

The Duke's Love

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LOVE

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# Capítulo 1

## *Chapter 1*

*Ravenscroft Hollow, Cornwall*

*1818*

The moonlight cast eerie shadows over Ravensfield Castle as Gabriel arrived on horseback. He halted his steed on the castle's approach road and gazed at it momentarily before urging the animal to continue.

He was exhausted and in dire need of a hot meal, a bath, and a bed to rest. Precisely in that order.

It wasn't just the journey that had brought him to such extreme weariness, but also the weight of his newly inherited title, which had compelled him to leave his quarters in Waterloo and return to his home. The responsibilities, the title, and Ravensfield Castle were suffocating him, but it was his duty to be there, even though he hadn't been able to make it home for his grandfather's funeral. He hadn't notified anyone of his return; he had only written to Mrs. Banks to forewarn her of his impending arrival at Ravensfield Castle and had asked her not to inform any relatives. He didn't want to be surrounded by uncles, cousins, and other family members who undoubtedly had something to ask of him and would stay at the castle for weeks.

No, he wasn't being ungrateful. He simply didn't feel capable of facing that situation. He loved his family, and the Gabriel Worthington of the past would have been more than happy to invite them to spend time at the castle. But he was no longer the same Gabriel who had gone to the continent, nor the one who had come home on leave three times. No, the Gabriel of now had been at the siege of Badajoz, had been at Waterloo, and in countless other infamous battles that had not only robbed him of joy but also of innocence.

The gravel of the road crunched under the hooves of the horse he had rented from the neighboring village, and he thought of the owner of Rosemoon Manor. A smile curved his lips as he thought of the Earl of Cadwell's Elizabethan mansion. That place had always filled him with great peace. He remembered its tall towers and delicate architectural details illuminated by sunlight. The mansion was surrounded by lush terraced gardens, where climbing roses intertwined in arches and marble fountains

murmured melodies as sweet as they were soothing.

Inside, the mansion unveiled carefully crafted opulence. Hallways adorned with crystal chandeliers led to rooms furnished with period furniture and intricate tapestries. Tall, lattice windows allowed the sea breeze to gently filter inside, cooling the rooms in the summer, while marble fireplaces provided a warm haven on winter nights.

Gabriel could visualize every corner of Rosemoon Manor. And, if he were the Gabriel of yesteryear, he undoubtedly would have spent the night there instead of forcing his sore leg to endure nine more kilometers. He knew the Earl was there. He had written so many letters pleading for his return, assuring him that he would wait in Cornwall, so it was impossible for him not to know he was in Moonford. Mrs. Banks had confirmed it in her last letter, just in case there was any doubt. But Gabriel would never doubt Owen's word. He always kept his promises. Always.

Gabriel had never quite understood why Owen loved Ravenshield Castle so much, as it was completely opposite to Rosemoon Manor. The castle exuded an aura of coldness and robustness. Its solid stone walls stood like imposing guardians, weathering the test of time and the harshness of the coastal climate. Battlements and watchtowers evoked a sense of medieval strength, for after all, that had been its origin.

Unlike Rosemoon Manor, Ravenshield Castle lacked the elegant ornamentation and delicate detailing of the mansion. Its spaces were vast and austere, with vaulted ceilings and dim corridors where, if one paid attention, echoes of the past could be heard. The rooms were furnished with sturdy, functional furniture designed to withstand the test of time. There was no warmth in Ravenshield Castle, yet Owen always ran to the castle to escape his own home.

Gabriel had always believed he knew nothing about Owen, and that was exactly how he felt every time he thought of him, despite the extensive letters in which he wrote trivial details about his daily life, but never delved into himself in depth, as if he didn't know how to. But could Gabriel blame him? He, who hadn't answered any of Owen's missives since his first leave. He, who, despite knowing he was at Rosemoon Manor, had passed through Moonford like a delinquent avoiding his creditors, even though he had stopped at The Silver Lion inn to have a pint and change horses.

He sighed and stopped the horse in front of the door. A stable boy appeared running just as he finished dismounting—saving him from the embarrassment of being seen losing his balance and clinging to the horse to avoid falling—indicating that they were expecting him. The boy took the horse, and the main door swung open, revealing Mr. Pillford, the steward of Ravenshield Castle. Gabriel sighed, resigned, and limped his way to the

door, forcing himself to ascend each darn step despite the fact that it would have been much more convenient for him to enter through the kitchen. He held back tears of pain and maintained a stony expression as he greeted the steward. He endured as best as he could the two rows of servants who were there to receive him despite the untimely hour. They all wore impeccable uniforms, and though they appeared truly weary, there they stood, displaying a composure that compelled him to behave as expected and allowed them to introduce him to the more important ones, even though he already knew them.

They could have arranged all this in the morning, which would have been the proper thing to do, but Mrs. Banks thought he would need a few days to rest and preferred to do it at that hour.

Blessed Mrs. Banks! Did she know something about his issue? Or did she simply sense that he needed solitude?

Well, whatever the case, he sped through the formalities and was led to his new room, the one that had belonged to the duke. He would have protested that they had decided for him where he was going to sleep, but he didn't even have the strength for that.

When they arrived at his chambers, he asked the housekeeper for something hot to eat, anything that was available, and to prepare a bath for him. After that, they could all retire to rest. And, since Mrs. Banks was the most efficient woman he had ever known, within twenty minutes a tray was brought up to him with steaming vegetable soup, roast chicken, a slice of bread, cheese, and—Gabriel assumed—everything the woman had found in the kitchen. Perhaps she had seen him too thin and wanted to fatten him up like a pig in a single night.

He ate ravenously, completely forgetting the refined manners that corresponded to his position. He was more like a famished soldier who finally got a morsel of bread to eat.

Scarcely ten minutes after finishing dinner, footmen arrived with a copper bathtub that they placed behind the screen, where his grandfather's tub had been, which was made of cast iron. He looked at Mrs. Banks, who accompanied a maid carrying towels and soap on a silver tray.

"What happened to Lord Edevane's bathtub, Mrs. Banks?" he asked, curious, looking towards where the servants had placed the new one.

"It was old, Your Excellency, and I decided to replace it with this one. But if it's not to your liking..."

Gabriel shook his head, indicating that he didn't mind. When he was finally alone, he locked the door, undressed, and stepped into the water. He

welcomed the warmth, which relaxed his muscles within minutes and eased the pain in his injured leg.

He sighed and reached for the soap, which smelled of lavender, and Owen's image came to him. That soap wasn't prepared at Ravensfield Castle, but at Rosemoon Manor. He knew it well because Owen had a faint scent of lavender. Mrs. Banks had always opted for unscented soap, just as Lady Edevane had requested. Neither his grandmother nor his mother liked perfumed soaps, but at Rosemoon Manor, they seemed to adore the scent of lavender. The closets, the sheets... Owen. Everything, absolutely everything, smelled of lavender. And that's why whenever that scent reached his nostrils, he remembered his old friend. It didn't matter that he had been avoiding it for years because that memory remained vivid in his mind.

He closed his eyes and remembered Owen. Slight, awkward, and a little clumsy, as if he couldn't coordinate the movements of his upper and lower limbs. He walked hunched over, which earned him continuous reprimands from his parents and tutors. Perhaps he did it because he was too tall and wanted to go unnoticed; Gabriel didn't know. But there was always something elusive about him, as if he truly wanted to be invisible to the world.

Except to him.

With him, he was cheerful, lively, fun. He was his best friend. He was despite the distance, time, and Gabriel's silence. And he would always be, even if Owen grew tired of his silence one day.

Owen Hargreaves would always be the most important person to him.

He remembered Owen's hurt expression the first time he ignored him. It was at the party of some duchess or marchioness; he wasn't sure. The lady was presenting her daughter to society; he did remember that because he had chased his brother—the true heir to the dukedom—all night. Owen, who hadn't changed a bit in the year since their last meeting, had followed him like a wounded puppy, desperate for a sign of affection from his master. And he, filled with cruelty, hadn't given him a single minute of his time. And then, to avoid his pursuit, he had fled London and hidden in Ravenscroft Hollow. Although, truth be told, he had hoped that Owen would follow him, but he hadn't. And he regretted it. He still regretted it.

Owen didn't know how important his letters had been to him over the last five years. He awaited them like one awaits the smile of the goddess Fortuna. Each of those letters, filled with everyday moments, rural

anecdotes, filled him with a peace he couldn't put into words.

But Gabriel wasn't stupid. The letters had changed, becoming colder, more distant, matching his silence. And it hurt, he couldn't deny that.

He wasn't entirely sure why he was running away from Owen, but once he had started, he couldn't stop, and now he didn't know how to reverse it. Was he truly running away from him? Or was he, perhaps, running away from himself?

It had all started during his last week in England on his first leave. He, proud, looked handsome in his uniform, and he had shown it off at Rosemoon Manor for Owen, who had looked at him with genuine admiration. And he had strutted through the mansion's gardens, proud.

Owen had led him to a secluded spot in the gardens, a blind spot where they used to hide to read forbidden books. Once there, his clumsy friend had pushed him against the old oak tree under which they had napped many childhood afternoons, and he had kissed him. Gabriel, back then, was already experienced in those matters, but Owen wasn't, and he was bothered that an inexperienced person had assaulted him in that way. His young and gallant self had felt very uncomfortable and annoyed. He had pushed him away abruptly and fled from him. Since then, he avoided him.

If he had analyzed his own feelings a little, he would have realized he was scared, not annoyed. That Owen's move was exactly what he had wanted to do on more than one occasion, although he had always justified those impulses by disguising them as any other emotion that would make him feel more comfortable.

No, Gabriel didn't deny his preferences. He knew he liked men, knew he had to be discreet, and was firmly certain that lying with a woman wasn't something he desired. In fact, all his sexual partners had been men.

But there was something about Owen that scared him, although at that moment he didn't know what it could be. Now he knew it was love. He loved his best friend in a way he should never love him. However, the mere idea of doing so terrified him. And when he realized his feelings were reciprocated, he fled. Now he knew all that, yes. But back then he didn't, and he had hurt Lord Cadwell himself, the most sought-after rake in London.

Yes, he knew every move of his old friend despite his silence and Owen's more than evident omissions. Owen told him anything but his daily whereabouts.

Admitting that it hurt to think there were other people in Owen's life and bed was difficult, but that was exactly what was happening. But what else was his old friend supposed to do when he himself had rejected him in such a cruel way?

Given the coldness and how much Owen had shortened his letters, Gabriel sensed that soon he would stop receiving his missives. It hurt, but he couldn't blame him. He had written hundreds of letters that hadn't been answered. Would he have endured all that? He was sure he wouldn't have. He wasn't as patient and steadfast as Owen. Being punished with his silence was fair. At least he could reread those letters over and over again and properly appreciate how his prose had changed as he grew and matured and...

And as he grew tired of writing to him.

Yes, he had sensed that too. The weariness. It had started with a simple change in the opening of his letters. It had gone from "my dearest Gabriel" to "dear Worthington" and ended with "dear Lord Edevane." And the tone of the missive had changed each time, becoming colder, more formal, more distant. And with that distance, Gabriel's heart broke more and more.

He wasn't going to deny that he felt unfairly treated, that he had rebelled against that change, but what could he do? He had set the boundaries, not Owen. Owen had simply changed, and he supposed he only wrote to him now out of habit. But acquired habits are lost as well, and soon Gabriel would be left without what anchored him to the world. He wouldn't enjoy the stories of the hens that had invaded the church in Moonford, the anecdotes of the Thomas twins, the old Mrs. Raven's constant scolding of anyone passing by her house...

Owen's tales were so vivid, even despite their coldness, that he felt he knew his friend's tenants better than he knew himself. He had laughed heartily at the mischievous antics of Owen's cats and how they tormented his friend's poor dog, which he had to protect from the feline attacks. He knew each of the patrons of The Silver Lion, their troubles, their lives...

But now that he thought about it, Owen had never talked to him about his daily life. Not once. But he dismissed that thought because he didn't want to dwell on it. Instead, he brought his hand to his lips and remembered the sensation of that clumsy kiss. He closed his eyes and conjured that memory, just as he had done all those years.

How would Owen feel if he knew that Gabriel had avoided kissing other men to not taint that memory? How would he feel if he knew that in all those other men, he saw Owen's face, his awkward body, climaxing while

silently screaming his name?

No, he would never know, he couldn't know. He would never tell him. Never! But now, it wasn't just all that which kept him from it. The truth was, he was ashamed of himself. The proud, handsome, and gallant Lord Gabriel Worthington of the past had become the emaciated, scarred, and dark Duke of Edevane.

Yes, he feared Owen's rejection, that was the truth. It had been so many years since they had seen each other, and he feared seeing horror in his expression. He was covered in scars, not just on his body, but on his soul as well. Plus, he was nothing more than a cripple.

He didn't know what his old friend looked like now, as his uncle Patrick—the only person he corresponded with— hadn't mentioned it. Being a rake and the most desired man in London had nothing to do with his physical appearance; it could very well be due to his attitude or his wealth. And, truthfully, he didn't want to find out. He didn't want to receive the same contempt from him that he had shown Owen.

Oh, Lord! He shouldn't be thinking about that. He couldn't. Not about Owen. Never!

He got out of the water and dried himself with one of the towels. He would tell Mrs. Banks never to bring him that soap again and to erase any trace of lavender scent from the castle. He had to get rid of the memories, no matter how.

He got into bed naked, avoiding looking at his own body and the scars that covered it. He closed his eyes and, with a sigh, fell asleep. Normally, falling asleep was a difficult endeavor, if he managed it at all, but the scent of lavender on his body and the sheets provided such tranquility that, for the first time in years, it took him less than two minutes to fall asleep.