



BONUS CHAPTER

BRINGING DOWN THE DUKE



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Chapter 8



“Your Grace. It appears that Miss Archer... is gone.”

“Gone,” Sebastian repeated, confounded. He stood next to his desk, his left arm still formally behind his back, having anticipated his butler to be in company of Miss Archer when the man entered his study.

The harried expression from an hour ago had returned to Bonville’s long face. He had failed at a perfectly simple task: to bring Miss Archer to the study so that Sebastian could make his apology.

“We found a note,” said Bonville awkwardly. “On the vanity table in Miss Archer’s room.”

“A note.” Sebastian frowned - he was beginning to sound like a parrot.

“Your Grace.” Bonville held out the small silver tray he was clutching with the fingertips of both hands. Rather too surprised by Miss Archer’s unexpected absence, Sebastian hadn’t paid tray and note much attention. Until now. He crossed the rug in two strides and took the letter. It was unsealed, a neatly folded square of thin paper with a few hastily scrawled lines. A scholarly penmanship, missing aesthetic appeal but very functional. The inverse of the author of this note – Miss Archer was supremely easy on the eye but seemed to lack all rational faculties. She hadn’t just left her room. She had left Claremont. On foot. Alertness shot through Sebastian hot like an electric current, and his lips pressed together to hold back a curse.

“I assume Miss Archer did not have a coach readied for her departure,” he said, only because the possibility of her successfully ordering his staff around seemed fractionally less outlandish than her just... walking away.

Bonville shook his head. “No, Your Grace.”

“Have the other ladies returned? Lady Catriona and Miss Greenfield?”

Another shake. “The ladies are still out riding in the park with Lord Peregrin.”

Peregrin. The root of this mess. Well. Not all of it. His unhinged brother might have brought Miss Archer onto the premises, but it had been he, Sebastian, who had misjudged the situation and had spoken to the young woman rather too harshly in any case. He hadn’t quite been himself; a vague yet visceral annoyance had spread from the pit of his stomach when he had (wrongly) concluded that Miss Archer was his brother’s paramour. This had coloured their entire exchange in the library. He had *felt* something when she had mocked him, when her impertinence and unfavourable judgement shouldn’t have affected his mood.

However, the final decision in this chain of foolish decisions that normally preceded a disaster had been Miss Archer’s: she had left, and was now out there, alone, in the heaviest snowfall recorded in decades. A walking liability on his property, and a hazard to herself. To think that she could have remained warm and safe in her room and *not* cause him trouble...

He took a deep breath.

“She is on her way to Hawthorn,” he told Bonville, holding up the note between his fingers. “Tell Stevens to send someone to fetch her. Someone competent, on horseback,” he clarified, because the last thing he now needed was more misunderstandings resulting in a delay in Miss Archer’s retrieval. In a few hours, the sun would begin to set. Would the snow-covered dirt road even be visible to someone unfamiliar with the estate?

Bonville had hesitated infinitesimally, clearly keen to ask a question.

“Since Madam set out into the wild without a chaperone,” Sebastian said dryly, “I assume Madam might have no compunctions about letting my staff guide her back to Claremont without a chaperone.”

Bonville bowed. “Sending a scout out at once, your Grace.”

The silence following Bonville’s departure was briefly deafening. It felt weighty, too, like guilt. Not an emotion Sebastian knew well. He rarely mis-stepped, or so he liked to think, and when he did, he owned it and corrected the matter. But an apology would only correct the offence he had caused Miss Archer, and not the equally bothersome fact that he had allowed a stranger to affect his behaviour. One of the first skills a man in a public position acquired was immunity to external influences, for if he were to allow the opinions of inconsequential people or even the important ones to affect him, he might as well never leave his bed. It must have been the travel fatigue – the recent journey from the Bretagne was still heavy like lead in his bones. It had made him irritable.

Miss Archer’s face hovered before his mind’s eye, a striking composition of gentle lines and precise angles, but what he remembered most clearly now were the faint hollows beneath her cheekbones. Was it tiredness? She had a steely bearing but was hardly sturdy. And yet she had left. On foot. He rubbed his temples. What was wrong with her? She was either shockingly impulsive, or too proud; willing to cut off her nose to spite her face. Both options were equally unappealing. He gave a shake. Whether Miss Archer was appealing should not preoccupy him.

He settled back behind his desk, into the crunching dark leather of his chair; a place where he was the one in charge of the surprises. Besides, a rather large pile of correspondence had accumulated during his forty-eight-hour stay in France, and he wouldn’t have much time to sift through it. Even if Miss Archer had managed to keep to the road to Hawthorn, she could have hardly gone far. He would not have to wait long for her safe return.

The knock on his study door came far later than expected.

He put down his pen. “Enter,” he said, his cold tone masking whatever emotions he might feel.

“Bonville,” he then said, noting that again, his butler stood very, very alone in the doorsill.

“There has been a complication,” Bonville announced, red in the face.

“She’s missing,” Sebastian said, his chest suddenly feeling cold, too.

“No,” said Bonville, “not quite. I understand she had been found.”

He stared, and Bonville cleared his throat. “She is still on her way to Hawthorn. Apparently, she refuses to return.”

At first, that statement made no sense. One did not simply refuse his orders.

Travel fatigue. He must be very fatigued.

“I see,” he said. He came abruptly to his feet. It seemed he had to pay a visit to the stables.



“She was immovable, your Grace.” The allegedly competent scout, a red-haired groom-gardener by name of McMahan, was crushing his cap between nervous fingers. Head groom Stevens stood next to him, his weathered face set in stone for he was the one who had chosen McMahan for the mission. The horses in the boxes near them sensed the tension and were disturbing the sweet, dusty air with agitated scraping and snorting.

Sebastian looked the young man in the eye. “Did you make it clear that it was I who had asked for her return?”

“Yes, very clear, your Grace,” said McMahan, blushing beneath his freckles. “It made her all the more determined to keep walking.”

Steven’s right hand twitched by his side, as if he had felt the impulse to slap the back of McMahan’s red head.

“Did it now,” Sebastian drawled.

McMahan nodded rapidly. “She seemed to swell in size, growing taller by an inch or two and her eyes became all fierce. She was so terribly... womanish. There was no proper way of handling that, your Grace –” He bit his tongue when he noticed Steven’s heated glare drilling into his neck.

Sebastian released McMahan from the situation with a nod. The lad was no match for Miss Archer, but who was? She seemed to have a habit of defying dukes every time she encountered one. And this included encounters that took place by proxy.

“Stevens,” he said, grimly amused. “Ready my horse – the stallion. And another, a docile one, with a side-saddle.”

He would find her. Handle it. And return with her to Claremont. No matter how fierce the look in her green eyes.



The cold burn of the headwind made his eyes water, and the road was visible only because McMahan’s horse had cut a path through the snowdrifts. It still took more than four miles until a lone figure appeared against the white sheet that was Wiltshire – she had walked that far. She was currently advancing up the hill near the old crofter’s cottage. His heart began pounding in rhythm with the stallion’s hooves as he drew closer.

She had reached the hilltop by the time he could make out the mahogany coil of her hair peeking from beneath her hat. A hat! Why not a fur-lined bonnet?

She must have heard or even seen him coming, for she had come to a halt, but she was awaiting the inevitable with her back turned to him, as motionless as if frozen in place. The behaviour of toothless, clawless prey when discovered. He knew she was anything but. He thundered past in a cloud of snow dust, then came to a sharp stop in front of her, a deliberate move that blocked her path with a wall of stomping, steaming muscle. Just in case she tried to impulsively run from him, which would only embarrass them both.

When she rose from her curtsy, she shot him an assessing look from beneath her lashes and it went all the way to his core. Only now he noticed how hard his pulse drummed in his throat. He felt the warm

sheen of sweat on his back. The cool touch of winter air on his brow. He blatantly returned her scrutiny. Her nose and cheeks were ruddy, one icy breeze away from frost bite. Her stupid hat was askew. And her coat – well, hell, it could barely call itself that; even in its hay days the now faded, patchy thing would have offered lousy protection in current conditions. A flicker of dark frustration heated his chest. His stallion danced beneath him, riled by his black mood. He reined both of them in.

“Good afternoon, Miss Archer.” He kept his tone deceptively idle. “Now, what exactly were you hoping to achieve with this?”

He drew a circle around her and the snowy path with his index finger.

She glanced up at him with guarded eyes. “I’m following your orders, Your Grace,” she said coolly. “The road permits travel, so I left your house.”

Right. The march, the snowdrifts, and two large horses barricading her way, had done nothing to curb her recalcitrance. In truth, she was crackling with barely checked determination, as if she had another five miles and at least one more take-down of an overbearing aristocrat in her. His unyielding streak tipped his hat to her persistence. The same part of him wanted to rise to the challenge and win.

“And as you could have safely assumed, I was referring to travel by coach, not on foot,” he suggested.

The corner of her soft mouth twitched. “I wouldn’t dare to make assumptions about your orders, Your Grace.”

“So had I made myself very, very clear, that it precluded travel on foot, you would have stayed put?” he shot back, and he could see the wheels turning behind her eyes as she weighed her answers, weighed whether to lie or be bratty to his face, until she finally chose to press her lips into a line and say nothing at all.

He nodded. He had not expected it to be easy. He did not *need* it to be easy to succeed. He swung from the saddle and approached her.

Her chin tipped up, and her body stiffened as though she had literally dug in her heels to hold her ground. A display of bravado that gave away her apprehension, and the knot he had carried in his chest since reading her note loosened. Still, he planted himself a mere foot from her, his shoulders tight with lingering annoyance.

“I would never order a woman to walk anywhere,” he said, “so mount up, if you please.” He pointed the riding crop he still held in his hand at the spare horse.

She eyed the animal with a wariness as if it were a scaly dragon and not the sweetest gelding in his stable.

“I will reach Hawthorne in an hour, Your Grace.”

“You won’t,” he said, thinking of the miles still ahead of her, “but it will be dark, and you will be ill. You might also lose a few toes,” he added, for her boots were undoubtedly as useless as her coat.

Miss Archer’s chin rose again. “I appreciate your concern— ”

“I will not have a woman come to harm on my land,” he cut her off, because the very thought of such a thing repulsed him. “Concern plays no part in it.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I have no desire to come to harm, merely to get to Hawthorne.”

Christ. “You are putting pride above your safety, ma’am.”

She visibly gritted her teeth. No doubt to stop some insult from flying out. Or to keep them from chattering.

Unaffected be damned. “Get onto the horse,” he ordered in a tone that would make people jump.

“I prefer not to, Your Grace,” came the prompt reply. “It’s huge.”

His fingers tightened around his riding crop and tapped it against his boot, because giving in to the mad impulse to grab and hoist her over his shoulder was not an option. *Yet*.

Miss Archer’s gaze flitted between the crop and his face. “There’s an inn in Hawthorne where I plan to stay,” she said quickly, “and— ”

“And then word gets around that I cast my guests out into the cold?” he said, disturbed by the realization that she might fear the crop in his hand. “Certainly not. You are not even wearing a proper coat.”

She looked down her front as though she was seeing herself for the first time. “It’s a most regular coat?”

“And utterly useless for an eight-mile march in these conditions.” His unease had sharpened his voice, when he knew that the most gentle tone was required to put her at ease. How little experience he had with this type of negotiation, where he wanted to right his mistake, but the opposing party had left the arena; where the opposing party was considered his inferior by every rule book in existence, but they didn’t seem to give a toss about the rules. Where the opponent’s gaze made him aware of his body beneath the protective layers of his coat; the sweat on his skin; his breath expanding his lungs, still a little too fast; and this tension in his chest and stomach that refused to lift even now when he had found her. In fact, it seemed to be getting worse.

She was assessing him again this moment, from his shoulders down to his boots. Realizing that of course she was no match for him physically. He pictured the scene if she were to try to dash past him, and him lunging for her almost on instinct like a hound after a fox, and them grappling in their snow-caked clothes like foes or lovers in some Shakespearean drama – or comedy, who could tell at this point – and it was becoming altogether ridiculous. And perhaps, just like sometimes one had to fight fire with fire, the only antidote to ridiculousness was something more ridiculous.

“Very well,” he said. He took off his hat. “It is not the appropriate setting,” he added, noting the puzzled frown on her face, “but it appears that we will be here a while.”

He tucked the hat under his arm and met her eyes, just as he would have in the formal and sane surroundings of his study. “Miss Archer, I apologize for handling our last encounter in an overly highhanded manner. Please do me the honor of staying at Claremont until the party concludes tomorrow.”

The immediate sense of a burden lifting from his chest confirmed that this had been the right thing to do.

Miss Archer, however, was quiet. Her face had gone still, too, the expression in her eyes so blank, it would take a lifetime to decipher.

For a beat, he wondered if he had said it wrong. He did apologize when required, but it rarely happened. In fact, as he stared into the beautiful, unreadable face before him, with the soft howl of the winter breeze in his ears, he could not recall with certainty the last time he had said “I apologize.”

But in this case, he had known that he had wronged her even before he had realized her true identity. He had known in the library by way of his instincts stirring, the subtle flutter in his gut, but he had let his head and what had seemed obvious facts overrule the warning. Her words had lacked all decorum, but her posture had been straight and open, and righteous outrage had burnt at the back of her eyes during their little exchange. She had displayed the kind of reckless courage that sprung from deeply wounded dignity, and it had made some of the things he had said sound petty to his own ears. There had never been a question that he would apologize. He just hadn't expected the humbling twist of having to do it entirely on her terms, on a hill, with his face freezing off.

Miss Archer remained as silent and enigmatic as a sphinx. He raised a brow, a question rather than a prompt.

She shifted on her feet. "Why?" she asked softly, avoiding his eyes. "Why would you invite a woman like me into your home?"

A woman such as yourself. Well yes, he had been a highhanded prig. He'd stop short at saying that out loud, though.

"I won't have any woman come to harm on my estate," he said. "And our earlier conversation was based on a misunderstanding. It is clear that my brother is quite safe from you."

Her gaze jerked to meet his, then dropped to the ground; it seemed it was her turn to cringe, and he immediately recognized his mistake. She must have jumped to the wrong conclusion, that he had shared the deeply embarrassing incident with his brother. *Behold, one of the queen's greatest negotiators, and he cannot stop himself from digging this enormous hole.*

"No one told me," he said.

"That's reassuring," she murmured, not sounding assured at all. The apology had done something to her, it had in fact taken the wind from her sails so entirely that her usually proud posture looked a little deflated. This did not sit right with him, either, so he smiled reassuringly, at least he hoped he was, aware that his intended expressions always felt much more pronounced on the inside compared to how they actually appeared on his face.

"It was plain deductive reasoning," he said, "logic, if you will."

"That's a sound method," Miss Archer acknowledged. Her stance had relaxed a little, and her eyes were... neither hostile nor mortified. Such progress.

He pounced. "You made it perfectly clear that you weren't in the market for a duke," he said. "It follows that my younger brother would be rather out of the question for you."

She blinked. A look of tentative intrigue came over her, and he might have held his breath. And, finally, very carefully, she said: "But wouldn't that be inductive reasoning, Your Grace?"

Their gazes locked, and a sense of recognition went through his body warm like a sunray after a stormy day.

He wondered why on earth he had approached the matter so disastrously wrong. She wasn't an opponent. She didn't want to be out here in the cold, she didn't want to be up against someone who by any natural order should never be up against her, and she probably preferred being with her friends at Claremont to being out of pocket, alone, in an inn. They wanted the same things, and still he had approached the situation like an amateur. It was as though his negotiating instincts were broken when it came to her. He supposed a wholly different strategy could be applied, and if he'd rather not call that approach flirting, he could easily call it scholarly banter.

“Deductive, I’m sure,” he said smoothly.

It was oddly satisfying to watch her piece it together in a blink. *Deductive, I’m sure*. Implying that he viewed the premise that a woman would always prefer a duke over any other man as a natural law.

Miss Archer pursed her lips at his arrogance. “Of course,” she muttered.

This time, his smile came from the depths of him, catching him off guard.

She seemed surprised, too.

Her attention moved to his mouth. And lingered.

A hot sensation washed over his nape, as if she had brazenly touched her fingertip to his lips. He was aware how he pushed out his chest and stood a little taller. He couldn’t have stopped himself from doing it if he tried, it was the natural response of a man when he felt himself inspected by a woman he found beautiful. The question of whether she appealed was thus answered with the boom of a thunderclap – she appealed.

The realization was over in a second. The dazed feeling remained. He had preened, for *her*.

“I can’t return with you,” Miss Archer said; sobering words, but her firm voice was plainly at odds with the heated confusion in her eyes. *She had felt it, too*. “I don’t know how to ride,” she added.

Oh. “Not at all?” he asked.

“Not on a side-saddle.” A blush turned her windburn scarlet.

“I see.” That problem, he could solve. He sprang into action; turned and clicked his tongue, and his stallion stopped nosing at the snow and trotted over with the spare mount trailing along. “You will ride with me,” he said, reaching for the reins again.

Her finely arched brows pulled together. “Is that another jest, Your Grace?”

What? “I don’t jest,” he said, sounding faintly appalled. Preening was bad enough.

Miss Archer had moved out of his reach, resistance plain on her face. Unfortunately for her, he never went back to square one.

She nervously brushed a curl back behind her ear. “It seems unsafe,” she said.

Didn’t it just.

“I’m a good horseman,” he said. He wedged the crop beneath the stirrup. It was unusual to have her on the horse with him, impossible by his standards, actually, but it was the fastest way to bring this unusual episode to its conclusion and he felt a restless urgency to return to regular protocol.

Miss Archer, too, was looking ready to run. The other way. Again.

He shot her a dark look. “Come here.”

Incredibly, she moved toward him then, as if he had tugged at her bodily, and he didn’t miss a beat—he took her elbow and turned her, unintentionally crowding her back against his horse.

A mistake. She was so close. They were almost chest to chest. It would take a deep breath, an inch of leaning in, to touch. His body heated as though he had stepped too close to a fire. But when a sweet, floral scent teased his nose, he breathed her in.

“Near instant compliance, Miss Archer?” he murmured, his body humming from the tension of toeing Rubicon lines. “You must be feeling the cold after all.”

Silence, except for the soft, rushed sound of her breath passing her lips. He must not think of her lips, or how she had looked at his. But she held him in his gaze and was watching him as though he was entirely new to her, and it was impossible to look away from her upturned face. It did not help that she kept staring back into his eyes, as if she meant for his gaze to sink into the green depths without caution and to explore all that lay beyond.

His jaw clenched. “Your teeth are chattering,” he said, and they were. “This is ridiculous.”

His hand went to the top button of his coat, and she froze. So did he, his hand suspended in midair. The truth of the situation now stood as glaringly loud between them as a circus sign; that saving her from freezing to death was appropriate, but offering chivalry, flirtation, and deep, long gazes was not.

Yes, he thought, his instincts were broken around her, except the most basic ones. It was as though under the clear open skies, all rule books had been ripped to shreds and what remained were a man and a woman, looking eye to eye on the oldest, most lawless playing field of humankind. It might have been *over in a second*. But it only took a second for a grenade to explode, for the ground to shift, for a life to change. A second was usually nothing, but once in a while, it was the point of no return. Miss Archer had turned from a random shrew with a pretty mouth to an appealing, mystifying woman, wholly unique in a world teeming with people.

However, she was not his woman to protect. She was not his to explore. Normally, he was not even to speak to her. And *normal* would begin again right now.

He took off his scarf with stiff fingers. “Take this.” His voice was rough. He was on edge, and she seemed to sense it. The scarf was taken without resistance.

He manoeuvred her into position without looking at her and put all the tension he felt into lifting her into the saddle. She appeared unbalanced up there, nervously clutching fistfuls of shiny white mane. Blimey. A toddler would sit better. He mounted up behind her quickly.

“Allow me.” He slid an arm around her waist and pulled her snug against his chest. A necessary safety measure. He could block out the fact that she felt like a perfect armful to him, and that holding her so close felt... right. Decency alone demanded that he did not think of her in such a way at all, certainly not as long as she was literally in his clutches.

As they set off, he seated himself properly, shifting his left leg to get a proper grip, and he heard her gasp. “Wait, please,” came her muffled voice.

He reined in the horse. “What is it?”

“Please take me to the village, Your Grace, to the inn. It’s a much shorter ride.”

He considered it, he did. He imagined her staying at the inn, alone, and moving on to Oxford, alone. The truth was, he had no right to keep her from doing exactly that. She was her own woman, and they were barely more than strangers. She shivered in his arms, then; he felt it through layers of clothing because she was leaning into his embrace rather than away from him, and his hold on her tightened mindlessly like a reflex.

Normal would begin again back at Claremont.

“Too late now,” he said. He spurred the horse into a gallop.