

*The Princess
and Me*

The Princess and me

N.H.J. Bartholomé

ALSO BY N.H.J. BARTHOLOMÉ

The Sutarebil Trilogy

The Bond between Sisters

The Reunion of Loved Ones

Standalones

The Freedom Fighters

Fantasie in onze wereld

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To the women around me who are still facing restrictions in our society, preventing them from fully loving whoever they choose: you have been the inspiration for this novel.

1. Start of a new beginning

Gun shots. *The roaring sound of cannon fire. Men shouting. Women crying. Parents desperately searching and calling for their children. Houses plundered by people we once called friends. Everywhere around us there's blood, fear and violence. I never thought I would live to see this day. Never thought i could harvest so much fear in my tidy body! This has been going on for some time now and still I feel like I can collapse at any moment.*

My father enfolds his wife and two daughters within his robust arms, quieting our sobs, lest we be detected. My two brothers gaze skyward, petrified of who might breach our sanctuary. We're hiding in our wine cellar for some time now and honestly, I fear that we'll never be able to see the sky above our heads again. Even if nobody finds us here... they'll surely be waiting for my family. As soon as they see our faces, they will hunt us down and kill us. Because that's what the sounds surrounding us are telling me: people are being slaughtered.

My older brothers look like the Roman warfare gods of yore. Elias though isn't even old enough to wear a gun; he's just fourteen. But i guess that desperate times ask for desperate measures.

Nicholas on the contrary is as of late the patriarch of his own family, so I guess hit is his duty to defend us as well as his wife and new born son. I observe my nephew, miraculously slumbering through the chaos, fear and loud noises constantly surrounding us. We're all afraid for the moment he'll wake up in sobs, feeling our anxiety. We should make sure he's got something to eat to prevent him from crying. My sister-in-law Louisa is just wordlessly praying in unison with my mother though. Like that will help. God has abandoned us; from the moment our former friends started to attack our houses and people.

Another blast and the ground shudders. Grit cascades into our eyes. This explosion was much closer than the last. And indeed, suddenly I hear wood breaking close by, the sounds of

statues being smashed to pieces, pieces of art being destroyed into oblivion, glass breaking and then flames of fire crackling. Footsteps are running and then there's perfect silence, except for the rustling sounds of the flames.

Nicholas glances at our father, too terror-stricken to inquire about our next course of action. I don't know what causes his distress. I don't understand him. What is there to do really? We are here. The flames are upstairs. We're in our safe haven. Nothing can touch us here, can it?

It doesn't take long for the raging fire upstairs reaches our shelter however. The heat in our small hiding space is growing. Smoke clouds our sight and makes it difficult to breathe. My father puts his handkerchief over our mouths, so we won't breathe in the toxic fumes. I hear him coughing as well and feel my own eyes water. He puts us down to the ground where the air is fresher. Still, I'm having difficulty breathing. I'm afraid we will all die in this dreadful place. Roasted like bread in an oven. I can't see anyone anymore. I hear a dull knock like a body is unconsciously falling down to the ground. I don't know who it is.

My eyes are burning, so they refuse to let my tears of fear fall. My throat feels thick and raspy. Swallowing hurts like a bitch and even my occasional breaths make my throat burn. Pretty soon I feel airless, which my father's body on top of me definitely makes worse. My lungs are screaming for oxygen. I see stars in front of my eyes.

And then the hatch to our shelter opens and I look death in the eye...



Screaming as if the world perishes, I wake up. Beads of sweat are running down my face. I really feel hot and feverish, although cool air is caressing my overheated skin. It will take a while before my breathing returns to normal. Such a vivid nightmare...

Even now, ten years after escaping that inferno in France, I find myself back there. Back in our beautiful home in France during the July Revolution as people call it now. I never much cared what name people gave this event and what caused it. For me, it was Hell on Earth. Violence a child should never

have to witness. Terror a child should never have to experience so early in her life.

I know I should count myself lucky. My family and I survived after all, but still... The July Revolution left me marked for life. Not physically, luckily, but mentally. I'll never lose my fear of fire nor for small spaces. And even when my mind is occupied with other things, in my nightmares I return to Paris in 1830 and find myself locked up once more, afraid to die. Afraid to see the people I once trusted, slid my throat.

My father was part of the French bourgeoisie and luckily, we were able to keep our title here in England. He is a Viscount here for as long as the French keep up their class system. When the classes disappear, however, so will our heritage. That's why my father did everything in his power to make money in England. Therefore, he first started as a decent businessman in our own county. Then he became the boss of a big food factory in Liverpool.

But he also expected his children to fight for our inheritance. We were in this together after all. Nicholas was already married to the pretty daughter of a Vicomte before the events of the July Revolution started. And since I am the firstborn daughter of my family, my parents wish me to marry a wealthy husband as well, so at least the future of the entire Le Bons family would be secured.

My handmaid, Alice Green, suddenly enters my room, startling me out of my reverie with a cheerful good morning. I merely grunt in response. She opens my curtains, and the sunlight momentarily blinds me.

'Good day, Miss,' my handmaiden remarks merrily. 'Are you ready for your big day?'

Immediately, I spring to my feet, and my nightmare is almost completely forgotten. Today is after all an incredibly important day for me. After years of study and preparation, I am today to be formally presented to the Queen as a marriageable woman. For as long as I can remember, I have been trained to embrace that one role, my destiny as a woman of noble birth: to marry a gentleman of standing. I have always wanted to be a loving wife and a good mother, and after today I shall be revealed to the men who are searching for a wife. Today brings me one step closer to my

ultimate goal. I have never been so nervous. A pleasant sort of nervous, and yet nervous all the same.

I was given a governess (Mrs Riley) when I was four years old, and she has guided me ever since in lessons on etiquette and all the accomplishments expected of a woman. She even moved from Paris back to England to continue her lessons to me and my little sister.

Mrs Riley taught me everything I know: she taught me how to enter a room properly – shoulders back, chin up, and not walking but floating into a room – how to sing, how to play the piano, how to dance like a lady, how to make art and how to be conversant about everyday business. But most of all, she taught me how to be a proper lady and that meant speaking flawless English and French and learning the rules of etiquette as well as the art of conversation – as well as the art of remaining silent at the proper moments. I was extremely good at remembering things and pretty soon I had all the noble English family trees memorized and I was a star at History of Art and European Literature.

It turned out that Mrs Riley's most challenging task was to help me speak English fluently, akin to the manner of the British upper class. Despite my best efforts, I still find it quite difficult to entirely eliminate my French accent from my speech. Fortunately, within our society, it has become fashionable to speak English with a hint of a French accent. If you manage that you're a real part of the *ton*. So, I guess I am not a complete waste of Mrs Riley's patience and lessons.

I almost float to the mirror next to my wardrobe and smile wryly at my dishevelled reflection. Besides, you can get me out of France, but you won't be able to get France out of me. My features immediately show people I am not born in England. I have olive coloured skin, which only needs to feel the sun to get a Coppertone tan. My smooth skin contrasts with my luscious waving hair and big brown eyes. My full lips give me a sensual look, and my big breasts protest everyday again against the tight boning of a corset.

In spite of everything, Mrs Riley considers me ready for the courting season, now that I have finished my education. I am no longer a little girl, but a woman fully grown. And that can mean only one thing: I am prepared for marriage. The

future my father has so carefully arranged for me is soon to be realised. That, after all, is why he devoted such care to my upbringing and instruction. Every bit of it was meant to secure me a worthy husband, preferably one with an even stronger social position.

To be introduced as a woman fit for marriage meant taking part in the formal process of courtship. A courtship was often regarded as something like a professional advancement, since everything a woman owned would pass into her husband's control once the wedding had taken place. For that reason, a man's pursuit of a wife was treated as an exceedingly serious matter.

The same, however, applies to women as well. We hope to make a match founded on genuine affection; to be carried off by a romantic prince, rather than be chosen merely for the sake of improving a man's financial position. Naturally, for us too, it remains something of a contest. Which lady succeeds in catching the eye of a gentleman from the upper tiers of British society? Who will win the hand of a prince? Who will be wed to someone beneath her own rank? And who will remain a well-known spinster, condemned to a lonely existence for the rest of her days?

These are the questions that drive us into our best behaviour. We buy the most extravagant dresses and jewellery to show off our wealth. We flirt with our fans, but only in a playful and innocent manner, merely by fluttering our eyelashes seductively. We never take it any further than that. After all, we are respectable young ladies. We are mindful of our reputations and have no desire to compromise our honour or be perceived as improper. We take pride in maintaining our decorum and ensuring that our interactions remain tasteful and dignified. My mother would actually murder me if I tried anything else.

Besides, I don't want to be the woman who brings eternal shame to her family, like Miss Aleshire a few years ago, who was caught frolicking around with a man in the gardens. The Aleshires are since then shunned from London society. The worst thing that can happen, if you'd ask me.

The first few years of my social life I will stay under my mother's wing. As she, together with Mrs Riley, raised me

into the woman I am today, she will be my chaperone during the courting season most of the times and guide me to every social event we will partake in. Only in the extreme case that she is indisposed may my lady maid Alice take over. When both my mother and Alice are ill or otherwise unable to accompany me, my older brothers will escort me to events. A young lady is just not permitted to go out unaccompanied. Period. I hope it never comes to that though, since my brothers would interrogate every suitor before they would have a chance to even dance with me.

Despite the fact that I will have few free moments in the coming period, I have been looking forward to the upcoming courting season for months. My first day of the courting season is immediately quite the busy one; one which we went through over and over again. First, I am about to have breakfast in my mother's dressing room. Then we will attend a concert and afterwards - in the evening - we'll attend a ball at Hillcrest, the residence of the Morningtons.

The Morningtons are widely recognised as one of the families most associated with organising the best social events during courting season. With five daughters still to see suitably matched, it is hardly surprising that they take such a prominent role in these occasions. As a result, each opening of the London season brings with it a grand ball at the Mornington residence, complete with all the splendour the age can provide. Renowned orchestras are to perform this evening, there will be amusements and dancing, and the night is to conclude with fireworks; most importantly of all, every eligible nobleman will be there. The full range of the upper ranks is expected tonight. This is our chance to rise above the position into which we were born and perhaps become a Duchess or even a Princess. If one succeeds in gaining a gentleman's notice at a Mornington ball, one's future is all but secured.

Alice sweeps into my room again carrying my debutante dress. Although it was customary for this dress to be white of colour, my mother thought it best to make it stand out a bit. Therefore, we chose to use a charming ivory colour over a white underground. My headdress includes three white feathers of a swan and a short veil which covers my eyes and

nose. My mother thinks I have sensual lips and therefore I had to show them at least. Furthermore, my dress is short-sleeved and has an elegant low neckline. I especially liked my lace gloves, which stretched up to my elbows. I think they were perfect examples of elegance.

Alice chatters away about the weather and my long-awaited debut as she helps me out of my clothes and washes me. She dabs perfume onto my skin and then fastens me into my corset. As she draws the laces tighter, in keeping with the current fashion for that much-admired hourglass shape, I feel that familiar constriction and unease beginning to steal over me once more. My breathing turns shallow, and to steady myself I fix my thoughts on the princes, earls, viscounts and dukes I am to encounter this evening. For one fact is beyond doubt: my particular favourite, Duke Arlington, will be there tonight as well.

Duke Liam Arlington...

Merely the mention of his name sets off a flurry of butterflies in my stomach. I read a lot of fairytales when I was younger and I fell in love with the idea of marrying a charming prince. Fair skin. Blond hair. Blue eyes. Those facial features always swept me away. A brave prince who would protect me against the dangers of this world. A man who would respect me and love me until the end of time. Someone who would listen to me and care for me for who I was. And Elias' friend, Liam Arlington, became just that. My own prince charming.

Everybody knows the story of the young Duke. How the former Duke and Duchess died at a very young age, forcing Liam Arlington to step into his father's shoes at an early age as well. We heard the rumours that because of this Liam lived the *joie-de-vivre* life, not caring about his duties, while it was his younger sister Christina who kept the estate up and running.

The Princess was never publicly acknowledged for her proper behaviour though. Princess Christina could only take over the duties of the Duke officially by marrying someone of her own social class or by marrying someone of royal blood. Otherwise, she would only operate as a Duchess in the shadows, while never carrying that title. Talking about

marriage as a career improvement. If someone deserved a title, it was her.

In my boldest dreams, however, I am the one who sets Duke Arlington back on the right path, after which he begins taking his responsibilities seriously once again. I would make a good Duchess. The only thing I feel guilty about in those dreams is that I would be taking Princess Arlington's rightful claim to the title of Duchess away from her. She has worked for that inheritance for years, but by marrying Liam I would leave her with nothing. I do wonder how Princess Arlington would cope with that. Would she hate me? I certainly would, if our positions were reversed.

But still... Liam is more than worth any family feud, however. Despite the fact that Liam is an irresponsible Duke, forsaking his duties at every turn, every young woman of the *ton* dreams of winning his love. He is so handsome. He is mysterious. But above all, he is rich. The catch of the season. How nice would it be to win the Duke's heart and make him realise he had been wasting time fooling around with other women?

To capture the attention of Duke Arlington remains a considerable honour for any prospective bride, although the weight of his noble responsibilities may inevitably rest upon her shoulders. However, Liam is the epitome of prince charming for numerous eligible women. With his striking blonde hair and piercing blue eyes, traits he shares with his sibling, he possesses a captivating allure. His charm extends beyond his physical appearance, as he effortlessly woos women with his charismatic demeanour. Furthermore, he maintains a finely sculpted physique, thanks to the boxing training he receives in secret. Although, in secret? There aren't many women who don't know everything about Liam. He's a real celebrity in our social circles. He is also evident in his love for horse riding and his enthusiasm for sporting events has many females attending horse races and other sport matches.

'Miss?' asks Alice and I shake my head to wake up from my daydream of Liam asking me to marry him, while dozen young eligible women look at us jealously.

'I beg your pardon?'

‘I asked if you liked your hair like this?’

I take a look at the mirror and I’m flabbergasted. This woman doesn’t look like me at all. I always thought of myself as a regular girl; not ugly, definitely not, but just not standing out. But the way I look today it’s as if I am a different person altogether. I have cheerful blushes on my cheek, while my eyes are dark and I daresay seductive. My sensual lips, as my mother would call them, are made ruby red giving them an extra sensual feeling. My hair is arranged in an updo collected at the back of my head. It is complimented by multiple loops of hair leading from the front of my head to the arrangement at the back. It is adorned with many little flowers. It shows off my slim neck, which is bedecked with a beautiful diamond necklace. I for once look like a princess of yore.

‘You’ve really outdone yourself today, Alice. I look stunning,’ I compliment her enthusiastically.

My handmaid beams with pride at the compliment and she curtsied gratefully. ‘Miss should look outstanding today. It is a big day after all. One, we’ve lived up to all these years.’

‘And I wouldn’t have come this far without your excellent help through the years.’

I’ve known Alice all my life. She is the daughter of our housekeeper, Mrs Green. Mrs Green and Alice had been with our family since before we left France, so in many ways I was raised alongside my lady’s maid. In the British countryside there were very few children near my own age, and so Alice quite naturally became my companion. From that, a most unusual bond between us grew. She was only a little older than I was, yet remarkably sensible for her years, and she became an endless source of comfort and guidance. I could speak to her about nearly anything, and she was always ready to hear my troubles and offer support whenever she was able. As something of a return for all her wisdom, I have spent many years teaching her to read and write.

I know it’s not possible due to our different social classes, but I would say I saw Alice as my friend more than my employee. I am glad that she decided to come with me as soon as I found myself a suitable partner. It is nice to know

that, though everything was hopefully about to change, one reliable aspect of my life would stay the same at least.

Alice lays her hands on my shoulder and as a token of affection squeezes them encouragingly. 'I know you will do just fine, Miss. You're absolutely prince-worthy.'

'Thank you, my dear Alice. Now stop talking or I'm about to cry.'

Alice smiles heartily. 'We wouldn't want to make smudges on my masterpiece now, would we?' She lets go of me and walks out of the room to finish her chores, while I smile after her. A valuable friend indeed, my sweet Alice. Irreplaceable.

2. Concert at Hanover Square Garden

After one more admiring look in the mirror, I walk to my mother's dressing room humming, where my mother is already sipping her tea. She studies the guest list of tonight's ball at the Morningtons with a stern frown between her eyebrows.

She looks up though as soon as I enter the room and she spreads her arms in a warm welcome. 'There she is! My beautiful daughter. All ready for her first courting season. Turn around, dear, and let your *maman* see how you look.' I obediently twirl around and my mother claps her hands enthusiastically. 'You look absolutely gorgeous, sweet girl. Miss Green has outdone herself this time.'

'I'm glad you approve of my looks today, *maman*.' I give her a peck on the cheek before sitting down as well.

'I always approve of how my sweet daughter looks. You have to show your father as soon as you're done eating.'

'That will be very soon indeed, since I can't imagine eating anything today with all that tension building up in my stomach.'

My mother gives me a rueful smile. 'I know what it feels like, darling. But you've come so far and learned so much. You are ready to start this new phase in your life. We have taught you all we know and we've taught you well.'

She looks at the guest list again, while I munch on a piece of bread listlessly. 'Lady Mornington has outdone herself this time,' my mother breaks the silence. 'Almost everyone accepted her invitation of tonight's ball. Only the Hudleys and the Styles are needed elsewhere.' She raises an eyebrow incredibly. 'The fools. Their loss. They obviously don't know what they're missing. The whole of London will be buzzing about this party. Mark my words.'

'I hope so for Lady Mornington's sake. According to Mary-Ann this party cost them a fortune.'

'I can imagine that, but that's of no concern to us. You will

be the centre of attention looking like you do today.'

Before I can withhold myself, I utter my worst fear for this day. It even sounds childish to me. 'But what if nobody likes me?'

My mother smiles warmly and lays her warm hand on mine. 'Then there's always next year,' she says in her soft voice. 'Besides, I can't fathom no one will notice you. Just look at yourself; you're a sight to behold. Plus, we have the entire season to find you a suitable husband. Tonight's just a start.'

I bow my head in gratitude and start to eat from the dishes our servants put on the table. I drink a lot of mayweed tea to calm my nerves and eat a couple of fruits with toast. More food I really can't eat right now.

After finishing breakfast, we proceed to my father's study, where he is engrossed in reading today's newspaper. After showering me with numerous compliments on my appearance, he remarks, 'The newspaper is brimming with reports on today's festivities at the Morningtons. It appears they have truly surpassed themselves this year.'

'They say the same every year, Mr Le Bon,' my *maman* observes, though she's brimming with excitement as well. 'We'll just have to wait and see.'

'They think that their balls will help their eldest daughter to find a suitable husband.' My father gives us a mischievous smile. 'But rumour has it that she already found a man, but he's just a baron and her parents won't approve of this match.'

My mother giggles and says: 'Mr Le Bon, I never held you for a slanderer. It doesn't suit you, *mon amour*.'

My father shrugs and winks at me. 'My information is based on facts, my dear, and therefore it isn't gossiping exactly. I leave the untrue words, uttered due to jealousy, to you women. Let me stick to my facts.'

'Not all women gossip,' my mother warningly tells him.

'I wouldn't dare to suggest otherwise.' My father rolls up his newspaper and rises. 'I have to ride to Liverpool today. There was something wrong with one of the machineries.'

'Nothing dreadful I hope?'

'No, I guess it's just a mechanical failure. Nothing to worry about. I will see you tonight at the Mornington's ball.'

This is our cue to leave and we go to the drawing room, which is definitely the finest place in our house. It shows our status, gentility and our fine taste. Our room is handsomely furnished, which meant not below our station but also not too trying. The room is filled with various commonplace items: ottomans, an antique cuckoo clock, comfortable armchairs, a sofa, my sister Naomi's writing desk, a sewing table, our renowned piano, and the circular drawing room table. We have varnished paper on the wall, which looks exactly like real marble. Moreover, there is a comfortable fireplace and chimney, which heats up the room agreeably. Above the fireplace there is the head of a bear, which my father shot down in his first hunting season on English soil.

My mother takes a seat on the sofa, but when I want to sit down next to her, she waves me away. 'Practice your piano skills, dear, before we leave.'

I'd rather continue reading the novel I was occupied with, but I don't dare to contradict my *maman* on this important day. So, therefore I sit down grudgingly and play my favourite songs on the piano. I embody grace and poise, my *maman* always tells me while playing the piano. My short, slender fingers delicately caress the ivory keys, producing melodies that fill the room with elegance and refinement. My expression is one of concentration. My eyes reflecting a deep connection to the music I play.

As I play, my presence truly commands attention, evoking a sense of admiration and awe from those fortunate enough to witness my performance.

While I'm playing a cheerful tune, my youngest sister Naomi enters the room and sits directly down behind her writing desk, not caring the least about etiquettes. She's a fair creature, but a rebel one at that. Since she's the second daughter, she thinks she doesn't have to study like I did. She thinks that if I marry well, she doesn't have to as well and can live her life as she pleases. I love her for her free spirit, but life doesn't turn out like that. We are women and we have a duty to fulfil. And within the confines of that duty, there is no room for writing stories. A woman does not write occupationally. We keep a diary and that's all the writing that's allowed in society.

I hope she will discover that before it's too late. When I marry in this season, she's the next in line to be married off and start a family. And she would improve her chances of finding a suitable man if she'd stop writing and would pay more attention to her etiquette lessons.

Naomi can't be blamed though. She has simply had a poor example set before her, and that poor example is now walking into the room. It is my brother Elias. As a second son he never paid attention to his responsibilities. Since Nicholas got married, he inherits the responsibilities of the Le Bon family when father dies. That leaves Elias with nothing. Instead of marrying and trying to make a name for himself, Elias just flounders about not knowing what to do with his life. He is a talented artist, I must admit, but he uses this talent as an excuse to drink and live a bohemian life. He's a charming man and could therefore easily find a suitable lady to marry him. He just doesn't want to settle down.

'Why live with just one woman, when I can have a dozen just as easily?' he once asked of me, when I confronted him with yet another girlfriend.

He has quite a few similarities with the current life Duke Arlington is leading, I daresay. Therefore, it is not wondrous that the two became real good friends.

You could say that their friendship would get me a head start at winning Liam's heart, but unfortunately Elias never introduced his rebellious friend to his family, so I don't even know if the Duke is aware I exist at all. I guess *papan's* overall opinion about the way both Elias and the Duke behave themselves and their late-night practices took care of such an event ever happening.

So, to be able to win the Duke's heart I still have to convince both my family and the Duke of my sincere affections for him. Secretly I hope I find a respectable man at tonight's ball, who will sweep me off of my feet and make me forget Liam Arlington ever existed.

I love my siblings dearly, but sometimes it seems like all the responsibility falls down on me after Nicholas did what was expected of him at least.

Elias whistles like he's impressed, when he sees my debutante dress and kisses me roughly on my hair. 'Elias, please,' I snarl at him. 'Don't ruin my hair.'

Elias laughs playfully. 'I'm sorry, dear sister. I don't want to ruin your big day. We all know how important this is for our family and stuff.' He gives our mother a kiss on her cheek and cuddles Naomi, till she cries out laughing.

I roll my eyes. 'Will the two of you ever grow up?'

'Why should we? We have Nicholas and you for that, haven't we? I can be the fun brother.' He ruffles Naomi's hair and they start to wrestle. 'And she can be the fun sister, who doesn't know how to defeat her big brother in a game of wrestling.'

'Okay, that's enough,' our mother says now as well. 'Could you two at least act like we belong to the same household? It's Elizabeth's great day after all and nothing should go wrong. I count broken bones as something that can go wrong.'

'Unless, dear Elizabeth wants to wrestle with us, I don't see how our wrestling match can hurt our sister.'

After one cold look of *maman* he holds out his hands apologetically though and sits down next to our mother. My mother gives him a cup of tea, which he eagerly drinks, meanwhile saying: 'It pains my heart, but I won't be joining you at the concert.'

'Which excuse have you made up this time?'

'I'm visiting a boxing match with the Duke.' I barely withhold a sigh of disappointment. So, I won't be seeing Liam until the ball? I really hoped he would join his sister at the concert.

'But you two will be visiting the Morningtons, won't you?' My mother looks at him threateningly. 'The ball is the opening ball of the season! It's most important for your sister's future that we are seen there as a respectable family.'

Elias rolls his eyes. 'Of course we will be there. You would banish me from the estate, if I wouldn't make it.'

'I sure would. And please, try to attend this ball sober for once.'

'I don't drink any booze.' Elias puts his hand on his heart.

‘Now you have wounded me, *maman*.’

‘And I would hurt you a little bit more, if that should prevent you from drinking too much at the start of the courting season. It’s not only Elizabeth coming out, but it’s about time you find yourself a decent wife. Many seasons have passed already without you settling down, son.’

‘But how do I find just one wife? They all want me, mother.’ He gives my *maman* a kiss once more and stands up. ‘And I want them all the more.’ He grins, curtsies mockingly and leaves the drawing room laughing. *Maman* shakes her head and claps her hands.

‘Let’s go, girls. I don’t want to be late for the concert.’

We say goodbye to our father, while our carriage is taken up front. I see Alice on top of the stairs with a mope. She looks up and gives me one last thumbs-up.

While riding to the concert I nervously play with my fan. This is it. Years I’ve spent on training and now it’s finally time for me to come out in London’s society.

In a twenty-minute drive we arrive at the Hanover Square Rooms. We enter the three-story building and we take our reserved seats. While my mother talks to some people she is acquainted with, I take in the grandeur of the hall with the marvellous chandeliers and the painted ceilings.

Afterwards, I look around the room and examine the other debutants like a sportsman who’s looking up the competition. One must know one’s enemy after all, especially during courting season. A few faces I recognise and I greet them with a respectable nod of the head or a small wave of the hand.

I see the Morningsons as well shaking hands vehemently as if they’re already hosting their party. The second daughter of the Morningsons is also coming out today. Mary-Ann Mornington is a dear friend of mine and we often have tea together. She is a spirited soul and has a kind heart. For her sake, I hope she will be able to find an eligible man this season. She is so much nicer and fairer than her eldest sister, Diana, who is a haughty and jealous woman. But perhaps her behaviour can be blamed on the fact that she’s already in her third season.

When Mary-Ann sees me, she walks right up to me and we exchange three polite kisses. 'Excited for tonight?' she asks me with a small voice.

'Yes, I am,' I say honestly. 'We have studied so long for this moment. I hope we are ready.'

'I have witnessed Diana's coming out of course, so I know a bit of what can be expected.' She shows me her dance card for tonight's dances. Her card is nearly as full as mine, which is a good sign for the both of us. 'The Duke is willing to dance with me,' Mary-Ann beams and I swallow back my indignation, since he isn't on my dance card. Yet at least. 'But I am not so smitten with him as Diana is. I fancy William Austen more, I guess. He's the Marquess...'

'Of Winchester,' I finish her sentence, since I know the noble British families by heart after years of studying. 'He's all right, I fancy. A good match.'

'Do you fancy anyone yet?'

'The Duke of course, but since my father probably will not allow me to marry him, I reckon I have to turn my focus on someone else after tonight.'

Mary-Ann giggles. 'Your family is a bit old-fashioned in that way, aren't they?'

'Well, I mean, I can understand. *Papan* has worked so hard to uphold his title. It would be a shame if I married someone, who is bound to disgrace my family with his outrageous behaviour sooner or later.'

Before she can answer me, Mary-Ann is called away and after another three kisses, she quickly runs back to her parents. I follow my friend and see the Duke's sister one loge away from the Morningsons. Princess Christina Arlington sits in her private lodge with her guardian Mrs Maxwell. In the semi-dark of the concert building the Princess' hair looks like a satin carpet of gold. She wears her hair loose and on her straight hair a diamond tiara is worn. She is the perfect example of how a respectable woman should look. I kind of envy her status and beauty, which seem to come so naturally to her.

Many men in the room try to catch her attention, but she stares almost bored to the orchestra pit, where the London's Royal Philharmonic Society are fine tuning their instruments.

The lights suddenly go out and I can only make out the spotlighted orchestra pit. Then the London's Royal Philharmonic Society starts to play and I must confess: I have never heard anything like it. I have often heard people tell stories about the beautiful music of the Orchestra, but I never imagined I could be swept away like this by a group of mere instruments.

All of my worries are simply gone. In the next couple of hours, I experience joy, sadness, anger and euphoria due to the mesmerizing sounds of the instruments. I let the music carry me away, while I watch the concentrated faces of the musicians and their skilled hands playing the instruments enthralled.

Once they finish, I must remind myself to maintain composure, though inside, I long to leap up and express my enthusiasm with loud cheers and applause until my hands throb. Instead, I applaud in a refined and controlled manner, while my heart pounds in my chest and tears continue to stream down my cheeks.

In the corner of my eye, I see Princess Arlington staring at me and as our eyes meet, she nods her head respectfully but with a small smile on her lips. She wipes away a few tears of her own and I smile. It looks like I am not the only person who couldn't keep a straight face during all of that. If every event during the courting season is as intense as this, then I would greatly wish for it never to end.

3. The first ball of the season

After that extraordinary time at Hanover Square Garden, I was convinced that nothing on Earth could ever outdo it.

Still floating slightly above reality, my family and I travel to the Morningtons at Hillcrest that same evening, where the Mornington's immaculate servants welcome us on arrival. Two gentlemen escort us into the ballroom, while another pair directs our coachman to where he should wait. Almost at once, my heels threaten to slide across the wooden floor, buffed to such a gleam that it looks as though a thousand diamonds have been set into it. I cling tightly to my father's arm, anxious that I might stumble at my very first ball as a young woman now considered fit for marriage. He glances at me sideways and gently rests his hand over mine in reassurance.

My agitation soon disappears when I take another look at my surroundings. The ballroom is immensely large; even bigger than ours with high ceilings and strong golden pillars. The orchestra is playing before the many windows which adorn the room. On the opposite side of the orchestra stands the buffet table with dishes from all over the country and even dishes from abroad. I realise that many families in the countryside could have lived off this food for many months, while we would squander this within a couple of hours. I pray to God to forgive us for our greed and then focus on the people surrounding me.

Many couples are already dancing. I hear a cheerful tune playing and see the quadrille being danced. I can't wait to dance myself, since I already had a couple of names written down on my dance card. Dancing sounds like a fun thing to do, but in our society, it is foremost a tightly wound choreography of strict social behaviours and actions. You are bound to participate in the rules the occasion requires, lest you scandalise yourself and your entire family.

Balls are the most important social gatherings of the age, and securing an invitation is by no means simple. On the whole, these occasions tend to attract more ladies than

gentlemen, which frequently leads to the awkward shortage of dancing partners, leaving many young women flushed with embarrassment at the edges of the room. For that reason, it falls to any capable host to do all he can to ensure that every guest has an appropriate partner.

The women are handed a dance card, on which the different kinds of dances are printed in order of the program. Next to each dance there is a little line, on which a man can write down his name to claim that particular dance with a woman. A dance card ensures a few things. First, that a woman can keep track of who would like to partner with her. As if we could possibly forget! Second, it also guarantees that a lady does not ask a man to dance with her, since that would stand for inappropriate behaviour. So, when the dance card is full that means that that particular lady is very popular.

But before I have my scoop on the dancefloor, we are bound to see the lady of the house, who my mother has already spotted. Lord and Lady Mornington are talking to the Bettingtons, distant relatives of theirs. As soon as Lady Mornington sees us, she excuses herself and greets my mother fondly with three kisses. After exchanging pleasantries, she can't help but pinpoint that three of her daughters are already dancing. I give the dancefloor one quick look and see Mary-Ann beaming with pride and joy, while she dances with her partner, the Marquess of Winchester. Also, Mary-Ann's eldest sister, Diana, is dancing with a haughty look in her eyes.

'Let's get you dancing as well, dear,' Lady Mornington suddenly says to me. 'Such a fine young lady shouldn't be seen standing on the side lines.'

'I have time to spare, madam.' I quickly show her my dance card, which is quite full actually. Still, she doesn't seem satisfied and takes me to her other guests, where she introduces me fondly. I know it is etiquette for the lady of the house to make introductions, but still it feels kind of humbling to be introduced as a girl nobody wants to dance with.

Luckily, at that moment my brother enters, forming my rescue for once instead of my eternal nuisance. Not minding etiquette at all he meets us amidst one of Lady Mornington's

many introductions. She forgives his rudeness momentarily though, since Elias has brought the Duke with him. Lady Mornington introduces herself to him and bids him welcome at Hillcrest. This gives me the time to examine the most desirable bachelor of London for the first time in real life.

Duke Liam Arlington wears a polished smile, which reeks of an almost court-trained charm. His golden hair glints in the soft light. On his red doublet an emblazoned gold rendering of Arlington's white wolf occupies the entirety of his broad chest. His black cloak falls gracefully around him. There is something in his striking blue eyes – which I immediately compare to the colour of deep oceans – and the way they contrast with his golden hair and fair skin that makes me at a loss for words. He is achingly handsome.

Lady Mornington offers a swift apology after exchanging a few polite words with the Duke and then hurries off, no doubt to alert her daughters to his arrival before every place on his dance card has already been taken.

‘And this is my baby sister Elizabeth,’ Elias continues wearily, when Lady Mornington has gone. ‘She’s coming out this season.’

I blush, when the Duke takes my hand and kisses it softly. He has large, strong hands, which are covered by leather gloves which barely fit his hands. ‘It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Lady Le Bon. Your brother Elias has told me many tales about you.’

‘I hope they put me into a good light.’

‘Oh indeed, he is very flattering about you.’ I see the Duke’s beautiful eyes lingering on my body. ‘And I see he told me no lies. Where have you been hiding all this time? You are definitely the most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes on.’

‘You’re flattering me, Your Grace.’

‘May I have the pleasure of having this dance, since you are still free for a couple of dances?’

Elias snorts. ‘Keen eye, mate.’

I am so flabbergasted that Duke Liam Arlington will be my first dance of the season that I barely manage to murmur my consent. I am about to dance with the most desirable bachelor London society has to offer! I want to scream. I want

to do a happy dance, but I just accept his hand with a respectful bow, when a demanding voice suddenly yells: 'Liam!'

The Duke looks over his shoulder annoyed and says: 'Dear sister, to what do I owe the pleasure?'

I quickly make another curtsy, when we are joined by Princess Arlington. She is as pretty as the Duke is handsome. I had gotten a glimpse of her already at Hanover Square, but now we're really face to face, I can only hover. With the same fair complexion, golden hair and sapphire eyes as Liam, she is quite the sight to behold. She is exactly the sort of woman who could make any otherwise ordinary girl feel rather unsure of herself, simply because she could never hope to appear as luminous and striking as the Princess.

Princess Christina is dressed in a red gown that looks unmistakably costly, with a silver bodice and sleeves that are cut open for effect. Upon her head rests a tiara set with what seems like no fewer than a thousand diamonds, glittering so fiercely that it is almost painful to look at. Dazzling, without question.

The bright blue eyes of Princess Christina linger on me a shortly which makes me blush vehemently. Then she nods her head approvingly and says: 'Lady Le Bon, is it? My apologies for taking away the chance to dance with my brother. I promise, this encounter will not take long.'

I nod, since that seems to be the only thing I am able to, and make it as if to leave them in private, but she shakes her head. 'No need to leave, love.' She looks at her brother and says venomously: 'Where were you all day?'

The Duke looks like a child busted stealing candy. He gestures helplessly with his hand and his ears redden. His helplessness makes him even more endearing. I had to help him, since my brother was the sole reason for the Princess' obvious anger towards her brother.

'I beg your pardon, Princess. It was my brother's fault, I bet. He took the Duke to a boxing match this afternoon.'

'Even so. I must admit I do think it does you credit that you would stand up for my brother's honour, though he has done nothing to merit such loyalty.'

‘Must we speak of my many failures right now, Christina? I think it’s not respectable to let a lady wait for her first dance coming out. And since I’m the one who promised her a dance, I think I’d better take her to the dancefloor now.’

‘It’s not respectable to leave your sister alone all day either,
Liam.’

The Duke waves away her comment. ‘You got aunt Emma to watch over you and soon you’ll get a respectable man all for yourself. Perhaps then you can let me live the life I want to live, sister?’

It looks like Princess Arlington is not ready to let this go yet, but she yields in the end and says: ‘I only let you get out so easily, because of your present company, brother. When you find the courage to come back to Arlington Park, then I will still give you Hell, you hear me?’ She turns to me once more and nods her head. ‘Once again, sorry, Lady Le Bon, for the interruption. Enjoy your coming out. I’ll see you around.’

‘Princess.’ I curtsy once more swiftly, because I feel the Duke guiding me rapidly to the dance floor, almost as if he is afraid that his sister will change her mind after all about chastising him. He holds out his hand, which I take blushing, and his other hand slips from my shoulders to my back. He looks at me attractively and then finally; I could put all my practice and study to good use. With a Duke nonetheless.

It feels like a dream has come true. The Duke is a formidable dance partner. He moves almost floatingly, carrying me through all the steps effortlessly. His warm body rests against mine, and his fingers are soft around my own. His other hand caresses my bare shoulder ever so slightly, which sends electricity coursing through my body. He spins me around effortlessly and guides me across the floor with remarkable grace as we waltz. Not once does he miss a step, nor does he appear to notice the resentful looks from the ladies watching us while one dance follows another and we never exchange partners.

It is hardly considered proper for a Duke, or indeed any gentleman, to reserve himself for a single partner all evening, yet Liam’s attention seems fixed entirely on me. The Duke treats me as though I were fully a woman, despite knowing

that this is only my first season out. I am scarcely eighteen. Surely, he must still see me as very young and not yet fully formed, yet he never allows the slightest trace of irritation to appear.

He says little about his friendship with my brother, though I had fully expected that subject to dominate the conversation. Instead, he appears genuinely interested in me. He asks me a lot of questions and never interrupts me, while I answer him. He really seems to want to know me. At least, as much as one can judge such things while turning endlessly across a ballroom floor.

We share three dances in total, and for my part, I could happily have gone on like that forever. The Duke only kisses my hand after our third dance and murmurs: 'You are a great dancing partner, lady Le Bon.'

'You have great stamina as well, Your Grace.'

'Your brother was not lying about your dancing capabilities thus far.'

'He would know since he's been my training dancing partner for many years now.'

'And while dancing with a woman more than three dances is considered inappropriate, I'd love to make another exception for you. I leave it up to you though.'

Much as I wished to remain on the floor with him, I was now expected to dance with another gentleman. To pass over my next partner yet again would most certainly set tongues wagging.

'You honour me with your request, Your Grace. Unfortunately, my next partner is waiting.' I look at my dance card and groan. 'And since it's my oldest brother it wouldn't be wise to keep him waiting.'

He shakes his head mockingly. 'Alas, woe me. I'll duel him right here and now if I must for the honour of your next dance.'

I laugh. 'Oh, you men! Must it always end in a duel right away?'

He muses. 'Perhaps not this instance, no. All right. See you around then, Lady Le Bon. And if you have a dance to spare later in the evening, let it be for me.'

'I promise I will.'

He lets go of my hand and leaves me flustered, until I become aware of all the envious looks, I receive from my fellow women in the room. The guys though just look like I am a very rare gem, they've come across. It seems while the women are repulsed by the Duke's obvious attention for me, the men are at the same time attracted by it.

Luckily, I don't have to bear the many staring eyes for too long before my eldest brother takes his rightful place as my next partner and we spin around in a Viennese Waltz. Nicholas admires my dress and says courteously: 'Sister, you are looking very fine this evening. Are you enjoying your coming out so far?'

'Yes, it is quite the experience.'

'Many suitors already?'

'Nicholas,' I laugh. 'Is that any way to treat a lady?'

'As your brother I'm allowed such curiosities.' He thinks about that for a while. 'But don't tell my darling Louisa I said so.'

'Only because you're my brother, I'll give an answer to your question.'

'Lucky me.'

'You must have seen me dancing with the Duke.'

Nicholas scowls. 'I know our brother is quite fond of him, but as your oldest brother I must say that the Duke is not a suitable match for you, his title and name notwithstanding.'

I find myself rather annoyed by his words. 'I'm not considering him as my potential husband just yet. We just danced. Dancing with a Duke increases my chances with actual suitors, so it would seem.' I nod my head to the many men, who are still examining me attentively.

Nicholas looks at me flabbergasted. 'Look at her. All strategic and cold behaviour. Using the Duke for your own ends.' He gives me a reprimanding look but then winks at me. 'As a matter of fact, I haven't seen you dancing with Duke Arlington, because I was in the meantime searching the crowd for eligible men who were clearly interested in you.'

'Oh, you were? My brother, the matchmaker! And which guy can I expect to ask me for a dance?'

Nicholas's eyes scan the room once more. 'I would put all my money on the son of Viscount Mayfair. Lord Mayfair is

constantly watching you, since you entered the room. It's almost improper.' I can see Nicholas frowning at the guy and his dazzling smile tells me my potential suitor backed off.

I laugh and give him a playful nudge. 'Don't chase away my potential husbands yet, brother. Viscount Mayfair's son is a decent match.'

'If I wanted someone drooling over you, I would have gotten you a dog instead. Much safer. And much more reliable, I may add.' Nicholas nods his head at someone and continues. 'That's Sir Williams, a decent fellow. The next dance on your card is his. Though I think he is too old for you.'

'Is there anyone here in the room who is allowed to marry me by your standards?'

Nicholas considers this. 'Perhaps.' He gives me a kiss on my forehead. 'I only want the best for you, sister. It's your first courting season and you will unfortunately find out that some men can be pigs. Father and I won't let anything happen to you or Naomi, when it's her time to come out.'

'And I love you both for that.'

Once our dance comes to an end, Sir Williams steps forward exactly as my brother said he would. Without delay, he begins speaking of his exploits on the battlefield, and as all that is required of me is the occasional nod and enough attention to keep my footing, I am free to let my eyes wander across the room.

Almost immediately my eyes fall on the Duke, who dances with Mary-Ann. He moves perfectly in line, but the conversation we had together seems to be missing between the two of them. Also with his former dance partner, Lady Diana Mornington, there was no chemistry as far as I could tell. Though not by lack of trying. Lady Mornington batted her eyelashes so often it must have hurt her cheeks. I saw her smile excessively to try to win the Duke's heart, but he didn't seem impressed.

Too bad, Diana, I think gloatingly. I can't help, but I smile secretly at her behaviour, which was close to outrageousness.

Sir Williams though seems to see my secret smile as an incentive to continue his tiresome stories and he starts another one about a battle in some faraway foreign country. I

almost can't hide my relief when this dance is over and I see two blank rounds on my dance card, before I'm wanted by the son of Baron Digby. I'm glad I can sit down for a while and have something to drink.

I rush myself to the buffet table and I very unladylike fill up my glass at the champagne fountain and empty my glass in just mere seconds. I almost choke, when someone behind me says: 'Good Lord, you have been thirsty indeed.'

I recover my posture and turn around. My cheeks redden, when I look into the blue eyes of the Duke's sister. I curtsy and say: 'Princess Arlington, you honour me with your company.'

She smiles fondly. 'Lady Le Bon, the honour is all mine. I see the champagne is delicious?'

I would gladly sink into a hole in the ground right now as I mutter: 'Very good, indeed.'

Princess Arlington seems not to be aware of my unease as she pours herself a glass of lemonade. 'Do you like your coming out so far?' The Princess asks me, after she takes a sip from her glass. She can drink ladylike, which increases my embarrassment only more.

'It is splendid.'

She nods to the room full of people. 'Any suitors yet?' Her voice has a typical London accent, which I have never been able to muster completely. Though I like hearing it. It sounds warm and welcoming.

I take out my fan and nervously give myself some fresh air. Breathing in this dress is near impossible, especially when you're just done dancing and making an utter fool of oneself. I just tell her with whom I've been dancing thus far.

'The Viscount of Arbuthnott has a nice-looking son. Rumour has it he is very kind and caring. Also, the sons of the Marquess of Winchester and the Marquess of Pembroke are suitable matches for a young girl like yourself. I could introduce you sometime, if you'd like?'

'That would be very nice indeed, Princess. You venerate me with your kindness.'

'Yes, there are a couple of eligible men here. They are perfect for a gem like yourself.' I blush once more by her praise. 'But some men are different than they portray

themselves to be.' Her gaze is piercing and I look shyly at the dancing crowd.

'My brother and father are watching my back, Princess. I need not be fearful.'

'I'm sure they are very capable of protecting you, but sometimes one can be misled by one's name or title for that matter.'

Our gazes meet and I see in those cool eyes exactly what I was fearing. She is talking about her brother. 'I'm sure my father and brother are perfectly capable of seeing through one's title.'

'Are they? Or even better: are you?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'My brother has been talking about you, since you honoured him with a dance. Or should I say: a couple of dances at once?'

'I am sure he talks about all his dance partners that way.'

'Yes, he does. And that's exactly my point.' Princess Arlington moves closer, so even though she whispers her next words I can still hear her clearly. 'I love my brother, but he is not a suitable match for a young decent woman.' She touches my underarm lightly. 'I am sorry if I speak out of term or if I'm being too preposterous, but I mean well. I know Liam as nobody does, since I am his sibling. He has a kind and caring character. Moreover, he is a handsome man. But our unfortunate youth has driven him over the edge and he is afraid to care for someone. Therefore, he uses us women as if we are nothing more than toys. When he is through with them, he throws them away and finds another girl.'

I shiver at her harsh words, since these almost completely reflect my brother's behaviour of late. She mistakes my shuddering and takes away her gloved hand. 'I only mean it well. Liam is not a liar. He may like you now, but he gets bored really easily.' She smiles ruefully. 'I don't want to... I hope you don't get trapped by his charms like many women before you. You look like a wonderful woman and you deserve a man who can give you a future.'

'I don't know what to say, Princess. I... Thank you, for your kind words. I can assure you, however, that nothing has passed between us on the dance floor. We just had a great

time. I don't think your brother intended anything by it, and for that reason I hold him in no way responsible. To me, it was simply a perfect opening dance to what will surely be a most interesting courting season.'

Suddenly, we are interrupted by Baron Digby and my little break is over. 'Would you do me the honour, Lady Le Bon?' he asks me while smiling nervously because of the company I am in at the moment.

He also has blue eyes, but they shine with anxiety and are flashing to the Princess so now and then. I look at Princess Arlington for permission, who takes a step back and beckons me to go.

I curtsy gratefully and Baron Digby guides me back to the dancefloor, still I can hear Princess Arlington's soft words: 'And so, it begins.' I look back over my shoulder, but she already disappears in the crowd rubbing her temples agitatedly.

4. The invitation

The next morning, I am still shocked by the harsh words of Princess Arlington. I must admit that I thought the dance between me and the Duke had been quite special, but after speaking with his sibling I seriously doubted that. I had known of course that both the Duke and my brother were considered the Casanova's of London, making love to women every other day, but still I felt like Liam and I really connected while dancing under the crystal chandeliers.

But I guess Princess Arlington was right after all. Who would know better than the Duke's own sister? Perhaps the Duke had only wanted to make me feel special. Perhaps the notion pleased him; that I might believe he had truly fallen in love with me. The Princess's words had shattered that illusion, however, and all that remained was the bitter sense that I had been foolish and misled. I had known perfectly well who Liam Arlington was from the start, yet I had still yielded to his charm, just as so many women had done before me.

Therefore, I am quite silent during breakfast trying to forget the Duke at once. Luckily, my mother can't stop talking about the young men she and my father thought to be decent matches for me. There is a pile of letters already of suitable men, who are willing to court me. Some of those men will come by later that day to introduce themselves officially to me. Courting season has begun indeed! Then why did I feel so distressed?

There is also a letter, which is directed to me personally. This is kind of odd, since suitors usually write to the parents of the woman they are willing to court. I take the envelope rather curiously and my heart skips a beat, when I recognise the family crest of the Arlingtons. I open the letter and read the few lines on the rather thick embossed paper.

'Well?' my father asks impatiently. 'Who is so bold to write to you directly?'

I swallow, because I still cannot quite believe it. Princess Arlington's words shoot through my head, while I read my letter once more. That doesn't change the outcome though.

'It's from Duke Arlington,' I say perplexed.

'Liam Arlington?' he asks, amazed. *Maman* rolls her eyes as if to say: *do you know another Duke Arlington?* 'What does he want from *you*?'

'He wants to thank me for the many dances we shared. He hopes to see me again pretty soon.'

My mother is exhilarated with that prospect, while my father only frowns. 'Isn't Duke Arlington Elias' friend?'

'Yes, he is,' my mother says soothingly, 'but he seems to be a very charming young man.'

'Charming indeed,' my father snorts. 'You mean a notorious womaniser?'

'He was very polite to me at least,' I say, feeling the need again to defend him. People were very quick in their assessment of the Duke indeed. Of course they were right, but secretly I still hope there is more to this man than his stained reputation. His letter is proof, isn't it? Or does he write to all his mistresses?

My father frowns. 'Although I think you're a very smart girl for getting the attention of a Duke, I'd rather have you taking a step back from him. Try to focus on other men, who are more trustworthy and more worthy of your attention.'

'But he has written to our daughter, Mr Le Bon,' my mother says enthusiastically. 'I don't think he's ever done that before. I mean that's not typical charmer-behaviour, is it?'

'But still, his title notwithstanding, I don't think he is worthy of our daughter's attention. I want to marry you off to a decent man, not some scoundrel. Dancing with him has done you some good however. It attracted the attention of many proper suitors. So, forget the most desirable bachelor of London,' I blush vehemently, 'and choose a better man for yourself, *mon amour*.'

Since my first visitor would arrive at two o'clock this afternoon, I decide to take a walk through our gardens and the meadow beyond with Alice by my side, where Nicholas and Elias are already practicing their shooting skills.

The weather is warm and sweet. The grass is as green as emerald and the apple trees near the northern border of our

estate are in full bloom. I am always very comfortable at revelling in the spring fragrances of flourishing blossoms and blossoming grass and flowers.

It is a warm April day and therefore I wear a salmon-coloured dress with white gloves. I also wear a bonnet with lilies to shield my skin from the sun, but still my mother insisted on Alice accompanying me with a sunshade as well. While strolling through our beautiful garden I tell Alice everything that has happened last night.

When I am finished, Alice frowns. 'I beg your pardon, miss, but I don't think it is very nice of the Princess to talk bad about her brother.'

'No, it isn't. However, Christina Arlington knows her brother as no one else does. She knows how he behaves around women.'

'That's true, but people do change, Miss, when given a proper reason. And the Duke can't lead this life forever. One day he will have to take responsibility for his estate and his subjects. Surely, he must know that. So, why not make the change, now a beautiful woman such as yourself is waiting for him?'

'I don't know if he ever will. I think he rather passes those responsibilities on to his sister. Look at Elias for that matter. I don't see him change anytime soon.'

'Princess Arlington has no real title, unless she marries. It's not in the Duke's power to just give all the responsibilities to her officially.'

'Yes, and when she marries, she becomes the Duchess and can take over her legacy, which in my opinion she pretty much deserves.'

'But it is rumoured Princess Arlington has no suitors yet.'

'I wouldn't know. But when you come to speak of it, I didn't see her on the dancefloor a lot. I can't imagine why, since many guys tried to catch her attention and she's quite a beauty to behold.'

'Looks can be deceiving, miss. I guess that's not only true for the Princess' brother.'

A gunshot startles me and behind the hedgerow I see my two brothers shooting at flying disks. I hear their voices taking turns shouting: 'Pull!' I see Nicholas' calculated shot,

exactly hitting the mark, while Elias' quick shots hit the target a mere fifty percent. They just take a break when I join them. Nicholas

drinks water, while I see Elias sipping whiskey.

'Is that wise?' I ask him, while I sit down next to them.

'I won't shoot you, dear sister, if that's what you're worried about.'

'No, don't worry,' Nicholas says and he grins teasingly. 'Elias wouldn't hit the mark if the mark was right in front of his eyes.'

Elias hits his brother playfully and says: 'I'm too soft-hearted to shoot right.'

'Yes, that's exactly the reason why you organised a shooting match with the Duke this afternoon.'

My heart flutters, when I hear him mentioned. 'The Duke is coming today?'

'Don't worry, sister, he won't be joining your suitors. Nor will he be bothering them.'

'We had a nice couple of dances last night.' I can't help, but sigh longingly.

Of course, my two brothers notice this. While Nicholas frowns, Elias laughs and says: 'Someone is in love.'

'Don't be silly, Elias. We just danced. Nothing more.'

'Except a few longing, desperate glances across the room.'

'I haven't been aware of the Duke's whereabouts after our dance. I was quite busy with other things.'

'Not according to Nicholas, you were not.' I throw my oldest brother a spiteful glance and he shrugs grinning. 'Besides, I hear you've also been gossiping with the Duke's sister.'

I blush, because I feel busted. Nicholas comes to my aid. 'I think Princess Arlington is above such behaviour. The Princess is a respectable lady, who is forced to behave responsibly, because her brother is acting outrageous all the time with you.'

'Don't speak of the Duke that way, brother. He is still my best friend.'

'I think that's part of the problem, is it not?'

'What are you suggesting?'

'Your scandalous behaviour, the Duke follows.'

‘The Duke is a grown man. He makes his own choices. I can’t help offering him the best choice.’

‘You think it best to squander your life? Losing bets all the time instead of making money for yourself? Having many romances instead of choosing a perfect woman to grow old with?’

‘You’re our title bearer, brother. Therefore, I can live my life as I see fit. And I am enjoying it well, so why on Earth should I give it up? I make money by doing something I like. I sell my art. And why have one woman, while you can experiment with so many?’

‘So, you are never growing up?’

‘Perhaps one day, when I meet Mrs Right. Until then, why should I not enjoy myself?’

Nicholas shakes his head. ‘You’re unbelievable.’

‘That’s what the ladies say.’

Nicholas sighs and stands up. He brushes the grass of his pants and says: ‘I’m going home. My wife and children are waiting.’

Nicholas is staying with his wife and three children in our house during the courting season. I am happy to have him back here, since he normally lives at Le Bon Domaine which is quite a distance from London. I always thought of Nicholas as the wise one, although he could be a little know-it-all from time to time. But I guess he had a right to, since he had everything, a man could desire. Louisa was a beautiful and caring wife from a wealthy family. She bore him three healthy children, who I really adore. I really envy Nicholas sometimes, since he is living my dream.

‘Aren’t you coming, Elizabeth?’ asks Nicholas, when I stay put. ‘Your suitors will arrive any moment now.’

‘Just a second. I must ask Elias something first.’

Elias points his index finger at himself and raises his eyebrows questioningly. ‘Me? I am honoured.’

Nicholas can take a hint, and he offers his surrender before turning away and stalking off towards the estate. I clear my throat and say hesitantly: ‘Elias, you were right. Princess Arlington spoke to me during the ball. And there’s something, she said that really bothers me. I hope you can offer me some relief.’

Elias gives me a crooked grin. 'I can picture the things she must have been saying to you. But dear sister, just follow your heart. Don't listen to gossip, uttered in complete envy.'

'You think Princess Arlington is jealous of her brother?'

'I think she's jealous of his preferred style of living. She would love to live his way, but she doesn't dare. And that's why she's jealous that Liam... Excuse me, the Duke does. That's all this is.'

'So, you don't think he would use me, like you two both use women generally?'

He grabs his heart mockingly. 'Now you wound me, little sister. I use women? I keep them in high standards; I beg your pardon! That's why I keep many of them to learn from those high standards.' He laughs at his own joke and I roll my eyes. 'As to answering your question. If the Duke is "using you", as you so kindly put it, you would know. You women feel those things. The women the Duke has been with knew it too, but they didn't care anyway. That's their choice, not the Duke's. He has never forced women to be with him.'

'I felt truly at ease with him.'

'Then that's your answer.' Elias stands up and offers me his arm. 'But let it be known, don't keep your hopes up too high. I know the Duke and I'm not sure he's willing to give up his life just yet.' I link my arm with his and we walk towards the mansion. 'Does that answer your question, dear little sister?'

'I guess.'

We are not even inside, when our mother storms out and says to me: 'You're late! Your first suitor will be here any moment! And you're not properly dressed yet!'

Elias smiles and says: 'Perhaps you don't even have to wait, till the Duke asks for your hand. Perhaps your future husband is already outside.'

'Who knows?'

That's the last thing I can utter, before both my mother and Alice waltz me toward my dressing room. I put on another new courting dress. This one is a violet silk dress with a typical round neck and a small white collar. My hair is pulled up in an aristocratic knot, adorned with a small net consisting of little diamonds. My mother puts on some

rosewater to make me smell good. And Alice adds a pale colour to my lips, cheeks and eyes. Because of the many layers of clothing, I feel heavy and awkward, but my mother smiles broadly when she takes me in.

'You're quite the Princess, child. Isn't she, Alice?'

'Yes, ma'am. She certainly is.'

'Give us a spin, dear.'

I spin around and my mother claps her hands enthusiastically. 'You'll find a husband in no time looking this good.'

I smile nervously and follow her to the drawing room, where we will receive our guests. My sister and brother are whisked away by my mother, so only my mother, father and I remain in the drawing room with the serving servants. I take a sip of my lemon tea and notice my hands trembling. The cup makes a funny rattling sound against its plate due to this. My father pats my knee encouragingly, but then our housekeeper Mrs Green, Alice's mother, enters.

'Sir Williams is here to see you, Lord and Lady Le Bon,' she announces importantly.

'Send him in,' says my father and he crosses his arms. 'What does that old man want?'

My mother shushes him. 'He is a good match.'

'He's an old goat, that one. And he dances as one as well.'

I hide my giggles behind my fan, just as my dancing partner of last night enters the room. He introduces himself and then begins speaking once more about his achievements. I nod at the appropriate times but am more than glad when I see him leave. Listening at him makes my head ache enormously and makes me long for a goodnight's sleep.

My next suitor is the son of the Viscount of Falmouth. He gets my attention immediately. Harry Harvey is a middle-aged man of thirty summers old and has beautiful meadow green eyes, which shine merrily. He has an olive-skinned complexion, which shows me that he works outside a lot. He has short dark brown hair and a neatly trimmed moustache and goatee. He is broad shouldered and his tight shirt just shows how muscular he is. Furthermore, he wears long black riding boots over white trousers and a long blue velvet coat with a high collar.

Also, his polite manners attract me. He is quite a talker but knows also when to listen. He treats me and my parents with the utmost respect and seems sincerely interested in me. I am sorry, when he leaves, but I promise him my first two dances at tomorrow's ball at Lady Mellington's are with him.

My third visitor is a Viscount from Ireland. Although he is very friendly, he has a squeaky kind of voice, which reminds me constantly of a Leprechaun. When he laughs it really is unsettling. And he laughs a lot, unfortunately. Also, his appearance has this effect on me with his red bearded face and dark green suit. I catch my father looking at me during one of Lord O'Sullivan's many laughing fits and I try to hide my increasing desire to laugh at him.

This day of potential suitors has tired me and just when I'm about to doze off for a couple of minutes, Mrs Green steps into the room once more. 'I beg your pardon, Lord and Lady Le Bon. I just received this.' She shows a letter, which is addressed to my mother and father. I close my eyes once more, until my father calls my name urgently.

'What's wrong, *papan*?'

'You're not done for the day, it seems.' He hands me the letter, so I can read for myself.

Dear Lord and Lady Le Bon,

Would you do us the honour of joining us for dinner this evening? We can imagine you are quite occupied with the coming out of your firstborn daughter, so there are no hard feelings if our request reaches you at an unsuitable time. We would be delighted though, if your family makes it to Arlington Park around 19:00.

Yours sincerely,

Duke Liam Arlington, Mrs Emma Maxwell &
Princess Christina Arlington

My lips part in astonishment as my heart begins to race. The Duke is inviting me to dinner? What am I supposed to make of that? Are my feelings perhaps not so foolish after all, and could it be that the Duke intends to pay court to me, of all people? Or is this merely an ordinary gesture extended to the family of his closest friend? But if that is all it is, why invite us at this moment? Or could it be that the letter is not from the Duke at all, but was instead arranged by his guardian? Liam was after all with my brother.

‘We must accept,’ my mother exclaims. ‘This is an invitation from the Duke himself! We can’t possibly turn him down.’

‘I didn’t know we owe the Duke anything?’

‘Dear Mr Le Bon, whatever this man’s motives are, we must go. It would not look well on us turning the Arlingtons down without a good reason.’

My father looks unbelievably at the letter once more. ‘I can’t imagine why can’t decline.’

‘Because he’s the *Duke, mon amour*. For crying out loud, it would be quite a scandal if we turned him down.’

‘Or we would ruin our daughter’s chances with other more suitable matches. Being seen with His Grace is not always a good thing.’

‘You overthink this too much, darling. The Duke never spoke about suiting anyone. Let’s just visit his estate and see what this visit is about. It’s probably just a nice family dinner. He is the best friend of your son, after all. A visit is long overdue if you ask me.’

My father shakes his head. ‘Ah, woman, you persuade me once more.’ He beckons Mrs Green. ‘Send someone ahead with our confirmation.’ He looks at us. ‘It seems we have an important dinner to attend this evening.’

5. Dinner without His Grace

Never would I have imagined, when I opened my eyes this morning, that I would be dining at Arlington Park by this evening. Ever since my conversation with the Duke's sister unsettled me so thoroughly, I have felt the need to find some answers for myself tonight and settle, once and for all, whether the Duke deserves any more of my attention.

In any case, I make sure to look my absolute best for the evening. Although the Queen of England is hardly keen on young ladies wearing too much scent or too much paint, I most certainly wear plenty of both tonight. It is in pursuit of a Duke's affections, after all; surely Her Majesty would forgive it in the name of genuine love. My gown matches the shade of his doublet and cloak from the ball, while drawing attention to my generous figure and sun-warmed copper skin. Tonight I leave my hair loose, so that I may toss it over my shoulder in what I hope is a most enticing manner when he speaks to me.

And I am not the only one totally dressed up for tonight's dinner. Although Naomi is normally considered the female version of Elias, even she dresses up very well. She wears her straight dark brown hair not bewilderedly loose like a beggar's, but very elegantly in a knot. She looks very much like a proper young lady with her satin dress, many jewellery and calm exposure.

My mother on the other hand is anything but calm. Her eyes are switching nervously from the window of the carriage to her hands, which she uses to spin her closed fan around time after time. It makes me a little seasick by looking at it. My father is as always, his serene self. He also looks out of the window of the stagecoach, but he just stares at our surroundings, seeing nothing, lost in thought.

Although Arlington Park is just outside London, the drive there seems to take forever, while in the meantime this nervous and nauseous feeling in my stomach is growing. I pray to God I will not vomit, because of it. My patience is

rewarded though, since after a mere thirty minutes I finally see the outlines of Arlington Park.

Arlington Park is a seventeenth-century country house set in formal gardens. It was completed in 1625 by the famous architect Thomas Ham. Arlington Park is a typical example of a Jacobean House, meaning that it is a majestic estate with the characteristics of the Renaissance in Italy. And that's right as far as I am concerned, since I see many classic looking pillars, Tudor arcs, brown-red coloured terracotta walls with a light-coloured craftsmanship around the doors and windows, sculptures on the bannisters and parapets and finally, very slanted roofs.

We follow a broad avenue to the estate itself and are very soon surrounded by many trees, like an army of soldiers leading us to the front door. These trees I see also on the avenue leading to the guest houses. The Arlington's house is set within a range of walled gardens. Each of the gardens has its own formal design, like the Cherry Garden, the Japanese Garden, the Maze and the Pond. There are also an orchard and a vegetable garden. Since I love walking outside, I hope Liam will do me the honour soon of promenading with me through his splendid gardens.

Our carriage halts in front of a small marble stair on top of which stands the butler of Arlington Park. He bids us welcome and asks us to follow him to the dining room, where dinner is about ready to be served. The Great Hall of Arlington Park is an enormous and impressive reception space. The black and white marble floor shines and shows the wealth this estate harbours immediately. There are many paintings on the ceiling, depicting gods, saints and the like, giving the hall a colourful and bright ambiance. It's like walking into a museum.

'Marvellous,' Naomi whispers impressed as she peels her eyes too.

We walk past the Great Staircase to a grand dining room, which consists completely of marble stone. The carved oak panelling, the gilt leather on the walls and the parquetry floor provide the perfect stage for an elegant banquet.

The dining table forms an important factor in the furniture of noble families, and you can see that in the splendour of the Duke's dining table. It's a twenty-foot-long rosewood table and is designed with a high degree of decoration. There are approximately twenty chairs, which have carvings of flowers on them. None of those chairs are the same though, each carving is different. There are a couple of table lamps on the dining table as well, made of solid brass, and which are obviously handcrafted, with many curved lines and in different colours.

We are seated on our appropriate seats by the housekeeper, a lady introducing herself as Mrs Brown, while the butler is about to announce our arrival to the Arlingtons. My father and mother are opposite one another, next to Mrs Maxwell and Christina Arlington. The Duke was of course sitting at the head of the table, since he was the head of his family and the owner of Arlington Park.

I'm sitting next to my father and Elias, who wasn't at home when we left and hasn't arrived here yet either. That can't be good, since Liam is supposed to be with him.

Naomi is sitting opposite me. She catches my eye and whispers: 'Please, marry the Duke. I want to share in this splendour.'

'Marry him yourself if you want to share in his wealth!' I laugh at her.

'I would if I could, sister, but since I didn't come out yet, you have to do this for me.'

'Poor Naomi, Isn't that a pity?'

Naomi wants to rebuke me, but luckily at that moment Mrs Maxwell and Princess Arlington enter the room. We all stand and curtsy. Princess Arlington takes her place opposite her aunt and beckons us to sit down.

'Welcome in Arlington Park, Lord and Lady Le Bon,' the guardian of the Arlingtons says warmly. 'I am truly grateful that you accepted our invitation. I hope you will enjoy yourselves this evening.'

Mrs Maxwell is a very shrewd woman. That much is sure immediately. Her silvery eyes examine us and I know she will be able to see through any lie you'll try to tell her. I think it is hard to estimate her age, but I would say she is already in her

sixties. The lines of wisdom around her eyes prove that much. Still, she has a very young spirit about her. She is kind and jokes a lot and it's obvious to me that her niece adores her, since she's hanging on her every word.

While I take her in though, I keep waiting for the Duke to enter the dining room as well, but the door stays closed.

While Princess Arlington beckons her servants to serve dinner, my father asks luckily before I have to: 'We were very honoured by Your Grace's invitation. Won't Your Grace be joining us this evening?'

'He shall be here soon, I hope. He must be delayed.'

I can see the annoyance in the Princess' eyes and Mrs Maxwell purses her lips disapprovingly. My father however says docilely: 'Your Grace is probably on his way right now. These shooting games can prolong themselves immensely. It's so easy to lose track of time.'

'Yes, especially when my brother is involved.' The Princess smiles suddenly. 'But since I am to be your hostess now for the moment, I can't keep you all waiting. So, would you mind starting dinner without my brother?'

'As you please, Princess.'

'Our cooks have outdone themselves. I warn you.'

As if they'd been waiting for this moment, the servants enter the dining room and lay out so many dishes on the table that I fear I'll never fit into my corset again. I see stuffed pigs, many dishes with fruits and nuts, famous desserts, caviar, potatoes, marmalade and dishes I couldn't even give a name to. Our hostess says a few words and then the banquet is opened. I eat as decently as I can, since etiquette is required even at the dining table.

Princess Arlington starts a conversation with my parents, while my sister and I eat in complete silence, enjoying the food vehemently.

Once I have finished the main course, the dining room doors suddenly swing open, and in walk both my brother and the Duke. We are on our feet in an instant and drop into curtsies, but a single glance is enough to tell me they are drunk. My brother's eyes are glazed and he is laughing far too freely, while the Duke is speaking at a volume that turns every head in the room. My mother covers her face with her

hands, clearly mortified, and my father nearly chokes on his wine.

Tears sting my eyes at Elias's sheer carelessness. He knows perfectly well how I feel about his friend, yet he still saw fit to get him drunk and make him late for his own dinner party.

The Princess' eyes narrow and I can see she is really annoyed with her brother's behaviour as well. Her aunt pats her mouth with her napkin, hiding her first reaction to her nephew's behaviour, and says loudly with barely suppressed anger: 'Dear nephew, we have invited guests to our beautiful house. I seem to remember you were the one inviting them? Have you forgotten about them?'

The Duke suddenly looks at us as if he sees us for the first time and his face reddens, when his eyes fall on my shocked countenance. He looks almost sobered up at once. 'Yes, I remember,' he says embarrassed, while he rubs his forehead, where a filthy spot spoils his otherwise untainted face. 'Of course I do. I was just... We were...'

My brother isn't aware of the awkwardness their behaviour causes and he says cheerily: 'My dear family! What the Hell are you guys doing here?'

'We have been invited to dine here at Arlington Park, son,' my father says, and the effort it takes him to contain his anger is plain on his face. Why can Elias not see that he is making fools of us all? 'Apparently so we may all sit and observe our son's shameful conduct.'

'How delightful, I'm absolutely famished though. Eat first, talk later, I always say.' He drops into the seat beside me with little grace and takes a drink of red wine. Even so, I can still catch the smell of beer on him, and the marks it has left on his coat and breeches are impossible to miss.

Never before has he disgraced me quite so badly, and I jab him sharply in the side in the hope of forcing him to pull himself together. 'Ouch, sister. You're hurting me.'

'Shouldn't you go home to clean yourself?' I hiss.

'Why should I? I am starving.'

'Because we are guests at the Duke's house, that's why!'

'Fret not! The Duke's just as hammered as I am.'

I ball my fists, while I try to keep my anger in check. 'Please, Elias. You are embarrassing us.'

'Just because you are coming out this season doesn't mean you're the centre of attention, sister. Not the whole world revolves around you,' says Elias with a raised voice.

The whole room falls silent and looks at us, but Elias doesn't care. He stuffs his mouth ungraciously and gulps down two glasses of wine at once. I do mind though. I try to fight back tears, excuse myself and hurry out of the room.

Since I'm not familiar with the layout of Arlington Park I just walk around the house, until I find a door to the gardens. The cold air is refreshing, and I walk into the garden, while tears run down my face. How could my brother be such an ass? He knows how hard I studied, how hard I worked to become a lady. He knows how important my first courting season is to me, but also to our family. Because if I wed a man of means, I can secure my family's future, including Elias's. Why is that so difficult for him to understand?

Today was a great opportunity, but first he keeps the Duke away from his own dinner party. And when he finally brings him in, the pair of them are drunk, with not a trace of gentlemanly conduct between them.

I had never truly held my brother's shortcomings against him. If anything, I stood up for him. I tried to understand the way he looked at life, and the pain that may have driven him to behave as he does. But tonight, I feel nothing but anger towards him, because he has never once tried to see matters from my point of view. He moves through life as though enclosed in his own little world, one with space only for his wants and whims. Nothing and no one beyond himself seem to matter to him. He is a selfish brute.

'Aren't you cold, Lady Le Bon?' A soft voice startles me out of my reveries. Once more I'm accompanied by Princess Arlington. I curtsy and try to wipe away my tears delicately, without the Princess being aware of them. She's not blind though and offers me her handkerchief understandingly.

'Thank you, Princess,' I say ashamed of my tears.

I wipe them away quickly, while the Princess caresses a rose absentmindedly and sighs, 'I must beg you for your forgiveness for my brother's behaviour tonight, Lady Le Bon.'

It was inappropriate and I promise you: this will not come to pass a second time.'

'You don't have to apologise, Princess. The only one who's at fault here is my selfish brother. He dishonoured our family tonight and your house at the same time. It's inexcusable.'

'They both were acting like idiots.'

I look at her, startled because of her impertinent choice of words, but when I see her warm smile, I nod my head admitting: 'Yes, they both were.'

'Brothers,' she muses. 'I'm glad I only have Liam to worry about. I can't fathom how you're handling two brothers and a little sister.'

'Patience is the key, Your Grace.'

Her smile is mesmerising and she doesn't try to hide it behind her hands or her fan as is customed for a graceful young woman. 'Come, take a walk with me.'

'Princess?'

It is not appropriate for two women to walk alone without being chaperoned. This could cause shame upon one's family, if found out. Even though we are two women merely walking through our own garden, unmarried ladies are not permitted to go out without a chaperone. The Princess must be aware of that as well.

Princess Arlington smiles naughtily though: 'Are you afraid? I won't hurt you nor will I compromise you.'

'It's not...'

'It's my estate. I make the rules here.' She offers me her arm and I feel I can't reject her, after the way my brother had been behaving. When I link my arm through hers, she curses softly and states: 'You are cold.' She takes off her mantle of fur and puts it over my shoulders carefully.

'Princess, you are too kind. I can't accept so much generosity.'

'It's just a shawl, love. There are many where this one came from. Besides, after dinner's pratfall this is the least I can offer you.'

'But I don't want the Princess to fall ill on my account.'

'I won't. Besides, this stroll won't take long.'

We promenade through many different gardens, and the Princess stops at every turn and explains to me what the

garden's name is, what it is used for and who designed it. We end our late-night walk at the Pond, which obviously contains a large pond with a beautiful marble sculpture of a Roman goddess. Princess Arlington tells me it is the goddess of love, Venus, and she recounts a few of Venus' most famous tales.

'This is my favourite spot in Arlington Park,' she ends her story. 'I come here to read or to think.'

'It is quite peaceful here.'

'Yes, it definitely is.'

I close my eyes and listen to the calm floating of the pond's water. I hear a few frogs croaking and a few ducks squawking. The cool wind brushes my hair and face and the light of the moon shines in my eyes. I can imagine why this is the quiet place of the Princess. It is a peaceful place, where one can be at ease. It's almost magical.

'So, if I'm not being too bold, what's your story, Lady Le Bon?'

I open one eye lazily. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, you're new in society. Tell me, how fair is life to thee?'

I hide my giggle behind my fan. 'Your Grace, that's a really long story indeed. I wouldn't want to bore you.'

'Please, tell me. We have time, since I am not willing yet to return to our shameful brothers.' She blinks jovially, which makes me feel oddly at ease. I sigh and tell her pretty much everything about my upbringing. I refuse to tell her about my nightmares though and our forced escape out of France. These things are private and I don't want her to think I am an unhinged person because of that trauma.

'So, you're French?' She speaks to me in my own language and my heart falls apart. It's been ten years since I heard someone speak French so fluently. It's almost like she's French as well.

Since our arrival in England both my father and mother refuse to use their language of birth, since they want to blend in and never be reminded again of what they left behind. Of course, a proper lady knows her French, so I was still being taught, but that's different from conversing with someone in the language of my homeland.

'I beg your pardon. Did I say something wrong?' the Princess continues in English, when she sees my sad expression.

'No, not at all. Your French is very good. It's just... It reminds me of home. That's all.'

'You miss France?'

'Yes, every minute of every day.'

'How long have you been here?'

'For almost ten years now.'

'Why did you leave in the first place?' I lower my eyes trying to decide what to tell her next. I don't want the truth to be out, although she's very easy to talk with. I don't want to lie to her either though. She is the Princess after all.

The Princess sees me struggling though, and comes to my rescue. 'I am sorry. I spoke out of turn. I am just curious about the young woman, who obviously fancies my brother enough to come to a last-minute dinner.'

'It's all right, Your Grace. It's just not a pretty story to tell. I don't want to abhor you.'

'I am not easily frightened, love. I can imagine though this is a story better told another time.'

'Thank you for your consideration, Your Grace.'

We remain quiet for a while, enjoying the clattering sounds of the fountain's water. It's very soothing. It calms my nerves.

At least that's until the Princess opens her mouth again. 'I meant what I said yesterday, Lady Le Bon,' the Princess finally says.

'I beg your pardon?'

'About my brother. Be careful. Guard your innocence. I would hate to see such an honest woman hurt, because of his frivolities.'

I smile gently. 'There's clearly nothing going on between the two of us. After tonight's events, I'm more certain of that than ever. But thank you, Princess, for your amiable advice. You really are too kind. It's nice having someone to have my back.'

It looks as if she's about to say something, but then she smiles. A smile which doesn't quite reach her eyes this time:

The Princess and me

'If you don't mind, I think it is time for us to leave. I'm getting you back to the estate, before I freeze to death myself.'

6. Meeting the Queen

Although the courting season had already been underway for a week, today was the day I was formally presented at the court of Queen Victoria. Quite possibly the most important day of the entire season, and I felt sick with nerves. For a little while, the disgraceful conduct of both Elias and the Duke slipped from my mind, and all I could think about were the many ways in which I might humiliate myself before the royal family.

The morning of my presentation arrives in a light so sharp it feels almost cruel. It is as though even the sky has decided I shall have nowhere to hide. The pale winter daylight pours through the tall windows of my bedchamber and lends everything an unforgiving clarity; the ivory silk draped over the chair, the pearls upon my dressing table, the delicate cracks in the porcelain of my powder box, the face staring back at me from the mirror, a face I scarcely recognise as my own.

I see myself as a stranger might see me; young, meticulously dressed, graceful enough, perhaps serene from a distance. Only at close quarters would anyone notice how often I press my fingers into my palms, how shallow my breathing has become, how my eyes shine with tension.

My room is full of movement from an early hour. My maid has arranged my hair with almost ceremonial gravity, curl by curl, pin by pin, until it no longer appears entirely human, but something more constructed, almost fairy-like.

My gown, pale as cream with silver glimmering through the embroidery, has been fastened around me like a beautifully decorated cage. Satin slippers. Gloves. Pearls at my throat. The faint scent of orange blossom water. Everything has been chosen with care so that it speaks before I need say a single word. Good taste. Good breeding. Good upbringing. Good prospects.

And yet beneath all that careful refinement, I do not feel more elegant, but more exposed. As though every fold and

every sheen do not shield me, but place me beneath a magnifying glass, so that the watchful courtiers may inspect and judge me with greater ease.

Downstairs in the hall, *maman* is already waiting, dressed entirely in dark satin that rustles with dignified restraint whenever she moves. I can only pray that I shall conduct myself with even half her poise. *Maman* wears her nerves as she wears her jewels; discreetly, yet never entirely concealed.

Neither of us says aloud what is truly at stake today, because in our world the most important matters are precisely the ones one is expected not to name. It is called a presentation. A formality. An honour. A tradition. As though it were not also the opening act of a season in which one will be observed, assessed and discussed by people who smile pleasantly even as they pass the harshest judgement.

The drive to the palace passes in a silence heavier than speech. Outside, London slips by in a wet shimmer of cobbles, mist and carriages. The whole city seems to be moving towards the same fate. Everywhere I see coaches bearing family crests upon their doors, horses breathing clouds into the cold air and footmen with rigid expressions opening carriage doors for girls much like myself. Girls poised upon the edge of something momentous, while inwardly perishing from nerves.

Inside the carriage, I keep my fan in my lap as though it might offer some kind of protection. As though it were a weapon with which I might parry criticism. As though it were a shield against cutting remarks and sharper looks.

Now and then *maman* straightens an invisible flaw at my sleeve, smooths a crease that does not exist, studies me for a long moment and says only, 'Mind your posture, Elizabeth. Don't stoop.' As though posture alone were enough to secure a young lady's future.

As we continue on, even she, who has trained herself into composure as though it were a second nature, cannot fully disguise her excitement. I cannot imagine what she must be feeling; what fears trouble her. After all, it is no small thing to present one's eldest daughter to the world.

My own excitement, meanwhile, has two faces. One is made of pure brilliance; the palace, the chandeliers, the silk,

the recognition of the court, the thrill of finally stepping into the world that has so long been spoken of only in veiled phrases.

The other face is sharper. What if I stumble? What if I mistime my curtsy? What if my name is announced and I suddenly forget how to breathe, never mind how I am meant to approach the Queen?

Yet once we arrive at the palace, every private thought is swallowed by the splendour surrounding us. The building rises not merely in stone, but in significance. It is not simply grand; it is imposing in that particular way power contrives to preserve itself in architecture. Tall windows where the light gathers like still water, and façades so elaborate they seem artworks in their own right.

Inside, everything is even more excessive. Marble floors that return the sound of footsteps with polished precision. Gilded frames. Mirrors that multiply candlelight and motion until the rooms seem composed almost entirely of radiance. Chandeliers suspended overhead like frozen constellations. Everywhere footmen, gentlemen, ladies, officers, ribbons, velvet, gold braid, white satin, mother-of-pearl, jewels and the constant choreography of a world kept afloat by etiquette as surely as a ship is kept afloat by water.

I had prepared myself for grandeur, but not for abundance. Not for the dizzying beauty of so much wealth gathered in one place. Not for the mingled scent of beeswax, warm candles and perfume that creates something almost intoxicating. Not for the way my own reflection flashed back at me in the tall glass panels, small and pale among so much brilliance.

The other debutantes are already assembled in the drawing rooms and antechambers where we are collected before the presentation. Some stand in little clusters with their mothers or guardians, wrapped in a haze of eager whispering. Others remain silent and stare straight ahead with that fixed expression which comes not from calm, but from supreme self-command.

Their gowns form a tide of white, cream, blush and silver. Their hair is adorned with feathers, flowers, pearls and ribbons. Their shoulders gleam in the light. Their fans flutter

like wings. Every one of them is beautiful, or at the very least dressed with enough care to appear so.

At present, that may be the most unsettling thing of all. Not that I would call myself plain, but that amid so much angelic loveliness I might simply go unseen. Snatches of conversation drift past me, soft and quick:

‘They say Her Majesty is in excellent spirits today.’

‘Lady Ashcombe’s daughter has nearly fainted three times already.’

‘Do not bow too deeply; it looks provincial.’

‘Have you seen her gown? Paris, surely.’

‘Those pearls belonged to an Empress.’

‘Do you suppose the Duke will attend this evening?’

Here and there comes a nervous laugh, pitched just a little too high to be sincere. Further along, a mother hisses something to her daughter that I cannot quite catch, but the look that follows is clear enough: Don’t you dare fail now!

At the far end of the room, a small ensemble is playing, positioned so discreetly that they are nearly lost from view. Mary-Ann is pacing there as well. She spots me and gives a brief nod, clearly unable to begin a conversation. For that, I am deeply grateful; I rather suspect I should be sick if forced to utter even a single word.

The music is not meant for dancing, as it would be at a ball, but is instead a polished stream of strings and pianoforte threading its way through the murmur of voices, presumably intended to keep us lively and at ease. Yes; a complete failure of purpose, if you ask me.

The sound is precisely loud enough to lend elegance to the silence, and just soft enough not to sharpen the tension. The notes drift upwards towards the high ceilings and return as something glossy and unreal. As though even the music in this place has been taught proper manners.

‘Do not stare, darling,’ murmurs *maman*, scarcely moving her lips. ‘You are not here to watch a performance, but to give one.’

I cannot help it, though. To be standing here after years of preparation feels faintly unreal. This is no ordinary social gathering, after all. Not a call for tea, not a concert, not a dinner in some gentleman’s townhouse. This is the court. The