

Chapter 1 - Coming Home

“I can’t believe Gayla’s already coming back from her study abroad. It feels like just yesterday she renounced the throne and said she wanted to get an education instead,” Hilda said to her younger sister.

“It has been four years. Plus you are now of age, Hilda. It’s your job to help govern our land,” Susie proudly replied.

“After getting married.” Hilda sighed. “Susie, what if Gayla is right? Do I really want an arranged marriage for the government, for dad, or should I try to find love like she is? I mean she called off her arranged marriage before she left. Couldn’t I do that? Of course, I could leave the throne to you.”

Susie chuckled, “I don’t think dad will give you that option right now or at all. It’s a little more than a week until you get married to Lord what's-his-bucket. Has dad even mentioned his name to you yet, Hillie?”

“I think he is from a Tudor family but it’s just another long name that I’ll have to hear at least ten more times before I remember it,” Hilda remarked as both of them started to laugh.

As Hilda laughed along with her sister, she remembered the original feeling she had when Gayla left. It was completely the opposite of how she was feeling right now.

The room was empty and everyone was down at the front gate. Gayla hugged her sisters and curtsied to her parents. It was time to set sail into her new world. A world where she could finally make her own choices.

However, this was the first choice that affected the people around her, especially her sisters.

Hilda’s heart fell into her stomach like a swallowed apricot pit. Why was Gayla leaving her? Why did Gayla dump all this responsibility on her? Hilda never wanted this responsibility. She was grateful to be a second born before, but not anymore.

As much as Hilda loved her sister, she hated Gayla at the moment.

"I can't believe I'm finally home," Gayla thought out loud, while the carriage wheeled closer to Andora. "Four years just breezed by. If only I had one more day. Even a couple hours would suffice."

An idea sparked in her mind.

"Stop the carriage, please!" Gayla shouted to the driver. Gayla jolted out the door before the carriage actually halted. "I won't be long; I just want to find some more books before I see my family. I'll meet you at the gate."

The driver nodded to her and drove on.

Stenger was quite the place to be that day. Music swelled in the streets, food flavored every corner, and a couple of town stores pushed to the corner with merchandise - everything Gayla could've imagined for the last few hours of freedom.

"Yes, a breath of freedom before reporting to my father," Gayla thought. "All I need is an hour."

It was Gayla's favorite town close to home. She knew Stenger's streets well. The bookstore was right across from the boulangerie. As Gayla got to the boulangerie, she noticed him.

Him. Who wouldn't have noticed him?

Gayla's heart skipped a beat at the sight of him.

He was a sight to behold. Gayla didn't think a sight of a man could make her heart flutter so much.

The brown wisps of hair in front of his face flicked at his nose while his soft-looking hands stroked the back of the book he was holding.

Gayla snapped herself back to reality when she realized she had been staring for almost a minute. She thought she knew everyone in Stenger. Gayla had to look one more time.

As she did, the man looked up from the book and smiled boldly across the street at her.

Gayla sheepishly turned her back to the bookstore and started looking at the warmed bread. Why of all the ways to find love did Gayla have to find it through love at first sight? She told herself that she knew better and had to find love deeper than just physical attraction.

Why did he have to look so nice and charming?

She couldn't go over to the bookstore now. What if the man got the wrong idea of her? The best thing Gayla thought she could do was buy some bread and take her time getting there by stopping at other shops on the street.

Thankfully, bread was one of Gayla's weaknesses.

“Paris was crawling with bread when I was there. I miss eating bread and cheese below the Arc de Triomphe,” Gayla thought to herself as she snacked. “That city was packed with history.”

Not too many shops were open today, despite the festivities, so it took Gayla less time than she thought to get to the bookstore.

“Oh well,” she thought. “At least I won't be embarrassed coming in here now.”

As Gayla began to look around, she noticed the handsome stranger beckoning some nearby instruments and threw some coins in a pot next to them.

“What a great song,” Gayla thought. “Definitely haven't heard this one in a while.”

“Would you care to dance?” The handsome stranger offered his hand to Gayla as he inched closer.

“Why, thank you. I'd be honored,” Gayla said, taking his hand.

“So, what brings such a beautiful girl with golden hair to the festival today?” He asked.

“I was mainly looking for new books. I thought it was more of a marche aux puces than a celebration.” Gayla said. “But so far all I have is bread.”

“Fair enough. Well, I noticed not too many vendors are selling things today. Whenever I have visited Stenger, the town always seems to be having a celebration of life.”

“Then, you are a visitor. I was wondering.”

“I like to go around the Pazinlea Peninsula once in a while to find some fun celebrations.”

“I tend to have more responsibilities and tasks to deal with instead of going out celebrating. Though I do often love a good dance. Speaking of, you have a great deal of technique to be doing these types of folk dances. And knowing the music,” Gayla noted from before.

“I did have a good upbringing in both dance and foil work.”

“Foil work? You fancy yourself a swordsman? Not too many people do these days,” Gayla smirked.

The stranger flashed her a noble smile, showing the dimple in the left corner of his mouth again.

“How about you? You don’t see too many women around here looking for books either. Some people think most women are still illiterate. I, myself, think that everyone deserves an education of some sort. ”

“I am pretty determined in my education,” Gayla’s smile grew larger. Thankfully there was more to this stranger than Gayla had first seen.

Gayla continued, “There isn’t too much I can do outside my house. My home is more suited and designed to tasks that my father thinks I should do. Dad’s a bit of a stickler on that. However, he let me create a library that I can’t get enough of. Oh, and thank you for the dance.”

The lively music had stopped and turned into bubbling conversations everywhere on the street.

“My pleasure. Wow, both gorgeous and intelligent. I would love to call on you later. May I get your name? Mine’s Callum,” the stranger introduced.

“It’s nice to meet you, Callum. Personally, I do have a fairly long name, but most just call me Gayla. My father is a difficult man to persuade to call on one of his daughters, so maybe I

could just meet you here tonight instead of all the formality? I do have somewhere to be right now.”

“Of course, I look forward to seeing you later.”

Gayla turned to leave, but her hand stayed glued in Callum’s. It was as soft as she had thought, but strong and firm clasped.

“Sorry I guess you’ll be needing your hand back,” Callum slightly chuckled, and kissed the back of her hand. “Until this evening, sweet Gayla.”

As Gayla left the town towards her carriage, a young man sauntered up to Callum.

"Sire, what was that? Who was that? You are arranged to be wed within the week. You can't go off gallivanting with the first pretty girl you see."

"First off, squire, Gayla's not the first 'pretty' girl I saw. There's something different about her than anyone I've ever been around. Her blue eyes just glittered in the sun. She is quite smart and very witty. I was just drawn to her. I can't explain it."

"I just hope I won't have to explain any stupidity to your father. Maybe she'll be smart enough to leave you alone so you can be married to the de Ghant girl next Sunday. Your father will kill you if you back out of this wedding. We can't have this end up like the last wedding," Callum's squire stated.

"Trust me, Gordon, it will be nothing like that. I'm sure that no death will preclude this wedding unlike the last."
