

Chapter One

Adeline

Della was certain of only one thing - that while she wandered around in the dark, she was becoming more and more lost. Mud squelched in her boots, making audible, disgusting sounds, and the hem of her dress was caked in mud. She stopped in the road, uncertain if she should continue. Every bone in her body ached, and not just in physical pain. The strain of the last few days had worn her patience to the bone. She was angry, exhausted, and not in the mood to be wandering aimlessly in the dark. So in the end, she turned around.

Della sighed deeply and pushed back a dark strand from her forehead. *Squelch, squelch* went her boots as she marched back to the Red Crown.

The Red Crown had been her appointed resting place for the night, before she decided to try to find the Hall on her own. She had no traveling companions, which while improper for a young lady of nineteen, didn't bother Della in the slightest. She opened the creaky inn door. Thankfully, the parlor was mostly empty. The man washing dishes looked up at her arrival. He nodded at her, smirking to himself as he returned to the glass he was drying. He was the owner of the Red Crown, and he had warned her against going out after dark. Of course, she hadn't listened.

Della tried not to let the balding man and his smirk irritate her. She had many other things on her mind. Heaving a heavy sigh, she sank into a soft brown armchair. The inn had seemed like a prison before, but now it was a respite. Grateful that the room was devoid of any onlookers, Della closed her eyes and propped her feet on a stool in front of the fire, warming her aching toes.

After a few moments, she felt someone's gaze upon her. Or more specifically, she felt someone gazing upon her unladylike position. Opening her eyes, she spotted a man she hadn't noticed before her arrival, or perhaps he had just come in.

He sat in the armchair diagonal to her, holding a book in his hands. He had dark hair that stuck up unevenly, as if he had been riding hard on horseback. His jaw was strong, and it tightened as he stared downward. Della realized with surprise that he was staring down at *her* muddy shoes.

Her cheeks reddened, and it was not from the warmth of fire. Angry heat rose up her neck. She turned her chin away and refused to move her feet out of pure obstinacy, determined to ignore him.

And yet, he continue to glance up from his book at her feet propped up by the fireplace.

Della's anger had been simmering under the surface before, but now it arrived at a boiling point. She pulled her feet off the stool, leaned forward with a hard look, and said, "Do you have something to say to me, sir?"

His eyes flashed in surprise before his scowl deepened. He looked too young and handsome to have such unattractive scowls. He said nothing and turned back to the book in his hands.

Della huffed, her cheeks still warm. Insufferable man. Taking note of the truly disgusting hem of her dress, she did her best not to stomp up the stairs to the room she had been previously assigned. She changed into her nightgown, the scowl on her face matching that of the man's downstairs. Why some people had to be so nosy and discourteous, she would never understand.

The sweet light of the morning brought a reprieve. Mornings were Della's favorite time of day. She enjoyed the way the light filtered slightly and slowly through her window frame. It brought a sense of mindfulness and purpose that she often found missing in her daily activities. Even Mr. S. Cowl (for that is what she had decided to call him) faded from memory. She could barely recall him now.

It was time for another long walk, but this time it would be with the aid of the sun. Della's stockings and boots had dried out by the fire. She knew she should choose a cleaner dress, but she had no guarantee that a new dress wouldn't become just as filthy. So she slipped back into the same muddy dress and set her mind to washing it out once she arrived at the house. That is, if the occupants of said house would even receive her.

When she arrived in the inn's main room once more, Mr. S. Cowl was nowhere to be seen. Della let out a breath, releasing tension from her shoulders that she hadn't known was there. The balding man was no longer working – instead was a broad-shouldered woman, her face pinched as she set out a plate of breakfast to an older gentleman at a table.

The woman looked up at Della's arrival down the stairs. She looked at her appraisingly, her hands on her hips. "Do you need me to call a coach for you?" she said, her voice loud and unpleasant.

Della grimaced. The coach that had been hired for her was long gone, and she didn't precisely have the funds to spend on something so frivolous. Walking would suit her just as well, especially now that it was daylight.

Della shook her head. "No, but I thank you. I prefer to walk."

The woman raised her eyebrows, then turned away, fixing another dish of breakfast. As Della walked to the door, she thought she heard the woman mutter something about "young ladies running around without maids". Della squared her shoulders, paying the comment no mind as she stepped out into the sunlight.

The gravel crunched under her feet and the sound irked her greatly. Ever since a cold-hearted man in a blue waistcoat had married her sister, the world had become quite irksome. Della hated that she'd agreed to this idiotic scheme, but what choice did she have? She wasn't sure what to think of it all, and she certainly tried her best not to think of it.

For now she had to move forward, whatever the future held.

As she trod across the foggy moor, the great gates of Fairstone Hall came into view much sooner than she expected. She was no stranger to great gates. It felt like a lifetime ago, but she had once resided behind some herself.

This grand manor lived up to its name. Fair, white stones graced the walls of the house, rising high in the sky. Della guessed with a galloping heart that the mansion must surely be at least six stories. Not only that, but as Della came closer it was clear that its front facade hid two outer wings that folded back behind it, tripling the size of the mansion.

How was she supposed to accomplish such an impossible task in such a large, cavernous place? The house was grander than she had ever imagined, flanked by foggy hills loping up to greet her. A sense of haunting emanated from the moors that surrounded the estate. The columns that guarded the front doors were an unblemished white, towering far above Della's head. Before she knew it, she was at the front doors, willing herself to knock with a quivering letter in her hand. She let go of the knocker and told herself not to tremble, but her hand didn't seem to listen.

A face appeared beyond the oak door. "Yes?" said an older man. Della tried not to stare at his receding hairline and stony expression.

"Greetings." The word came out like a squeak, and Della cleared her throat. "Greetings, my name is Adeline Dawson and I'm here by invitation."

When the butler raised an eyebrow so forcefully that his too-tight collar moved up his neck, Della cringed inwardly. She held out the letter. "Sir Wakefield invited me this last Wednesday."

The butler took the letter but made no move to read it. Della felt almost relieved. If she was refused at the door, then this whole scheme would fall to shambles, and neither she nor her sister Rose would be at fault for it.

It took a moment to realize that the reason the butler wasn't reading the letter was because he was looking in disdain at her mud splattered dress. Della's pride bristled, and she cleared her throat again, shifting awkwardly.

He finally opened the letter. Scanning it quickly, he said, "Very well, ma'am. But you should know that it is *Lord* Wakefield, not Sir. He is an earl, after all."

"Of course," Della said, suddenly feeling smaller than she could ever recall.