

Two

Harrison raked his hand through his hair and checked his watch fob. Almost nine o'clock in the morning and the women still hadn't appeared in the American House's dining room for breakfast. They'd miss the meal altogether when the waiters stopped serving on the hour. But more importantly, Harrison had a bone to pick with Isabella.

He viewed her as another younger sister, so her antics shouldn't surprise him. But this particular lark—*forgetting* to tell him another woman would travel back to New York with them—reigned supreme. His fingers tangled in his hair again before snatching up the newspaper poised at the table's edge.

A pair of women at the corner table smiled in his direction and exchanged whispers. Though he only overheard the word "handsome" from his unintended eavesdropping, he could easily fill in the gaps. He studiously ignored their tittering and attempts to catch his eye—necessary habits from his history—and flicked open the newspaper. It served as a suitable shield from the women's unwanted attention.

A well-timed “Good morning” from Isabella further saved him from the simpering spectators, and he rose out of chivalric habit, folding the newspaper and welcoming the women to the table with a slight bow.

“Victoria, we are in for a treat.” Isabella took her seat directly across from Harrison. “See, American gentlemen are extremely deferential and attentive in their manners to ladies,” she added with a nod to Harrison. “Holding open doors and giving up their seats on trains—the sort of etiquette often lacking back in England.”

A strangled scoff escaped Harrison’s mouth, and it took all his so-called manners to quickly mask it as a cough instead.

He glanced Victoria’s way. Seated to Isabella’s left across the table, Victoria still wore the veil and avoided his gaze. The only evidence she had heard Isabella’s remark was a slight nod of her head.

So, they were going to have a repeat of last night then. Victoria had said nothing besides apologizing for practically sitting in his lap in the carriage. She’d trod over him, bumped him with her valise, and would now be perpetually underfoot the entire journey.

He had no doubt she was a widow; the black mourning wear and *Mrs.* appellation were telltale. On the hunt for her next husband, he supposed. Well, it wouldn’t be him. If he could avoid the snares of the wolfish women on the other side of the dining room, he could certainly avoid the taciturn widow across from him.

Isabella leaned to the side as a waiter delivered her tea. “We have all day to explore Boston, the *Athens of America*.” After declining sugar for her tea, she continued, “Dinner’s at one, tea at six, and there’s no shortage of entertainment to keep us busy in between—Griffin’s Wharf, Faneuil Hall, Bunker’s Hill, the Athenaeum.”

Harrison inwardly sighed. He would have to travel with the women to all these sights, and on only a few hours' rest. Though sleep had come surprisingly easily to him last night, the noise from the awakening wharf had roused him much too early. The stirrings of one of his head pains already lurked behind his eyes.

Isabella made way for her breakfast plate and gasped, nearly causing Harrison to drop his teacup. "Grapes! Victoria, aren't they marvelous? And we each have an entire bunch to ourselves."

Victoria kept her focus on her plate and uttered a noncommittal, "Hmm."

Isabella gave a little bounce of delight and popped a grape into her mouth. "Mmmm. Simply divine!"

Harrison's willpower—strained though it was—kept his snort of amusement within. He'd forgotten how much Englanders prized the little, round fruit given they were a crop aplenty in America. Isabella jabbered on, unaware of her lack of audience. He cast his eyes Victoria's way, but she appeared unimpressed by the small purple globes on her plate. She deftly slid her food behind her veil without dislodging or soiling it.

Why didn't she just remove it to eat? Was it permanently affixed to her head? She'd insisted on wearing it in the middle of last night, too, though it surely impeded her vision. Ridiculous.

As if sensing his gaze on her, she raised her head, the right side of her face angled in his direction. She met his eyes for the first time, her only visible eye a penetrating, cerulean pool that sent a jolt of something through him.

He'd never felt anything like it before and couldn't quite name it. In his haste to glance away, his eyes drifted to her lips. *Stop, Harrison. You will not become your father.*

“Do you have it too, Harrison?” Isabella asked, her interruption timely.

“I’m afraid you caught me quite off guard, Isabella,” he croaked. They likely noticed his distraction, but hopefully didn’t discern the reason for it. “Of what are we speaking?”

Isabella glanced pointedly between him and Victoria before continuing. “Why, Americans’ restless energy. Their knack for ensuring everything is conducted with extreme rapidity and little repose, like this meal, for instance.” She quirked a meaningful eyebrow when the waiter reappeared to clear the plate she hadn’t yet emptied. “Do *you* ever enjoy yourself, Harrison?”

“Of course,” he huffed.

Isabella arched an eyebrow at his immediate affirmation. She knew him too well.

When *had* he last truly enjoyed himself? Long before he joined his father at the law firm. And long before the accident, after which he assumed the mantle of a positive fraternal example for Georgina in his father’s lack. And certainly long before he discovered his father’s untoward undertakings. Perhaps when he was six or seven? Had it been more than two decades since he’d found any enjoyment at all? But what choice had he had? None. That’s what.

“It’s exactly as I thought!” Isabella exclaimed, correctly interpreting his silence. Putting her hand over his, she gave him her usual wide, friendly smile. “Then we shall ensure we all have fun on this adventure of ours.”

Utterly impossible. From across the table, Victoria frowned, and he couldn’t find a reason to summon a smile at Isabella’s edict either.



Harrison clicked his hotel door shut and stripped off his stifling frock coat, pinching the painful knot in his forehead that had only grown earlier during their thoroughly tiring tour of Boston.

With the unseasonably warm, late September air as their constant companion, the three had seen every stop in Boston that Isabella had mentioned at breakfast, and more.

Isabella had tried her hardest throughout the day to fulfill her promise of adventure, though he hadn't exactly helped in the matter, the heat and the pounding in his head both compounding as the hours wore on, further souring his mood. But in his defense, Victoria hadn't seemed inclined to cooperate either. She had stayed as far away from him as possible.

Now, lying in his shirtsleeves and trousers in the cool darkness of his room at the American House, at least he'd been released from any duty to play host to the women for the evening. Isabella had a dinner invitation elsewhere, and Victoria had retired early to her room, her claim of fatigue confirmed by the pallidity of her skin and darkening circles under her eyes.

Demanding knocks pounded on his door before he registered fire bells clanging from the street outside. So much for quiet. *How long had the bells been ringing?* He was so accustomed to their frequent disruptions in New York, he had become adept at tuning them out. The peals were already fading, taking with them any reason for alarm. Then why were the knocks on his door growing more insistent?

"Mr. Wright! Are you there?" The muffled female voice outside his door was frantic.

Grumbling under his breath, Harrison rose and crossed the small room to open the door. Victoria's hand was poised to knock again. As usual, she wore her veil, the pupil of her right

eye wide. Taking in his state of undress, her pupil expanded farther.

Why hadn't he reached for his coat on the way to the door? He fidgeted under Victoria's gaze and tried to stifle the red heat surely creeping up his exposed throat. What was it about this woman that so befuddled him?

"Yes, Mrs. Clarke?" he asked, annoyance taking the place of his discomfiture.

"Wh-what do those bells mean?" She wrung her ungloved hands and glanced up and down the lengthy hallway.

"Only the fire brigades." He didn't try for a reassuring tone as he continued. "They're quite common in the large cities here."

"F-fire?" She was visibly trembling now.

A few doors in the hallway opened and heads peeked around doorframes, likely people checking on whether the ringing bells required any action on their part. Lamentably, the onlookers could interpret Victoria's presence at his door in his state of dress as a compromising tête-à-tête, and the very last thing he needed was any insinuation he behaved like his father.

Harrison steeled himself with a deep breath and lowered his voice. "Hear how the bells are quieting? The fire's not in or near our building. Return to your room, please, Mrs. Clarke. We are attracting unwanted attention in the hall."

"Yes, yes, of course." Her veil bobbed in acquiescence.

Before he could stop himself, he added, "Allow me to bring a drink of iced water to your room. I'll be there momentarily."

"Iced water?"

Did this woman only speak in questions? "Yes, we Americans abound in iced drinks as well as grapes." So he was trying to be funny now, was he? Less than twenty-four hours in this

woman's company and he was already losing his typically tight grip on his emotions.

Still noticeably shaken but calmer, she nodded. "Th-that would be lovely, thank you, Mr. Wright." Then she turned around and returned to her room, her steps as hushed as her voice.

Harrison donned his full ensemble and went in search of the water he had promised her. He could use a glass himself, though it'd do little to curb the pounding in his head. This trip was just one aggravation after another, and its end couldn't come soon enough.