

GRACE HITCHCOCK

His Delightful
LADY DELIA



AMERICAN ROYALTY
BOOK THREE



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For my Angel Baby

*Because of the hope we have in Jesus Christ,
we will hold each other again.
Know you are treasured and loved beyond measure.*

*With all my heart,
Mama*

Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us.

1 John 4:15–19

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 116"

One

NEW YORK CITY
OCTOBER 1883

Madre had lost her voice at last. And while the news had initially struck joy in Delia Vittoria's heart, she now repented most heartily as she paced in the wings between the walls of faded burgundy velvet of the Academy of Music's curtain. The hum of the audience and the strumming of the instruments warming up filled her senses. After five years as her prima donna mother's soprano understudy, Delia had thought she would be ready for the limelight when the time came, especially since she had been all but banished to the ensemble for years. She clasped her trembling fingers. She couldn't allow herself to give in to her nerves or they would affect her voice and her career would be over in a single night. Maestro Rossi would be furious if she failed after all the hours he had invested in her.

Maybe no one will be here for opening night, what with the Metropolitan Opera House's grand opening being tonight, as well. She peeked through the crack between the

curtains, and her stomach dropped as she spotted Mr. and Mrs. Astor taking their seats in their rose-lined gilded opera box. The pair was never there for the opening act. But Delia supposed that when the rival opera house was opening the same night, Mrs. Caroline Astor wished her support for the Knickerbockers' exclusive opera house to be evident, and judging from the sixteen other boxes filled with guests, Mrs. Astor had used her influence as the leading matron in society. If Delia faltered, all in society would know by midnight, as every member of the elite set had their pick of opera balls to attend throughout the city and would no doubt discuss Delia's unexpected appearance.

Her pulse hammering in her ears, she whirled away from the curtain and nearly ran into an ensemble member dashing to his place on the opposite side of the stage. She focused on what Maestro Rossi had told her to do should she be overtaken by nerves. *Breathe in. Breathe out.* She closed her eyes and imagined herself not in the wings but alone with her teacher. This was just another lesson, one of thousands—in front of thousands. Her stomach churned. This exercise was not working. *Lord, help me.*

The instruments silenced, and as she closed her eyes again, she could envision the rustling coming from last-minute guests finding their seats, their murmurs echoing off the horseshoe of exclusive boxes lining the walls of the Academy that held New York's elite. The curtains drew back as the prelude began for Bellini's *La Sonnambula*, *The Sleepwalker*, and Lisa's cavatina followed, the company streaming onstage while Delia doubled over, feeling she might actually toss her accounts now that her entrance was rapidly approaching.

Four company men took their positions, gripping the

horse shafts of the milk cart in which she was supposed to stand and ride onto the stage while performing her aria. Madre had done it countless times as Amina, the young bride-to-be in Bellini's opera. Delia could not fail. She swallowed back a groan and smacked her cheeks in rapid succession. The bride was not supposed to appear green, rather fresh-faced and rosy-cheeked. She grasped the nearest actor's hand beside the milk cart, who assisted her inside. The men adjusted their hold on the shafts, and she drew in a sharp breath through gritted teeth at the sudden movement. The actor sent her a reassuring wink as she spread her feet apart to keep her balance, clasping her hands to her chest, praying she looked for all the world to be a girl in love, even though she had no experience of such things in her nearly four and twenty years.

One of the girls in charge of costuming flitted past, only to whirl about and point to Delia's hair, grimacing. Delia swept her hands over the overlarge hairstyle, her ebony locks arranged and puffed to perfection. Her fingers found the loose flower, and she tucked the blossom back into place, resumed her position and plastered on a smile to cover her nerves.

The milk cart was tugged forward, and she almost lost her footing but then gripped the floorboards in her slippered feet. *I will not fall.* The cart jolted her again as it crossed through the wings and onto the stage. She spread her arms wide to keep from stumbling and decided to hold the position to fool the audience into thinking she had already faltered. She fought against squinting past the lights to see who was in the audience, yet she had performed enough as a member of the choir to know who would be there and where. Instead, she focused on the massive crystal chandelier overhead and

allowed the music to flow through her, and in that moment all faded into nothingness as she became the music.

Her voice rang true in the high notes, stayed strong throughout, and when the aria faded, the applause of the crowd woke her, lifting her from her hazy dream. The applause did not dim, and Delia allowed herself a glance to Mrs. Astor, who lifted her hands to shoulder level and clapped, nodding her head once, which had the rest of the women in society rising to their feet, applauding her, and some of the single gentlemen in the nearest boxes throwing roses at her feet.

Delia could not rest in the moment, though, as Amina's love, Elvino, began their duet. The rest of Act I was an elated blur that ended in thunderous applause after her second love duet. She rushed from the stage for her costume change for the famed sleepwalking scene. Flowers rained in her path, her slippers crushing delicate blooms, even as she took pains to avoid stepping on them. In the wings, her friends in the company squeezed her hand as she went to change in her mother's dressing room, which was already overflowing with roses and bouquets of fall blooms. Her cheeks heated, knowing that the flowers were from gentlemen admirers.

She stripped off her gown and stepped into the nightgown that had, unfortunately, not been fitted to her, and the train was several inches too long. But the waist fit just right, even though the bodice was almost too confining to draw a full breath.

"You are doing well." Hester, her mother's maid, tugged the strings at the back of Delia's nightgown, securing it. "Now, for the sleepwalking scene, just execute it as you did in your rehearsal."

“You mean the one where I wasn’t even allowed to mark the movements onstage until after Madre left the Academy?”

“Yes, but in the chorus you’ve seen her perform hundreds of nights. Simply do what she does, only better.” Hester handed her a glass of water.

“It’s difficult to improve upon a star.” Delia downed the water and hurried to apply more rouge where she had thoughtlessly ran a hand over her cheek on her way backstage.

“Even though your mother is called the next Jenny Lind, it doesn’t make her untouchable, especially with her—uh, choices of late.”

Delia quickly dressed her hair with half atop her head and the rest flowing to her waist like a waterfall. The idea of her sleepwalking scene where she walked the narrow plank extending from the stage over the orchestra pit sent her stomach into tumbles. Still, she had to perform it without a mistake or she would never sing again—at least not at the Academy.

Delia jumped at the sharp knock on the door. Thinking it was the stage call, she threw open the door to find a waiter in the opera house’s scarlet livery bowing to her, a note pinched between his extended gloved fingers.

“Miss Vittoria, I have a message for you.” He gave her the note. “And please allow me to convey my compliments on your wonderful performance.”

“Thank you.” She closed the door as the waiter returned to his position. She flipped the letter over, searching for a name, the weight of the luxurious paper supporting the wealth behind it.

“The mystery will end as soon as you open it,” Hester chided, flapping her hands and motioning for her to hurry and open it. “You don’t have much time.”

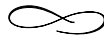
Delia opened it and read aloud. “My dear Lady Vittoria, please attend my ball tomorrow night at the mansion as my honored guest. Best wishes, Caroline Webster Schermerhorn Astor.”

“What an honor, miss.” Hester pressed her hands to her ample bosom. “Your mother best not find out about this. Imagine what she might do if—”

“No, it would not do for her to find out,” Delia agreed as she tucked the letter inside her reticule.

“No time to worry about that, ladies. Amina’s sleepwalking is about to begin!” a stagehand called from the door.

Delia drew in a deep breath, whispered a prayer that she would not fall off the plank and into the orchestra pit, and rushed toward the stage.



Kit Quincy never missed an opening night at the Academy of Music, which was by far the most auspicious night as it marked the beginning of the winter season of society. But when he received his sister’s frantic letter just moments before the understudy’s entrance, Kit had no choice but to whisper his excuses to his friends and hotel manager, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey Gunn, who had joined him for the evening, slip from his seat during the prelude, and ride for the Lowes’ residence. Uncle Elmer or Ramsey would have to fill him in on the performance later.

Kit waited for the carriage to slow and then leapt out onto the sidewalk, pulling the collar of his opera cape closer in the crisp foggy evening and glancing up to the Lowes’ brownstone with only the gaslights on the second floor flickering through the lace curtains.

“Return home,” he called to his driver. “No need for you to catch your death waiting for me.”

The elderly driver tipped his hat, hunching his shoulders against the icy wind cutting between the rows of houses. “Thank you, Mr. Quincy. Shall I return in an hour to fetch you?”

“No need. I’ll have one of the Lowes’ grooms bring me home if it begins to rain.” He looked to the sky. “Or sleet. Otherwise I will hike back.”

“Very good, sir.” The driver turned the carriage and departed.

Kit trotted up the gray stone steps and twisted the bell. He took shelter in the doorway and waited, the fog turning into a thick mist and coating his silk lapels. Kit checked his pocket watch in the electric streetlights on Fifth Avenue. *Nine of the clock? And the downstairs lights are already dimmed?* He squinted through the sidelight window but didn’t see anyone coming. He twisted the bell a second time, and just as he was considering ducking through the servants’ entrance, he made out the willowy figure of a woman in an opera gown descending the stairs, kerosene lamp in hand that illuminated the tear-stained face of his parents’ ward, whom he considered his sister. She set the lamp on a nearby table and fumbled with the trio of locks.

“Jocelyn?” Kit ducked into the marble foyer, the wind blowing a pile of invitations from the round table in the center before he could close the door. He scooped up the invitations and deposited them atop the silver letter tray. “Whatever is the matter? And why are you answering the door? Surely, your servants—”

“I sent them away for the night.” She fell into his arms, sobbing. “I didn’t want them to know!”

“What happened?” Kit placed her at arm’s length, assessing her for any signs of harm, even though he knew that Lucian Lowe would never hurt his wife. “Jocelyn, I cannot help you if you do not cease your tears. Tell me so I can attend to the matter.” He fished out a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed the folded square into her shuddering palm.

“You must fetch him for me.” She wiped under her eyes. “Promise me you will?”

Kit’s insides burned. Whoever hurt his kindhearted sister would pay—and pay dearly. “Who? Where is Lucian?”

“Who else could hurt me like this?” Her voice cracked. “I am not a weak woman, but this . . . this is more than even I can take. Must you make me say it?” Jocelyn pulled away from him, throwing open the parlor doors and striding into the dark room.

Kit clenched his fists in an attempt to squelch his rising anger, which would only cause his sister more distress, and retrieved the lamp from the foyer table and followed. Jocelyn turned from her desk in the corner of the room with a packet of letters tied with a crimson velvet ribbon and sank onto the settee, running a finger over the ribbon. Her bottom lip trembled.

Kit leaned against the doorframe and waited until a single tear traced down her pale cheek. “Where can I find your husband?”

She jolted, her head snapping up. She shook the clouds from her head and answered, “H-he sent word that he would dine at the club, but it is opening night.” She released a dry laugh. “Lucian would never miss the chance to be with the city’s darling over me, and I know the moment the clock

strikes eleven o'clock that he will be rushing to Gramercy Park for his clandestine meeting with that Italian opera diva, even though he vowed never to see her again." She wiped her nose with the back of her handkerchief.

Everything in Kit urged him to find Lucian and beat him senseless. Instead, he crossed the room and sat beside her, taking her hand in both of his, intent on staying until her sobbing abated. Yet one look at her swelling belly and red-rimmed eyes and he lost the last morsel of fortitude he possessed. "Am I allowed to throttle him, Jocelyn? He cannot treat you and his child with such callousness."

"You are a true brother to rise to my defense and very sweet." She squeezed his arm, her other hand absentmindedly resting on her stomach.

"There is nothing 'sweet' regarding my objective. The man has pained you, and he will be held accountable for his infidelity."

A flash of concern crossed her features. "He may be telling the truth. Best check the club first, and if you do find him there, talk with him. Plead with him to remain faithful to me . . . to remember his promise to forsake *her*. I cannot bear the thought of him with another woman." She rubbed her temples, closing her eyes as her body trembled. "But it is hard to compete with that Vittoria woman he has secretly been seeing since long before we married. For five years I've been unwittingly *sharing* my husband with another." She grasped his hands, brokenness lining her every movement.

He swallowed his retort, unable to voice his true thoughts on the matter—to call his cousin the things he wished, which would burn the lady's ears. "How long have you known about Signora Vittoria?"

She picked at the cluster of yellow silk flowers at her waist. “I discovered his duplicity this summer, but he swore to me it was over.”

Kit grunted. Apparently, he did not know his cousin beyond the boardroom. A few so-called gentlemen in his acquaintance possessed such secrets, but until now, it had never been in his power to right the wrongs done to their innocent brides. “Give me the address, Jocelyn.”

She pulled the ribbon securing the letters and held out the top one to him, the address scrawled on the front to a Giovanna Vittoria. “I found this on his letter tray, to go out with the post several days ago. I confronted him, and he promised he had not seen her, that it was merely a moment of weakness that had brought it about after his seeing the poster advertising the latest opera. He said he was only wishing her well. But I found these in his library, tucked into a copy of a history of operas.”

He pulled the envelope from her fingertips. Rising, he unfolded the letter, brows lifting at the script in Italian.

“He knows I cannot read it. I studied French, not Italian.”

From the smattering of words he could understand, he crumpled the note. “It is most likely for the best. *La Sonnambula* shall end at eleven of the clock, so perhaps I can catch him between the theater and the diva’s home. But in case he is telling the truth, I will check the club first.” He pulled the bell cord. “We will send for some tea to help calm you while I fetch him.”

“The servants are gone,” she reminded him, the vacant look in her eyes betraying her utter exhaustion.

“Then I shall make it myself.” He shrugged off his cape, draping it over the back of a chair. “You need tea.”

“You know how to make tea?” Her lips curved in a smile. “How domestic of you.”

“A degree of domesticity is a necessity on a ship. I’ve spent many a month sailing, during which times I learned to take care of myself.” He turned up the parlor gaslight and used the lamp to guide himself to the kitchens. He had gotten lost in thought of how to deal with Lowe, and the tea turned out a little too strong, but he managed to find a tray and set her a nice tea service with a slice of bread. After bringing it to her and calming her enough for him to leave her alone, he tugged on his cape.

Knowing hailing a cab would be next to impossible at this time of night, he trotted to the stables and didn’t bother waking the groom but saddled two of Lowe’s horses for the journey to the club and the three-mile ride to Gramercy Park. He didn’t want to take the chance of Lowe getting away in a carriage. How an opera singer could have obtained a residence in such an elite neighborhood, directly across the street from the park, he had no idea, but that was neither here nor there. What kind of woman was so brazen as to invite a married man into her home for all to see? Well, he knew what people called her sort. He shook his head and tugged the girth of each saddle tight once more.

With only an hour to spare before the performance ended, Kit set off into the night for the club to search for Lucian in the vain hope that his cousin was indeed *not* with that woman. His efforts proved fruitless and more than a bit annoying as he was caught by not one but two professional acquaintances, who were avoiding the social scene of the opera, both seeking advice on European hotel property investments. As there was no polite way to extricate himself,

he was forced to cut the conversation short, no doubt offending them.

When he finally approached the prima donna's residence, the streets were clogged with the carriages of the well-todos returning from their night at the opera, all heading to one party or another to continue the festivities. Deciding it was best not to confront Lowe when there were so many witnesses, he directed the horses beneath a willow tree, attempting to blend in with the darkness and wishing he had worn a cloak to keep the mist from soaking him through. His opera ensemble would be ruined, but that mattered precious little when Jocelyn's happiness was on the line.

The brush of the willow branches on his sleeve brought his gaze to the remaining leaves bending low, offering him protection from the wind. He had always considered willows to be a sad sort of tree, until he had courted a woman christened with the same name. He smiled as he broke off a leaf and rolled it between his palms, the horse shifting beneath him. His time courting his dear Miss Dupré had been both thrilling and odd, as he was in a competition for her hand along with twenty-nine other suitors. And while she had stolen a piece of his heart, he did not regret leaving the competition. At nearly forty, Kit finally came to the conclusion that he was entirely too old for her . . . though some in his circle would say that fourteen years was nothing to keep a marriage from occurring.

The gaslights roared to life in what he assumed was the parlor of the residence in question while those in the surrounding houses dimmed as the residents retired for the evening, and others were still bright where parties continued. *Can't linger any longer, old boy. Time for action.* Kit guided

the horses in front of the brownstone and fastened the reins to the hitching post. He took the stairs two at a time and pounded on the door. His anger rose with his accusations at the sound of footsteps approaching, but when it opened, he blinked at the sight of a lady in a sapphire gown. Her beauty stunted his speech.

Her ebony tresses were arranged into a loose coiffure that left tendrils to frame her face, emphasizing her wide, brilliant green eyes and full rosy lips. Her cheeks appeared to be a lovely olive tone, but they were heavily rouged, most likely from her performance tonight. It was bad enough to wear such cosmetics on the stage, but to not even wash her face before she left the opera house? It spoke ill of her nature. Her nature being why he was here and *why* she had most likely left on the cosmetics. The beauty of the woman turned sour as he was reminded that she was a loose opera singer and therefore was not to be trusted in polite society. “You.” He ground out the word.

“Excuse me?” Her brow furrowed, taken aback at his tone.

“Hello, Cousin,” said a slurred voice from behind the door.

The door opened fully, and his appraisal of the woman abruptly ended at the sight of Lucian at her side, a grin plastered on his face. He blinked rapidly against his own stupor as he nearly stumbled headlong out the front door. Her arm instantly anchored him about his waist. *Such blatant familiarity. How can Lowe act in such a manner, especially with a wife at home?* Certainly, Jocelyn was a bit tightly strung, but when Lowe had declared his undying love, Kit had approved the match, albeit warily, threatening that if Lowe ever hurt his adopted sister, there would be trouble. *Well, now*

there's trouble. Kit clenched his fists. “Do you have any idea of how much pain you are causing?” He narrowed his eyes at the woman. “Surely there is another you could ensnare—someone who is preferably *unmarried*.”

“Pardon me?” She gasped, shrinking back, but it only pulled her closer to Lowe as he wrapped his arm over her shoulders.

“You *are* Signora Vittoria?” Kit shouted before recalling the neighbors. If they didn’t already know of Lowe’s infidelity, they would soon enough if he didn’t control his temper.

“I’m *Miss* Vittoria,” she hissed, brows arching.

Even her title is a lie, then. “Well then, *Miss* Vittoria, you should be ashamed for entertaining a *married* gentleman. Have you no sense of honor or common decency, or do you think because of your occupation you can get away with such harlotry?”

Her cheeks’ color deepened, and he began to think perhaps it was not rouge after all but her natural heightened color. The color of guilt.

“How dare you come to my home and—”

“Do not speak of *daring* when you have my cousin’s arm draped over your shoulders.” Kit gripped the brim of his hat so tightly it cracked. He tossed it in the pathetic shrubbery. *Let her servants fetch it out.*

“Enough of this. Take him.” She pushed Lowe out the door, the man nearly plunging headlong down the steps before Kit grasped his flailing arm.

“Don’t be like that, *piccola* Delia.” Lowe’s words slurred as he ran a hand over his grin.

“Do not call me *little* Delia.” She turned her glare on Kit. “And, sir, I may share my mother’s surname and her voice,

but I do *not* approve of her choices and would *never* entertain a man such as him,” Miss Vittoria spat, tossing Lucian’s hat and coat out onto the stone steps, a sleeve landing in an icy puddle.

Kit stiffened. No one had mentioned a mother.

“It is a term of endearment.” Lucian waxed on despite her obvious desire for them to depart, what with the coat and gentleman tossing. “I love your mother and would make a great father to you, even if you are rather too old to be my daughter—which is why calling you *piccola* makes me feel more fatherly toward you, as I have every intention—”

“And what of your wife?” Miss Vittoria drew herself up. Her full height would not even reach Kit’s shoulders. “If *you* had any honor at all, you would cease this pursuit of her like I have asked you every single time I have found you here.”

“Your mother,” Kit managed, feeling the blood rush in his ears.

“Yes. Did it not occur to you that there are *two* ladies Vittoria in residence here?”

He gaped at her, the stupidity of his assumption striking him. “Surely, not both of them can be opera stars.” He looked to Lowe, who shrugged, still grinning from his time in the cups.

Her eyes sparked as she tilted her chin, looking down her nose at him. “I wouldn’t call myself a diva quite yet. I am her understudy, Mr. Quincy.”

His brows rose at his name on her lips before remembering that like most New Yorkers, she must have read about him and the outlandish competition in the papers, seen his picture even though he had always been in the background of the sketches of the famed Willow Dupré and her suitors.

“I would. If your voice is anything like your mother’s.” Mr. Lowe grinned. “Your mother sings like an angel. My angel.”

“That’s enough out of you.” Kit drew Lucian’s arm over his neck and hauled him down the steps, looking back up at the beauty, his gut wrenching at the offense he had placed at her feet. “I am sincerely sorry for everything, Miss Vittoria.”

“Not as sorry as I,” she said, closing the door and shutting them out.