

Brass Hearts

A Steampunk Fairytale

By: A. Lightbourne

Books By A. Lightbourne

~Space Trippers Book 1~

Trippin'

The adventure begins when Valesque's unfinished ship is commandeered by the enemy, with her on board! To make matters worse she is getting blamed when her long lost device is found on the ship and strands them in uncharted space. Can she figure out what is happening in time? Or will they all be destroyed by her own hand?

~Space Trippers Book 2~

Just Passing Through

After the disaster in the hydroponics lab the ship needs more food supplies. But the trade aliens seem a little too interested in Valesque for Tim and Sanic's comfort. With the addition of a new, sifting alien girl, they set out to rescue her.

~Space Trippers Book 3~

A Frosty Farewell

The ship needs water, so they are off to the nearest water trade planet. Valesque has found some disturbing secret files on one of the Upper Crewmen. Will they get the water they need? And if they do will they be going home with one less crewmate?

~Space Trippers Book 4~

Will Work For ~~Food~~ Parts

As the ship makes its first jump home, the tracker Valesque found points her to a nearby planet. Making an excuse to stop for repair supplies, can she find her contact on the mysterious supply planet where all the technology keeps disappearing?

~Space Trippers Book 5~

Don't Even Ask

Valesque is on a roll, only one step away from meeting her mysterious contact! All she has to do is follow a map to a certain planet and talk to a guy named Melwesúl. Sounds simple enough, right? But how do you find someone on a planet where the answer to every question comes from the barrel of a gun? Our heroine's only chance is to butter up the planet's chauvinistic leader. But can no-nonsense Valesque, who couldn't even manage to flirt with peaceful Skmead, really fool the macho gunslinger? Or will she end up as just another notch on his well-worn hilt?

~Brass Hearts~

A Steampunk Fairytale

All Dulcy Spry wants in life is to inherit her father's small, family business, and help run it while she waits. But after a fateful encounter with the snobbish Mr Pridget on the roadside Dulcy's best friend, Alise, and younger sister, Rosa, drag the reluctant Miss Spry into high society, where lies, manipulations and family secrets threaten to ruin her peaceful life and cast her into the dismal prison of an unwanted marriage.

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This Book is dedicated to

all my readers, I hope you enjoy the story as much as I do.

Special Acknowledgment to:

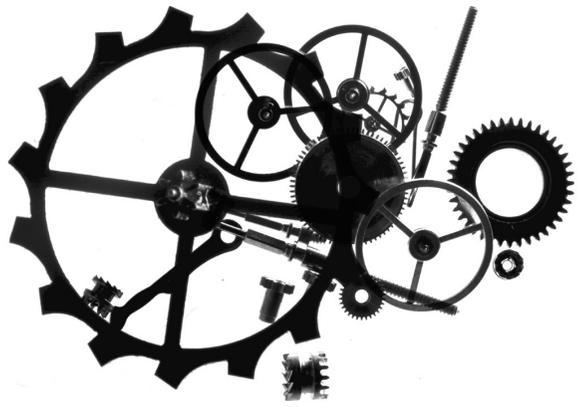
My sweet, supportive Hubby who is the best thing in life!

About the Author:

A. Lightbourne lives in Florida with her husband and menagerie of animals.

Her love for writing started at an early age, writing stories in her 1st grade journal.

She is a certified PC tech and artist, with a deep background in designing and building her own electronic devices and computers, knowledge she uses to bring Scientific Engineer Valesque and all of her creations to life.



Brass Hearts

A Steampunk Fairytale

Preface

Steampunk is a fun Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre that leaves plenty to the imagination. Endless possibilities of 'what-ifs', full of intriguing combinations of futuristic, modern life and olde-time romantic mannerisms and notions.

Things I found interesting while researching for my books:

Steam cars and steam power have a long history. Evidence shows that Ferdinand Verbiest built a steam powered vehicle for the Chinese Emperor Chien Lung around 1678.

I have a fondness for clockwork generators you may have noticed if you have read my other works. These electric generators have not yet been advanced very far, but from online research they are quite possible. One article mentioned that there was a small one in use in 1909 to power an electric light on a clockwork toy train. Even more recent there has been talk of companies seeking to invent a clockwork powered laptop.

In my fiction they have been perfected, made quite large and are usable as alternative power sources.

My steampunk world is an amalgamation of industrialized mid to late 1800's and modern day, combining a little of each time period's tech, customs, manners and language.

Instead of grungy, dystopian surroundings our heroine comes from a beautiful, rural, coastal town that sits directly between two larger cities. Like a fairytale there is not a lot of focus on local history, mechanics or unnecessary detail.

The place: somewhere on a world very much like our own.

The music: a mixture of classic waltzes and 'trendy' ragtime.

The time: early spring, just on the brink of the upper classes' 'social season'.

And here our story begins.

Once upon a time, or so the saying goes, in the charming seaside town of Spindlehaven....

 Chapter 1 

"The manor house has been rented!" Alise Cogsworth exclaimed as she quickly parked her dainty, steam surrey and bounded towards her busy friend.

"Of course it is rented", Dulcy called back, putting the last of her packages on the small flatbed of her buggy. "It's the start of 'the season', it is rented every year", she said calmly as she turned to greet the pretty, breathless, blonde. Their little coastal town did not have much attraction in itself, but during the social season, every spring, it was a popular rental spot, as it was situated directly between where the steam engine to the bustling southern city stopped and the airships to the sprawling northern city began.

"No", Alise dismissed, her excitement bubbling through her usually calm and collected demeanor. "It is rented by them! They came back!" she continued gleefully in a voice that showed she had been holding her breath while relaying the astounding news.

Dulcy tilted her head to the side in thought. "The Wheelhouses?" she recalled, referring to the family that had rented the large estate the previous year. She was confused as to why that would be such urgent news, her friend had never seemed that interested in them before.

Alise was beside herself. The sedate and proper daughter of the most affluent businessman in town looked like she was going to explode. Her face was turning bright red as she gently bounced up and down on the toes of her heeled boots while reaching out to grasp her friend's hands in a restrained effort to make her understand. "No", she repeated, holding herself back from dancing and singing it out. "They are back. The Vonns! They are finally back! Well...you know, not all of them...but, oh," she cried, turning away as she clutched her white-gloved hands to her chest and made a graceful pirouette in the graveled parking lot, "it is like a dream", she sighed.

"Well, of course they would not all be back", her friend nodded. "Didn't the father die just a little while ago?" she remembered distractedly as she dug a key out of the top compartment of her utility pouch on her right hip. "The son is probably back to settle some of his father's holdings. He had quite a few investments around here", she commented to the entranced figure that still walked about in a fog at the thought of the young heir's return.

It was inevitable she would act this way, Dulcy thought to herself in amusement, after all the years Alise spent dreaming about him and following every article about the Vonn family in every gossip magazine she could find, since their fateful encounter when he visited as a young boy. It was completely inevitable that as soon as he came within arms reach Alise was going to come up with some plan to meet him.

"So, what is your plan?" Dulcy asked patiently, attempting to snap her friend back to reality. She was happy for Alise of course, she was the sweet, beautiful daughter of the most prominent man in town, it would be a cinch for Simon Vonn to fall in love with her. But Dulcy had other things to do this morning and she was already behind schedule. So whatever Alise had planned, and more directly, whatever Alise had planned for her to do, needed to be disclosed in a hurry.

The golden-blond head turned towards her again, the dreamy look disappearing from her pale blue eyes as it was replaced with a determined glow. "I am going to persuade Daddy to throw a party!" she exclaimed in an excited hush, not wanting to cause a loud commotion outside her father's business. "I just know he will agree when I explain all the benefits! It is quite likely after all, that while Mr. Vonn attends to his late father's interests, he might want to invest in a few himself. And Daddy has been wanting to expand into larger markets for ages", she giggled, sure of her plan's success.

"So, what do you want me to do?" Dulcy asked uncertainly, the plan so far sounded like a practical one, one that Alise would hardly need her help to orchestrate.

Alise stopped, a serious look crossing her lovely face. "Attend the party with me of course. And lend me all your support, I do not know what I will do or how I should act when I am at last to be in the very same room with him!" she cried with a mixture of terror and delight. "I mean, what if he does not notice me? What if he dislikes me? What if he is already engaged? Well, actually ...none of the gossip channels say he is engaged...but still... what will I do if I let out how much I know about him and his family...he will think I am a crazed stalker..", she rattled on, coming up with more and more things that could go wrong and making herself more and more nervous about them. But after eleven years of waiting, she was not going to be scared out of it so easily. Whatever it was that came up or stood in her way, they could overcome it, as long as Dulcy was there to support her.

Alise looked at her reliable friend with appreciation, sure she was untidy most of the time and tended to pull all of her hair up under her well-worn hat, which always laid askew on the top of her head. And her blouse, corset and over-skirt were all routinely smudged with traces of grease, as were her hands.

Even this morning she had apparently already been hard at work repairing things at her father's steam baths.

In contrast, all she had done was go down to the local tea shop and catch wind of the latest gossip.

Their lives were so different, but they had been friends for so long that their stations in life no longer had any bearing.

"Anyway, I know you are probably in a hurry, and I do not want to waste another minute myself! I will let you know the moment the date is set for the party, in fact, I hope to be able to tell you this very evening. Time is of the essence you know, I need to snag him before someone else invites them elsewhere", Alise called out as she returned to her previous excitement, rushing past Dulcy's modest little wagon with a flutter of blue silk and white lace skirts, before disappearing inside to beseech her father.

Dulcy shrugged as she climbed up into the driver's seat and inserted the key. Parties weren't really her thing, and she doubted she even had anything remotely appropriate to wear, but she knew her friend would not let her out of it. Dulcy sighed in resignation as she put her steam buggy in gear and drove back out of town.

A few miles down the road she came upon a curious sight. A long, sporty, low to the ground, two-seater steam phaeton sat abandoned in the middle of the town-bound lane. And not just any fully customized, red-leather upholstered phaeton, but from the looks of it a solid gold one! Even the exposed steam engine

in the front of the vehicle was put together with gleaming, highly polished gold pipes and bejeweled connector rings. Not good, solid, sturdy parts, of course, since the material was so expensive all the pieces looked to be rather thin and fragile. Dulcy shook her head sadly at the sight, feeling sorry for the poorly fitted steam engine. That wasn't a steam carriage, it was an ornamental jewel box, no wonder it had broken down.

She glanced up and down the roadway, but saw no sign of the owner anywhere. Well, she thought, she could not in good conscience just leave it there, the poor thing. Going around to the side, she donned her work goggles and pushed the magnifying lenses down over her left eye as she began to examine the showy piping for the cause of its failure.



Chapter 2



"Welp, looks like you are not needing me after all", the old station mechanic acknowledged upon recognizing the modified doctor's buggy that sat idly off the road.

"What do you mean?" his passenger inquired brusksly, he had just spent a hard half hour persuading the old codger to drive him out here and fix his vehicle, and now it seemed they were back to square one.

The elderly man stopped his carriage and put the shifter into reverse before replying. "You already got some help", he informed him, turning around from the front seat and indicating the other vehicle that had joined the stalled one on the roadway ahead.

"Yes, but what if they are unable to get it running?" the younger man remarked, not wanting to let his only sure hope abandon him now.

"It will run", the old mechanic assured him. "You got one of the best mechanics around here working on it. Lucky

coincidence, eh?" he chuckled, after all the time the young aristocrat had wasted insisting on dragging him away from his service station, and here a better mechanic was already on the job.

"Well, I will just get out and check on this 'street mechanic', and then we can decide what to do", the passenger ordered warily. He was not about to risk getting stranded again, especially with some, no doubt, grubby, back-hills ruffian.

As soon as his passenger's foot was clear of the doorway, old Jack Clanket immediately stepped on the accelerator, turning his carriage around and chugging quickly back towards town before he missed any more customers.

The rich stranger slapped his hands to his sides in frustration as he watched the old man escaping, thus making the whole ordeal of getting him out here pointless. At least he had not paid him in advance for his services.

Turning his attention to his vehicle, and the unknown person servicing it, he called out. "Excuse me, you there, Sir!" he addressed the ragged-hatted, thick-goggled figure he could barely see over the top of the engine compartment.

"Sir?" a decidedly feminine voice echoed in amusement as the person in question stood up and gave him a quirky smile. "Is that how you address young ladies where you come from, stranger? If you call me 'Sir' should I call you 'Miss'?" Dulcy inquired half seriously as she flipped up her magnification lenses to get a good look at the man who had just mistaken her for a 'mister'.

The man was very elegant and handsome. Dressed in a dark blue cutaway suit with tails and matching top hat decorated with a large golden gear and two long feathers. He was very dapper and aristocratic looking in his expensive outfit, with his black hair and sharp blue eyes, she admired.

'A girl?' he thought, taken aback at the sight of such an unkempt female. "You...what do you think you are doing there?" he exclaimed worriedly as he pushed aside her appearance and took note of her rummaging around in his solid gold piping.

"I am fixing your vehicle, of course", she replied as if that should have been obvious, what with her looking at the steam engine with a wrench in her hand and all.

"I think not..... madam", he refuted, he was not sure what she was up to, but he doubted the girl was fixing the steam work as much as stealing from it. "For unless you have been married thrice, which I find decidedly hard to believe, I do not think

those trinkets you have there upon your finger are belonging to you", he accused sternly.

Dulcy looked at the collection of jeweled couplings she had stuck on the ring finger of her left hand. "These are just your spent connector rings", she explained innocently. "It is not like I was going to keep them, they are completely worthless", she defended, moving to slide the glittering circlets off and toss them on the vehicle's seat.

"Worthless? Madam, I will have you know those 'worthless' pieces are solid gold and set with genuine, rare gemstones", he corrected her authoritatively, aghast at her insinuation.

"Well, as fittings, Sir, they are worthless", she persisted, showing absolutely no interest in the purposed value of the ill used items. "Your precious metal had bulged out and one even cracked from the pressure of the boiling water and steam, leaving gaps in the system. I refitted the bad spots with some good quality pieces I happened to have on hand. But I suggest you get the whole system refitted with sturdier fittings if you plan on actually driving this 'jewel box' around", she continued, wiping her hands on her over-skirt as she finished up her repair job.

"I will try to remember that if I am ever up to taking advice from suspicious street urchins", he sneered at her lack of propriety. "But I would prefer to keep common brass out of my custom, Lagaren, phaeton."

"Brass may not be elegant, Sir. But it is worth more in dependability than your flashy gold. An engine is simply no place for soft metals. Brass is like an old friend, maybe not the best looking, but dependable, trustworthy and will back you up when it counts. Soft metals are flashy, but unreliable and will inevitably let you down when you need them most", she instructed plainly.

"That may be true to a certain extent, structurally", he conceded. "But brass is far too cheap, common and ugly to ever be compared with the finer metals. And I would prefer my Lagaren to shine as it is intended and not be cheapened or tarnished by association with the common elements", he replied, in a way that seemed he was referring as much to their class differences as to the actual metals.

Dulcy came around the vehicle and stood before him, crossing her arms over her dirty, blue corset as she assessed him again through her thick work goggles. Physically she was quite short compared to the tall, elegant gentleman, and certainly not as well dressed. But she had pride in her own worth, pride that was not about to back down in the face of this man's class prejudiced remarks.

"Your name would not happen to be Vonn, would it?" she inquired with a disappointed frown.

"No. My name is Pridget", he informed her smoothly, wondering what had brought that question on so suddenly.

"Good", she said with obvious relief, a smile returning to her face as she happily climbed back up into her buggy. The last thing she needed was for this infuriating man to have been her best friend's love interest. It would have been impossibly uncomfortable to have to help set her up with that egotistical boar.

"And you are so very welcome, I am so glad I could stop in my busy schedule to fix your engine for you, do not mention it. I hope you can now continue your long drive in your little 'jewel box' to whatever, hopefully, distant place you were heading. Good day, Sir", she finished as she turned her vehicle around and headed back to town to replace the parts she had used on his repair. He may think her even more impertinent for having said it, but she didn't care, he was the one being rudely ungrateful to begin with.... calling her common, ugly brass.

As soon as Dulcy was within two blocks of 'Cogsworth's Sprockets & Spindles Emporium' she spotted Alise hurrying down the walkway and motioning for her to stop.

"You are just in time!" she called out breathless, trying to hurry yet still be ladylike as she made her way down the sidewalk and over to where Dulcy had pulled her carriage off on the side of the street. "Look!" she exclaimed happily, her blue eyes twinkling with sheer delight as she displayed the light purple envelope she had been using to flag her down. "Daddy has consented to the dance, I just knew he would, so I was just going to mail the invitation!" she informed her.

Dulcy was astounded at her speed in getting fancy invitations made up so quickly, it couldn't have been over half an hour since she left her in front of the Emporium. "You got all the invitations ready to mail so soon?" she marveled.

"Nooo", her friend laughed, waving the envelope to emphasize its loneliness. "I only have one made up. I just have to be sure he gets it before anyone else tries the same thing, so I made one up and I am mailing it directly....ohhhh, look!" she breathed, suddenly sidling up close to her friend as she stared across the street, having spotted the Gentleman in question. "There he is now! Ohhhh....I have to hurry and mail this before someone else gets the same idea!" she exclaimed, not wishing to miss her long awaited opportunity by even one second.

"But...he is standing right there", Dulcy reminded her. "Why not just hand it to him in person?" she suggested thriftily, wasting a stamp just to mail something down the street, when the person was right there in front of you, seemed a little ridiculous to her.

"Oh, no, no no", Alise rejected, her eyes wide at the thought. "I could never think of doing that. What would he think of me, we have not been introduced and I come up to him on the street and force an invitation on him. No, I could never do that", she repeated.

"I thought you wanted to get your invitation to him first", Dulcy reminded her practically.

"Yes, but, I would be so embarrassed. He might think it impertinent of me...and what if he said no...I could not take that, not right to my face..", Alise squirmed, her desire almost outweighing her manners.

"Fine," Dulcy sighed, holding out her hand, "I will do it."

Alise hesitated, almost placing the precious paper into her friend's outstretched palm, but then stopping and clutching it to her chest again, "Are you sure? Would that be proper?" she worried.

"It is fine, I will just tell him I am hand delivering the invitations, special delivery", Dulcy assured her.

The pretty little blonde's face lit up. "That might work", she brightened, warming up to the idea "...But we have to fix you up a bit if people are to believe you are a messenger for an

elegant party", she insisted, placing the precious correspondence in Dulcy's hand as she set hers to work on her friend's appearance.

The first thing Alise did was pull off the scrunched up hat and free Dulcy's curly locks from their unflattering prison. Once loose, Dulcy's hair fell down past her shoulders, almost hitting her waist. Alise hurriedly finger-combed the wild mane, trying to get the stubborn loose curls to settle into some sort of presentable formation.

"Honestly, your hair is so unruly", she tisked as the wild waves fought her taming attempts.

Dulcy frowned as her friend tugged and pulled at the uncooperative lengths. "That is why I stuff it up in a hat", she reminded her.

It was no use, no matter how she tried to smooth and coax it, the hair just puffed back into a tangled-bramble mess again. Finally, Alise undid the ribbon tie at the collar of her blouse and pulling all of Dulcy's thick hair back she tied it up tightly in a long tail. At least that was half presentable.

She then took out her lacy, white hanky and rubbed the dark grease spots off of Dulcy's cheek, making a nice rouge effect with the scrubbing. She then rubbed the other side pink to match and dug a lip tint out of her little velvet bag.

Alise then quickly undid her friend's 'over-skirt', which was just a piece of cloth that served as an apron, and flipping it over so the cleaner side was out, she tied it back around her waist to help hide the old, brown skirt underneath.

There was nothing she could do about the dirty, dusty-blue corset. But it was already a one hundred percent improvement.

During the transformation process Dulcy had kept watch on the man down the street, groaning inwardly as she saw another, unhappily, familiar silhouette join him.

"I was starting to wonder what had happened to you", Simon Vonn called out as his tardy friend finally made an appearance. "I am afraid you are a little late for luncheon now, Pridget. Synthia is in there just finishing up. I thought I would come out here and see if there was any sign of you", the young man recounted, glad to see his friend seemed to have made it safely at last.

"I had a little trouble with the phaeton on the road. Broke down just outside of town", Edmund Pridget grumbled, he had been traveling all day to get to this out of the way little burg and now he was tired, famished and in a foul mood.

"Where is it?" his friend asked with concern, moving as if to find a way to tow it to safety.

"It is fine. A street mechanic stopped and got it working again. It is at the shop now. I had a terrible time trying to talk him into refitting it. He kept insisting the brassy little 'Miss Spry' was the best mechanic around and he would not take apart her repair. But I insisted he get original replacement parts installed and he finally relented. It should be done in a few days, they had to order out the parts, of course", he grinned proudly.

"A 'Miss Spry'? A young lady stopped to help you on the road?" Simon repeated incredulously.

"If you could call her a 'miss'. You should have seen her. Completely unkempt. I had never seen a woman look so dirty and....common. And she put brass in a Lagaren! Actually had the audacity to counsel me to get the whole thing refitted with the ugly, common parts", he scowled at the very thought.

Simon Vonn shrugged silently, the solid gold, Lagaren phaetons were notorious for breaking down. They were only meant for very short drives, less than half an hour at a time at best. If Pridget had actually driven it all the way from the airship dock north of town, then it was no wonder the mechanic had suggested sturdier parts.

As they were talking, a young woman stepped quickly up to them. Dulcy had not quite caught what Pridget had said, but she could guess. Especially when he glanced at his light-haired friend and nodded significantly in her direction, causing Mr. Vonn to begin with; "Hello, you must be the mechanic who helped my stranded friend earlier", he smiled, with no hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"Well...yes", she hesitated, not sure what else he had been told about their exchange.

"You are very good I understand", he continued casually.

Her eyes darted to the dark haired gentleman before carefully directing her attention only at Vonn, trying to remain cheerful and well-mannered, so as not to make a bad impression for her friend.

"I have experience with steam engines", she replied, not going into full detail. She was there to formally deliver a very important invitation, not to discuss mechanics.

Simon Vonn regarded the petite young woman before him admiringly, he certainly could not understand why Pridget had called her unkempt and common. Sure, she was not polished up like a society lady, but for a country girl she looked almost charming, like a picture of a quaint milkmaid with her long,

curly hair pulled back in a bow, bright hazel-green eyes, rosy-pink cheeks and a large white apron tied about her waist.

"So you are employed at a steam works then?" he assumed more than asked, still picturing her more as the quaint farm girl than a steam worker.

"No," she corrected, wondering where this was leading, "my family owns a steam bath business and I help keep the machinery running." Out of the corner of her eye she saw the dark-haired gentleman make an inward laugh as he obviously thought her even more beneath him now, as she admitted she worked in a public bath. Nervously she continued, trying to negate the 'public baths' image, "It is like a hot bath, only more...recreational. I mean, well, we have some private hot baths, with special spa recipes, but mainly it is a giant, hot pool, like... an indoor beach", she added, trying to give them the right mental picture. "It is quite popular, especially this time of the year when the weather tends to be cool and rainy."

Pridget seriously doubted that. If her father truly was a businessman and was doing well, then he certainly would not have his daughter running around town looking like a vagabond.

Dulcy suddenly felt uncomfortably exposed without her hat, it had always been so comforting to hide under. "Anyway," she continued, clearing her throat and trying to look very official, "I am hand delivering special invitations to an upcoming mini-Ball. It will be held before the official season, to welcome our out of town visitors", she announced, hoping it sounded grand enough to entice him. "You..are Mr. Vonn, is that right?" she inquired just to be sure. He assured her he was.

"Then, this one is for you", she stated as she produced the fine, lavender envelope. "It is being given by that lovely young lady over there", she nodded instead of pointed, trying to remember all of her manners as she indicated her friend on the other side of the street, who stood pretending to look in a shop window, but was actually watching the scene across the way through the reflection in the glass. Dulcy was hoping the sight of the beautiful hostess would add more attraction to the invitation. "She is the daughter of Mr. Cogsworth, the most influential man in town", she continued, pumping up Alise's value.

"We would be most delighted to attend. Would we not, Pridget?" he agreed heartily, clutching the envelope in his gloved hand as he gazed, with obvious interest, at Alise.

"Oh, is this Gentleman in your party?" she noted with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

"Yes, he has come to stay with me until the start of the season. I must say, I do not have as good a head for business as he does, so he has come to help me straighten out all of my late father's affairs in this region", Mr. Vonn explained happily, still distracted by the daintily attired figure across the road.

"Well, I am sure the invitation is meant for your whole party then", she forced a smile, 'no matter who happens to be in it', she added internally. "By the way, I was very sorry to hear about your father passing", she added solemnly, bowing her head respectfully.

"Oh, you knew Sir Vonn?" Pridget asked pointedly, almost as if he was trying to embarrass her by catching her in a false sentiment.

"Not to speak to", she replied, raising her head and looking between the two gentleman openly. "But we knew him from when the family had visited the area before, when we were young children", she explained, not going into detail about who the 'we' was she spoke of.

"Anyway, I must be going, I am running very late as it is", she remarked as she turned away towards her parked buggy. Then remembering the rude Gentleman's solid gold carriage, she turned back slightly and cautioned in a low voice, "Umm, the mini-Balls here are always very nice, and I dare say this one will be more elegant than ever...but we are a small town and I

am sure not quite up to the elegance you would be accustomed to, so you might not want to go too...extravagant in your dressing", she cautioned, not wanting them to feel embarrassed by overdressing for the occasion. With that she smiled and went on her way, with Alise quickly exiting the scene as well, when she saw the task had been done.

Simon Vonn looked at the elegantly addressed invitation in his hand, smiling happily. "She seemed like a very nice sort of girl, do you not think so, Pridget? Especially when she warned us not to be too decked out, that was very thoughtful of her, I think", he commented, getting only a grunt of disinterest from his wealthier friend. "I admit though, I am quite surprised at your having such a bad opinion of her, now that I have met her", he continued. "From your description I was expecting her to resemble a filthy, half starved, homeless wretch. Instead I found her quite charming, for a country girl. Yes... I think I will quite like our stay here", he continued with a wistful smile as he looked forward to the lovely Alise's mini-Ball.

Edmund eyed his friend warily, Simon was always too congenial to every pretty face that batted an eyelash at him, having been quite the carefree playboy up until his father's untimely demise. It looked like it would be up to him to run interference once again, and keep the money hungry she wolves at bay. And in this provincial little town they were bound to be hungry indeed.

 Chapter 3 

When Dulcy returned home it was late in the afternoon. She brought her packages into the house and laid them on the entry table. She was too tired to bring them into the machine room now. Not that it was very far, the house was attached to the business, sitting just behind the main building, yet with its own drive and front entryway. It looked just like any other two-story, clapboard sided house, except for the large, brick building that overshadowed it.

Wearily she made her way to the sitting room and plopped herself down on the nearest seating surface she could find. The morning had not proved as productive as she had hoped, and she still had to attend to the repair she had gone out to get parts for to begin with.

For right now though, she just wanted to rest. Then she could make a bite to eat and try to get something useful done on the overtaxed boiler.

"Whatever happened to you?" her sister's voice broke in critically as she entered the room and looked over Dulcy's altered appearance uncertainly.

Dulcy sighed. "Alise had me deliver a party invitation for her", she said, as if that should be enough to explain the change.

"I almost did not recognize you without your ugly, old hat", her sister continued, swishing her long, silk skirts about behind her as she strode majestically over to the settee and perched on the edge, regally facing her older sister.

"Oh!" Dulcy sat bolt upright, grabbing the top of her bare head with her hand. "She took my hat!" she exclaimed, finally remembering she had not seen Alise after delivering her envelope, and so had not gotten it back. "I bet she meant not to return it too", she realized. "She probably does not want me looking so 'scruffy' while Mr. Vonn is around", she acknowledged aloud.

"Mr. Vonn?" her sister, Rosa, parroted with sudden interest. "The Vonns are in town?" she pressed urgently, leaning forward slightly as she became increasingly curious about the possibility.

"Yes, I am not sure for how long. But at least he did say Mr. Pridget would only be here until the start of the season, thank goodness", she grumbled, happy the unpleasant man's stay would be so short.

"He?" her sister questioned, wondering who her source of information was.

"Mr. Vonn. When I gave him the invitation for Alise I asked if Mr. Pridget was in his party and he said, 'yes, until the season starts'", Dulcy expounded innocently.

Rosa pressed her lips tight together, turning slightly red as she spoke very slowly, "You...spoke to Mr. Vonn....the Mr. Vonn...heir to Sir William Vonn...you? Unmannered and uncultured...and looking like that? You spoke to him?" she angrily stressed, seeing her sister ruining her chances before she could even meet the Gentleman herself.

"Me unmannered?" Dulcy cried in defense. "I would say it was that Mr. high and mighty Pridget who is unmannered. Do you know what he called me? Well...not really called... more like insinuated", she complained, recalling the rude incident yet again.

"Do not tell me you had the nerve to speak openly to a Pridget too?!" Rosa gasped in horror, her chances were just getting worse by the minute.

Dulcy slumped back in her chair, "Well...I had to talk to him, I was fixing his stupid Lagaren after all", she defended poutily.

"Oh, Sister!" Rosa called out in despair. "You did not. You did not go clanking away on a steam engine right in front of a Pridget!" she begged. "We might as well move! There is no recovering from this humiliation! Such unladylike looks and behavior," she bemoaned, gesturing up and down Dulcy's frumpy frame, "and right in front of a Pridget! We are ruined! I, Rosa Cortessa Spry, am ruined!" she lamented bitterly.

"It is not like they know our name", Dulcy muttered.

"What was that?" her sister perked up, thinking she had just heard a beacon of hope.

"They never bothered to ask for my name", Dulcy repeated, thinking it very rude.

Rosa brightened.

"But then, Old Jack could have told that odious Pridget when he drove his phaeton back to his shop. And I did tell them our father was in the 'hot bath' business", she recalled.

Rosa scowled.

"But as far as I know, they do not know our name", Dulcy finished, slapping her knees as she stood up to get something to eat before returning to work.

Rosa's eyes narrowed as she rubbed her chin in thought. "There may still be a chance then. If we can just make a shining impression from now on, they may forget all about the unfortunate incidents today", she schemed. Turning to her sister she ordered: "From now on you have to keep your appearance presentable, and by 'presentable' I mean passingly ladylike", she warned, weaving her plan as to how to live down her elder sister's social blunders. "And from now on, no working on machines...of any size, kind or color!" she emphasized. "From now on that robo-worker can do that job. That is what it was designed for after all", she decided.

Dulcy shook her head with a wry frown, "Come on, you know as well as I do, that clockwork steamfitter breaks down almost as much as the steam works themselves", she reminded her little sister sensibly.

"Then we just have to come up with some excuse as to why you were so untidy today", Rosa mused to herself, completely ignoring her sister's objection. She couldn't let them know her sister regularly worked on their father's outdated boilers, like a common peasant. "Then we just have to make a splashing

impression at the party, and then...all will be well", she plotted, not about to let the opportunity of two rich, young, single men pass her by. "When was the Ball again?" Rosa questioned, wanting to plan out the time line in detail.

Dulcy wandered off towards the kitchen, "I forgot to ask", she dismissed with wave, completely uninterested.

Rosa's green eyes narrowed at the departing silhouette of her embarrassing, uncultured, older sister. "Useless", she tisked.