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**THE HEART
HAS ITS REASONS**

Bronwyn Howdsworth

The Heart Has Its Reasons
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The heart has its reasons which the mind knows nothing of.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

Chapter One

Wiltshire, May 1788

Voices, in the vestibule.

Mayhew thrust open the sitting room door, every pore oozing agitation. “Miss Rachel, you have callers. Mr Nathaniel and a Miss Parker.”

At last. “Nat!”

Rachel’s headlong rush halted as a vision in blue silk entered the room, followed by Nat, who towered over the young woman. With her blue eyes, and blonde hair peeking from beneath a flower-trimmed straw hat, she reminded Rachel of a delicate Dresden shepherdess.

No smile from Nat. His grey eyes didn’t quite meet hers. Indeed, he seemed fascinated by the view over her left shoulder. Odd!

His voice boomed—how unlike Nat to speak so loudly. “Rachel. Good to see you. May I present Miss Susanna Parker. Susanna—Miss Lawson. Miss Parker and me are recently affianced.”

What? Rachel grasped the door handle to steady herself. She mustn’t faint, must not surrender to sudden dizziness, to shadows pressing in on her. She fought the urge to close her eyes and pretend she’d not heard correctly.

Her throat dried. Her voice seemed to emanate from the bottom of a dark abyss. “Wonderful news, wonderful. Won’t you both sit down?”

Nat and the young woman took the sofa opposite her.

This couldn’t be happening. It wasn’t real. She mustn’t reveal her shock. Her sense of loss. There’d be time to cry later, to shut herself away in her room. She felt in her pocket for the worn coin. Honorius. The token from Nat, given years ago.

How stupid to have made so much of the gift. Not a symbol of affection after all. Just another Roman find from the orchard. Nothing significant. There’d been no promises. No pledge of undying love. How

ridiculous to have imagined Nat represented anything more than an honorary brother.

She took a deep, shuddering breath.

An automaton, that's what she'd be until Nat and his young woman took their leave. She could do it. She must numb herself and play the part of one of those strange clockwork amusements that replicate the gestures of living, breathing creatures. Dead on the inside, going through the motions of civility, apparently a perfectly adequate member of polite society, but inside—lifeless. Dead. She might as well be dead. What had life to offer without a future shared with Nat?

She clenched her hand to stop its shaking as she reached for the handbell on a side table, rang for tea and managed, somehow, to direct the maid on what should be offered her guests.

Mayhew left the room, and Rachel blindly reached inside her pocket once more for the old Roman coin, pressing its uneven edge into her palm, before asking in a voice that still seemed to belong to another, "When is the wedding? How pleased your father and stepmother must be, Nat. And what of you, Miss Parker, where do you hail from?"

The young woman offered a coy smile. "Susanna, please. May I address you as Rachel? Darling Nathaniel has told me all about you. That you're like a sister to him. We will, of course, invite you and your family to the wedding in Derby, which is my home. At least it is until we marry. We shall settle in London."

Sister? Surely, though, I've been more than that? I had hoped... Look at me, Nat! Did I not mean more to you than that?

It transpired that Nat had been at Cambridge with Susanna's brother, and they'd met in London.

"Only three months ago," Susanna giggled.

"Nat, have you sent word to Marianne? She'll be sorry she's away at your grandparents'."

At last he looked at her. His eyes—sad. Almost pleading.

Ah Nat. She's bewitched you.

No, something wasn't right. She longed to ask him if he was truly happy.

"I'm given to understand Marianne will be returning the day after tomorrow. Constance accompanied her, I believe?"

“Yes, she did, Nat.”

Rachel cleared her throat, and addressed Susanna. “My sister Constance, Miss Parker—Susanna. She and Nat’s sister are great friends.” As were Nat and I.

“And your parents? Where are *they*?” Nat asked.

It’s as if he’s built an invisible wall about himself. I can’t talk with him the way we used to. Oh Nat...

“Papa’s in his study, wrestling with next Sunday’s sermon. Mama’s visiting parishioners.”

Susanna inspected Rachel from head to toe. “What exactly are *you* doing?”

Mortified, Rachel looked down at her shabby dress. Why did she have to be wearing her oldest gown today? How could she compete with a beautiful, delicate creature like Susanna?

“I’m preparing mulberries, for jam making.”

The young woman raised her eyebrows. “Don’t you have servants to do such tasks?”

Rachel’s heart beat as though any moment it would burst through her threadbare bodice. So many days she’d waited for Nat’s return, and now... now she wished him gone, along with his porcelain princess.

“We do, but there are four of us to look after. We have a maid of all work, a gardener, and another man to drive us about and look after the heavy work. My mother and sister also help about the house.”

“Really? Isn’t your mother the daughter of an earl? That’s a little unseemly, surely?”

What an unpleasant young woman. “Please, Miss Parker—Susanna, tell me a little of *your* family. They must be delighted with your betrothal?”

Nathaniel’s smile did not quite reach his eyes. “Couldn’t resist Susanna, could I?” He stroked Susanna’s pale, delicate hand.

Susanna’s blue eyes widened disingenuously at Rachel. “My father’s the vicar at Sommerleigh, and we’re to be married there. The second Saturday in June. Father will conduct the service, assisted by my eldest brother. He’s also a vicar.”

“That’s less than four weeks away!” Rachel exclaimed, hastily adding, “How many brothers have you?”

“Oh, four, and all older than I. I am the only girl.”

“So of course she’s most terribly spoiled,” said Nat. He turned and gazed at his fiancée, who favoured him with a demure smile. Rachel’s stomach roiled and she was relieved when Mayhew entered with the tea things. Reverend Lawson held the door open for her.

“Ah, young Nathaniel.”

Nat stood and shook hands with Rachel’s father. “May I present my fiancée, Miss Parker?”

The reverend exchanged a brief but telling look with Rachel. “Well, well. My congratulations, Nat. What a beautiful young woman you’re to wed.”

Susanna nodded graciously in the general direction of Rachel’s father.

Nat broke the sudden silence. “How goes the hunt for artefacts, Mr Lawson?”

“Very well, my boy. Rachel’s a great help. We had hoped you might join us on the dig while you’re home. How long before you commence work with your father?”

“In June, a week after the wedding. We’re to live with him at Bedford Row, while we look for a house. It will be convenient, at any rate. As you know, it’s above ‘the shop’, or at least the office Father uses after hours.”

“Indeed,” said Mr Lawson. “So how much longer do you remain in Wiltshire?”

“Two days, to await Marianne’s return from Grandfather’s place. Then we’ll be off to London so that Susanna and Marianne can see dressmakers for gowns and shop for all the other twaddle a wedding requires.”

Susanna nodded. “Nathaniel’s stepmother will stay in Wiltshire until the wedding, as she has all my darling’s half-brothers and sisters to care for, but my own dear Mama will be meeting us in London to help.” Again, her wide, blue, unblinking eyes focused on Rachel. “Perhaps you and your sister would care to join us?”

Rachel tried to smile naturally, but she could feel her mouth held in a rictus of inanity—the same stunned face she’d been wearing since Nat and Susanna’s news had hit home. “Thank you, but no. We have very good dressmakers in the village.”

Susanna looked doubtful. “Well, if you’re sure...”

As Mayhew picked up the tea tray from the side table, Nat said, “I see the vicarage food’s as good as ever. How are you, Miss Mayhew?”

“Foine, Master Nathaniel. You enjoy that cake, moind.” She backed out of the room, wearing a perplexed expression. News of the engagement was out, then. Rachel gritted her teeth and busied herself dispensing the refreshments.

Susanna held up her hand, palm outward, when Rachel offered her cake. “It looks most delicious, but I must watch my figure.” Somehow, without adding anything to that statement, she insinuated that Rachel should, too.

Defiantly, Rachel took the largest slice of rich fruit cake left on the serving plate, though she had no appetite.

The next half hour was an ordeal. Nevertheless, schooled in manners and etiquette by her exacting mother, Rachel did her best to present an agreeable face to the company.

She drew a silent breath of relief when Nathaniel and Susanna made noises about leaving, but not before Nathaniel issued an invitation for Rachel and her parents to dine that evening at the manor. Gratifyingly, her father consulted her before accepting, and she nodded her assent—it would be churlish to refuse the invitation, and deprive her mother of the opportunity to meet Susanna.

But, as Rachel and Mr Lawson saw the young couple to their carriage, only she was privy to the triumphant glance that Susanna bestowed on her.

* * *

She wouldn’t cry. What was the use? As they walked back up the steps to the front door, though, when Rachel’s father lay a comforting hand on her shoulder, she felt the tears gather.

“Rachel, you don’t have to go this evening.”

Her father, for all his vagueness and academic preoccupations, was astute. Even so, she’d never imagined he’d sensed her affections for Nat were more than a sisterly fondness. Nat seemed to have been ignorant of her feelings before today. Besotted with that Susanna creature, he’d shown no remorse during their visit! But then, why the desolate look in his eyes just now, when he and Susanna had been leaving, and his refusal to properly look at her?

She blinked, then sniffed. “It’s quite all right, Papa. Just a shock, that’s all. Nat hadn’t mentioned Miss Parker in his letters.”

Rachel rapidly crossed the vestibule and rushed up the stairs, calling over her shoulder, "I'll be back in the kitchen in a moment, should you need me."

She ran into her bedroom, took the coin from her pocket, and flung it into the top drawer of her bureau. "Don't care if I never set eyes on you again, Honorius, nor on Mister Nathaniel Barrett, for that matter!"

* * *

Nonetheless Rachel suffered the exhaustive ministrations of Mayhew as she dressed her hair that evening.

Her mother didn't bombard her with her usual criticisms, but was kindness itself, insisting Rachel wear the new rose silk taffeta gown and her late grandmother's pewter necklace. She even helped Mayhew finish styling Rachel's hair, all the while muttering, "I don't know what has come over Nathaniel. I can tell you, Mr Lawson wasn't impressed with the chit. And little more than three weeks to the wedding! Indecent haste. You mark my words, Rachel, she's befuddled the boy."

There was a blessed pause in Lady Octavia's diatribe before she added, "Or worse!"

Rachel wrinkled her brow. "What *do* you mean, Mother?"

She saw, in the mirror, Mayhew and Lady Octavia exchange knowing looks. "Wait and see, my girl. Wait and see."

* * *

Though a warm late spring evening, they took the closed carriage the short distance to the Barrett estate. Rachel sat opposite her parents. Her father wore his usual clerical garb, but her mother was magnificently gowned in dark blue silk, her silver-blonde hair beautifully dressed. Sapphires adorned her throat.

Not for the first time, Rachel wished she had her mother's looks, and not her father's. How fortunate for Constance to take after their mother's side of the family. Not that Rachel had really minded. Not until today.

She took stock of her appearance. Hair, good. Russet, so far from fashionable, but it was glossy and thick. Complexion, freckled. Well, *slightly*

freckled. Apart from that, not too bad but, again, not fashionably pale. Eyes, big and brown with decent lashes, framed by brows that were quite acceptable. Figure? Hmm. Everything appeared in order, though she could hardly be described as small and delicate, like a certain baggage.

At the thought of Susanna and Nathaniel, and the evening ahead, her stomach churned. Even Mama had said they needn't attend the dinner if Rachel didn't care to. It wasn't too late to send their regrets.

So Mama, too, hadn't been blind to her feelings for Nat. Had she really been so transparent in her regard for him? Rachel had heard raised voices coming from Papa's study and knew, just knew from the affronted tones of Mama's comments, that she must have been aware of Rachel's regard for Nat all along.

She couldn't deny Mama the evening. She was avid for details, it seemed, and wouldn't really be satisfied until she'd seen Miss Parker for herself.

Their coach passed between the manor's gateposts and proceeded up the drive, and Rachel steeled herself for the ordeal ahead.

* * *

The vicarage was no humble home, but the Barretts' Tudor manor house, given to Nat's merchant father as part of Lady Mary's dowry, was a palace by comparison. Not that Mr Barrett wanted for wealth in his own right. Rachel alighted from the carriage and bleakly trailed behind her parents to the open front doors of Neelbury Manor.

Once divested of their light cloaks in the entrance hall, servants ushered them into the large dining room, where fires blazed in the two huge fireplaces, despite the mildness of the weather. Mr and Mrs Barrett, followed by Nathaniel and Susanna, came forward to greet them. Rachel was relieved to see that the dining table was set for about thirty people, and that an elderly couple she knew socially, Sir Harry Evans and his wife, Dame Emily, were already present.

Lady Octavia had never warmed to the second Mrs Barrett—not surprising given that Lady Mary had been her dearest friend, and that barely fifteen months after her demise Mr Barrett had suddenly married the woman who became Nat and Marianne's stepmother.

Rachel had long thought Mrs Barrett a cold fish, preoccupied with churning out half-brothers and sisters for Nat and Marianne—eight at last count. Always distant and aloof with her two stepchildren, she seemed equally detached from her own brood. She had a somewhat mysterious background—father a merchant who traded with Russia and northern Europe and was himself the son of a Russian emigré, and mother reputed to have been a member of a czarina’s court.

Still, perhaps she was a perfect match for Mr Barrett, who’d remained as remote as he’d been on that awful day when he’d returned from the estate of Lady Mary’s parents to tell Nat and Marianne of the deaths of their mother and baby sister from smallpox. Rachel and her sister Constance had been hastily dispatched home to the vicarage, and Rachel still remembered his icy demeanour as he sent them on their way.

“Lawson, Lady Octavia, Rachel—good of you to come at such short notice.” Mr Barrett shook the hand of Rachel’s father and nodded to Rachel and her mother. Mrs Barrett gave the three of them an all-encompassing nod, and a thin smile.

Nat propelled Susanna forward. “Lady Octavia, may I introduce my fiancée, Miss Susanna Parker.”

Susanna smiled prettily and sketched an imprecise curtsy. “I’m delighted, Lady Octavia. I did so regret missing you this afternoon when we called.”

Lady Octavia blinked at the vision before her. So did Rachel. Susanna was clad once again in a sky-blue silk gown, this one trimmed extravagantly with the finest lace Rachel had ever seen.

And Rachel now realised why Lady Octavia was bristling with barely contained anger.

Susanna wore a necklace of diamonds, and in her elaborately coiffed hair a matching pin. Both pieces of jewellery had belonged to Lady Mary, Rachel remembered. Just how had Susanna been allowed to wear them? Was not Mrs Barrett their rightful owner now? *Her* only ornamentation was a triple-strand pearl collar.

Lady Octavia was too well-bred to remark on Susanna’s jewellery in public but Rachel was certain that strong judgement would be pronounced on the journey home.

Susanna turned her attention to Rachel's father. "Mr Lawson, I think we will be great friends. With my own dear father and one of my brothers members of the clergy, I'm sure we have much in common."

Rachel's father murmured something unintelligible in reply.

"Dear Rachel. You must tell me all there is to know about my wonderful Nathaniel. You must inform me of all his little foibles and habits."

Nathaniel smiled uneasily and looked anywhere but at Rachel.

He knew. He knew she loved him. Knew she'd expected they'd marry one day and that he'd broken her heart. Did he regret his betrothal to Susanna? Even if he did, it was too late now. Far too late. He was bound to Susanna. She'd lost him. Forever.

* * *

It was not exactly a sparkling dinner, though the food was decent enough. Not as good as the meals served in the vicarage, Rachel thought, but tolerable.

Perhaps that was unfair—she might be dining on the finest food in England and it would still taste like sawdust.

Her companions at table represented the leading lights of the local county set, and their conversations were, for the most part, vacuous, and concerned with the subjects of hunting, fishing, and shooting, none of which interested any of the Lawson family, least of all Rachel.

Mercifully, Susanna and Nathaniel were seated at the other end of the table, which spared Rachel conversing with them, though from time to time Susanna's irritating giggle penetrated the boring conversation Rachel suffered with the young man on her left, the Hon. Cecil Peel, whom she thought a gormless individual with the intelligence of a newt. She'd already endured the inanities of the man on her right, James Mortlock, Esquire, a man well and truly in his dotage.

Hadn't she suffered enough this day?

She caught the eye of her father, seated diagonally opposite her. He winked almost imperceptibly. She smiled back. How fortunate to have such good parents on her side!

But would this interminable evening never end?

* * *

When Mrs Barrett rose to lead the ladies into the drawing room, it was with a sense of foreboding that Rachel pushed back her chair and made her excuses to the tedious gentlemen sitting either side of her. Her apprehension was realised when, with a gay smile that appeared to be for the benefit of the entire company, Susanna approached and looped an arm through Rachel's. Loudly she announced, "I just know we are going to be great friends, and now's the perfect time to become acquainted!"

Rachel looked at Nathaniel, who gave both young women an encouraging smile, though he still wouldn't meet her eyes. Her mother, she noticed, raised her eyebrows, then followed Mrs. Barrett through the double doors held open by two of the footmen.

Reluctantly Rachel allowed herself to be borne along after them by her nemesis.

The drawing room was cosy, panelled in dark wood, with its own fireplace, and furnished with sofas and comfortable chairs. Susanna led Rachel to a two-seater, thereby discouraging anyone else from close proximity, while the other ladies arranged themselves and were kept occupied accepting cups of tea from the servants.

Under cover of the proceedings Susanna withdrew her arm from Rachel's and muttered, "I know you'd set your cap at Nathaniel. Just remember, he's mine now."

Rachel gasped. "What *do* you mean?"

"He takes every opportunity to praise your virtues, you and your family's, but I know he means more to you than any brother. I see it in your eyes. It's as plain as the nose on your face. It's obvious to everyone except Nathaniel, so that's a blessing. Don't try to beguile him. Don't even think of it. I have tied him to me in ways you can't even dream of."

Rachel bit off a retort. She felt heat suffuse her face. Was this creature really saying these words? What *had* Nat got himself into?

She took a deep breath to steady herself. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. He *is* like a brother to me, and a dear friend as well. Nothing more. I'm very happy for you both."

And that's a lie—two lies in fact. Yes, I want him—desperately—but, even more, I feel so sorry for him tying himself to this ruthless young woman. I don't think she loves him. She's in love with his social status and his money. She's bewitched him.

No, she'd trapped him!

The hasty marriage, Susanna's hints, that look exchanged between her mother and Mayhew, Nat's awkward behaviour. She'd seduced him. Hence the reason for Nat's haste in marrying—Susanna was with child, and Nat intended to do the honourable thing.

Susanna looked coldly at Rachel. "Just remember your place. Family friend. Nothing more."

Oh Nat, you stupid man. What have you done?

So much upset today. Not what she'd anticipated just a few days ago, when she'd eagerly awaited his return from Cambridge. How quickly one's world could be overturned and shattered.

Gratefully Rachel accepted a cup of tea from a footman, and busied herself adding sugar and accepting a fondant sweet. Over the rim of her teacup she watched her mother and Mrs Barrett chatting politely to each other. Nobody would ever guess that Lady Octavia disliked Nathaniel's stepmother. So she would endeavour to employ the same politeness towards Susanna. What else could she do?

* * *

Rachel spent the next hour moving about the room, conversing with the other women in an attempt to avoid any further upsetting discussion with Susanna. Dear, ever observant Mama drew both young women into conversation with her and Mrs Barrett. Lady Octavia had noticeably thawed towards Nat's stepmother. The reason was soon evident.

"Rachel dear, Mrs Barrett was just telling me that Mr Barrett lent those beautiful jewels to Susanna for the evening."

Rachel spoke without thinking. "But surely they're yours, Mrs Barrett, to do with as you see fit?"

Mrs Barrett pursed her lips. "As I was telling your mother, I was overruled by Mr Barrett. I suppose that really it's his decision as to what is to be done with them."

"I did ask Mr Barrett, when he showed them to me and said that one day they'd be mine, if I could perhaps wear them this evening. It is, after all, a special occasion," Susanna said.

In an apparent attempt to mollify Susanna, Mrs Barrett added, "They look well on you."

Rachel thought the effect of the jewels, worn together, a little too much, but said, "Quite dazzling, Miss Parker. They suit you." Let her make of that what she will!

Susanna's simper was becoming all too familiar. "Rachel, I beg you once more, please call me Susanna. You should not be so formal."

* * *

When the gentlemen could be enticed away from their conversation over port, they joined the ladies in the drawing room for tea.

Nat meandered towards the two young women, bearing a plate of caraway cake. He appeared a little the worse for wear. Oh dear, Rachel thought, he's drunk rather too much, but at least now he'd the courage to look her in the eye.

"Ladies, may I pass you a slice of this delicious confection?"

Susanna smiled at her fiancé. "Darling Nathaniel, you know I try to keep away from rich treats."

Rachel felt no such compunction. "Looks a lovely cake, Nat. I'll take a piece. By the bye, did you obtain a First up at Cambridge? I'd completely forgotten to ask."

"Oh, we don't want to be discussing such things this evening," said Susanna.

Nat ignored Susanna's interjection. "Actually yes, I did."

For a moment, it was like old times, as Rachel looked into Nat's smiling eyes. "Oh, well done, Nat! I knew you could do it."

"Frankly," said Nat, "a lot of the chaps at Cambridge don't have much inclination for studying. I had to work hard, but not too hard!" He grinned down at her and, as of old, absentmindedly pushed an errant lock of black hair out of his eyes.

So handsome, but mine no more—if he ever was! He belongs to Susanna.

Susanna pouted. "Really, Nathaniel, must you talk of university tonight?"

"But surely, *Susanna*, you and Nat met through university," Rachel said. "It was his acquaintance with your brother, was it not, that saw you become attached?"

Appeased, now she was once more the centre of attention, Susanna inclined her head graciously. "Indeed, you are correct. We owe Cambridge a great deal."

Rachel nodded. "Indeed!" The word almost choked her.

* * *

"Well, I thought Miss Parker wearing dear Mary's jewels was not proper!"

Lady Octavia spoke vehemently, barely seconds after Whatley closed their coach door and took his place on the driver's seat.

"My dear," said Mr Lawson, "it's for Barrett to decide who wears them. He owns the jewels now."

"And his poor wife has been usurped by that miss. I truly felt sorry for Mrs Barrett this evening. I never thought I would say such a thing, but there it is!"

"Surely Marianne has some right to her mother's gems?" Rachel asked. "After all, Lady Mary *was* her mother. Shouldn't they come to her?"

"I do believe," said Lady Octavia, "that dear Mary left them to her husband, in the expectation that when Marianne came of age, they'd be given to her. In the meantime, Mrs Barrett should be entitled to them.

"I had a most interesting conversation with that lady. She is quite upset, she told me, to find that Mr Barrett has enlarged the monument to dear Mary in her family's chapel and he means one day to be buried next to her, and not with the current Mrs Barrett!

"Mrs Barrett has asked me to tea, and I intend to call once that Susanna person takes herself off to London. Mrs Barrett has told me that she feels the need to unburden herself of much that is troubling her."

"Mama, you must go. Poor Mrs Barrett. I didn't realise."

"Yes, do so, my dear," said Mr Lawson. "Even after all these years I have not been able to really acquaint myself with the lady. She has told me that when she's up in London she prefers to attend services at the German Lutheran church and that it's been some time since she's had the opportunity to do so. Apart from that, I know little about her."

"And Miss Parker!" exclaimed Lady Octavia. "She is no match for Nathaniel. Mark my words, it will all end in tears."

“I fear you may be right, my dear. Nathaniel needs someone whose intellect is equal to his. Like our daughter.” Reverend Lawson leaned forward and took Rachel’s hand. “I’m so sorry, Rachel.”

Again, Rachel found herself fighting back tears. Blinking rapidly, she resolved never to cry over Nat again.

“Thank you Papa, thank you Mama. I must get over my disappointment and move on to other things. After all, there are plenty of other eligible and intelligent young men out there.”

With characteristic bluntness her mother replied, “Well, none of them were visible this evening!”

* * *

Rachel was spared further contact with the happy couple for the moment, but two days after the dinner at the Barretts, her sister Constance arrived home in one of the Barrett coaches.

Constance was a person whose diminutive prettiness belied an explosive temper and outgoing personality. She was, in all ways, her mother’s daughter.

As the family gathered in the vestibule to greet her, before so much as embracing any of them she untied her calash bonnet and threw it on the hall table.

“I’ve just called in at the Barretts and stayed for a cup of tea whilst Marianne’s luggage was unloaded, because we had a note from her step-mama about the engagement, and I just *had* to meet that Susanna article before I came home. She’s awful! Such a coy miss. *And* she’s barely sixteen.

“What on earth has possessed Nat? She wants Marianne to go traipsing off to London first thing tomorrow, too, to help her buy folderols and dresses and all sorts of things, using Nat’s money! Poor Marianne hasn’t so much as had a chance to recover from the journey back from her grandparents’. Miss Presumptuous asked me to go to London too. I said I would rather catch rats!”

Lady Octavia moved forward to embrace her youngest daughter. “Oh Constance, you didn’t.”

“Now, now, Constance, you must be more charitable. Why, you’ve only just met Miss Parker.” Reverend Lawson nonetheless patted Constance on

the shoulder, and Rachel could have sworn there was a ghost of a smile about his lips.

“Humph,” said Constance. “Rachel, I think it’s unconscionable what that minx has done—stealing Nat away from you like that.”

“Oh, say what you mean, Constance.” Rachel bent to kiss Constance’s cheek. Was everyone else in this world aware of her true feelings for Nat? How naïve she’d been in thinking that she’d kept those sentiments secret. As Susanna had said, it had been in her eyes for all to see. All except Nat, apparently. Either he’d been blissfully unaware, or he’d chosen to ignore her passion for him.

But then, why his embarrassment? Perhaps it was due to the shortcomings her family perceived in his fiancée? Nat acted as though he was enchanted by Susanna. She seemed to present an accommodating façade to him, most of the time she favoured him with rapt attention, and her beauty was beyond question. Even if he’d been forced into marriage by reason of her being with child, well, he obviously thought marriage to her to be no particular hardship.

So perhaps, after all, he *had* been aware of her, Rachel’s, deep feelings for him, and that particular fact embarrassed him, because he had no wish to reciprocate. If that was the case, if her heart truly was in her eyes, then she had better remedy the situation.

“Well, honestly, Rae, she’s all wrong,” Constance continued. “I could see that she’s quite witless and she pretends to be all helpless and very female, and I know you detest women like that, just as I do.”

“Ah, but men don’t,” said Lady Octavia.

“I should have thought Nat would be able to see through that sort of act,” said Constance.

“He seems totally smitten,” replied Rachel. “And love is blind.”

“Well, I shall never marry,” said Constance. “If a lady has to carry on like that to snare a man...”

“What about young Mr Standish?” asked Reverend Lawson. “He was most disappointed when he called a week ago last Tuesday and found you’d gone away.”

“Oh pooh,” Constance said. “He’s satisfactory enough, I suppose, but he’s only your curate, Papa.”

Reverend Lawson chuckled. “But, my dear, you haven’t had to act the coquette to attract him, have you? He likes you for who you are, though I fear he might change his mind if he could see you in such a temper.”

* * *

Rachel went along to Constance’s bedroom to help her unpack. Following another outburst of indignation from her sister, Rachel managed to steer the conversation onto the safer subject of her holiday with the Duke and Duchess of Treshire, Nat and Marianne’s grandparents. Years before, when Lady Mary had been alive, both young women had spent a weekend with their mother and Lady Mary and Marianne in their mausoleum of a house.

“Has Nyworth changed very much?”

“No, not so much, but Marianne’s grandparents seem frightfully old nowadays. And her Uncle Cyril! He’s a fusty old bachelor, but goodness me, he’s a baby. He goes on and on about his health, and if you so much as sneeze he won’t let you near.”

“Well, with his sister and her baby dying at Nyworth from the smallpox—”

“Yes, but that was years ago. He’s such a melancholic. His brother Edward is much nicer. Edward’s wife is lovely, too, and their little boy. Edward’d make a much better duke than Cyril. But by the look of the old duke, it won’t be long before Cyril’s wearing the coronet.

“Oh, and you should have heard the duke go on when we got word of Nat’s engagement! Said he was silly to marry so young—well he’s only twenty-one, isn’t he? That’s frightfully young, the duke said. He said Nat needed to sow his wild oats, and who on earth was this young woman he was going to marry, whose father’s a mere clergyman?”

“Then he realised what he’d said, and the duchess smoothed things over by saying that there are clergymen and there are clergymen, and that our father is a scion of an old and noble family.

“Then I said well, our mother is the daughter of an earl, and she thought it fine to marry a clergyman, and she was good enough to be their daughter’s great friend—”

“Constance, you *didn’t!*”

“I most certainly did. Anyway, the duke laughed and said he couldn’t think of a better friend for his granddaughter than *me*, and it’s a shame that either you or me weren’t marrying Nat, as he was always talking to his grandparents about the great times he has with us here.”

“Had,” sighed Rachel.

“Oh, I am so cross with that boy!” Constance exclaimed. “Why he couldn’t see what was right under his nose all this time...”

“I quite agree,” said Lady Octavia as she entered the room.

“Mama, please tell Constance to stop,” said Rachel. “It’s no use to keep carrying on this way. Nat has made his decision. It’s done.”

Lady Octavia wearily lowered herself to sit at the end of Constance’s bed. “I had such high hopes for you and Nat.”

“Mama, I truly hadn’t realised—”

“He’s been like one of the family, all these years, but you forget that he has great prospects, and considerable wealth of his own. A fact of which I’m sure Miss Parker is only too aware.”

“It wasn’t his money I was interested in, Mama.” Rachel sat down next to her mother.

“I know, my darling, but it’s something that must be taken into consideration when choosing a husband.”

Constance, busy rummaging inside her chest of drawers, sniffed. “I shall never marry. I couldn’t possibly spend the rest of my life with someone I didn’t love, just because he had pots of money.”

Her mother smiled. “So there’s no chance for Mr Standish?”

Constance, pink-cheeked, turned as she slammed the drawer shut. “Well, he’s poor, Mama! So, taking that fact into consideration, I can’t marry him, either!”

In spite of her heavy heart, Rachel giggled. “Has he asked you?”

Constance blushed an even darker shade of pink. “Well, no. Anyway, Mama, how is it you were allowed to marry Papa? *He’s* only a clergyman.”

“Ah, remember what you said to Nat and Marianne’s grandparents about your papa’s family? He is, after all, the fourth son of a baronet. My parents thought that, with his three brothers all members of the military, there was always the chance the baronetcy might eventually come to him, should they be killed in battle. Fortunately only your Uncle Henry died in the course of his service, so it was not to be. But the belief that one

day I just might possibly be the wife of a baronet was enough to placate my parents when I fell in love with your dear papa, especially after our attempted elopement.”

“Mama?” Agog, Constance sank to the floor.

Rachel turned to her mother in astonishment. “You eloped?”

“I said ‘attempted’, my dears. When I was a mere fifteen years of age, your papa and I tried to flee to Scotland, but my father and two of his men stopped us before we reached Worcester.”

“Mama!” Constance gazed at her mother, enthralled.

“What happened then?” Rachel asked.

“Oh, there was a great to-do.” Their mother laughed. “We were kept apart for over a year, and then our families relented, especially as we were determined to wed. We waited until I was seventeen, and then had a most respectable ceremony, and all was forgiven. Your father’s a good man, and my parents realised it could all have been a great deal worse, so here we are, living in poverty, but I wouldn’t change your father for the world.”

“Surely, Mama, we are not so poor. We live very well, do we not?”

“Your father’s stipend is not very much, my dears, and he’s had little money from his parents. Just a small inheritance. We could live respectably on the stipend and the money that comes to him as a fund holder, but it’s my money, inherited from both my grandmothers, that affords us our little luxuries.

“And you, Constance,” Lady Octavia added, “have done well to appreciate that you won’t bring money to a marriage and that attaching yourself to a penniless curate would be a perilous business.”

She turned again to Rachel. “So now you see why I was so disappointed that Nathaniel chose another. I don’t want you and Constance to have money worries when you wed.”

Lady Octavia put an arm around Rachel’s shoulders and drew her close. “Nat is a fine young man—rather subdued and somewhat lacking in confidence, to be sure—but you have so much in common, not the least all the happy times he’s had here with us. I feel so sad for him. One day he’ll realise that Miss Parker, for all her pretty ways, is not the woman with whom he should be spending the rest of his life. You are right, Constance. Miss Parker is not only intellectually Nat’s inferior, but I worry that her

character is not all it should be. I hope, for the dear boy's sake, I'm proved wrong. She's so very young, and we must make allowances.

“There, that's all I'll say on the matter. We will busy ourselves ordering new gowns for the wedding, which we must endure for appearance's sake. We shall wish them both well, then come home and go on with our lives.”

With the sleeve of her gown, Rachel rubbed at her eyes that had suddenly become damp. “Yes, Mama, we shall.”