

CHAPTER I

ISABELLE



Nearly an entire season had passed, and the balls at Almack's still stole my breath. My head spun, almost as quickly as the couples in the center of the room. The sheer size, the walls that seemed to climb into the sky, the ornate details rising over and above the walls to the curved ceiling, and the gold chandeliers that hung as delicately as the chains around the ladies' necks—all of it overwhelmed my senses, like a beautiful but indulgent bout of drunkenness.

But then.

The shimmer from the golden accents dulled with a single note. I turned to examine the cluster of musicians. Every week, they played on and on, seemingly immune to the spinning room or the glittering gold.

Such a task must have proved tiresome, but music was not meant to sound so mechanical. Nor so dull, so painfully dull. Each note seemed *almost* as measured as the line of women standing beside me. Flawless hair, pinched-pinkened cheeks, and perfect posture—none of those things masked the reality, not truly.

Pretty did not conquer truth, and that truth had taken me an entire London season to confront. Desperation, even when dictated by tradition, did not suit anyone's complexion.

We were on parade, even more so than the one I had witnessed

weeks ago when a naval ship returned to port. I had joined the throngs to witness the heroes, joined to cheer and congratulate them in their service.

This—waiting to be chosen as a dance partner—however, was an entirely different parade, one I recognized as imperative, given my family’s circumstances, yet unforgivably humiliating.

My friend Anna squeezed my hand and whispered in my ear. “Goodness, Isabelle. There, just now, do you see Mr. Rowley?”

I squinted and looked to the entrance, but crowds blocked any view. Almack’s gatherings had an uncanny ability to render me utterly useless. The room’s stuffiness stifled my ability to speak, and any of my attempts appeared as contrived and uncomfortable as the pins digging into the back of my scalp. How had society ever deemed such a display acceptable—men glancing over ladies as if they were pieces in an art gallery?

Emotion cracked against my throat. Unfair or not, I had volunteered to be a part of this; I had begged for Mama and Papa to send me. A London season had been my one wild card, my one chance to improve my prospects and those of my younger sisters.

“So many handsome gentlemen here tonight.” Anna nudged me. One of her dark brows lifted. Her blue dress matched her eyes with astounding accuracy, a lovely contrast with the brown spirals framing her porcelain skin. “Perhaps you shall not go home empty handed.”

I sneered involuntarily, cringing when I inhaled too deeply. The overheated room stunk of far too many perfumes, perfumes that hardly worked to mask the horrid odors of perspiration. “Yes,” I said, schooling my features. I did not believe even a word coming out of my mouth, not anymore. “If Providence wills it so, I shall yet receive my own offer.”

Mr. Rowley’s blond curls bounced above the crowd, and I released a sigh. My last hope of success lay on that man’s shoulders. If Mr. Rowley were to offer for me, my answer would be a certain *yes*. Not because I loved him—goodness, no—but because I could not find fault in his company nor his looks. Rich, handsome, kind, and bearable. My girlish notions of romance had been swept away, piece by piece, with every ball, musicale, or dinner I had attended.

Anna lifted an arm with the music, and the swaying movement held as much grace as a Grecian statue. She locked eyes with a gentleman, and her lips spread into a beguiling smile. “Isabelle, I do hope you will forgive me if I abandon you to dance with...”

Her voice trailed as the gentleman in question bowed before her. “Miss Somerville, may I claim this next set?”

Anna tilted her head, as if considering. She knew her power, though she hardly needed it. Family money and absurdly lovely looks were enough to catch a husband. “I would be delighted, Mr. Giles.”

I released a slow breath, watching as the pair of them threaded toward the dance floor.

How did Anna do it? She had already procured two proposals but continued to entertain others. How could anyone truly enjoy being in that position? More perplexing, why did her mother, Mrs. Somerville, allow Anna to postpone answering the gentlemen?

I bit my lip when the answer came.

Money.

Money took away the worry and necessity of a quick and advantageous match. Anna would marry well, no doubt, but she held the power to choose when and how. I spun my thumbs; I did not have such luxury. Worse, I had two younger sisters to consider. If I failed, how would they ever marry well?

“Miss Kinsley, you are simply glowing tonight.”

The sight of Mr. Rowley shook me from self-pity. His green eyes swept over me with an admiration that would have caused most ladies to blush. I, unfortunately, had proven a poor excuse of a lady. Such glances did not unnerve me. I managed a smile. “Mr. Rowley, how kind you are. I wondered if I might see you here tonight.”

He took my hand, kissing it carefully before bowing. “My attendance was never a question, not when you are leaving London in a week.”

“Yes. I will miss your friendship greatly.” Would I? I hardly knew if I would think twice of him, despite his handsome features. “And you? Will you remain in London this summer?”

He dropped my hand, with what appeared to be great reluctance. “That is to be decided.”

I swallowed before wiping a sweaty palm against the side of my dress, a dress Anna had given me after wearing out the back hem from dancing. Even with the worn hem, the silk dress was finer than most of the ladies' in the room. The fabric hugged my figure in a flattering and fashionable way, though I did not fool many with my fraudulent appearance. The power of the tongue far outweighed that of beauty, and my country-physician father seemed too much of an obstacle to overcome when it came to attracting a man of wealth and character.

"Blast, Miss Kinsley. London, or any other place, will never be as lovely and enjoyable without you." His brows arched into a single peak, the top rising above his Roman nose. "I would relive the entire season if it meant spending it with you again."

I flinched. I was not too proud to hope my assertions wrong. "Oh?"

He nodded, glancing at me with marked intensity. Mr. Rowley had always paid me particular attention, but he had never hinted at anything serious, not until this moment.

Heat did not grace my cheeks, and my chest was as hollow as before. Yet, I determined to try. Juliet and Charlotte deserved that. "The season must come to a close, but our friendship need not."

He took my hand once more, but this time the movement felt abrupt, urgent. He tightened his fingers around mine and leaned his head to my ear. "Oh, Miss Kinsley, I would wish nothing more in all eternity."

I trembled and tried to swallow once more, but my tongue—like my lips to my teeth—clung to the roof of my dry mouth. Anticipation heightened my senses. The hope of relief, like a long-awaited bath after a day at the beach watching boats coming in and out of Bridlington, seemed possible. I had longed for this moment, prayed for it, begged for it.

"Mr. Rowley," I managed, returning his hand with a squeeze of my own, "you are much too kind, much too good to me."

He pulled back. Moisture collected in his eyes, but then he dropped my hand and retreated. "You mustn't say such things, or you will pain me more than I already am."

I blinked, over and over. Had he not just hinted at his affection?

The hope from a minute earlier disappeared, and nausea made an appearance instead. Mr. Rowley would not offer.

He sniffled and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, his features set to stone. “Did Miss Somerville accompany you tonight?”

“Anna?” I asked, still blinking blankly.

He dipped his chin. “There is a matter I must discuss with her.”

I gestured toward the dance floor, suddenly aware of what was to come. “I am afraid she is occupied at the moment.”

Mr. Rowley ran a hand through his curls. “Perhaps I shall not lose you forever, Miss Kinsley, not if I can contrive a way.”

I choked on my next breath, watching him disappear toward the pairs of dancing persons, and my chest rattled at the sight. I was no Anna—*that* fact was certain. I did not possess the same social gifts, the same impeccable ability to read or influence another. However, I had thought myself better than to fall prey to a weak man’s confessions. Or, was it my own frail imaginations that had inhibited all rationale?

Mr. Rowley did not mean to offer for me; he never had intended to. Worse, he had insinuated offering for my friend to ensure our continued association. Was I no different to him than a woman at a brothel? That fact sent a wave of disgust coursing through me. I stumbled backward until I found an empty seat along the wall.

Almost as quickly as I fell to the cushioned seat, a set of maternal figures sprang across the room in my direction. I swallowed hard and straightened my back, preparing myself. There was no rest for the wicked, and, apparently, I had been wicked, for another inquisition was about to begin.

My mother reached my side remarkably quickly, further evidenced by her labored breaths. Her chest heaved as she leaned over me, and a strand of silver blonde hair fell over one of her blue eyes. Sometimes, the sight of my mother was enough to unnerve me. Peering into her face seemed like a crystal ball, transporting me to my future self. Thank goodness I had my father’s brown eyes.

Mama whispered between a plastered smile. “Isabelle, why are you not standing? The gentlemen won’t even see you in this corner. Stand. You must.”

Aunt Susan shook her head, and her enormous purple feathers

mimicked her irritated movement. Her eyes were larger than plums but considerably less enticing. In fact, I rather wished to pluck them out from her impudent expression. At least Mama pretended a smile. The scowl lines around Aunt Susan's mouth ran as deep as canyons. "Would you expect more from Isabelle? She has given up entirely, I tell you. Such a waste."

Mama swatted Aunt Susan's arm. "I won't hear such things. Isabelle will yet make a match. Mr. Braithewaite has been asking for her all evening. I have it from good authority that he has something to ask you, Isabelle—something that will ensure you a match. Tomorrow morning, he shall call."

My stomach stirred, bubbling in a sickening way. She could not mean what I supposed. Three meetings hardly made for a proposal. "Speak to me?"

"Yes." Her head bobbed up and down in an excited manner.

The more-mature-in-years Mr. Braithewaite had an unnerving smile, a smile that severely tempted my patience. I had managed politeness in our sparse meetings, but my manners threatened to give way. If Mr. Braithewaite had possessed even a flicker of charm, he would have married years earlier. He was plenty rich.

Some married for less, much less, and to one even more odious. Marriage was an economic proposition, and a husband, Mama claimed, might be avoided as easily as a squeaky step.

But, oh, how I detested squeaky stairs.

"Well, now," Aunt Susan said, lifting her nose in the air, "I had not known Isabelle to have caught Mr. Braithewaite's attention. I have hardly seen the man. Has he called often?"

"No." I wrapped my arms around my middle. "He has not called often. Twice at most, both of which were endured in utter silence and unparalleled discomfort."

Mama sat beside me, placing her hand on my knee. "Silence is preferable to that of insufferable nonsense. Rather, Mr. Braithewaite speaks when it matters, dear. Besides, the man has his pick of wife amidst the entire *ton*."

I rather doubted Mr. Braithewaite had his pick of the *ton*. Anna would never have accepted him. She would have laughed in his face.

Envy crept into my cheeks, heating them in a way I wished I could temper.

Aunt Susan puffed out a breath, smiling in her ridiculous, amused way. “What I would have done for a silent husband. Edmund did not stop chirping in my ear, and he continues to, even from his grave.”

Most fortunate Uncle Edmund, to have escaped Aunt Susan and familial pressure in one final flutter of his eyes. I cringed, wriggling my nose. I was rushing headlong into the same ‘til-death-do-us-part predicament, if I could stomach the idea of Mr. Braithewaite, and already I looked forward to my uncle’s fate.

That did not bode well, not at all.

“Just think of Juliet and Charlotte, Isabelle.” Mama’s eyes gleamed with emotions.

I exhaled, forcing a smile. My love for my sisters could sustain a lifetime of misery. They deserved more than a country fisherman to wed.

Mama wafted her fan and grinned once more. “We shall owe it all to you.”

Biting my tongue was all I could manage in response.