

A Touch of Velvet

Chapter 1

Lady Eleanor leaned back into the soft squabs of the coach's bench seat. She knew not how long she might have to wait for him, but she would wait as long as necessary. Her driver gave her a look of disbelief when she ordered the coach readied long after most refined women retired for the evening. Now, well past midnight, she periodically heard his *humph* of discontent as he shivered with the encroaching fog. However, what those at the posting inn thought of her traveling the short distance from the inn to sitting outside the men's club did not bother her. Lady Eleanor came for him, and she would not return home without him.

Despair no longer lived in her heart; it and misery died the day her father, the Duke of Thornhill, took his last breath. Now, only a desperate need to finish for what she came existed. Lady Eleanor's pride remained. She survived—she overcame the piercing loneliness—the chaos of the last few years. Unconsciously, she fumbled in her reticule for the letter. It was too dark to read it, but knowing it was there reassured her within a few hours or even a few minutes, the searching would be over.

Her shadowed eyes surveyed the establishment's door once again, praying it would open, and he would be there at last. Nerves and stress rode with her tonight, and a faint trembling shook her being. *Would she even recognize him?* Eight years—nearly eight years—may have dimmed her memory. A boy of seventeen and a man of five and twenty must not look the same. She studied each man entering and leaving the hall, looking for the familiar face.

Brantley Fowler absently watched the table's other players and even those at the surrounding ones. Sometimes men set on manipulating the cards worked in pairs. Although surrounded by players, dealers, servers, and courtesans, he sat in isolation. A raised eyebrow often showed his deference to polite society's rules. Remote and enigmatic, he demanded attention. Usually a man needed another decade's experience to control such regard, but no one who ever looked upon his face would doubt him to be anything but a man of action.

He narrowed his gaze. "Do you plan to wager, Sir Henry?" He spoke with an amused drawl.

"I will get to it, Fowler," Sir Henry's voice betrayed his attempt at convincing his opponent that his cards were strong enough to justify his bet. Yet, Fowler heard the timbre of a bluff. Instinctively, he knew the hand was his for the taking.

Bran's eyes darkened, and a decided coolness spread across his features. "I only asked, Sir, because I wish to be home before dawn. At this pace, we will be lucky to finish the game before your wife comes to root you out." A smirk played across the corners of his mouth. This was not London; it was a thriving town in Cornwall, and although there were signs of decadence, no one would refer to it as a gaming hell.

Sir Henry tossed away the card and drew another from the stack. Smiling, he made the wager only to find Fowler's hand the stronger one. "It looks like you win *again*," Sir Henry grumbled as Brantley gathered his winnings.

He heard that tone before. Brantley paused giving the man a warning look. "Men have many vices," Bran spoke with a quiet assurance, "but I limit mine to cards, Sir Henry. I win often, but I also lose. Tonight, however, was not one of those times."

Sir Henry flustered; he looked about, hoping the other players might also object to losing to Fowler, but his tablemates diverted their eyes. "I did . . . I did not mean an offense, Mr. Fowler," he stammered.

"Of course, you did not," Brantley chuckled lightly. "It is just the hour's lateness. It makes enemies of men who can be friends in the daylight."

Sir Henry nodded. "We are friends, Mr. Fowler," the apology inherent in the words.

Brantley's smile showed a confidence he knew the others lacked. "I count you as a friend, Sir Henry. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I believe I will call it an evening." He pocketed his winnings. Making a polite bow to the table, Fowler picked up his walking stick and headed towards the door. He retrieved his hat and cloak from the hostess and bid the doorman a good night.

Stepping into the intruding dampness and fog, Brantley breathed deeply, clearing his lungs of the cheroot smoke and the smell of stale whiskey. He paused, allowing the night to creep into his blood. He held the pause long enough to watch a woman of society descended from a coach parked directly before the club. A footman assisted her, and for a few brief seconds, Fowler found the scene anachronistic. Why would a refined lady be in this part of town—in this town, even—and at this time of night? Then his gaze fell on the livery, and his heart stopped. Nearly eight years ago he divorced himself from any connection to that line. Raising his eyes, they locked on the woman's face standing before him.

"Brantley?" her voice caressed the air.

"Ella?" The word caught in his throat. "Ella, is that you?"

An elongated second held before she was in his arms. "Thank God, I finally found you."

Fowler directed Eleanor's coach to follow his. He could not take her to the posting inn at this hour, and his household staff adjusted to his unusual comings and goings years ago. Plus, they discretely looked the other way when he "entertained" single females. The shock of seeing her on Cornwall's streets after all these years nearly sent him into apoplexy. Sitting his favorite carriage's darkness, amazement became his companion. How had he known the woman standing before him was Eleanor—his Ella? The last time he saw her she was but thirteen. He supposed it a combination of recognizing the Thornhill crest and the sound of her voice—a voice, which brought back a flood of memories. She did not say why she came, but Brantley knew: His father no longer lived. That would be the only reason Eleanor would come for him.

In her coach's luxury, Eleanor rolled towards his residence. She spent a small fortune finding him, but now Bran could no longer hide from his future. The letter in her reticule told her Bran from the age of seventeen sold his services to various foreign dignitaries. As a youth, he served in mercenary units—fighting for causes no Englishman would deign worthy. As a young man, he offered protective services to the rulers of several foreign countries, thwarting the plans of assassins and spies. He nearly died on three separate occasions, reportedly risking his life for innocent women and children. His time dealing with the Punjab earned him a fortune. By all monetary standards, Bran could be deemed a self made man—a man of success. Brantley Fowler lived for years in Brittany—yet, the wars with Boney drove him home, or as close to home as he ever allowed himself to be. He returned to England nearly two years ago, living. Now, Eleanor wondered could she convince him to really come "home."

The coaches rolled to a halt before a stately, but moderately sized manor on a secluded lane. Eleanor only glimpsed the house's exterior. Her thoughts remained on her mission. Within

moments, a footman set down the steps, and Bran extended his hand to assist her down. They climbed the few stairs to the entrance, her hand cupped in the crook of his arm.

“Good evening, Sir.” Despite the hour, a very proper butler opened the door before they reached it.

“Good evening, Horace.” Brantley’s voice not betraying the angst he felt. “Horace, I shall entertain Lady Eleanor in my study. Please have someone bring us tea and something to eat.”

Eleanor turned in surprise. “Bran, that is not necessary.” She wondered what Bran’s staff must think of her coming here in the middle of the night.

“It is necessary, Ella,” he cautioned. “We are likely to be some time in renewing our relationship.”

Fowler handed Horace his cloak, walking stick, and hat. “I also need the large guest room for Lady Eleanor.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Where are your trunks, Ella?” Bran returned his attention to her.

“At the Fin and Fowl.” Not sure what to expect, she finally took a long look at the entranceway. Tastefully elegant in its presentation, the décor reminded her of their mother’s influence.

“Horace, send a footman to the Fin and Fowl to retrieve Lady Eleanor’s belongings. Be sure to give her coachman proper shelter, as well as housing her coach and cattle in the stables.”

“Right away, Sir.”

“Ella, did your abigail remain at the inn?” He watched her as she scrutinized his household.

“She did.” Her answer relieved his concern. The idea of Eleanor traveling so far alone worried him.

“Be sure the lady’s maid is brought here and housed properly.”

“Yes, Mr. Fowler. Anything else, Sir?”

“No, Horace. Once those needs are met, please release the staff for the evening. Lady Eleanor and I will have a late breakfast so allow everyone a few extra hours of sleep in the morning.”

“Thank you, Sir. They will appreciate your thoughtfulness. The tea will arrive shortly. I will bring it myself, Sir.”

Displaying feigned assurance, Bran simply acknowledged the gratitude with an aristocratic nod of his head. Taking Eleanor by the arm, he led her to his study. Upon entering the room, she strolled to the sofa and settled herself comfortably among the cushions, while he took up residence in an opposing wing chair.

Waiting for a response, which never came, Bran cleared his throat. “You certainly gave me a surprise, Ella. I never expected to see you on The Blue Bull’s steps. I am not sure I would have recognized you without the livery. Your looks changed from that gangly girl I used to chase away from my room.”

“Your looks, too, matured. You filled out nicely, Bran. However, your image surrounds me daily at Thorn Hall.” Silence followed her remarks as they both allowed their eyes to assess the person before them.

Horace arrived with the tea, scones, preserves, and seed cakes. He placed the tray on the low table between them. “Shall I serve, Sir?”

“No, Horace, we will handle it. See to the other arrangements, and then you may retire.”

“Yes, Sir.” The butler made his bow, exiting the room and closing the door behind him.

Eleanor poured them both a cup before she spoke again. "I suppose you know, Bran, why I came," her voice barely above a whisper.

"I suppose I do." Bran put the cup down and then strode to his desk for the brandy decanter. "I believe I need something stronger than tea." He poured two fingers' worth, tossed it off, and then poured another. "When?" he began after a long silence. "When did he die?"

"A little over a month ago." Eleanor's words held no true regrets. "He really passed nearly two years ago. He was nothing but a figurehead for some time. I ran the estate since he began to suffer from the infirmity of his mind. We kept it as secret as possible."

"Then why are you here, Eleanor. Surely you do not think I mourn the man? The day I left, I said farewell to Thornhill and all claims I might have. You are welcome to it. If you have the competence to run it, then be at it."

"If I had a legitimate claim to Thornhill, I would not be here, Bran. I would leave you to your life. I understand you amassed a substantial fortune on your own. My reports say you live the life of a rake—gambling and women being your products."

He cautioned, "Eleanor, bitterness does not play well for a refined lady."

She barked out a laugh. "Then you deny the reports? Are you more, Brantley, than what your critics say?"

"How I live my life is my business," he charged. "I just told you, I hold no desire to claim Thornhill. Take it and do what you will." He strode to the chair and flopped down, ignoring what he did to his clothing.

"Bran, when you walked away from Thornhill, you also walked away from me and from Velvet. You left us to survive on our own. Excuse me if I resent having to ask you to return home; yet, I have no other choice. Our father left the estate entailed upon the male line. Even though it was mine from the age of nineteen, I cannot succeed. The estate and title are yours."

"I do not want it, Eleanor!" He leaned forward to make his point. "I want nothing that once belonged to our father—not the title—not the estate—not the position—and not the money!"

"Then you leave Velvet to Cousin Horton's touch. You leave him the estate, the title, the money, as well as the girl you once promised to marry. I suppose he will allow me to continue on as Velvet's companion, a poor relative. Imagine a duke's daughter in such a position. Will that not set tongues wagging?"

The mention of Velvet Aldridge's name brought a brief smile. He wondered about her forever. When he lay on a muddy battlefield in those early years, it was Velvet's innocent face, which kept him alive—kept him going. However, he betrayed her—betrayed her with a need to never be like his father. Decidedly, Bran placed his memories away on the shelf, never to disturb them again. "Velvet surely does not expect my attentions after all these years?"

"We purposely did not discuss it since before father's illness, but I seriously doubt she expects anything from you, Brantley. You were seventeen when you swore to love her forever—Velvet was not yet twelve. If she holds any such delusions, she does not openly speak of them, and truthfully, she does not need your regard. Velvet turned out quite lovely. If father's illness did not prevent us a proper coming out, we both could be established elsewhere, and Thornhill's fate could be someone else's problem. However, father's lifestyle only allowed for his own needs. Cousin Horton is five and twenty years older than Velvet; he suffers from gout and rheumatic spasms. Worse than that, the man's reputation for debauchery far outshines anything of father's. Will you leave her and me to such a fate? Horton will run through the money within a year. We will be destitute, and we will be subject to the same kind of profligacy our father brought into our lives daily."