

Bruises on both my knees for you

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Bruises on both my knees for you

by [MoonlightShines \(Thatkillervibe\)](#)

Summary

Beth was an intelligent woman, she would not be caught drowning for a man whom she suspected had little to no interest in her. Nor would she reject six spontaneous proposals or even entertain the fuss of willingly subjecting herself to four consecutive seasons altogether on the vain prayer of a chance.

Stargirl Regency AU

Notes

This fanfic is a love letter to:

Julia Quinn

Netflix Bridgerton

Stargirl

...And Billie Eilish?

~.~

The title and prologue is a direct reference to the killer violin covers in Bridgerton (Netflix). It doesn't make any sense for it to be played in the 1800s and that's why it's *chef's kiss* And huge thank you to @vagusnerve for helping me turn a silly idea into a 12.6k fic.

(PS: I'm also no British expert or historian!!!)

Creepin' around like no one knows
Think you're so criminal
Bruises on both my knees for you
Don't say thank you or please
I do what I want when I'm wanting to
My soul, so cynical

~.~

Whitmore House was by far the largest manor in the country east side of Kensington Palace. All of England's high society gathered in the lavishly ornate dancing hall for parties thrown for every imaginable occasion.

Today's was to mark Viscountess Lady Barbara Dugan's birthday, of which every guest ever so politely avoided acknowledging her actual age.

Beth removed her pelisse before slipping further into the home. While others stood and did their best not to stare at the grand entrance, Beth was quite familiar with the stairs and halls. Lady Courtney Whitmore (now Mahkent) grew up in this house and shared the same governess as Beth did in childhood. They became dear friends from the young age of six.

Now, at one-and-twenty, Beth and Courtney stood side by side with Miss Montez, who held no title but was welcomed into their hearts and homes once introduced at the debutante ball three years prior when she had caught the attention of the Viscountess' distant nephew, Earl Henry King II.

Courtney nudged Yolanda's side with her satin white glove to the elbow at the sight of her cousin. "Here comes your betrothed now. I think he wants to dance with you, Yolanda."

Yolanda clicked her tongue and sighed. “The earl is *not* my betrothed, Court. He hasn’t proposed.”

“Not *yet*,” Courtney corrected, accepting a pastry from a waiter’s tray as they passed by. Beth admired her best friend’s grace, for she could never lick crème from her lips in public as delicately as she. “But surely you’ll accept if he does?”

Yolanda smiled hesitantly but did not reply as Lord Henry King II stopped in front of the three ladies, eyes seemingly only on Miss Montez even as he accomplished a polite greeting to Beth and Courtney also.

“Would you like to dance, Miss Montez?”

“I would, My Lord.” Miss Montez took his arm, and they continued onto the ballroom dance floor.

“She’s going to say yes,” Courtney gossipped, giving Beth a knowing smile.

“Say yes to what?”

“His proposal, of course!”

Her blonde curls are pinned up perfectly, framing the light highlights of her lively brown eyes. She easily had the most expensive gown in the room out of all the women of their age, though she does not carry herself in it as though she’s aware of that. Beth, the daughter of a Lady as well, could not compare her own emerald green gown to hers, nor does she find she wants to.

“That nervousness of hers about becoming a countess will subside the moment Henry promises himself to her. Yolanda was born to be one of us. Besides, they’ve been corresponding for an awfully long time.”

She flicked her wrist out after making the statement as if the matter were fact. “Now that the earl’s father has passed, he has permission to ask her. Apparently, his values threatened Henry’s right to the family’s inheritance. Could you believe that had been the only issue all along? That wretched old man!”

“Courtney!” Beth scolded, for as much as she quietly agreed, she would not be caught speaking ill of the dead, certainly not of a wealthy and powerful earl with a bloodline so close to the monarchy.

Lady Mahkent shrugged, biting her tongue to hold in her laugh. It was her family that she just scorned. Perhaps that counted for something. “It’s true.”

A new waltz started, and Beth felt guilty as Courtney’s eyes immediately searched across the room for her husband.

“I’m sorry,” Beth murmured, feeling embarrassed and selfish. “You must be wanting to spend the evening with Cameron.”

Courtney was not in the position to marry for love, but she says she enjoys her life with Cameron Mahkent. It was a relationship Beth could not understand nor wanted (She wanted passion—the scorching reciprocal mark of eros—to *burn*), but she supported her, as best friends did.

It’s love, Courtney had reassured after the birth of her firstborn son.

Either way, love or not, it was expected of her to share at least a couple of dances with her husband at her mother’s ball. Not to be standing idle with an unmarried woman in her fourth season.

“Are you sure?” Courtney fretted, not fond of leaving Beth alone. But Beth is more than capable to care for herself, and she could spot Lord Tyler not far from them, discussing some

type of gentlemanly issue or other with the Viscount.

Beth nodded and saw her off as Courtney grabbed Cameron's arm, leading him into the dance along with Yolanda and Lord Henry King II.

Beth watched, listening to the music. Each musician of the violin quartet sat so stiffly as they played, brows creased deeply with concentration as their arms jerked to set out their pieces just so. It seemed exceedingly difficult to play instruments with strings, though the melodies were so lovely, Beth considered it a tragedy that her mother had insisted on Beth only learning voice and piano.

Voice and piano were practiced by every lady in society. Unless one could perform arias, to be accomplished in those was nothing of note.

Talent. Maybe that's what Beth lacked in her life. Though well assured of her intelligence, the *ton* does not offer many opportunities for Beth to make a show of it. Reading as a hobby makes for great conversations only, but a lady does not begin chattering about world history or astronomy or maths unless asked first, and even then it is deemed arrogant to outsmart one's company. Indeed, such a situation could lead to a gentleman's embarrassment.

Therefore, Beth mused as she lost herself in the airy notes of Vivaldi, it was a talent she needed, to gain popularity and accord with the ranks of London's high society by her own merit, and not through her connections.

Talent, and a husband.

"Are you a connoisseur of music, Miss Chapel?"

Beth spun around, surprised to find herself face to face with Lord Bowin. She took a careful step back. The gentleman had attempted to court her every season since her coming out, to which Beth had very obviously declined.

He held a handsome wealth and a proper enough reputation. In terms of social desirability, he had plenty. In charisma and charm, however, Lord Bowin possessed none. His gait had been awkward since boyhood, and he never seemed to have mastered the art of the smile, as every attempt resembled closer to a pained grimace. Every conversation with Lord Bowin was stilted and lulled with gaps of silence as he wracked his brain for something unremarkable to comment on, of which Beth always struggled to respond to.

The Viscountess blamed his cumbersome way with words on his upbringing, an only child with a deceased father. But Beth was quick to point out Lord Tyler had an almost identically tragic and lonely childhood, whose personality to Isaac's could not be further apart.

The man was dull, for lack of a better word, which Beth hated to admit, as it was unkind, but after year after year of continued repetitive dullness, he remained a bachelor with his sights on Beth alone. It was quite irritating. Really, he should quit London and start the marriage market somewhere anew.

“What makes you ask that?”

“You have been watching the quartet for two full songs.”

Which meant he had been watching her for longer, a fact that made her uncomfortable that he'd make another ill attempt at courtship.

“Ah,” Beth murmured faintly. “So I have.”

According to her mother, Lord Bowin is the reason why Beth is still unmarried. While she had evaded his advances at serious courtship like a fish to a man's net, that could not be further from the truth.

Beth was ready to marry.

If she was asked for her hand by Lord Tyler.

She glanced aside again, her heart swelling at the mere sight of the duke as he ran a hand through his brown hair.

Rick had been a constant in her life, their mothers had apparently been very dear friends. This was only recently discovered however after the shocking Harris scandal was revealed to English society. Beth nearly fainted when she learned that Rick had been abducted by his estranged uncle as an infant, who had paid his staff to poison his wealthier brother and his wife for some mysteriously unknown reason. The drunkard assumed false parentage of his nephew and treated him horribly.

And though the surprise title for the man she had otherwise known to have been a future baron left her assembly of family and friends in a shock, Beth could not say the change to dukedom made any difference toward her affections for him.

The same could not be said for other women. Several ladies have taken new notice, they now vied for Rick's attention. Something of which Lord Tyler seemed to have developed an utter indifference towards, much to Beth's relief.

No, Beth had secretly adored Rick as the son of a baron, just as she does now that he's a duke. For he had always been her good friend. Rick was the only given name of his that really mattered to her.

"So you have," Isaac echoed unnecessarily. "And you have yet to answer my question. What instruments do you play? I am rather fond of brass horns myself, though I could never hold myself up to standards for making a living out of it like my father, I find it rather unseemly. I'm quite sure father played himself to death! I appreciate those that choose to play, nevertheless."

Beth nodded, rather bored. "I play the piano."

"Is that all?"

“And voice.”

“Very well.” Isaac sighed as though disappointed. “As is expected, I could not ask for more, I suppose.”

She gritted her teeth. The song stopped, and there was a pause.

Lord Bowin offered her his hand.

“Would you care to dance, Miss Chapel?”

The first thing that came to her mind was to say, *no I would not care to*.

She would not dare say that however, she had no real reason to decline nor be so rude.

It was at that moment Beth noticed Lord Tyler looking her way. It was easy to spot him, as she had developed the bad habit to always have an eye on him, even when she should have someone else’s attention.

Having *his* attention, however, thrilled her entirely.

The way Rick and Beth metaphorically danced around each other was worse than all the actual spins and skips of the uptempo waltzes. Beth was an intelligent woman, she would not be caught drowning for a man whom she suspected had little to no interest in her. Nor would she reject six spontaneous proposals or even entertain the fuss of willingly subjecting herself to four consecutive seasons altogether on the vain prayer of a chance.

That wasn’t true. Most days, it did feel like the vain prayer of a chance. Beth *thought* she saw desire in Lord Tyler’s eyes whenever they strolled down Mayfield together or met at Whitmore House for afternoon tea with Courtney and the Viscountess. If it was not his impassioned desire that she might have been seeing in his eyes, and it really was her own

desire reflected back at her from the pools of her own, Rick was at the very least endeared by her. That much had to be true. But if he saw Beth as more than a loyal friend and beautiful woman, then why hadn't he ever tried courting her in earnest? She could not for the life of her figure out what was holding him back.

Perhaps the duke needed a little push.

Beth batted her eyelashes at Lord Bowin, knowing Lord Tyler was watching.

"I'd love to," she raised her voice over the volume of the tuning violins, taking his hand as he rushed her to the centre of the ballroom.

They stayed together for two dances. They said nothing throughout and when it was over, Beth feigned a horrible thirst.

"You wouldn't like to dance a third?"

"Oh, no. I mustn't." She really mustn't. To be seen dancing three waltzes straight with a man would elicit rumours Beth had no want for. She tapped the base of her throat, above her family's jewels. "I'm in a desperate need for a punch or lemonade."

She stepped to the side, and he followed her. Beth turned back around, hopeful that Lord Tyler would catch her eye.

Lord Bowin gave her a lopsided smile, thinking she's looking for him and being coquettish.

"You are a true enigma, Miss Chapel."

Beth stopped. The desire for her punch was forgotten. "I am?"

Isaac hummed, nearly stepping on her toes. "Indeed."

“Why?”

“I just assumed you would’ve been wed by now. You’re beautiful and available, there should be no reason why you haven’t any prospects for suitors before me unless there is something utterly wrong.”

“I have had many callers,” she corrected. “And rejected six proposals. None were to my liking.”

“What impossible standard have you set yourself for a husband?” Isaac grumbled. “Six offers? Ridiculous. Certainly, there is something amiss.” He scratched his nose. “Surely, you are indeed so perfect I almost think it is a deception.”

“...How so?”

“Why, if it weren’t for your poise, I’d half have the mind to think you have already been corrupted by the touch of man.” Isaac laughed after, as though publicly defaming her reputation at the month’s most socially important event was the subject of hilarity.

Beth was not laughing. Neither were the two couples on either side, who have undoubtedly heard everything by any indication of their loud gasps.

“And how presumptive of you,” Beth shot back sternly, her voice only giving out the slightest tremor as she blinked back tears of horror and mortification. “To think of yourself as a prospective suitor for me. You’re unwed too, Lord Bowin, and not with any positive affirmation of your character nor known courtship by any woman at this party.”

Rick strode over. “What in the *hell* did you just imply?” His tone was sharp. Beth glanced up with a quick inhale. Rick was *furious*. She had known he was close by, of course, but not that he had heard every word.

“Merely that—”

“Do not *dare* say that twice over.”

Though Lord Bowin was not used to heeding commands. “Have I not asked an honest question with sincerity? I am not taking direct attack at Miss Chapel, rather it is in fact a highly esteemed compliment.”

Beth covered her mouth, pain and panic flared beneath the rigid corset in her chest as more heads turned to stare and whisper. Rick wrapped an arm around her waist as though he thought she might swoon, but his direct physical contact only left her in a worse state of overwhelmed.

“The reason why you are unmarried is that you are scum. You have so clearly dampened the spirits of Miss Chapel with your inadequate conversation and you continue to demonstrate utter lack of social awareness with your complete failure at apologizing for doing so.”

“I—I beg your pardon?”

“You can beg for it on the duelling grounds,” Lord Tyler snapped. “We meet at dawn.”

“To discuss the matter further?”

“No, you bloody fool! To *duel*.”

Isaac’s eyes blew back, alarmed. “Your Grace, you have overexaggerated the situation entirely!”

“You mean to tell me you consider the honour of Miss Chapel’s name trivial?”

“Why, if you asked me—”

“No, I have heard quite enough from you, I think,” Rick ground out. “If you do not appear at Hyde Park by dawn I will find you with my pistol *myself*.”

He withdrew his hand from Beth’s waist. She tried and failed to latch onto it again, overcome with terror at the heel-turn of events.

“Rick!” Beth cried, calling after him as he stalked out of the ballroom and into one of the grand hallways. She could barely make him out from the blurriness of her vision. She swallowed down a sob, grabbing onto his sleeve. “Your Grace, wait!”

He turned around and his face softened at once.

“Hush,” he said, “Don’t cry. I will make that bastard pay.”

“Oh please, don’t!” she begged. “This is hardly necessary to duel over!”

Rick balked, indignant. “Of course it is! Did he not gravely insult your honour? Did he not trivialize your virtue?”

“Yes, but—”

“Did he not ridicule your good name by calling into question your beauty, honesty and kindness?” Lord Tyler flushed, looking aside, and cleared his throat. He raised his brow and lowered his voice to a quiet, yet firm whisper. “He made you *cry*. He called you *ruined*.”

His eyes were alight with such a blazing fury, it left Beth at a loss for words.

“I am not ruined,” she managed out, though she did not need to, for she had not the man in front of her to convince. “Lord Bowin owes me an apology.”

A public apology, only. And then to leave her well alone. Forever.

Lord Tyler agreed. “Then it is settled, as no apology was extended to you, we *will* duel at dawn.”

He brushed his hand along her arm for a fleeting moment, then took her hand in his, and brought it to his lips. Beth could not feel the light kiss through her gloves, yet her stomach leapt in equal parts giddy and fear. She told herself to remember the situation. He was merely saying goodbye.

Perhaps for the last time.

“Which is only a short few hours from now, I must excuse myself from the party to prepare.”

Prepare? Prepare for what—Departure? Death? Prepare his estate, his will, make arrangements for his inheritance...

If Lord Tyler died in Hyde Park—

That thought struck the fear of God into her heart.

“No!” She hurried after him, nearly catching her dress in the door hinges of the coatroom in her haste to catch up. “Don’t duel with him, I beg of you Sir Harris—” She grimaced at her slip up, especially when the duke winced as though the old name gave him physical pain.

“Please, it is Lord Tyler and always has been.”

“Frankly I do not care what I ought to call you if you wish to be *dead* by morning!” Beth snapped.

He stood still as a servant handed over his coat and pretended to hear nothing of their subject of conversation. The servant raised a brow at Beth.

“Would you like your pelisse, miss?”

“No, thank you,” Rick replied for her. “I’m the one leaving so early. Unless Miss Chapel wishes for her carriage or to be accompanied home?”

“Not at the moment,” Beth murmured demurely, unable to look away as Lord Tyler dressed for the wet London weather.

His fingers made quick work with his buttons, Beth could count them all along the length of the fabric. One, two, three, four, five... Those hands on his garment that she ached him to touch her with just as gently.

With his eyes still on the fastening of his coat, he calmly uttered, “Do you doubt my abilities?”

“No.”

He glanced up at her tone.

“Do you doubt the efficiency of my firearms?”

“No—”

“Do you—”

“You are a great marksman and you know it, which is precisely why I cannot have you *murder* Lord Bowin in a duel, it is *illegal*.”

“Would you rather I fight him with my bare hands instead, Miss?” he quipped.

“No!”

He looked at her fiercely. “Then you best fetch Lord Bowin a doctor.”

“If Lord Bowin grants me an apology then, you would put this duel to rest?”

“If he had intentions to demand your forgiveness, he would’ve done so by now.”

Or, Rick gave him such a fright he had rendered him speechless!

“You have not given him the opportunity!”

“I hardly care!” he retorted back. “I will not sit idle waiting for Lord Bowin to restore his respectability when it is *your* name he had put on the line!”

“It is unsafe and dangerous if the Viscount caught wind of this—He highly favours you, I cannot imagine how your reputation should—”

“The gentlemen in this court forgo duels on the regular,” he argued.

“—Rick, you are *not* listening to me! You could die!”

“You’re mistaken, Miss Chapel. I hear you perfectly fine. It would be my *pleasure* to die for you.” He softened his tone, once more. “Do not fret, Beth. My death won’t happen.”

“And on what authority can you make such a claim? Have you already deliberated with God?” Beth could not hold in her sarcasm, she was so angry.

“No, of course not,” Rick said. “But I am even more confident he had not deliberated with Bowin.” He motioned at a Whitmore House butler to deliver The Honourable Mike Dugan a message, then slightly bowed his head at her, “I must take my leave.”

Beth wanted to scream.

She went back to the ballroom, wiping her tears dry as she searched for Yolanda. Surely, that woman could talk some reason into Lord Tyler, if Beth could not. Yolanda has stopped Lord Henry King II from commencing a duel once, herself. If only Beth knew how she’d done it, for to talk a man out of inflicting violence onto another man proved more difficult than to tame a wild horse. Although Lord Tyler was nothing alike the vile monster of an uncle that shadowed his life, the influence of the man could not be wiped from his temperament.

A good man with a stubborn temper makes a great husband.

But any man with a stubborn temper makes a nightmare for his wife.

You are not his wife, Beth scolded herself. *Perhaps he’d listen to you if you were.*

The truthfulness of that only hurt her more.

Beth caught sight of the blue ribbons in Miss Montez’s raven black hair in the crowd of the waltz, before swishing away behind other couples. Beth navigated through the other members

of high society, letting out a breath of relief to spot the reds of the earl's hair. She approached the back of his head as her mind whirled with what she ought to say and do. Rick would need a doctor, a pistol, his written will—

“For you are a diamond of the first water, my dear Yolanda—If you would be my wife—”

Beth stopped abruptly, clasping her hands over her mouth to conceal her gasp. By happenstance, she had nearly burdened the earl with her troubles by interrupting his *proposal*.

She fled the scene before either could notice.

Now, what must she do?

Any hope left to prevent disaster left her. Truly, Beth had never felt so stricken, so panicked.

Why couldn't she think?

Beth had prided herself so greatly on her intelligence, she had solutions for solutions, answers for questions nobody had yet even asked. Her mother had departed the Chapel wisdom, having valued education and the developed mind as highly as needlework and London etiquette. Beth had been led to believe she was equipped for the trials of not just the ton, the *world*.

And now...what? *Nothing?*

She felt bitterly helpless, her heart so bruised it was as though it *bled* like her monthly courses through her chest.

She could not announce her troubles to anyone, she could not even find her friends in the overheated room. She spun around, looking for anyone who could salvage the disaster. Mr.

Zarick? Though he was so soft-spoken, Beth could not possibly imagine his ability to persuade Lord Tyler unless by a stroke of luck or magic. Not Sir Justin, stricken in years. His heart was frail and the stress of the situation may well kill him.

Her thoughts had her so wrapped up in worry, she had collided straight into someone else. She jerked back, horrified at her unladylike behaviour.

Thank God it was Courtney.

“Beth—Are you alright?”

Beth opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. The weight of the night wore her down until she was left inconsolable and heartbroken. She threw herself into Courtney’s embrace, unable to quell her cries.

“My goodness!” The Viscountess’ daughter held her dear friend as her legs went weak, and she crumpled onto the floor in a heap of her emerald dress. Courtney glanced up at her husband, Cameron, whose boots Beth could see hastily turn away as if to say *I’m already gone*.

“Beth, come, oh please, let’s get you off the floor.”

Courtney discarded her gloves in favour of caressing Beth’s crestfallen face streaked with tears.

“What’s this all about?”

“He’s going to get himself killed—” she wailed, balling her fists into her hair as her hysterics died down. Her head throbbed worse than the time she had consumed too much wine, she thought she might be ill.

“Who?!”

“The duke!”

Courtney’s eyes bugged out. “Rick—?”

Beth’s face crumbled all over again.

“We shouldn’t do this in public,” Courtney said to herself. “Come, let’s get you settled with tea. I’ve had my fair share of music, and I miss my baby.”

“But your mother—” Beth protested weakly.

“Will have another birthday next year.”

Courtney ushered Beth from the party, leading them away from the grand stairwell entrance, and through several servant’s doors even Beth had not known existed.

After some tea, and a handkerchief for her eyes, Beth explained everything in the privacy of Courtney’s drawing-room.

“Well, I never liked him,” Courtney replied with a huff when Beth had quoted Lord Bowin’s words verbatim, smoothing out the skirt of her two-year-old daughter on her lap. Colin, her three-year-old son was fast asleep in the nursery. “He does owe you an apology.”

“But his life?”

Courtney’s nose twitched, and she looked aside. “I’m not as averse to violence as you are, you know. My father was a soldier. I know he was not a good man, but I had looked up to

him very much.”

Beth trailed her finger around the trimmings of her teacup, listening.

“Lord Dugan, before he married my mother, was also a very brave man. I’m sure he had killed before, though I’ve never asked.”

“You *do* think Isaac should die?”

“I didn’t say that at all.”

“Then what are you saying?” Beth answered impatiently.

“A duel is not all about the shot. It’s an act of service. There’s some honour in standing up to injustice. An act Rick *wants* to give.”

“But that’s just it!” Beth nearly slammed her teacup onto its saucer. “This isn’t about Rick. It is not him who has been offended. It’s me. Me, Court. My life, my name. My reputation. Why should Rick choose to take a man’s life *for* me?”

“You know the power of the words of a man who holds weight in society. Are you not concerned about how you’ll be looked at if his rumour went uncontested...That you’re a *light-skirt*? Beth, it would be nearly impossible to snare an English gentleman for marriage! Besides, I’m sure Lord Tyler only aims to wound.”

“I don’t want any English gentleman, I want—” She shut her mouth. Tried again.

“I am not nearly as concerned about marriage as you seem to think. As long as—”

Damn. Her mouth skewed up. How could she walk around the exact reason and still let Courtney see things her way without exposing her exact reason and letting Courtney see things her way?

Far too soon, a wicked glint appeared in Courtney's eye. Beth inwardly groaned.

"As long as...?" she prompted.

Beth dropped her eyes to the teacup held in her lap. "It's nothing."

"Beth, we have been friends for a very long time. I would die with your secrets, as I know you will with mine."

Beth sighed. "I could care less about how I appear to society as a whole. Society as a whole is unkind. But there are those in the ton. People who do matter. Those who I do care that they still think highly of me. Lord Tyler, especially."

Courtney took a tea biscuit from the platter on the table, though it did nothing to cover the smile spreading across her face. "And why should that be?"

Beth shot Courtney a glare that had sent many potential suitors fleeing from Chapel House during afternoon calls. "He is my dear friend. I simply care for his opinion."

"And here I was, under the impression that *I* was your closest friend."

"You *are* my closest friend, Court. Lord Tyler...Rick..." God help her, even reflecting upon his name has the strength to put a smile on her lips. She crossed and uncrossed her ankles underneath her dress, clasping her hands around her used handkerchief. Her fingers played with a loose thread, desperate to fiddle. "He's different, you see."

Courtney's brow rose gracefully. "And how is the duke different?"

“Oh, you know,” Beth said, ducking her head to hide the way she was sure she appeared suddenly flushed and foolishly tongue-twisted. Red did not colour her cheeks the way it could on Courtney’s fair skin, but she was sure there was some way she could tell when the heat rose to her face.

“No, please,” she said, gesturing to her with a hand movement with bright eyes and a light laugh. “Enlighten me.”

Beth shifted in her seat once more. “He is simply…”

“Simply?”

“Well, not simply…”

“Not simply?”

“Court!”

“Beth. Speak what’s on your mind.”

“Well…” Beth drawled out for no reason. “He is a man, and you are not.” That logic sounded ridiculous to her own ears, but when she finally chanced a glance back at Courtney, her friend’s hand stilled in the golden blonde hair of her baby, mouth parted in a perfect O.

“You love him!”

“Of course I love him!” Beth cried, nearly flinging her teacup halfway across the room. She sniffed into her handkerchief, “Why else am I so unravelled?”

Courtney's baby began to fuss. She stood up and rocked her with maternal care, pacing along the carpet of the drawing-room as she sang a tuneless song.

Beth watched, arms folded along the back of her chaise with resigned envy.

"Oh, Beth. I understand you now."

And that gave her comfort, a weight lifted off her shoulders.

"What do I do, Court?"

"We should ask Yolanda for help."

"We can't," Beth told her morosely. "I had thought of that already. She's occupied."

She scoffed. "With what?"

"Being convinced of becoming a countess. I witnessed the earl's proposal."

Courtney nearly squealed. She sat back down, plopping her child back onto her lap so she could clap her hands, almost dancing in her seat. "I knew it! I told you, I knew it would happen!"

Beth mustered a smile. She didn't have the heart to tell her she wasn't sure Yolanda had accepted Henry's offer.

What was worse, she had not yet considered the consequences should Rick successfully win the duel. Bowin's mother had her connections, she could hardly see how Rick could go on with his livelihood without a bounty over his head for the murder of another man. He'd have to leave the country.

Either outcome, Beth would never see him again.

"I can't let this duel happen."

"I'm sure Lord Tyler is keen on not stepping down from a challenge."

"I must convince him otherwise." Beth laughed dryly. "He would not listen to reason."

"And what reasons did you give him?"

"All of them!"

She listed them on her fingers. The due apology, Rick's reputation, and favour with the Viscount, the bloodshed of another man upon his name.

There was the matter of his uncle.

The thought had crossed her mind. Would he listen if she pleaded on behalf of his character? His legacy? To not fall into the gripes of the likes of Baron Harris, the man so poisoned with anger he had poisoned his own family with it? To rise above it, to be a better man? To show compassion and mercy?

Surely, Rick would hesitate in the face of that?

Beth worried her bottom lip, casting a glance at the ticking clock mounted by Courtney's vanity.

It would be cruel to do that, however effective it may be. His eyes flashed with pain at the mere mention of his old name on the way to the coatroom. The years of abuse unjustly inflicted upon him, the drunken beatings and senseless violence. Lies and neglect.

Beth has not once, not ever, compared any act of Rick to that of Lord Matthew Harris.

And it was because she loved him, she never could.

The clock struck a new hour. Time. She needed time.

"So he has completely disregarded your feelings?" Courtney countered.

"He could not have," she confessed. "For he doesn't know there were any to be disregarded."

Courtney began to unpin her hair, letting her curls fall down her back. "You never told him?"

"Told him?!" Beth cried. "When could I have ever told him?" She closed her eyes and breathed through the anxiety that prickled beneath her skin. "...I couldn't," she muttered. "I can't."

"You can't?" Courtney's comb thunked onto the carpet. She spun around, spluttering, unlike any lady Beth had ever seen. "You must!"

"I can't!"

“How many seasons have you been in love with him?” her best friend retorted.

The patronizing tone was going to drive Beth mad.

“I have waited...” Beth’s voice shook, and so did her hands. “And waited...I have waited *so* long. Six potential husbands, gone because I had only wanted the one. Rick is no stranger to me, Courtney. He might fight for me, risk his life for me, but I will not let myself be disillusioned, *because* he is a good man.”

“My dear, you are making a convoluted mess. Tell Lord Tyler you love him and not to duel. Be honest, it’s as easy as that.”

“Love is not an arrangement you can make with the first nice gentleman you set your cap on!”

“Do *not* turn this on me. Just because you don’t understand what Cameron has done for me does not allow yourself to take your grievances upon my life!” Courtney spat. “I am happy. I am a mother with two beautiful children, I have done what I had to do to keep Whitmore House and my family *afloat*.”

“And you don’t regret that you have no love for your own husband?!”

“I grew to love him! As I have told you for years.” Courtney scooped up her child and brought her against her side, “Look at Cassandra’s face and tell me she is not the product of love? It was a surprise, yes, but surprises are possible, I know you are able to comprehend that.”

Beth crossed her arms, refusing to blink, for there were those bloody tears threatening to make their floodworks encore in this spectacle of a night.

“But you— *Beth*. *You are just as stubborn as Lord Tyler*. Do you not hear yourself? In possession of the remarkable privilege of genuine love for a man, and yet you are choosing nothing.”

The silence of truth roared in her ears. Courtney sat down curtly, letting her daughter down to dawdle then continued with her hair.

Beth knew well enough that she would have dismissed her from her home after such a callous insult to her marriage, no matter how close in friendship they might be. It was a testament to the way Courtney kept quiet and signalled for more tea from her maid that she had not.

Beth inhaled sharply, knowing she had both received and inflicted pain. Her mind jumbled with the franticness of distraught emotion and the foggiest of lack of sleep. Apologies and plans and words she could take back or wishes she would not have said are useless. Behind the large silver curtains were the dark clouds of night. Soon, they will part to make room for the morning.

She could just sit here with bated breath as the duel in Hyde Park commences. A man could die at worst and be seriously wounded at best. They would know by early morning, and it would all be put behind them, or a man will be arrested and ugly aftermath would follow.

Beth had wished for talent. Talent and a husband.

Maybe, a husband is out of the question. Not important, in the face of the urgent crisis.

But she was wrong in her private musings, in the ballroom beside Lord Bowin. She has talent.

Her mind, her wit, her intelligence and strength and tenacity for her own will.

She jumped from the chaise with alacrity. "I don't want to choose nothing!"

Beth won't *do* nothing.

There was still enough night left in the sky to make it.

Beth left Courtney behind. If she had remembered correctly, Rick would seek guidance and support from a second, a necessity in a duel. His second would undoubtedly be the Viscount's son, The Honourable Mike Dugan, since he had called for him in Beth's presence earlier that evening. Courtney handed her child to the nursemaid, then scurried off in search of her step-brother.

To separate required a chaperone. If the matter of Beth's virtue and reputation was still undecided by the ton, wandering along the streets at night would only lead to further compromise. Granted, a female chaperon would be wise, but they had none they trusted with the secret who was worth disturbing at this hour. Courtney rang a servant on the urgent call to find Lord Mahkent back at the party. With a borrowed cloak over Beth's shoulders and a pair of old riding boots, she set off in a Mahkent carriage with Cameron, to make the way to the duke's estate.

The London fog carried through the empty streets with the rolling carriage. The dead quiet other than the heavy rain against the window left Beth uneasy. The trip felt longer than it had any right to.

Cameron cleared his throat. "I'm sure we'll get there on time."

"Yes," she agreed faintly, she could not allow herself to think of any other outcome. "I cannot thank you enough for accompanying me."

"Oh no. It is no trouble, Miss Chapel. A favour for you is a favour for family."

Beth wanted to shrink into the velvet bench seat and cry. She swallowed down her discomfort and reached out her hands to hold onto the bench. She was not one to be susceptible to motion sickness, but never before had she been so dreadfully nervous.

“Lord Mahkent, I must offer you an apology,” she blurted out. “You are a very kind man and an excellent father, a good husband and a wonderful friend!”

Cameron sat back against the bench, wide-eyed. “Well!”

“I had misjudged you for far too long. I always was of the opinion Courtney settled for you without seeking better. You were always the gentleman with money and a kind smile and I had wanted so much more for her, you see. I had dismissed you as inadequate.”

“I can agree with you there. I was what Courtney needed, not what she wanted.”

Beth gasped at his modesty, “But I was wrong! I only thought that because I hated her circumstances at the time, and we were so young, how could she have possibly known if marrying you was the right choice? I loved her too much to see her make a mistake all because of her father’s careless gambling!”

“So you were cross with Lord Curtis.”

Beth opened her mouth, then closed it.

Cameron had made it sound ridiculously simple, put like that.

“You were cross with Lord Curtis, and so, you were cross with me.”

“Yes!” Beth frowned. “*Oh.*”

A soft smile passed over his lips. “In all honesty, the circumstances of it all had troubled me as well. I might not have properly loved her for my wedding, but I can assure you, Miss Chapel, I love her now.”

“Indeed,” said Beth. “That is clear. I’ve been blind. I am sorry.”

Cameron reached across space between them, a cool light hand over her borrowed purple cloak. “It’s forgiven and well behind us. I pray you haven’t been plagued this entire trip because of me. It is unlike you to be so quiet.”

“Not exactly,” Beth shrugged one shoulder. “I have many worries tonight.”

The carriage came to a halt.

They both looked out the window.

Rick’s estate.

Beth lifted the hood of her cloak over her hair to prepare for the rain. Lord Mahkent helped her with the steep step down, avoiding a brown-sodden patch of mud.

“You won’t join me inside?”

He shook his head. “Have someone fetch me if you are in need. I don’t wish to stand in the way of eavesdropping your private matters, whatever they might be.”

A solid lump formed in her throat. Still, she walked on in the puddles, drenched and steelily determined to make her case until she met the grand doors of Tyler House at the top of the many stairs.

Inside was dark, scarce, empty.

She had never been to Tyler House before. They had so often met at parties and outdoor luncheons. Meetings and calls at Whitmore House, Dugan House or around Mayfield and Town.

The esthetics of Lord Tyler's manor and Beth's impressions of them would have to be put aside for a more suitable time. She ran to the man closest to her, gripping onto his shirtsleeves, as frantic as the matter deserved. "I am so terribly sorry for the unannounced arrival so late—or early, rather, I am sorry to have disturbed your sleep, this is ill-bred of me—but I *must* speak to Lord Tyler immediately."

The butler looked down at her grimly. Beth blinked, it was clear the man had not been sleeping either, still dressed in his Spencer and sporting the itch of a servant ordered to do anything but what he preferred he ought. "I am sorry, Miss. His Grace had just left the estate in a hurry."

"Hyde Park so soon? There's still yet an hour! And I hardly believe Lord Bowin to arrive early." She was rambling to herself now. She let go of the poor man's sleeves, for she was getting him wet. Her hair sagged over the front of her face like sheep's wool. She sighed, drawing it back into a resemblance to the evening style she had twisted it in. Cloaks for ladies were truly not very practical without a parasol. One, she realized, she had left at the Whitmore House coatroom.

The butler hummed as she went on, her words tumbling out of her mouth like a madwoman. She supposed with the way her heart thumped erratically, pleading eyes near maniacal, the crawling desperateness that had washed over her and her dastardly drenched appearance, she was one.

"Are you here for your letter, Miss?"

Beth stood still immediately.

"—My letter?"

“His Grace had written one for a Miss Elizabeth Chapel with his affairs in case of his passing.”

“He is not dead!” she yelped.

Not yet, anyway.

“Of course, Miss. I’m glad to hear. Come, I’ll show you to his study?”

She should turn back and return to Cameron.

She had no business reading any letters addressed to herself for an event that had not yet happened.

Beth should stop thinking as though Rick is fated to die. Between the two men, it is dreadfully clear who is the most likely of entangling themselves with mortal danger. And though the thought of Isaac Bowin brought a scowl to her face, she could not help the flicker of pity she felt for him. The man had no taste nor class for the proper treatment of women, but a chance to explain himself or rectify his mistake was not even offered before Lord Tyler had challenged him.

She wondered where he was now. At the church on his knees? Walking up and down the streets of Town, searching for a second? Sir Isaac spent so much time talking about himself, she could not once remember if he had ever uttered the mention of having friends.

The butler’s invitation was tempting. To know more about Rick, she would always find herself having a hard time resisting. It took all her strength to turn away from the gossip after his uncle’s passing, so she could hear the truth from Rick himself.

But to walk in Rick’s private study, to go through his belongings...

That was personal. An improper thought to be entertained.

Wholly, completely.

Surely, his butler knew that.

And yet, her curiosity had never gnawed at her so fervently to follow its whim.

What if there was something in that study the butler wanted her to see?

“It is up these stairs.” He had produced a lantern.

She shouldn’t.

“I am not his family,” she protested weakly. “I have no business to go through his affairs.”

“No,” the butler said. “I suppose not.”

“And the duke is not at home, it would be a breach of trust.”

“Mhm.”

She paused, wringing her hands. Though, his affairs would have information. Valuable information she could use to talk to him with confidence. She could convince the duke if she knew his plans. If he had to leave the country, it would help to know where he was going.

It was her letter in there, after all.

Before she had realized her mind was made up, a servant had removed her cloak and given her a blanket to put over her shoulders. She was walking up the grand staircase, then passed many doors in the wide shadowed halls.

There were massive portraits and paintings hanging on the walls, much like the works in Whitmore House and Mahkent Hall. She gazed up at them as she walked by. They were portraits of the former duke and duchess. Rick's family.

His mother. His father.

One with the three together, with Rick as an infant. Before he was snatched from them.

She tore her gaze away.

The butler guided Beth to another large room with a desk by a window drew open. A quill sat on the surface, and she immediately pictured Rick sitting there, scribbling down everything he needed to have in order hastily.

No—

Thoughtfully.

Hours had gone by since he'd left the party. Time he had to collect his thoughts and see them through.

Beth turned around, but the butler had left. The lantern was hooked by the door in the corner, emitting warm light, enough together with the grey from the window to adjust Beth's eyes to the dim room.

Grabbing the lantern, she approached the desk.

Suddenly she did not want to touch it.

Except for that quill, it was bare. It must be in one of the top drawers, his papers. Tied in a bundle, likely. And in that bundle was a letter, addressed *Miss Elizabeth Chapel*.

A letter she was scared to read.

She placed the lantern on the desk by the quill and drew the chair closer.

The first drawer was locked. Beth sucked in a breath.

The second and third were locked too.

In fact, all of the drawers were locked. They should be, she thought scornfully. It was the sensical thing to do. Someone could sneak into his office when he was not looking, with the intent to go through his documents or finances to gather his information.

Someone like her.

“Sir?” She called out for the butler, feeling foolish. After her incessant talking, it would’ve been courteous to have at least asked the man’s name. “Hello?”

Beth jumped up with alacrity. There was no time to wait around. A key. She needed a key.

Rick’s second was The Honourable Mike Dugan. Mike was the type of fellow one gave clear instructions to. Not because he was simple-minded, rather, Mike cared little for elaborate plots or complication.

With this logic, she didn't worry about knocking for hollow books in the adjacent library or drawing up floorboards for hidden compartments. The key would be somewhere practical. Like the granite mantelpiece over the fireplace or a—

Beth fished her hand into the base of the only vase on a wooden table, procuring a silver key.

She grinned at her own ingenuity and rushed back to the desk.

The first drawer unlocked with ease.

Two lump sums of money, a written will, parish papers and a map for France. She scanned through them all without carefully reading, to get the gist of his plans. Her hands kept turning over other objects — feathers and quill tips, loose coins, a yellowed photograph—searching for an envelope with her name.

There wasn't one.

She went to the second drawer instead. Inside, a letter folded over with her name sat at the top, ink barely dried.

Beth snatched it, sinking into the chair with relief.

Dear Beth,

It is clear to me if you are reading this, my plans have gone awry.

For that I am sorry. It was not my intention to die.

But I can forgive myself for labouring my final breaths in Hyde Park because it is still my pleasure to die if it meant honouring you.

Ever since I have learned the ill truth of my uncle's deeds, I had longed to meet my parents again. I often revisited my childhood in my dreams. Imagined a loving mother and a present father—One that cared for their child. It was such a novel thought, under the cruel guardianship of the baron, I had never once conceived it was even possible, that joy and love existed in life for me.

Everything changed.

My name. My title. My heritage. My fortune.

One day these things were unknown to me. And on the next day, these things were true.

Similar was the realization of my love for you.

The sentence knocked the wind out of her lungs. She had to read it twice. Her finger trailed over the words in disbelief.

Similar was the realization of my love for you.

Even before her, in writing, it barely seemed true. He loved her. He *loved* her? But when? And how? When for years Beth felt it too much to ask Rick to love her the way she wanted him to.

She steadied her shaking hands and forced her gaze to fall below that line to finish the letter.

It is unfair of me to tell you this, now that I am gone.

But I fear this might've been the only way.

I was yours until the end.

Rick

Rick was prepared to kill or die.

Beth emerged from the mental fog. Panic struck her in a frenzy and she shot out of the chair.

Dear God, dawn was in a moment and he was prepared to kill or *die*.

She jerked her head to the glass window so tautly, her neck could have snapped. It was not yet morning, but the rain had stopped. Clouds were parting to make way for sunlight and she had not even the time to spend looking out of windows to make such observations.

Beth's sharp memory helped her find her way back through the manor. She ran like a bat out of hell, not even heeding at the stairs. In her left hand was the duke's letter, tight in her grasp, the other held the lantern, which she thrust at the butler along with the maid's blanket when she found him by the doors. She thanked him for his kindness profusely when he ran after her to return Courtney's forgotten cloak. The air was crisp and fresh from the night showers, but she could not be refreshed by it until she stopped the duel.

Beth knocked on the door of the stalled Mahkent carriage, rattling the handle.

Cameron opened the door, rumped and disoriented. "Where is he?"

"Wake up, quick! I have to get to Hyde Park!"

The man jolted upwards as Beth climbed in. "*The duke wasn't home?*"

"I had missed him by a few minutes."

"Good heavens! Then what had—" He looked down at her and changed his mind, deciding he didn't need to know. He stepped out of the carriage.

"Where are you going!?" Beth cried. "We must go!"

“It’s not too far, but the park is sprawling and no person could possibly walk through that in time. We’ll get there faster by horse.”

Beth gaped at him.

Cameron furrowed a brow. “You *do* know how to ride, don’t you?”

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On the back of a galloping horse, Beth followed Lord Mahkent through the empty streets of Mayfield. In a short time, they reached the entrance of Hyde Park. The sun streamed down in beams as the sky turned from its gloomy grey to something clearer. Her hood flapped in the wind as Rick’s letter crumpled against the leather of the reigns. It had been years since Beth practised equestrian sport, and even then could it never compare to the thrill of racing through the hills of grass beside the banks of the reflecting Serpentine.

In the clearing, five men stood at a distance away.

A burst of adrenaline had Beth surpassing Cameron. The horse came to a halt when she asked it to, and then Beth was climbing off its back.

Rick and The Honourable Mike Dugan were close together, inspecting what Beth assumed to be a pistol in a wooden box.

“Your Grace!” she all but yelled. Everyone turned at the sound of her voice. Rick said something to Mike, then rushed to Beth.

She stopped to catch her breath, flinging her arms around him. “Rick— *please*.”

“Beth!” He held her close, searching her face for an answer to her presence in alarm. “Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

She was hurt, though not in the way Rick meant it. Hurt and scared, desperate, upset— And incredibly confused. His hands were on her skin, his touch tender and loving and Beth could not understand how he would rather risk his life over telling her she was the woman he loved.

“Don’t duel Lord Bowin, I beg of you!”

Rick pressed his lips into a firm line. “It has already been decided.”

“Dear God, please! Drop this nonsense and listen to me. I can’t have Lord Bowin’s blood on your hands!”

“I aim to wound.”

“Do not take aim at all!” she shrieked. Beth pointed at Lord Bowin and Sir Sharpe. Lord Bowin fiddled awkwardly with the pistol as if he had never held one.

“Look at that man! He’s petrified to duel you!”

“As he should!”

“Rick,” she shook the lapels of his blue waistcoat. “If you cared at all for my honour, you would listen to my word.” Courtney’s hood had fallen down. Beth’s thick, kinky black coils tumbled into her eyes.

Rick stroked the hair out of her eyes, his thumb pressed against her cheekbone under her fluttering eyelashes. She held her breath. “It is because I care, I cannot let this go,” he said softly. “You must understand.”

“Lord Tyler!” Sir Stephen Sharpe bellowed. “We are to begin!”

“In a moment,” he briskly called over his shoulder.

Cameron had now appeared, walking the two horses to a tree in discussion with Mike and the doctor.

Rick removed his touch, as though remembering himself, and looked down at her. “Is that a new cloak?”

Beth could not mask her irritation that came with Rick pausing enough to notice a new wardrobe piece in her attire but refusing to take her pleading seriously.

“It’s Lady Mahkent’s,” she said stiffly.

He took her hand. “It is lovely on you.”

“Thank you,” she said. His compliment gave her butterflies, but she was still mad.

He turned her hand face forward and found his crinkled letter in the palm of her hand. “What’s this?”

Beth said nothing.

His face was drawn. “Where did you get this?”

“I went to your house. I found it there. If you truly honour your intentions of defending the sanctity of my character, if you are honestly so deeply troubled by Lord Isaac’s advances and

commentary of me, the greatest defence I could imagine to win my affections is not by *violence*—”

“I do not think I could ever put this behind me. I am so irrepressibly angry.”

“Why!” Beth implored. “*Why?*”

Rick swallowed. “You’ve read my letter. Are you asking me why I am upset over something so plainly obvious?”

“It is not obvious!” she retorted. “I had learned of it all through a short letter I would have never read unless you died!”

Silence stretched. Beth begged with her eyes for Rick to say something—Anything.

“Lord Tyler!” Lord Bowin’s voice carried over. “If you intend to kill me, I beg you to get on with it, I can hardly wait any longer!”

“In a moment!” he bellowed back, again. “Can’t you see I am in conversation with a lady?” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “Never had I heard of a man so desperate to approach the end of his life!”

Beth suppressed a smile she did not want to have.

“I must go. I will not aim to kill, simply to wound, and I will assume Lord Bowin will take a shot at the sky.”

“I don’t know about that,” Beth muttered. “He sounds resigned.”

“We shall see.”

He spoke with confidence, but in truth, Rick seemed in conflict. He turned to meet the men for the duel, but his feet worked so slowly, it was as though they wished to stay rooted to the ground by Beth’s side instead.

Beth followed him, grabbing his arm. Her hand caught his bare wrist. His flesh was warm. And it warmed her to grasp it.

If the duel went wrong, if Rick bled out, Beth would touch him again. Draw his body to her chest until his warmth left him at daybreak. Until she too, was devoid of light and life.

She could not let it come to that.

He turned around once more with tired eyes.

“Beth. Please.”

“What if I told you I would accompany you to every ball and social gathering for the next six months?”

“That would do little to salvage your reputation.”

Beth let out a short breath. “What if I collaborated with you in a scheme to send Lord Bowin abroad?”

“To leave London weather? Hardly suitable punishment, I think.”

“Lord Richard Tyler!” she exclaimed, completely losing patience with him. “What do I have to do to put an *end* to this?”

Something passed over his features.

“Well?!”

““Marry me,” he said.

Beth faltered. “W-what?”

“Marry me,” he said again. “Be my wife and I will have mercy on Lord Bowin. I will call off the duel. I will accept his formal public apology. No party will be injured, and your reputation will be restored, should any taint come of it.”

Beth let go in a daze. “You wish to marry me?”

Rick took a step forward. “Very much so.”

“You wish to marry me?” she repeated. “You want to marry at all?”

Rick’s eyebrows creased together in utter confusion. “Why wouldn’t I want to marry?”

“You had never asked for my hand! You had never courted any lady other than Miss Quick for a short time. Which I remember vividly because I had been miserable the entire two weeks you did!”

“Why were you miserable when I courted Miss Quick?”

“Why?” she echoed incredulously. Beth loved this stubborn, obtuse man. “Why do you think? I loved you! I *love* you. You are the only husband I ever wanted. Don’t you see how confused I am, to hear your declaration of love *now*? I had been a debutante for years as your friend and never once did you try to court me. Never once did you ask me nor my father nor my brothers for *my* hand!”

Rick stared at her, aghast.

“Your Grace,” said the doctor, utterly unimpressed. He glared at his pocket watch and scowled. “Will you be duelling or not?”

“*Not!*” said Beth, Rick, Mike and Cameron in unison.

Lord Bowin slumped down against the oak tree until his coat-tails met the dewy grass, gasping out with relief.

The doctor muttered out a curse and left.

Beth turned around to compose herself, blinking at the sun. Exhilaration was the word for how she felt at Rick’s proposal. Her dreams laid before her, everything she has wanted in arm’s reach.

And then that exhilaration washed away, retracted like the water of the tide.

Doubt crept into her mind.

Two hands rested over her shoulders. “My dearest Beth,” his lips were so close to her ear.

She shivered.

“Marry me,” he said again, softer this time.

“How do I know?” Beth spun around and whispered. “That this letter is not some ploy?”

Rick swallowed. “Do you really think so lowly of me?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“After everything you’ve seen in the drawer?”

Beth trembled. His gaze was fervent. She could not look away. “I do not know what you speak,” she said. She paused, then felt ridiculously shy, for he would not quit looking at her in the same intense way and her heart was aflame because of it. “Your Grace,” she added. “I do not understand. I only ever found your plans and this letter.”

“Nothing more?” he implored.

“Rick,” she repeated. “I don’t understand.”

“No,” he realized. “You don’t. Come.”

Rick strode over to his horse with Beth in tow and mounted her upon it.

“Where are you taking me?” Already knowing she’d follow him no matter his answer.

“To Tyler House. There is something I must show you.” Rick nodded to The Honourable Mike Dugan. “Mike, I ask you to make arrangements with these gentlemen on my behalf.”

“Already taken care of,” Mike assured.

Lord Mahkent issued Lord Tyler a look. “I will accompany you both back to the estate.”

“That is unnecessary—”

“With all due respect, Your Grace. I am far too invested in Miss Chapel’s welfare to leave her alone at this hour.”

Rick could not argue with that.

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“Good morning, Your Grace,” said the butler, very pleased upon their arrival.

“Good morning, Mr. Mustang.” Rick nodded. “Please let me formally introduce you to Miss Chapel, and our friend Lord Mahkent.”

Mr. Mustang didn’t bat an eye. “Lovely to meet you both.”

Beth nodded, sharing a secret smile with the man as Rick ushered her past him and further into his house.

Surely, it would do little to point out the fact Beth had just been here. In the duke’s determination to bring her back to his affairs, that likely escaped him. Beth kept quiet.

“You must be hungry,” Rick realized belatedly and set out to find a maid to inform the kitchens of needing breakfast and tea trays.

He returned, rather sheepishly and sat in the chair of the desk. He took the key that laid on the surface next to the quill without question, even though he must’ve known he had never left it there.

“Come,” he beckoned to her softly. “Open this drawer.”

He passed the silver key. Beth took it in her hand and unlocked it. Only an hour ago or so she had been here, and she had opened this drawer. And there was a folded letter with her name. It was open, without an envelope, with fresh ink.

Miss Elizabeth Chapel.

That letter is almost ruined now, clutched against her skirts, clenched into her hand. But Rick’s message was branded into her heart and mind, Beth could recite it in whole if needed.

Beth looked down at the drawer. There was a mountain of blank envelopes. That letter had rested upon them, Beth never noticed in her hurried state.

Her hand hovered over them, afraid to touch.

“What is this?”

She looked to Rick, who simply sat back in his chaise with a weary sigh.

“Letters from your father?”

He shook his head.

“Letters to the baron?” she guessed again.

“No, my sweet.” Rick reached forward and opened one. A letter tumbled out of the envelope, once it was unsealed. He pushed it flat against the tabletop and guided Beth’s hand over it so she could see. “Letters to you.”

“What?”

Rick unlocked the third drawer, and there were more.

“What?” Beth said again, for lack of finding a better word.

He rustled through them, then sliced another envelope open with a letter knife. Beth read the first one, then set it down, stunned. Rick pressed the second one into her hand.

Beth glanced at it. “This one dates four years ago.”

“I know.”

My dearest Beth,

Mr. Zarick asked for your hand today. I was in a discussion with Miss Montez about... the state of existence, or some other philosophic doubt. That woman always brings the worst of questions out of me. I think I know how the world works, I think I understand it all.

I don't.

Every time I speak to you, I learn that I don't.

With delicate grace, you declined Mr. Zarick's offer and never before had I felt so pleased for a man's misfortune.

I went home and sat in miserable silence for an embarrassingly long time.

Then I collected myself because you had invited me to a luncheon with Courtney.

You were joyous, then. Carefree.

I don't know what Mr. Zarick offered you.

Love. Happiness. Security. Children? How is that not enough for you?

Why is that not enough?

~~How could I ever compare, if that is not enough?~~

I don't need those answers. You are not marrying Mr. Zarick.

I'm glad.

I think about the times you are next to me. Your gloved hand tucked into my arm.

The corners of your eyes when you grin. The careful, considerate appraisal in the nod you make, when you wish to correct someone. Someone in need of correcting, and yet, you choose not to.

When you clasp your hands behind your back because you fidget too much with the yellow muslin of your dress if they stay in front. Is that why you prefer having your hand tucked into my arm?

Is that why you bring a parasol, even when it is not raining? When the clouds are white and the sky is blue and the only tempest is the restraint I must endure to not kiss you?

Gladness is not what I feel.

Yours,

Rick Harris

She turned to the duke but nothing came out of her mouth.

Mr. Mustang appeared with the tea service. He placed it down on the table with the vase.

Cameron perked up, uncrossing his arms and pushing himself off the back wall, trodding off to it.

Beth could not even think about tea. She sat down without words as she read through the multitude of letters Rick had addressed to her, confessing his devotion to her, much like the pages and pages of own personal collections of thoughts Beth had bound up in her own private journal.

Dearest Beth,

I am going to tell you to find a husband.

Society has begun to talk.

I cannot bear the pain of watching you entertain the chatter of Lord Bowin.

You look as though you'd rather be anywhere else.

I'll start to decline your dances. I'll talk to other women.

The weight will be off my shoulders if I see you happily married to someone that deserves you.

I wouldn't covet another man's wife.

I would not lust after her, either.

Tomorrow I will tell you.

Find someone to love.

It would do us both good, I think.

I could move on with my life.

And see you happy with yours.

With love,

Lord Tyler

Dearest Beth,

I am not able to tell you to find another husband.

I could not be friends with him.

I'm afraid I'd covet his wife.

Yours forever,

Lord Tyler

“I have written to you a letter every week since I was sixteen years old. Some of them, I had sent you, on occasion. Your birthdays, for example. Or when I had to leave with my uncle during those unbearable trips to Scotland.”

Beth knew this because she had treasured every one. Nothing in them revealed his feelings. Nothing. Beth would read those letters again and again, for any trace of longing, but could only surmise the writings as cordial or friendly.

My dearest Beth,

I know you are no fool. Your mind is sharp.

I love that your mind is sharp.

You do not take something given to you if you know it is ingenuine.

A lady like yourself sees through deception.

Sees through liars like me.

You asked about the gash beneath my eye.

Touched it even, stained your fine white gloves to graze your fingers over the wound.

I trembled beneath your touch, then.

And when you asked me how I sustained the injury,

I lied.

You brought me to Chapel House and sat me on the damask furniture there.

You brought raw meat from your kitchens to dull the blackened bruising. Soaked warm water to absorb the dried blood.

"How did this happen?" you asked.

And I lied.

I knew you would see through that.

I knew you'd see through me.

I struggle with the truth, sometimes.

I struggled in that drawing-room.

We were almost alone then.

I could have told you.

It would have eased the ache from the blow, at least.

I hate my bloody father.

Thank you for humouring me.

But you don't deserve a liar for a husband.

So much more, you deserve.

A man that's honest.

That's not me.

Yours,

Rick Harris

“These are the ones I had not sent.” He corrected himself. “These are the ones I wanted to send.” He looked over her shoulder at the letter she’d just read and winced. “Maybe not that one.”

“Why hadn’t you?”

The duke sighed.

“At first, I did not send them, because I knew I could never provide the life that a lady such as yourself was used to.” He let out a dry laugh. “I had convinced myself to rid my thoughts of you, and attempted to do so by courting Miss Quick.”

Beth made a face that made him smile. “I assure you, those weeks were as miserable for me as you say they were for you.” He paused, wrinkling his nose at the memory. “And Mr. Wallace West, too, I’m sure.”

“If you knew this, why hadn’t you come to me after?”

“Then...” He searched through the drawer and sliced open another letter. This one dated a year back. “Then I did not send them, because of the turmoil my life was cast into with the revelation of the brutality of my uncle.” His eyes narrowed, and he tapped against the desk surface in a nervous gesture. “I had always known the baron as a cruel man, but not once had I questioned that he was not actually my father. And of course with that came everything new and overwhelming with the sudden dukedom. I was quite lonely during that time, to be truthful.”

“You could have come to me,” Beth whispered. “You should have. I wanted to be there for you.”

“Which is why, these reasons I professed were excuses, as I was simply too cowardly to risk being rejected. So I had punished myself with watching from afar, having you in my life at a distance until Lord Bowin took it upon himself to insult your virtue. I am deeply, *deeply*, sorry Beth, for ever disappointing you or making you feel tricked.”

He stood up then and took her hands in his. Beth was moved to tears.

“I only hope you will forgive me—”

“Rick—”

“Let me finish,” he interrupted gently.

Cameron coughed in the background, and turned around, making an excuse to check on his carriage, shutting the door behind him.

Rick gathered Beth's hands in his together, bringing them to his lips, his eyes still on hers.

"These words are true. I love you, Miss Beth Chapel. I love your mind, I love your spirit. I love your strength and courage. Nothing would make me happier than being your husband."

"Nothing?"

Rick buried his hand into the third drawer and pulled out a dainty velvet and very old box. He lifted its cover, revealing two gold wedding bands.

"Nothing," he promised.

Beth kissed him.

Then kissed him again.

~.~

They had a garden wedding on a perfect day.

Lord Bowin was graciously offered an invitation.

He didn't attend.

Yolanda kissed Beth's cheeks and adjusted her veil, knowing exactly how it was like to be weighed down by the headpiece of a noble family's diamonds, now that she was affianced to one.

“You are the prettiest bride I’ve ever seen,” said the soon-to-be countess.

She nudged her intended in his ribs when he opened his mouth to protest. “Well, I’m sure when we wed—”

“Beth is the prettiest bride you’ve ever seen, isn’t that *right*, Henry?”

He straightened his spine, wrapping his arm around her waist. “Yes, of course, dear.”

“Good man,” Yolanda teased.

Courtney sighed dreamily, leaning into Cameron’s side as they stood by the wedding cake.

“I think I’ve had enough of watching wistfully at those two lovebirds, don’t you?” said Lord Mahkent to his wife. “We should celebrate our efforts in uniting the happy couple.”

She grinned. “We did secure this marriage, didn’t we?”

“I helped too!” Mike added, stuffing his plate with desserts. “You should’ve seen what had transpired on the duelling grounds before the dutchess arrived. It was a family effort.”

The Viscount turned to his son with his eyebrows high into his hairline. “On the duelling *what?*”

“Nothing, Father,” Mike muttered. “You misheard me.”

Beth laughed with the Dugan-Mahkent family, waving goodbye at her best friend as she departed the group, Courtney taking Cameron's hand for the waltz.

Her husband tapped her shoulder. "Lady Tyler," he said with a wickedly handsome smile. "Why is a beautiful dutchess standing like a wallflower at a party?"

Beth blinked at Rick. It was a good question. This was, indeed, her party. And the last time she was mesmerized by a string quartet, she had landed herself in a mess.

"Force of habit, I think. Waiting for you to pass by, not wanting to dance with anyone else. Are you going to ask me to dance again?"

"I was going to, Your Grace," he began, tucking her hand into his elbow, and bending down to kiss her chastely—Only because they were in the presence of a large company. If he had her any other way, fiercely and passionate like that first kiss, when he pulled her into his lap on the study chaise, he would not be able to respectfully keep social expectations, for in truth he wanted to kiss her and kiss her and *then* —

He pulled away while he could still physically bear to do so, wiping the wet corner of her mouth with his thumb.

Her eyes went dark, soulful, hypnotic. Beth's lungs expanded in her chest, under the corset beneath her wedding gown.

"You were going to....?" she breathed, transfixed.

"I was going to ask," he continued, "then I thought, best you ask me yourself."

"You want me to ask you to dance?"

"I do."

“Why?”

“So that my wife will see, when she asks something of me, I listen and no longer stubbornly disagree.”

Beth lifted her chin and looked at her husband. “I don’t ask you to dance with me, then.”

Rick gave her a hesitant smile. “You don’t?”

“No,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. She pulled him down to her level so in his ear she could whisper, “I ask you to take us home. I ask you to bring your bride to bed.”

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