuse us, Mr. Day.”

“Gladly, for that means the second dance awaits us that much sooner, my lady.” Theodore bowed and bestowed a light kiss to her hand.

She curtsied to Theodore and rested her hand atop Cullen’s, sending his pulse to pounding. He had not been expecting such charms from a lady well into her twenties who, by all counts, should have been married the moment she was of age, given her family alone.

As the violins began the Viennese waltz in perfect time, he chasséd side to side with her before drawing her into his arms,

twirling them about the dance floor. “Tell me, Miss Dupré, how are you not already spoken for by at least a dozen suitors?”

She inclined her head to the men encircling the ballroom floor, who were staring at them. “As you can see, I have over two dozen suitors.”

“True.” Cullen spun her around, pulling her ever so slightly nearer.

“What about you, Mr. Dempsey? Why did you decide to join us tonight? I cannot fathom your having any lack of potential brides.”

*Direct.* He liked that. “I have been too focused on building my business to attend society’s call.”

“Not even for a ball here or there to meet someone?”

He caught a glimpse of the gentlemen over her shoulder as they twirled past and couldn’t help but grin at the scowls on Houlgrave’s and Lord Peregrine’s faces. Cullen leaned down and lowered his voice so that she alone would hear. “No one really knows this, but as we are courting, can I trust you?”

Miss Dupré nodded, her wide sapphire eyes serious. “Of course. I am not one to betray a confidence.”

“My shipping business struggled for years following my father’s untimely death, and after taking rather drastic measures, we are only now recovering. I have not been able to step away long enough to seek out a bride, but now that I am respected by men in our set, I feel as though I can offer a woman more than my charming personality and impeccable dancing skills.” Cullen winked to soften his confession, as if the losses of his past had not nearly crippled him.

“I am so sorry to hear of your father’s passing. I cannot imagine the pain of losing one’s parent.” The rims of her eyes reddened in sympathy as if she had experienced such fear before. He had heard of her father’s illness but had not realized until now how close she was to her father . . . something he had not felt since he was a young lad.

“Thank you. Whenever I think of the fine childhood he gave me, the sting of his loss dulls to an ache.” *Even though he destroyed the rest of my memories*, he silently finished. It had been nearly six years since his father’s passing and yet it was still difficult for Cullen to recall the pleasant memories of his father. When Cullen had met some of his father’s more nefarious connections, he was disgusted to discover that the foundation of the family’s business had been built on the backs of their fellow Irishmen, whom Father had paid mere pennies. And he had obtained the money through gambling with dangerous men, who in turn incurred staggering debts—debts Father had paid with his life. “But enough about me. Tell me about yourself, Miss Dupré, and what it is like to be a woman in business.”