

The
GRAND
DESIGN

A Novel of Dorothy Draper

JOY CALLAWAY



HARPER MUSE

The Grand Design

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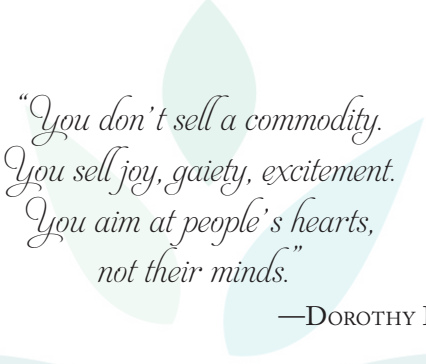
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For my husband, John



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*“You don’t sell a commodity.
You sell joy, gaiety, excitement.
You aim at people’s hearts,
not their minds.”*

—DOROTHY DRAPER



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One

THE GREENBRIER RESORT
WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, WEST VIRGINIA
AUGUST 1, 1908

I'd been lured to the dining room as prey. I eyed the roast chicken in front of me and had pity on the poor fowl whose end was drizzled in sage butter and decorated with dainty carrots and pearl onions. I, too, was draped in finery for my final presentation—a Charles Worth ensemble of yellow-green silk with metallic gold floral brocade and beaded tassels at the back to accentuate my sleek figure. *Sleek* was the polite way of saying much too tall and imposing, but no one—especially our seamstress—dared say so to a Tuckerman.

I wasn't the only one being prepared for a swift devouring. The dining room was filled with silk and chiffon served atop a platter of tradition and romance. I eyed one of the stately Corinthian pillars behind me and followed the rows of them down the length of the enormous dining hall, imagining how many women they'd seen sacrificed in their shadows. There

were more than a thousand people here for the Greenbrier's Centennial Celebration, and the room was bustling with waiters and Vanderbilts and Du Ponts and Beckleys and Stevenses and Hendersons and Alexanders and Julliards and Kanes, and likely a few European ministers thrown in for variety, though even their presence wouldn't stop the incestuous matchmaking ritual that had been established among these proper families.

"They've arrived, Dorothy," Anzonella muttered, tapping my leg with hers. I didn't want to look up but did so reflexively as Warren Abercrombie III and his father glided into the room behind the kindly looking maître d' who, judging by his cheery smile, had no idea he was leading a wolf and his reluctant son to a table full of sheep. I wished that our au pair, Mademoiselle, had been swifter with my hair, that we'd been able to come down for dinner earlier so our table would be occupied by now. We always arrived late, however, and though it was almost a guarantee that the Kane girls would be even more delayed than we—there were five of them, after all—we were nearly always left with four or five unoccupied seats.

"Star, please keep an open mind this season," Father whispered across the circular table, not much caring that the Kanes, our neighbors back home in Tuxedo Park, New York, were hearing every word.

"I will not," I said. "And you know why, Father. He's one of my dearest friends, practically like a brother. Not to mention nearly four inches shorter than I."

Mother's swan-like neck turned just slightly, her eyes daring me to say another word. I could feel everyone's attention on me as Warren approached, as though I would suddenly begin to swoon after five seasons of our fathers' attempted pairing. Each year our

families hoped we would see each other anew and fall in love, that we'd see how perfectly matched we were, how safe we would be in each other's arms. It wasn't that he was boring or irritating or ugly or poor. In fact, he was quite charming and handsome, a true gentleman, but I couldn't consider him despite the joy it would grant our parents. My heart would never be his, and standing next to him made me feel Amazonian, not to mention he wouldn't free me. Women in our set weren't actually married; we were commodities merged and traded, pawns exchanged for a European title or a monopoly of the railroads. Marrying a man in this circle would trap me in a penitentiary masquerading as something else: the Tuxedo Park village or a Fifth Avenue mansion or a Southern estate. I'd already been ensnared by the former two my whole life. Every time I thought of it, I wanted to walk into the woods that surrounded the Greenbrier and never come back. Unlike at home or in the city, I was barely chaperoned here and there weren't any gates, only the unoccupied wild of the Allegheny Mountains and whatever adventures were to be found beyond. I could find another town. I could become someone else, someone lauded for living in the color and eccentricity that defied dreary societal expectations. I'd always thought, deep inside, that I was intended for more than the life of an heiress wife. What that life was, I didn't quite know. I was hardly allowed to breathe without being instructed on its proper execution, let alone dream. Of course, running away was only a fantasy. The reality was that I would never do it, despite craving liberty. The prospect of starvation or murder was slightly worse than imprisonment.

Rose, the youngest of the Kanes, was the only one still watching Warren. Her already rosy cheeks deepened to a blush as she realized the maître d' was planning to seat the young Mr.

Abercrombie directly across from her and next to me. I wished I'd been situated between my father and my brother, Roger, but I had a feeling our circumstances were prearranged. It hadn't always been like this. As a child I'd felt free and thought my parents wanted me to feel that way always. They'd never minded that I tore my dresses playing and didn't give a fig for equestrian sport and had an imagination that made formal schooling nearly impossible. All of that changed when I was presented. Suddenly, there were rules and expectations and approved men. I knew they thought it their duty to find me a secure match, a guarantee that I would remain settled where I'd always been. Perhaps they supposed I could somehow find happiness despite it all as they had. But surely they knew their love was an anomaly, a happy coincidence that united the iron fortune of the Tuckermans with the shipping fortune of the Minturns.

"Miss Tuckerman." Warren's voice was almost a sigh, and I met his gaze as he appeared over my shoulder. He looked handsome for a man whose breeding had only awarded him an unfortunate five feet five inches, his dinner suit impeccably tailored just like every other man's in the room. His blond hair had been trimmed short and he'd grown a mustache since I'd last seen him.

"Good evening, Warren. It's lovely to see you again," I said, smiling for the both of us. It wasn't his fault that our parents couldn't concede our lack of romance. He didn't favor me either. He took his seat and turned his attention to my parents and our neighbors.

The elder Mr. Abercrombie peered around his son. "Hello, Miss Dorothy."

Father caught my eye and scowled as though I was intending

to ignore the greeting. Mr. Abercrombie—always “Ren” to Father—had been his childhood best friend. They’d lived next door to each other for a few years in Manhattan before Mr. Abercrombie’s father, a railroad man, moved them to South Carolina following the Civil War, chasing an opportunity to reconstruct the battered Southern tracks.

“Mrs. Abercrombie is quite reluctant to miss the occasion to see you and sends her love,” he continued.

“I’m sorry to miss her as well,” I said politely.

Warren said under his breath, “She was going to attend but thought she’d simply stay home and wait for me to return with you as my bride.” A waiter deposited his plate in front of him. I laughed, and the corners of his mouth twitched up in a smile.

“Did you bring an ample amount of ether with which to drug your intended?” I asked.

“Of course not!” He turned to me, feigning horror. “Chloroform is rumored to be much more suitable.”

“I appreciate the consideration,” I said. “On a more serious note, Warren, what are we to do about our fathers? I know you’re just as keen to swear your life to me as I am to you.”

He shrugged. “Wait until they give up?”

“That could be years,” I whispered. “Five more at least. They’re not quite desperate enough. Promise yours won’t wear you down.”

Warren grinned. “Let’s grasp a spirit of optimism, shall we? This season will be the last,” he said. “You forget that I’m older than you by two years. I’m nearly twenty-one, and my parents married at twenty-two. I have a feeling they’ll soon think time is running out and cut us loose.”

“I’ll be happy to hope,” I said.

I cut into my chicken and turned my attention to the bustle of the room. Charley and Ellen Bonaparte were at the table beside us, their hands clasped under the table. It was well-known that they'd met at the Greenbrier, the proposal offered on the edge of the Lovers' Leap trail surrounded by blooming rhododendrons. I hoped for such love. I wanted the passion I'd only read about in novels. I wanted to believe it could happen to me, but then I remembered the sharp sting of rejection, the way my two flirtations had ended—one lost to a girl six inches shorter, the other lost to the discovery that the man was a fortune hunter. Love could still ensnare. Freedom was my higher aspiration. But if both came calling, I'd welcome them with open arms.

I shifted my attention back to the table in time to hear Rose ask Warren about his family's summer travels. The Abercrombies always traveled far into the fall, the mosquitos in Sumter too thick to bear. In contrast, we would make this our last stop before home. We'd been to Europe in early May through June, followed by Newport in July, and now the Greenbrier. The Kanes had just joined. Being quite loyal to Tuxedo Park, they departed for a sojourn to the Greenbrier only because it was nearly required. Since what seemed like the beginning of time, if a family was absent from the Greenbrier, they were absent from society—and it was especially important to be seen on an occasion such as the Centennial, particularly when one's daughters were out and looking for suitable prospects.

Anzonella tipped her head at one of the Du Pont cousins at a table across from ours. "Do you suppose I should stand him up for our lovers' walk or embrace the pairing for the month and then feign a change of heart when I return home?" she asked, then took a bite of a carrot. I was about to ask her when he'd

proposed the idea when the maître d' interrupted our dinner once again, this time bowing low between my father and Mr. Kane.

"Former Italian finance minister Mr. Pietro Vacchelli is just in on the late arrival at the station. I wondered if it would be much of an imposition to seat him and his nephew here?" Both men grunted in agreement as they always did when something was in fact an imposition. Gentlemen wouldn't dare concede that they were put off by the intrusion of an outsider.

"Very well. I thank you," he said and was gone at once.

"An Italian minister? Here? It will be a bit awkward, will it not?" Warren asked. "There's been quite a bit of talk about Italy possibly breaking from the Triple Alliance because of its strained relations with Austria-Hungary. Now that the Entente Cordiale has been formed, perhaps the country is courting allegiance elsewhere? Of course, if there were ever to be a European conflict, our great nation would side with the Entente Cordiale, so—" He looked around at the older men, whose silence said volumes. Political discussion was appropriate only when discussing pleasant things. Ill words were best forfeited to silence. I had no idea what he was talking about anyway.

"He's a *former* minister," Mother said, leaping into the conversation without thought. She had always been this way—riding her horse astride, wearing elaborate jeweled costumes when the occasion called for drab, speaking her mind when most did not. One would assume that Mother was an unconventional woman altogether, but Father's sensibilities still held her mostly to tradition. "I doubt he's come to the Greenbrier to discuss Italian-American relations."

"Or has he?" Edith interjected from her position next to Mother. She was the oldest Kane and always interested in

some sort of dramatic happenings. “Suppose he’s come to the Greenbrier to win us to their side? Won’t Mr. Taft be here this season?”

She stopped talking and stared over my head, letting the chatter and the faraway sounds of Chopin’s Piano Concerto no. 1 drift over us. Though it wasn’t polite to turn away from the table, I did anyway and immediately understood the reason for her silence.

“Good evening, all. I am Pietro Vacchelli.” The minister, a bulky man with sparse white hair and a full beard, shook hands with the men while his nephew, who unceremoniously folded himself into the seat beside Warren, captured the attention of the ladies. It could hardly be helped. His face was chiseled, his eyes were crystal blue, and though his ebony hair was much too long for the fashion of the season and his mustache was barely a shadow, the overall effect was a rugged sort of look.

“Thank you for accommodating us in the middle of your dinner,” the minister’s nephew said to Warren. His accent was thick, but his command of English was clear.

“Of course, sir,” Warren said. “I’m Warren Abercrombie. And your name?”

“Oh!” The minister exclaimed, nearly toppling his water glass. “This is my . . . my . . .”

“I’m Fiorenzo Rossi, Enzo, Mr. Vacchelli’s nephew,” he said. His uncle seemed relieved at his interjection. Edith, sitting all the way across the table, quickly introduced herself, and as we went around the table making introductions, it seemed that Mr. Rossi was barely taking note.

“Are you enjoying America, Minister?” my father asked Mr. Vacchelli as he buttered a roll. Father’s eyes met mine and I

knew what he was thinking. It wouldn't do to have my attention shift from Warren to anyone else, especially an unknown entity, an Italian of possible paltry breeding. I nearly laughed at his concern, though the idea of running away to Italy did have its appeal. But Anzonella was one of the most sought-after women in New York. She'd received the best of her parents—her mother's high forehead and blue eyes, her father's fair complexion. If she couldn't command Mr. Rossi's attention, one of her remarkably pretty sisters would. All four of them had their eye on the mysterious Mr. Rossi.

Mr. Rossi leaned over to Mr. Vacchelli and said something in Italian. I couldn't understand any of it, and that irritated me. Mademoiselle had made sure that I was fluent in French but had given the other languages little to no mind. Perhaps it was my fault. I'd refused to spend more than two years studying at Brearley. I hated the way my classmates mastered the courses with ease while I'd struggled. Then again, I wasn't one to learn through books. I thrived in creativity, in thought, instead, and Mademoiselle, unlike my instructors at Brearley, had always understood that. Instead of giving me a set of facts to memorize, she'd asked questions and encouraged me to consider, to ponder an answer until I came upon the correct one.

Mr. Vacchelli replied to Mr. Rossi and he barely smiled, punctuating one dimple in his left cheek.

"I apologize, Mr. Tuckerman. Yes, I'm enjoying America very much, although we have only been here a week and have spent it all on a train. It's Enzo's fault, if I'm being honest," Mr. Vacchelli said with a grin.

"Yes, I suppose that's right," Mr. Rossi said. "If I hadn't taken to the very vulgar profession of auto racing—which, I must point

out, was Uncle's doing, as he introduced me to the sport through his friend Pierre de Caters—we'd have been here a month ago. However, I would have missed my last race. It was quite a rush."

I imagined it was. I couldn't fathom how wonderful it must feel not only to drive an auto at such a tremendous speed, but to have the independence to engage in such a glamorous yet improper profession.

"Did you win?" Father asked, though his tone professed he didn't much care.

"I'm afraid not. It was my first time driving for Lancia and I found the engine lacking, if I'm honest," he said.

This interested me. "A Lancia, you say? My uncle just had one imported," I said. I'd thought the purchase quite an extravagance. He already had two Benzes—one of which I'd almost crashed taking a turn around his circular drive. Mr. Rossi didn't seem to hear me, instead gesturing for his uncle to pass the bread plate.

"I was there when the autos set out from Times Square in February," Rose sputtered. "It was so exciting." Mr. Kane's eyebrows rose. His youngest daughter's presence at the start of the New York to Paris round-the-world race was clearly news to him.

"I'm sure it was. Auto racing is a thrill in every sense," Mr. Rossi said. "It must have been especially exciting for the Italian driver, Antonio Scarfoglio, who had never driven an auto before." I wanted to comment that he seemed jealous he hadn't been chosen. "I specialize in shorter, faster distances. I often drive for Fiat. I must say that the autos driven during that race weren't necessarily the finest. Züst is clearly satisfactory, but I prefer the smoothness of Fiat."

Mr. Vacchelli coughed. "No one else is quite as passionate about the sport, Nephew," he said.

Warren said, "Perhaps, but it's still rather interesting. The world race was on the front page of all the papers here for months. It made me want to take up the sport myself."

I nearly laughed. I doubted he'd ever done anything remotely dangerous in his life.

Mr. Abercrombie cleared his throat. "I'm afraid you don't have the time," he said. "What with your studies and brokering land for the rail and helping your mother keep up our little cottage and grounds."

The Abercrombies' little cottage was a sprawling thirty-bedroom Federal-style estate designed by Richard Morris Hunt.

"What are your aspirations when you're not racing?" Mr. Abercrombie asked. "What sort of business do you involve yourself in?" The questions irritated me, as they were clear attempts to dilute Mr. Rossi's worth.

"I believe he said he's a professional," I said. "I would assume most of his time is spent perfecting his form." The statement bordered rude, but nothing irked me more than when our kind rubbed our high breeding in the faces of normal folk.

"Actually, I hope to be a businessman someday when I'm through with racing," Mr. Rossi said. "I've studied extensively in Rome."

"He's very proficient with languages," Mr. Vacchelli said. "French, German, English, and Portuguese so far."

Mr. Rossi busied himself with cutting a slice of tomato.

"I'm sure that comes in handy on the race circuit," Father said.

"It does," Mr. Rossi said. "I've been fortunate to meet some interesting men."

"And any young women?" Anzonella asked. "I like speed.

Perhaps I will take up racing too.” Mr. Rossi glanced at her as if she’d misspoken but didn’t bother to ask if she was earnest. She was.

Mr. Kane asked, “Did you arrive in New York City, Mr. Rossi, Mr. Vacchelli? It’s quite a place, and at times I dearly miss having a home there, though not enough to leave the heaven of our Tuxedo Park for months at a time. Tuxedo is only forty miles northeast of Manhattan besides. Close enough to pop down to the city and back in a day.” He would expunge any talk of auto racing from the conversation before his daughters fainted from swooning.

The truth was that Mr. Kane found city life completely unnecessary and a home away an added expense. On the other hand, my father adored our city house on East Sixty-Ninth. My grandfather had been a city man through and through, an industrialist of the highest rank, and my father’s fondest memories were at his house on Madison Avenue.

“We came in at New York but didn’t spend much time there,” Mr. Rossi replied. “We live in Rome, and New York seemed a bit similar with the noise and crowded streets. Our destination was here. There was much talk about the Greenbrier from a friend of my uncle’s back in Italy. On several occasions he urged us to visit and claimed that it was the most spectacular place in all the country—that the mountain views and blooming wildflowers served as the perfect backdrop to a resort of extraordinary elegance and glamour. Uncle decided when he retired, we must go.”

I took a sip of my wine and turned to Anzonella, who was staring, enthralled, as Mr. Rossi cut a small bite of chicken.

“It is magnificent indeed,” Warren said. “Nowhere in America will you find such lovely landscape, such lovely company, or such

lovely women.” He lowered his voice at the last statement and Mr. Rossi laughed under his breath.

“I am impressed,” he said. “I’ve never seen anything so large seem so intimate . . . if that makes any sense?” I knew exactly what he meant. As beautiful as it was, the Greenbrier could seem positively stifling at times. All the families of families who had been seated here a century ago knew every rumor and embarrassment and joy of everyone else’s heritage.

“Intimacy can hardly be helped regardless of space,” I said. “We’re the country’s oldest families and probably all related in some way or another, so I imagine walking in here feels eerily like disrupting a private wedding. To tell you the truth, I wish it wasn’t that way.”

“I always hope for a bit of fresh air,” Warren said, grinning. “It would be good for my prospects. I don’t suppose you’ve brought along any sisters or cousins?”

Father wouldn’t stand for our bemoaning tradition. “This resort was built before our country’s Civil War. There are finer structures across our great nation, that is certain, but I doubt another resort has seen the history this one has. Do you know, Mr. Rossi, that the two opposing generals, Grant and Lee, vacationed here after the war? And this dining room itself held the wounded of both sides at points during the conflict.”

“I can sense it,” Mr. Rossi said candidly. “There’s enough chatter about it overseas that the importance of the Greenbrier is clear.”

Satisfied with his diversion, Father simply tipped his head and went back to his conversation with Mr. Kane. I loathed occasions like this, when our fathers felt threatened by those lacking an early American pedigree. It was embarrassing.

“Don’t mind him,” I said, low enough that Father couldn’t hear me. “And there’s no need to pretend that you’re awed by our country’s history when Italians boast nearly three thousand years.”

“It’s of no matter. I enjoy hearing about it,” Mr. Rossi said. “Those plants in the urns, what are they?” He gestured to the blooming pink and purple flowers around the room.

“Mountain rhododendron, I suppose,” Warren replied. “Is that right, Miss Tuckerman?” He glanced at me.

“Yes,” I said. “Thank goodness they didn’t settle for palms in a room this drab. It’s much too reminiscent of a clubhouse . . . or perhaps a funeral parlor.”

I’d always disliked the way our parents’ generation decorated. Rich leathers and mahogany dressers and ferns and plaster pillars and frowning statues were all so unfriendly and cold. I suppose that’s how we all were, really—stiff and beautiful.

Mr. Rossi laughed. “Your dead must enjoy quite beautiful surroundings,” he said. “What would make this room more enjoyable for you, Miss Tuckerman? Would you prefer the walls done in pink?”

I stared at him, feeling my cheeks flush. The proper thing to do would have been to ignore him. To pick up my fork and take a bite of my now-cold chicken and strike up a conversation with Warren or Anzonella. Then I noticed the corners of his lips starting to twitch into a smile. Humor like this, like mine, was all but absent in proper society. It either went completely unnoticed or was passed off by most as brash or rude. Sparring with him was a challenge I couldn’t refuse—despite knowing how much I’d horrify Father.

“Yes. I would,” I said truthfully. I’d envisioned the room

differently more times than I could count. “Or kelly green or robin’s-egg blue or coral, with the ceiling matching. The pillars could remain white. They’d disappear that way. And I’d line the windows with chintz, the print as large and bold as I could find.” I was speaking dramatically on purpose, but I wasn’t lying. I’d watched Mother decorate our homes—home after Tuxedo Park home—and I knew what I liked. Color made Mother feel alive, and it made me feel happy too.

“The owner of this lovely resort—the C&O Railroad, is it?—is truly blessed in the fact that you’re a debutante and not the man charged with outfitting this magnificent room,” he said. The table quieted toward the end of his sentence, and then Father let out a mighty laugh.

“Star has always had an eye for the dramatic,” he said. “She’s won it fairly—her mother is fond of outfitting our homes uniquely.”

I wished he’d stop calling me Star. It sounded narcissistic to outsiders, as if Father was hoping I’d become famous, a possibility that was positively horrifying to any proper Tuxedo Parkian. Fame didn’t sound quite so terrible to me. If I was ever to scandalize society by gracing the papers and the lips of people worldwide, I’d be confident, but certainly not vain. And I’d definitely not be called Star.

“And our homes are always lovely,” Mother said. “I use what I have. Grandfather’s antiques and Mr. Tuckerman’s crystal decanters and color, yes, when it’s appropriate.” Though Mother was known for pushing the envelope with her costumes, her decorating styles were always classic with a touch of daring. She enjoyed rattling our Tuxedo Park traditions but didn’t desire to break free from them as I did. I’d insisted my room at home be

papered in wide royal blue and white stripes with curtains of the same trimmed in lemon-yellow fringe. Mother had only agreed because my quarters were out of guests' sight.

Mrs. Kane said, "Your homes are always breathtaking, Susan. The envy of our little neighborhood."

"They are," Father said, "but you should see Star's room. I have no doubt if she were the owner of this grand place, it would be decorated in such a manner that the naked eye could hardly stand it. The old fellows would go running back to Newport and Jekyll as quick as the trains would run."

I dabbed my napkin to my lips, blotting a drop of wine. "Who's to say that wouldn't be precisely my plan?" I asked. "If you can't abide cheer, you don't belong here." I winked at Father, pretending I didn't feel Mr. Rossi's eyes on my face. Most people likely thought me silly and ignorant when I spoke this way—perhaps Mr. Rossi did as well. But then again, he was an automobile driver, not an heir to some vast fortune, required to dissolve into expectation. There was a chance he didn't care at all for formal intellectual discourse and furnishings and wealth.

"I'd trust you with my home, Dorothy," Anzonella said. Predictably, she supported me regardless of my harebrained spoutings, and I loved her immeasurably for it.

"I pray your husband has the fortune of glass eyes, Miss Kane, in order to behold Miss Tuckerman's creation," Mr. Rossi said. His face didn't suggest humor in the slightest. Only the sparkle in his eyes gave away his wit. The whole table quieted—the society equivalent of a scolding for unsatisfactory behavior—but he didn't seem to notice. Perhaps he didn't care. I hoped that was the case.

The waiter took my plate and deposited a steaming bowl of

bread pudding in front of me as I placed the white linen napkin back on my lap and looked at Mr. Rossi around a stunned Warren.

“And I pray your future wife has glass eyes *and* sealed ears, in order to behold you, Mr. Rossi. In fact,” I said, turning toward the entrance to the dining room, “if you’ll just depart out that door and down the lawn, you’ll find your perfect match atop the springhouse. She’s rather lovely and immensely fond of old dullness since she’s gray and unfeeling herself. I do hope you’ll be happy together. Her name is Hebe.”

I took a dainty sip of wine and heard Mother sigh. Warren cleared his throat. Clearly this exchange was making everyone uncomfortable. I loved it.

“Hebe you say?” Mr. Rossi asked, tipping his spoon unbecomingly my direction. He was visibly trying not to smile now. I could see the edges of his lips lifting and felt laughter bubble in my throat. “I suppose if Heracles won’t mind sharing, I’d be agreeable. I’d look the picture of youth forever. Just please . . . please don’t tell her about your ambitions with the resort, or else I’m certain my intended will go tumbling from her perch and shatter from the horror of it.”

“This dessert is divine,” Mother started.

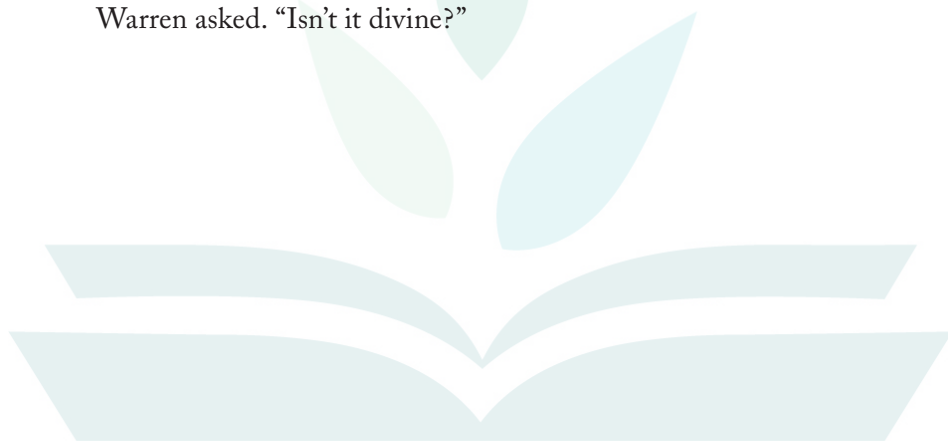
Mr. Abercrombie spoke at the same time. “We’ve just returned from Athens and have had the opportunity to see many depictions of the lovely goddess, haven’t we, Son?” He turned to Warren expecting a response, but my friend simply took a sip of his coffee and looked at me.

“Yes,” he said finally, with the irritating cool of a gentleman, as though my exchange with Mr. Rossi hadn’t happened at all. Every man at the Greenbrier behaved this way, and at once I

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wanted to do something scandalous—stand and scream, pitch my wine into Mr. Rossi’s face, unpin my hair—just to see if I could rattle out a true reaction. Whoever responded would capture my attention, though I had a feeling no one save Mr. Rossi would, and heaven knows Father wouldn’t consider him suitable.

“What do you think of the coffee, Miss Tuckerman?” Warren asked. “Isn’t it divine?”



HARPER
MUSE



Two

Mademoiselle had begged me to wear the gold gown to the ball tonight. It was the safe choice, the choice that would match the rest of the angelic gowns traipsing the ballroom, the choice that would merit nods instead of whispers as I walked the treadmill on Warren's reluctant arm. But dinner had left me in a rebellious frame of mind, so I'd refused, choosing a turquoise ensemble with a narrow fit and draping train heavy with gold beads and glass ornaments. For as much as Mademoiselle loathed the gown, Mother loved it. She'd chosen the designer—Jeanne Hallée—the design, and the color, insisting turquoise complemented my skin tone and would make me stand out.

“Are you ready?” Warren asked, materializing at my side.

The parlor was crushed with my contemporaries desperately hoping to pair up before the opening notes of the treadmill processional lest they be forced to enter the ballroom unaccompanied and watch the introductory parade of their peers from the balcony seats designated for the elderly. Ever since we'd been presented five years ago, neither Warren nor I had had to experience the unease of looking for a match. It went without saying that we'd

walk in together. That was one thing we actually agreed on—that our pairing was a convenience at the start of the nightly ball.

“I suppose,” I said. “And you?”

Warren laughed, his gray eyes glistening in the lamplight. His smile was contagious, and I smiled in turn.

“What is it?” I asked. “Is there chocolate in my teeth? I didn’t check after the bread pudding at dinner.”

“No,” he said, still laughing. “It just occurred to me that if we’re not careful, this could be us on our wedding day. Me asking you if you’re ready and you resignedly saying, ‘I suppose.’ As you mentioned, our fathers have ensnared us in quite a lengthy game of matchmaking, haven’t they? Despite our protesting, I’m still extending my arm to you and you’re taking it.” Both of us sobered, the roar of the treadmill commotion eclipsing what would’ve been an uncomfortable silence.

“We know what we are to each other and what we’re not,” I said. “No amount of coercing will ever change that, I’m certain of it.” I realized he was looking up at me. I suddenly wished for the absurd heeled shoes colonial men used to wear. I felt like Goliath to Warren’s David. “It seems to me we’d simply rather be on the arm of a friend than hunt the parlor for a someone who’s equally ill-matched.”

“Yes. That’s exactly—”

“My!” Anzonella careened into me. “Have you ever seen such a ruckus?” Violet Battenburg lace ornamented her lithe body, her gloved hand coiled around Mr. Harold Vanderbilt’s arm. Apparently, she’d declined Mr. Du Pont after all. “Mike, look at them,” she said, referring to her escort, who had always been “Mike” regardless of the fact that *Michael* was not in his name at all.

She tipped her head at a crowd of women gathered in the corner. It was quite peculiar, the throng including all of the Phinizy sisters, Miss Ellen Yuille, Miss Irma Jones, Edith Kane, and both Prather sisters—I could have sworn Margaret Allis was attached to William Van Culm, but what did I know? Ordinarily, the women were determined to scour the room alone, each lady for herself, in order to locate the last poor gentleman without a lady attached to his arm, but this time they were talking with each other while subtly trying to edge closer to whatever was in the middle.

“What in the world?” Warren asked.

“Surely they’re squabbling over a box of diamonds,” I said.

“One would think,” Anzonella said, “but no. It’s Mr. Rossi. Rumor has it he’s handsome, foreign, and a driver of fast Italian cars.”

I laughed.

“Fresh meat,” Mike commented smugly. “I’m only glad Willie’s not here or he’d be just as pathetic as the women.” Willie was Mike’s older brother. It was rumored he’d driven his first auto at the age of seven and had been transfixed ever since. “I can see him now, begging Mr. Rossi to race the Vanderbilt cup. Personally, I’ve never seen the appeal in autos or auto races.”

Warren rolled his eyes.

“His allure will fade once they realize his worth is a fraction of theirs. He’s Mr. Vacchelli’s nephew, not even an heir to whatever scabble his uncle has. And the way he spoke to Dorothy at dinner was appalling. He has no manners.”

“I suppose you could be right,” Anzonella said. Despite her words, her own cheeks were flushing. “Completely untrained . . . unlike the two of you.” She collected herself and nodded at our

escorts. Mr. Rossi was mysterious, and regardless of his likely being no one's eventual fiancé, he was interesting. At least, he would be until one of our fathers dug around enough to unearth his background and means. It happened at least once every season: a handsome newcomer would emerge on the scene, disrupting everyone's natural pairing, and when affection became too obvious for a father to bear, he would put an end to it by revealing that the suitor was a bastard or a fortune hunter or, worse yet, a divorcé. The intrigue was always exciting.

"Don't be too critical of Mr. Rossi on account of me," I said. "I was just as improper as he was, and to be quite honest, I enjoyed our little spat." I wondered what it was like for people outside of society. Did they still consider money and rank as important as character, or was love as effortless as finding someone who made your breath catch? I had to believe it was the latter, that in another life I could simply climb into Mr. Rossi's fast car and let him whisk me away to Italy.

"I've won!" Miss Bolling Phinizy squealed, holding a short straw up in the air. The women dispersed and the object of our conversation appeared. He was sitting in the leather chair next to the fire, his fist clutching an assortment of kindling.

"Did he just have the women draw straws for his arm?" Warren asked, disbelief and horror marked on his typically youthful face.

"It appears so, yes," I said, perplexed as he set the kindling down on a hideously dreary carved mahogany table and stood, barely smiling at Bolling as she took his arm. It didn't even appear that he was disappointed, just bored, as though this was some sort of routine charade. In contrast, Bolling smiled triumphantly and began to gush at him while her eyes searched the

room for jealous glances. As far as I could tell, he hadn't said a word to her.

His eyes met mine. I could feel my cheeks burn. I hadn't intended to stare. I refused to be interested in a man who so blatantly thought himself a catch, and now he would assume I was just like the rest of the women here at the Greenbrier, desperate to feel the solidity of his arm under my hand, to stare into his piercing blue gaze, to marvel at the way his wavy black hair hung half in his eyes, just asking to be swept back against his forehead.

"Perhaps he should inquire of Thornton Lewis about drawing up flights for the horse show next week, since he's apparently so versed in games of chance," Mike said.

Anzonella laughed. "Jealousy doesn't suit either of you," she said, absentmindedly tucking a stray ebony strand back into her loose coiffure. Her hair had been coiled and drawn to the top of her head with a pin of fresh rhododendron. The strings in the ballroom were tuning, their familiar hum a natural cue to get in order with your partner for the treadmill.

"Remember last year?" I said, laughing. "All of you were in a tizzy over that woman Eleanor Balsam, who turned out not to be the French shipping heiress she claimed but a native of White Sulphur Springs keen to find her way down the aisle with one of you."

Warren had been her favorite and he'd been in love. We had all disregarded it as a fleeting infatuation at the time, and he would never admit the truth now, but looking back it was clear that Eleanor had stolen his heart. As soon as we processed in together, he'd find her and occupy her dance card for as long as she'd allow. His father had been furious, constantly apologizing to me about his lack of loyalty, though I'd appreciated the diversion.

“She had the gall to write me,” Warren said, avoiding our eyes by appraising the vine stenciling bordering the ceiling. “She apologized and wanted me to call on her this summer.”

“And will you?” Anzonella asked, shifting behind us to take Mike’s arm.

“You know he won’t,” I said.

It was one thing to be of unfavorable breeding. That could be overcome given the right circumstance. But poverty could not. It was too difficult to determine whether a person was in love or in love with wealth. Fortune hunting could take a toll on a family, and almost no one was in love quite enough to live in squalor.

I glanced back at Anzonella and in the process caught Mr. Rossi’s eye again. He now occupied the very last position with Bolling at the end of the coiling line. Before I could look away, he plucked a floral vase from the fireplace mantel and held the pink rose motif against the white wall, appraising it. Bolling looked at him as though he’d gone mad. I knew he was attempting to make me laugh, to revel in our private joke, but I turned away, unwilling to encourage a man with unbridled arrogance. In any case, I hadn’t really been teasing about the Greenbrier’s stuffy decor. Floral wall coverings and color would look magnificent. It would make this place sing of romance and softness and unbidden wilderness, reflecting the Greenbrier’s natural state rather than the traditional structure society had imposed on it.

The French doors opened to reveal the same old scene—the ballroom illuminated by the old brass chandelier, white lampshades shielding the electric lights, and a crush of parents and grandparents gathered around the perimeter and up top in the balcony. Festive wide red linen streamers swooped from the

ceiling to the corners of the windows, I suppose to match the crimson posters announcing General Watts's exhibition mile at the Centennial Horse Show next week. It could have been made lovelier with large bouquets and a trellis entry. But, of course, decorating was a far cry from my role as guest.

"Welcome to the Beckley ball," Mr. Beckley announced as the piano concluded a piece by Chopin. "We're honored to host this celebration in honor of Mr. and Mrs. John Simmonds, who are celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary today. Please let the treadmill begin!"

I'd paraded in my first treadmill five years ago, marking me forever a Greenbrier debutante. The experience had been much different than my presentation to society at Sherry's in New York. Unlike at Sherry's, where my look and manner and fashion had been immediately praised, everyone here had gawked at me, scrutinizing my white sequined dress, which I had selected intentionally to stand out. Proper debutantes at the Greenbrier wore lace. The way I walked, the way I smiled, the manner in which I held Warren's arm mattered immensely. I'd known quite well all of it would be reported in papers from Virginia to New York the next day, and because I dared to be slightly different, the reporters deemed me splendid. I had been featured in all the stories. It had been satisfying indeed.

"Here we go, darling," Warren said as the line moved forward.

I laughed under my breath at his endearment, only half a joke. "Do you suppose we should just say we're engaged for the duration to avoid this absurd ritual?" Engaged and married couples weren't expected to parade in. Only those of us available for purchase were to be presented like choice livestock at a farmer's auction.

“Of course not,” he said. “How else will my future wife catch sight of me? I can’t be eclipsed by a sea of the elderly.”

I could practically feel Anzonella fluffing her skirt behind me. She was the belle of the treadmill, always a favorite in the columns for her innocent smile—that, and she always looked like a pixie. She was petite, nearly half a foot shorter than I, and if I hadn’t been fast friends with her before I realized I’d grow to what seemed like twice her height, I surely would have avoided her.

Martha Phinizy and Mr. Francis Kendall glided through the doorway into the ballroom, and Warren and I followed. The applause was stagnant as it always was, no one wanting to show favoritism, even though favorites always emerged throughout the season. I stepped with care, Warren’s stride exactly in line with my own. Our parents were together, parallel to the chandelier. Warren turned toward them, but I tipped my face the other way, toward the orchestra, trying to avoid the joy in my father’s eyes. Instead, I watched Bolling and Mr. Rossi enter the room, and heard a hush fall over the steady applause. It wasn’t typical for a new guest to walk the treadmill, nor was it necessarily considered proper, and it went without saying that Mr. Phinizy wouldn’t take too well to one of his daughters promenading on the arm of a man who wasn’t an established guest of the Greenbrier.

“He’s Italian,” I heard an elderly woman shout to her husband as Warren and I disentangled at the end of the ballroom and dissolved into the crowd to find our friends.

“Good luck tonight, Dorothy,” Warren said, grinning before he wandered over to find Mr. Bonaparte and Mr. Davis.

“I wish,” I said under my breath, but Warren had already gone.

“It’ll be Taft or Canada for me.” Mr. Kane was talking loudly

from the gathering of our fathers in the corner behind me. The election again. It was always about the election with the men these days, and I found the talk silly. There was no one to debate. Of course, everyone was for Taft. He was one of us. So was President Roosevelt, whose family was absent the Greenbrier for the first time in as long as I could remember in order to give Mr. Taft the attention he was due.

“Canada.” My father laughed. “You’re a Kane. Both of our families were here on the *Mayflower*. Canada isn’t an option.”

“Don’t you suppose a change of power from time to time might be a blessed occasion for a country?” Mr. Vacchelli’s question was what our fathers had all been waiting for. Absent womanly presence in their circle for a moment, they could discuss politics. And they’d finally found someone to disagree with.

I was watching Mr. Rossi. I realized it too late, the moment he twirled Bolling around at the end of the promenade and faced me. His eyes met mine, but he didn’t smile, and I immediately began to walk toward Anzonella and Martha and Edith gathered under the chandelier to escape both the uncomfortable responses to Mr. Vacchelli’s retort and Mr. Rossi’s advance toward the train wreck of a conversation.

“I’m supposed to tell Bolling she’s not to dance with Mr. Rossi,” Martha said as I reached my friends. “Father is horrified, but of course she won’t listen. She won five dances and I guarantee she fully intends to hold him to his promises.”

“I wouldn’t listen to your father either,” Edith said, her gaze drifting to the politicians in the far-left corner, now including Mr. Rossi. She adjusted her wreath of bluebonnets and fiddled with her dance card, reminding me I’d forgotten to retrieve mine from Warren.

“Whatever possessed you all to play his little game?” I asked. So many ladies clamoring for his arm before he’d had as much as a conversation with any of them struck me as absurd. I was taken by him, too, but we had actually spoken. Why hadn’t he asked me? I glanced around, immediately knowing. I was surrounded by beauty much greater than my own. My earlier daydream felt silly. No one would ever whisk me away to love and freedom. Forty years from now, I’d be right here, beaten into submission by the master that was society, chained to duty and expectation.

“Oh. It wasn’t *his* game,” Martha said. “Bolling begged him to do it, to make it fair. He was quite a poor sport about it. In fact, he kept insisting that he choose a partner on his own.” Martha laughed. “Edith told him he really shouldn’t be walking the treadmill in the first place. So he agreed.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “He’s handsome, sure, but—”

“He’s handsome, sure?” Anzonella practically laughed out loud. “Look at him and then look at Mike.” I did just that, searching the ballroom for Mike, who was intermittently holding up his dance card and staring at Anzonella as though to figure how to occupy her all night. He was handsome, his brown eyes and square jaw the picture of masculinity, but his looks were completely eclipsed by Mr. Rossi’s. “Before Mr. Rossi arrived, my arm would’ve been resting on the prize, but now it’ll be Bolling’s name in all the papers.”

“The attention does have its rewards, I suppose,” I said.

I’d never been one for the sort of publicity that determined my worth by the man whose arm I held. I enjoyed attention I won myself.

Martha snorted.

“I think it’s his lips,” she said.

“And his accent and his surety and his hair.” Bolling walked up to us, her already rosy cheeks burned nearly red. “He races automobiles.”

The opening notes of Strauss’s “Voices of Spring” interrupted the hum of the room. Father would be pleased. He and Mother waltzed beautifully to the traditional piece, so unlike the Argentine tango that as of late had found its way to our ballroom on occasion. The new style of dancing dismayed the older set—most couldn’t figure the steps—though it was terribly fun. I didn’t much care what was played tonight so long as I’d be able to make my way to the refreshment table in the parlor by the fourth piece. The Greenbrier’s lemon ice was my favorite and I liked watching the dancing from the sidelines. The spectacle was beautiful to the eye of an outsider, everyone decorated in color and flowers and gaiety. From the parlor, no one could see the silent feuds and jealousies.

Henry McVickar, a fellow Tuxedo Parkian, winked at me and held out his hand to my friend. “Anzonella . . . Miss Kane, could I have the pleasure of this dance?” She took it, much to the chagrin of Mike, who was too late making his way from his position against the windows to thwart Henry’s advance. “I do hope you’ll save me a waltz toward the end, Miss Tuckerman. You don’t know how much I missed my neighbors during my time in Europe.”

The crowd around the perimeter of the ballroom thinned, the majority of my peers taking space on the dance floor. I reached for the rhododendron in my hair, thinking that perhaps I should feign illness tomorrow. It was boring, watching the same couples, most of whom were only old friends. The sense of mystery and romance was all but absent, and even though lasting love was at

times born from years of familiarity, that wasn't the sort I hoped for. I wanted surprise, something different, something worthy of an Elinor Glyn novel, someone that would take me places I'd never seen with people I'd never known.

"Shall we?" Mike appeared at my shoulder, his eyebrows knitted as he appraised Henry and Anzonella laughing as they twirled round their siblings.

"I suppose," I said, taking his hand. His grip was soft, limp even, and though he was still considered one of the most eligible bachelors at the Greenbrier, I couldn't see the appeal.

"Miss Tuckerman." The voice was low, coming from behind me, and I turned in Mike's arms in time to see Mr. Rossi pull Bolling against him. Something inside me hitched at the sight of the way he held her, though his dark eyes were locked on mine. "The sixth dance," he said. "The sixth dance will be mine?" I suppose it was phrased as a question, but he'd meant it as a statement. Before I could think to laugh at him, Mike whisked me away.

By the time the band struck up the fifth Strauss waltz, I was standing in the parlor enjoying a lemon ice. I leaned against the wall, wishing I could slump instead. My feet pinched in my kid leather oxfords. Everyone was sweating. The staff had opened the windows hoping for a breeze, but their efforts had done nothing but encourage the stifling warm air inside.

Bolling, who moments ago had been in Mr. Rossi's arms, was now sitting down on a tufted settee with her grandmother. The crown of her blonde hair was saturated. She took a handkerchief

from one of the attendants dressed in the Greenbrier's smart white livery and dabbed her forehead.

"These are quite good." Mr. Rossi's voice startled me, and I turned to find him smiling.

"They must be. You haven't appeared this happy since your arrival." I immediately wished I could take back my words, and hastily spooned a bit of ice in my mouth to prevent more disastrous sentiments from emerging.

"I haven't been and neither have you," he said, gracefully settling the embarrassing insinuation that I'd been watching him all night with his own. "Whatever is the matter with you? It's not the wall color again, is it?"

I laughed. "Of course it is. I prefer color to drabness and hinge my satisfaction on the shade of the walls." I began to turn away, but his hand brushed my arm.

"I know you're being humorous. What is it truly? Why aren't you blissfully cheerful?"

I sighed.

"It's not that I'm unhappy. I suppose I'm only bored," I said, breaking from his eyes to watch the final steps of the waltz. "This place is beautiful, but it's the same thing year after year. I fear I'll spend my whole life doing nothing but the same things with the same set, abiding by the same rules."

"Oh," he said simply.

I wondered if I'd said too much.

"As difficult as it is to imagine boredom in the midst of these characters in this grand place, I suppose I understand. Perhaps you feel you're trapped?"

The crystal was frigid in my hand and I set it down on the linen tablecloth in front of us.

“Yes,” I said. “What is it like to be free? You know. It seems you’ve taken hold of it.”

Mr. Rossi laughed.

“At the start, it feels like you’ve just taken your first breath,” he said. “It feels like you’re weightless, like you’ll never have to go back to the life you left behind.”

“And you never regret leaving? Do you suppose you’ll ever have to return?” I asked, well aware that, knowing nothing of his past, I was asking for me.

“I’m uncertain,” he said. His face was serious again, his eyes settling on mine with a disconcerting weight. He bowed and held out his hand as Harry Lincoln’s “A Southern Dream” began.

“It’s the sixth song. May I have the pleasure, Miss Tuckerman?”

I took his hand without answering or thinking. He led me onto the dance floor and pulled me against his chest. I could feel the heat of his body, his gaze on my face, and the disapproving stares of my parents, but I didn’t care. I knew well that I’d feigned indifference on purpose. Disinterest was the only way to avoid feeling put off when he hadn’t asked me to accompany him on the treadmill and spent most of the evening in Bolling’s arms. He moved gracefully, his posture straight, but his face tipped down toward mine. I glanced over his shoulder, watching my friends watching us.

“Miss Tuckerman,” he said. “Are you looking for Mr. Abercrombie?”

“No,” I said, meeting his eyes. “I’m looking at you.” His lips quirked up in a smile and I could feel my cheeks redden as I held his gaze. “Won’t Bolling, Miss Phinizy, won’t she be offended that I’m occupying you?”

He didn’t flinch at all.

“No,” he said. “Well, perhaps, but if she is, I don’t mind. I’m not taken with her in the slightest. I’m not spoken for at all.” His eyebrows lifted as though he’d asked me a question, and I grinned, finding his manner of speaking altogether confusing and endearing.

“But you’d like to be, at least for the rest of the season,” I said. “A man doesn’t come waltzing into the Greenbrier and hold a contest for his escort in order to avoid being attached.”

“That contest was silly. It wasn’t my idea. I only wanted one woman to accompany me, but when I came into the room, I found her otherwise occupied,” he said.

Butterflies riddled my stomach, but I wasn’t naive enough to suppose he was speaking of me when the Kane girls had shared our dinner table. I laughed and felt his arm tighten around my waist. A few more inches and his lips would be on my forehead. I wanted to lean into him, to feel the thrill of standing that close, but I didn’t. He was used to risk, accustomed to breaking the rules, and as much as I felt like being daring, I couldn’t. I was a china doll tucked away in a cabinet.

“You could approach her again, you know.”

“I have,” he said quietly.

He blinked, and I realized then that we’d been missing the steps, going round nearly in circles as we talked. “I know she’s not promised, but I can’t tell if her heart belongs to someone else. I don’t have the courage to ask. She’s not like the rest.”

I swallowed, hesitating. He spun me around, leading us back into the throng of dancers, and I knew then that if it was me, he would’ve been content in our unguided dancing, waiting to hear what I had to say.

“Ask her again,” I said. “It’s the only way to know. There are

too many parents attempting to force arrangements. For instance, I love Warren as a—”

“You’ve been very kind,” he said abruptly, just as the final notes sounded. “I’m sorry to have taken you away from your Mr. Abercrombie.”

He let me go and paced toward the parlor. I tried to follow, needing to tell him that my love for Warren was as for a brother, but by the time I got to the parlor, he was gone.

“Is everything all right?” Anzonella was beside me, her face flushed from dancing.

“Yes,” I said, eyeing the discarded ice glasses still sitting side by side. I was confused. The night had stolen my sensibilities, Mr. Rossi’s as well. Even if I had been the object of his attention—which was unlikely—he wasn’t suitable even though he was handsome. I wondered if I’d actually have the courage to run away from my family, from comfort, from society if I had the chance. “Perfectly as it should be.”

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