

THE DUKE'S DARING DARLING

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Dedication

For Laura Landon, who led the way

Chapter One



“Whatever you do, stay away from my father.”

“You papa? But I not know him.”

Rusilla Ivanovna Charkova felt her careful composure slip for a moment. The reality of what they were about to do had just hit her in the noggin. She and her two new English friends were slipping into the ball uninvited. Rue turned to Del Wayburton who was keeping awfully quiet. The look on her face said she wasn’t so sure about this daring escapade Hari had coaxed them into, either.

“Oh, you’ll know him, alright,” Hari scowled. “He’s the one who’s so skinny he can hardly hold up his chest full of medals.”

“He carry it with him?”

Now Rue was truly confused. Her grip on the English language was good, but woefully lacking just when the Russian belle needed it most.

“No, silly. His medals are not *in* a chest, they’re *on* his chest. You know. Here.”

Hari—or rather Lady Harmony Mountmarten—demurely patted her own budding bosom and Rue realized her mistake. The man would be *wearing* his medals. Just like her own father had. Before he died in that terrible sledding accident outside their dacha two winters past.

A man with a chest full of medals was to be admired. Respected. Not groused over like Hari was doing. Did she not know how fortunate she was to still have her father in her life?

Rue straightened her shoulders and sighed. “Yes. I to be careful. He never know you come here, sweet Hari. I make promise.”

“We’re wasting time, girls. Only two more dances before they all leave.”

Hari whirled off the bottom step of the servant's back staircase and laid a hand on each girl's shoulder.

"Don't worry! The old men will be in the card room puffing on cigars by now and half of the mothers will be fussing over their darlings in the retiring room. It will just be us, with the few girls who have not yet excused themselves because their chaperones have fallen asleep, of course." Hari whirled back around and pointed to the scattered dancers they could almost see through the butler's pantry door she held slightly ajar. "And them."

With a grand sweep she indicated all the young men gathered here and there.

"So many!" Rue whispered.

"Ready my dears?"

Rue nodded and adjusted the small mask Hari had supplied for each of the three. They were simple, unremarkable masks, chosen specifically to help the girls blend in with those who had actually been invited to the Mountmarton Ball Masque.

Hari looped her arm through Rue's elbow. "Now don't forget, only two dances left in the set. Then we'll meet on the terrace and come back in through the stillroom and up the back stairs. And voila! Nobody will know we were here!" She dropped her voice to a mischievous whisper. "Except our boys!"

With a joyful nudge, Rue's petite friend moved the threesome forward. There was no other choice but to move with her if Rue was to maintain decorum and not draw undue attention. But halfway into the room she felt Hari draw away with a contented sigh as she took the hand of the fellow who had just swept in to lead her onto the ballroom floor. Judging from Hari's smile, this was the fellow she'd been pining over the whole time they'd been dressing.

Rue's new friend was barely sixteen. Too young for the young earl who had whisked her away. Such a thing would never have been allowed in Odessa. Not at home. Rue reminded herself that of the threesome, she was the only one of a legitimate age to be here. After all, she was eighteen and a half. This would have been her year of coming out, now that her period of mourning had ended. But her mama was still grieving, and when she insisted on the European tour, Rue could hardly refuse.

My sweet flower, please understand me. We must leave these memories that

pierce my heart morning to night. Come! We go to Paris. Vienna. London!
This you will love.

It had never seemed possible to Rue, loving a place that had no trace of her father in it. She had counted the days until she could return to the Ukraine. But when her mother's lungs succumbed to the strange London air, there was nothing for it but to wait out her recovery. Every day Rue thanked God for the elegant sanatorium Hari's mother had recommended. And for Del's parents who had taken her in. But it was not home, and—

"There you are!"

Rue felt a masculine hand land squarely on her back and another take hold of her right hand. Without warning she was swept toward the dancing crush.

"You've saved me," a mellow male voice whispered above her ear. "I hope you don't mind terribly."

Rue turned her head as she was being rushed forward and nearly forgot to breathe as her eyes took in the chiseled jaw beneath her captor's mask. But his false smile raised her ire a bit and loosed her tongue a lot.

"Podozhdite minutku!"

She stopped in the midst of their flight, causing the fellow to trip rather gracelessly. "Wha—"

"I say stop this minute."

She thrust his hand from her and stepped away from his arm that had lain so very nicely against her back. "I am Rusilla Ivanovna Charkova. And it is you to introduce."

"Roosh—"

"Miss Charkova to you, Englishman. And you are?"

"Ah. Yes. You wish to know with whom you're about to dance?"

"It is proper? No?"

"No. I mean, yes. I was most improper. Forgive me, dear lady. Ned Danton, Duke of Wellbury, at your service."

The introduction seemed to help his initial agitation settle, and she watched his broad shoulders expand as he took a calming breath.

"You see, there's someone very special I need to speak with, and with that little twit chasing me all evening I've not had the chance. See there?"

A glance in the direction he pointed explained the situation clearly enough. A gangly, freckled lass paced the fringes of the dance floor like a hen who had misplaced her chick.

The Duke of Wellbury moved closer and spoke in a whisper. "I can't explain, but I really must dance with Lady Georgiana because...well, because."

Rue felt her irritation slide away, banished by the pools of baby blue that stared at her from his masked face with such fervent fever.

"Ah. This iss most important, yes?"

His smile turned sheepish, an expression that would have looked silly on any other male. But on this tall fellow whose chestnut hair swept back from his temples in the most delightful curly waves, it looked positively princely.

"Well, why you not say so in place of first?"

With that, Rue put her hand gracefully into his great palm and stepped into the music. His face flooded with gratitude as she encouraged him to twirl her away.

"Where iss this girl who has chained your heart to hers?"

Now he did actually blush, and Rue felt herself shiver in response to the sweetness of it.

"See?" he whispered. "There, with the white roses in her hair." He paused and growled. "Dancing with that cad Maclyn."

Rue stretched her neck to its fullest swanlike proportion and spied the girl. She was indeed one of the fairest maids in the ballroom. And her partner with the raven hair and fearsome mask was nothing short of heart-stopping.

"I see," Rue sang. "She iss worthy prize."

He beamed.

"Here is vat we do."

Rue lowered her voice and spoke close to the young man's ear. Every few steps he would execute another mad twirl, making her fight hard to keep her train of thought, which wasn't easy with his heavenly strong arms practically lifting her off her feet.

"Really? You think it will work?"

She swatted his shoulder and tilted her head to the side, giving him her most flirtatiously indignant scoff.

"Rusilla say it work, it work! But first we must have, um, how you say, body message. In case your little twit come between again."

"My little twit? I say," her partner laughed. "Is your language always so daring?"

Rue blanched. Twit was another English word she had never heard

before. When he had spoken it in the middle of the ballroom she had only assumed it was a proper term meaning a young girl. It seemed innocent enough.

“Vat? You say little twit, I say little twit. Vat iss wrong with this?”

He gave her a dubious look, and then a slow smile of pleasure overtook his expression. “What is wrong with this, indeed?”

He swept her into a double turn and it took all her skill to make it look as if she could twirl all night.

“So. Vat iss body message to be? Hm?”

Her partner’s mouth twitched in confusion.

“Body message? Oh! You mean, signal?”

“Signal! Yes, signal is vat I mean to say.”

“Ah! A signal. For...”

“Well, vat if you talk to this Georgi but bad boy come back to bother? You need my help you signal me. See? Like, um, signal that mean *come now to help me*. Yes? Like dis, maybe, da?” She let go of her partner’s right hand and tugged at her ear. “Ven I see you fingers pull on you ear, I come. With haste. I fly to your rescue from unwanted intrude. Yes?”

“Ah. Yes. That could come in handy.”

“Yes! Use you handy to pull you ear.”

She wasn’t certain why the young man laughed so heartily at her comment, but at least he seemed to understand the need for signals.

“Now,” she continued, “waltz almost at end. Quick-quick, move close to your lady. See?” She leaned her body weight in the direction of the fellow’s sweetheart.

Without hesitation, the young Duke of Wellbury executed a breathtaking triple turn. Rusilla felt the scintillating pull of the turn and the answering pressure from his broad hand on her back. He was so strong, yet so very graceful.

It would be a pity to let him go.

But if the plan was to work, she had to, although for a moment she contemplated what might happen if she pretended to miss the musical timing and stayed locked in his arms.

Of course, that would be unkind. She’d seen the hopeful look in his eyes when he’d understood that her plan just might work. She couldn’t disappoint the fellow now that he was so close to winning his lady. That would be more than selfish. It would be downright mean-spirited.

Swallowing her own desire and preparing herself for the next moment, Rusilla drew a deep breath, lit her face with her broadest smile, and sang her command.

“Now!”

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Ned Danton, Duke of Wellbury, watched Rusilla Charkova execute a perfect pirouette as she skated right into the arms of the fellow who had claimed the current waltz with Lady Georgiana Rathmore. The delectable Georgiana covered the intrusion prettily, as he knew she would, but he swept in to catch her up as if rescuing her from some dire fate.

Surprisingly, the brazen exchange had not caused a stir. And if it had, the girl who called herself Rusilla had assured him it would be she who was found at fault and he who would come out the hero.

“Ned! Whatever are you doing?”

Georgiana was annoyed, which momentarily threatened to unnerve him. The sharp edge to her tone was a startling contrast to the Russian girl’s *shooshing*, lyrical voice. Ned had been mesmerized by the exotic girl’s full lips that seemed to lay each word on its own bed of silk. His paramour’s lips, on the other hand, were pursed in displeasure.

But this was Georgi. *His* Georgi. Smart, sassy, independent Georgi. What did it matter that her voice wasn’t as lilting as the Russian girl’s? He’d always planned to propose marriage to his childhood friend. Some day. But Maclyn’s attentions tonight had somehow thrown him off the ledge of procrastination. If it would keep her out of Devan Maclyn’s way, he would ask her tonight.

“I couldn’t go another minute watching you twirl away with that fellow,” Ned groused.

Her answering swat landed on his shoulder in perfect time with the final note of the waltz.

“*Balderdash*. You can’t possibly be jealous of the Earl of Charleton, Neddie. He’s a complete rake!”

Ned watched the flush begin to fade from her cheeks as Lady Georgiana gathered her composure. It took a moment for her words to sink in, but when they did, his heart made a bit of a leap in his chest. She didn’t care for the cad!

Yet.

But what might happen if the blackguard continued to woo her as he had tonight?

Now was the time to act. He cast his eyes about the room in search of the nearest exit.

“Let’s take the air, shall we?” he asked, already guiding her toward the terrace.

“Ned, really, I do need a glass—”

Momentarily flustered, Ned considered refreshment. But if no footman magically appeared with a tray of champagne flutes he might have to leave her side, which he most assuredly was not willing to do.

Even as the thought arose, he was spared the dilemma. At that very moment, a footman passed just beyond Ned’s elbow, enabling him to pluck up a flute without missing a step as he steered Georgiana toward the open terrace door.

Within seconds they had crossed to the steps and found their way down to a muted pool of light. Georgiana allowed him to turn her toward him, but her pretty pout still concerned him.

“Don’t be angry with me, Georgi.”

He held out the champagne like a peace offering and she accepted it almost greedily. He placed his hands on her soft upper arms, letting his thumbs glide slowly back and forth. “Do say you’ll forgive me,” he begged, and instantly regretted the pleading he heard in his voice.

Georgiana turned her head to the side, sending the tantalizing scent of white roses across his nose. She tilted her chin to take a sip of champagne, letting the soft tendrils of her blonde curls drift maddeningly across the back of his hand that still had not released her.

Now she looked at him from the corner of her eye. “We have plenty of time to dance, Neddie. What’s the rush all of the sudden?”

“Rush? What rush? I’ve waited the whole evening.”

“Well, then, let’s go dance.”

He’d just managed to get her away from the crowd and she wanted to scoot right back to it.

“Neddie?”

He heard the quiet stamp of her small slipper that underscored her impatience.

“Not yet,” he breathed. Ned reached a hand to turn her chin toward him. As she pivoted, Ned dropped both hands to take her free hand in his. As

she drew her next breath, he lowered himself to one knee.

“Dearest Georgi, we’ve been perfectly matched friends since our days in the nursery garden. There’s no one in the world I know better than I know you. No one with whom I am more completely at home.” He took a fortifying breath. “Lady Georgiana Rathmore, will you do me the immense honor of becoming my wife?”

In his daydreams he’d envisioned this moment repeatedly since early youth. Georgiana’s lush lips would spread in surprise, then stretch into the glorious smile that never failed to give his heart a hitch. She would emit a small squeal of surprise, draw him up from his knees, and cry, “Yes, yes, yes!”

And then she would let him kiss her.

But as it all played out mentally for him, Ned suddenly realized she hadn’t said a word.

“Georgi?”

He rose to face her, relieved that at least she’d not pulled her hand away from his.

“Georgi?”

She dropped her gaze. Then, without looking back up at him, she swung her head toward the upper terrace, toward the door through which they’d just exited. Before she turned back, he saw what it was that filled her eyes.

Longing.

It was longing.

Not for him, not for marriage, but longing. Longing for what? The dancing crush? Or mere escape?

Even as he wrestled with that question, Georgiana turned back to him.

“You’ve spoken to my father?”

Ned felt unsettled by her cool statement. “Of course, darling! That is, not directly, but when I wrote and asked if I might see him immediately upon his return, he suggested my uncle and I meet with him tomorrow morning early. He seemed very pleased, Georgi. He said he’d been hoping to speak with me, as well. I’m certain he knows my intention.”

She ventured a polite smile.

“It’s true. He does think very highly of you. So perhaps I shall marry you, Your Grace. But...”

Her final word hung in the air, brutally twisting Ned’s stomach into a slow knot. Before it could rise into his throat and turn him into a stuttering

schoolboy he pressed. “But what, Georgi. But what?”

She sighed. “But only if we wait until after.”

What was she saying? “After what—?”

“Don’t press me, Neddie. You’ll know tomorrow morning.” Now she gave him her look that said she knew better than he. “Just promise me you’re willing to wait.” She gave him a look that never failed to set his limbs to tingling. “You always give me what I want.”

Of all the emotions he’d expected to feel tonight, crestfallen was not one of them. But that’s what he truly felt. Crestfallen. He’d made his bold move and thrown himself at his sweetheart’s feet only to find that she was less than enthusiastic. But *perhaps* was better than *no*, and that thought did make his heart dance the tiniest bit.

“Of course, my lady.” Ned swallowed hard. “Not until after.”

His hand came to her cheek. This was what he had wanted, wasn’t it? His tidy future was all planned out, and Georgi lay at the center of it. She was for the most part sensible, highly respected, calm in a crisis, frugal, a perfect hostess. A perfect duchess. And her foresight was uncanny. What a pair they would make! Ned let his eyes slip away from hers and settle on her rosy lips. When they twitched slightly, Georgiana caught her bottom lip between her teeth. She could have done nothing more alluring.

“Georgi,” he whispered, and lowered his head to taste this night’s treasure.

But just as he came close enough to detect the subtle hint of champagne on her sweet breath, a musical laugh cut the air. It came from just beyond the foliage that sheltered them, distracting Ned and spoiling the moment.

Their privacy had not been invaded, but the moment had been broken, nevertheless. Ned listened for the couple to move slightly away before glancing in their direction without claiming his kiss.

He recognized the lavishly ornamented hair of the Russian girl disappearing into the garden. She kept turning her head to look adoringly into the eyes of her escort.

Ned froze. Those adoring looks were being showered upon the same black-haired mongrel who had been monopolizing Georgi all evening. He was the most notorious rakehell in the district. Had ruined more maids than half the army of France. And his head was now bent close—too close—to Miss Charkova’s.

He happened to know the girl had only been in London six weeks, not

nearly long enough for a newcomer to know the man's reputation. Not long enough to know that just being seen leaving the ballroom on Devan Maclyn's arm could be enough to destroy her. And it would be his fault!

Why hadn't he warned her to elude the Earl of Charleton as soon as Ned and his sweetheart were safely away? But he'd said nothing. Instead, Ned had let her play right into the man's clutches just so he could capture Georgiana.

If he had any honor at all, he had to do something for the girl. And quickly.

Ned turned his face toward Georgi and was stricken dumb by her upturned face and closed eyes. She still waited for her kiss. It should be a slow kiss, tender, plied with just the right amount of want.

But Rusilla was disappearing into the dark.

"Georgi, I...that is...forgive me, but...I'm sorry."

Her eyes flew open, but Ned didn't see that. He was already running.

