

Finding You

Early Summer, 5 years Before the Divine Rift

Austin rode hard through the forest. He was to meet with a man named Yorick, a prominent member of the Agricultural Council. Shortly after, he had an appointment with Lord Justin about a proposal that they were working on. Austin was the First Lord of the province of Rockwell, second only to the High Lord Gregory. He had a tremendous responsibility even at the youthful age of twenty-two. Tightly scheduled appointments were the general order of the day for the Members.

While worrying over this, he could see a moderately-sized cottage in the distance. He urged his horse forward, eager to finish his journey as quickly as possible. Nearing the front gardens, Austin spied a maidservant crouched near a patch of tomatoes.

Coming to a stop, Austin dismounted. He led his horse by the reins, and he walked closer to the servant. She had stopped working when she heard him approaching, and now she rose. From a distance, Austin had not been able to decipher too much about her, but he could now see that she was very young – about his age – beautiful, and she had inquisitive gray eyes. Her brown hair was tied back in a loose bun to keep it out of her face as she worked. A few strands had escaped and fell upon her face.

“Tell your master that Lord Austin is here to see him,” Austin said. She hesitated before she curtsied and went inside the cottage.

There was something about this servant that made Austin want to watch her retreat, but he was too pressed for time. He found a place to tie his horse, and then he made his way back to the front of the cottage. At his knock, a manservant answered and led him to a small sitting

room where Yorick was waiting for him.

“My lord, it is so good to see you,” Yorick said, taking a few steps forward and bowing slightly.

Behind Austin, the door opened and closed, and he glanced back to see the maidservant from before wiping her hands on the apron that she wore over her dress.

“I understand that you’ve already met my daughter Kaitlyn,” Yorick said with a smile.

Austin whirled around and saw Kaitlyn’s eyes narrow slightly before she curtsied. “I’m hoping that we can spend some time in town during the coming months,” her father said, walking over to the sitting area.

Even though Austin knew that he should follow the man, he regarded Kaitlyn for a moment. He had immediately thought her to be just a maidservant, but closer inspection revealed that he had been sadly mistaken. She was of average height and very slender. However, there was a certain air of femininity that she retained even though he knew that she spent a lot of her time outside since her father was a farmer.

“In town?” he asked the older man as they walked over to the sitting area. Instead of joining them, Kaitlyn stayed where she was near the door and took a seat in a single chair against the wall.

“Yes,” Yorick replied. “We have high hopes that she will meet any number of men from which she might choose a partner.”

Austin discreetly glanced at Kaitlyn and saw that she looked to be about twenty years of age. Generally, women began attending events at that age, so he could see why Yorick was planning this. Although she was most likely educated, Kaitlyn most likely had spent many of her younger years working on her father’s farm.

“Do you have any candidates in mind?” Austin asked. He had no idea why he was prolonging this conversation, but he was curious to know the answer.

“Forgive me, my lord, for interrupting,” Austin heard Kaitlyn say, and he looked in her direction. She was looking at him with a piercing gaze. “I have not yet met any man who I might consider for partnership, so there is no one I will have in mind when I am in town.”

“Of course,” Austin replied. “I was simply wondering if your father himself knew of anyone he might like to introduce you to.”

“I don’t think anyone will ever be good enough for my Kaitlyn,” Yorick said with a fond smile at his daughter. “But regardless, my lord, I am interested to hear your input on the council’s proposal.”

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Kaitlyn rose from her seat and quietly strode from the room. She had felt extremely uncomfortable holding such a conversation with the First Lord of Rockwell. Not only was he a very powerful nobleman, he was extremely handsome. She had felt like fidgeting under the regard of his brilliant green eyes. He was also very tall and athletically built; he may be a nobleman, but he was certainly not an idle one.

Why he had shown such interest in her plans for the next few months, she had no idea. She was the daughter of a farmer, although a successful one, and Lord Austin was a Member of the High Council.

She made her way outside and headed toward the stables. It had been a while since she had been out for a good ride, but that wasn’t the reason why she was going. She wanted to see her horse and the rest of the animals. Her mare, Shay, and the rest of the animals always managed to calm her and make her forget whatever was captivating her mind.

That was where Austin found her when he was finished meeting with Yorick. Kaitlyn was sitting between Shay's front legs fiddling with some hay, and her horse leaned down every so often and took the tidbits from her hand. Kaitlyn looked up at her mare and smiled before lowering her gaze, spying Austin standing at the door, leaning against the entryway to the stables.

"My lord," Kaitlyn exclaimed, getting up quickly from where she was sitting. "I did not see you."

Before responding, Austin regarded Kaitlyn for a moment. Kaitlyn shifted slightly as she waited for Austin to speak. Instead, he cocked his head to the side and regarded her for a second. Suddenly, he snapped to attention, as if realizing that he was woolgathering, and he grinned at her.

Without saying anything, he took a few steps forward. Kaitlyn, still shocked as to why the First Lord was in the stable, did not move. Austin took a few more steps, approaching her cautiously as though she was a frightened animal, before taking her hand gently and bowing while lightly brushing his lips on her knuckles. "It was a pleasure making your acquaintance. I hope to see you in the coming months at a few social events." Slowly, he let her hand go, and he took a step back.

"The pleasure was all mine, my lord," Kaitlyn said. Austin did not miss the way she unconsciously rubbed her knuckles. With a nod of his head, he turned around and strode out of the stables. Waiting a few long moments after he left, Kaitlyn sank back down near the horse, and she leaned her head on the animal's knee. No words came to her as she thought over what just happened. First, he had mistaken her for a servant, and then he had made it a point to come out to the stables and bid her farewell. Was that his form of apology? Did he feel the need to

apologize at all? Was it all just a common courtesy to him?

Kaitlyn sighed and set about getting more hay to both feed the mare and distract her own thoughts.

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Kaitlyn looked out at the ballroom before her. She had been at this ball for over an hour, and she was just now getting a chance to step back and take a good look at her surroundings.

The ballroom, as she had expected, had been lavishly decorated, and the room was filled with dancing couples and people conversing with one another. The scent in the room was like no other she had ever encountered. At first, she could only take in the rich scent of expensive hothouse flowers, but then she registered the smells of many varieties of cologne and perfume. The bright colors of ladies' gowns, as well, were a pleasant visual assault as their wearers moved gracefully about the room.

The Fourth Lord and Lady of Rockwell were hosting this event, and Kaitlyn had already met their son, Lord Absolom. The entire family had been very kind to her thus far. Absolom had approached her a few minutes ago asking for a dance later that evening, and she had gladly accepted.

She had not yet seen Lord Austin. In one way, that fact had made her feel less apprehensive. When she and her father had come into town a few days ago, she had been preoccupied with thoughts of encountering the First Lord. She hasn't known what to make of their last conversation, and she was a bit nervous about possibly seeing him again. But it didn't appear that he would be attending this particular event. His not attending was strange since it was known that Austin and Absolom were close friends.

And then, as if summoned by the Fates, he entered. Utterly handsome in expertly tailored

evening clothes, Lord Austin, the First Lord of Rockwell, held a commanding presence. Many others, she could see, noticed his entrance as well. The light from the chandelier stroked his chestnut hair, and his evening clothes accentuated his height.

Instead of standing and gawking, however, Kaitlyn looked around for Aaron, the man who had asked her for the next dance. She found him quickly, and when he met her gaze, he smiled warmly. Within the past hour, Kaitlyn had been formally introduced to many of her father's acquaintances, and a few men had come to meet her of their own accord; Aaron was the later.

When she turned back around to look straight ahead at the dance floor, she nearly gasped at what she saw. Lord Austin was heading straight toward her, his emerald gaze locked on her.

Just then, she could hear the first notes of a new song beginning. She turned and saw her dance partner beginning to move in her direction. Maybe if he got to her soon enough, she surmised, Lord Austin wouldn't be able to talk to her.

Before departing for the ball this evening, Kaitlyn had tried to talk herself out of her worries. Lord Austin would not pay any attention to her, so she need not worry. He was a Member of the High Council after all, and there were certainly far more illustrious people for him to spend time with. To her chagrin, she had been unsuccessful in changing her thoughts. There had been something about the way Lord Austin had regarded her when he had entered the stable and found her sitting in the hay near her horse. He did not have to come to the stables to begin with and yet he had. First, he had mistaken her for a maidservant and then purposefully found her in order to say his farewell. She had every reason to be apprehensive. For now, however, she just wanted to be able to avoid him for a few more moments. An hour or two more might work well enough.

Her hopes were crushed, however, when she looked back and saw Lord Austin some twenty feet away. Accepting the inevitable, Kaitlyn squared her shoulders and set a pleasant expression on her face.

“Kaitlyn,” Lord Austin said as he reached for her hand and took it in the warmth of his own. Deftly, he raised it to his lips and gave the back of her hand a chaste kiss before letting it go. Too shocked to react, Kaitlyn made no move to counteract him.

“It is certainly a pleasure to see you again, my lord,” Kaitlyn said, taking a step back and dipping into a curtsy.

As she rose, she glanced around quickly and found that her next dance partner, her savior, had slowed his pace.

“I see you have no one to share this dance with,” Lord Austin said. Unintentionally, Kaitlyn met his gaze with her disappointment on display before she could conceal it. His lips twitched with amusement.

She looked back to find Aaron and let out a frustrated sigh. The man who had been, only seconds ago, approaching her for the dance was now stopped in his tracks. When he met her gaze, he shook his head almost in terror. Her eyes narrowed. The First Lord was not to be interrupted.

Turning back, she saw Lord Austin grin. “Would you do me the honor of this dance?” he asked as he held out his hand.

Kaitlyn was wise and followed Aaron’s actions. She was in no place to decline an offer from Lord Austin, something she was sure that he was aware of. A bit hesitantly, Kaitlyn placed her hand in his and let him lead her out onto the dance floor.

“I trust you’re having a pleasant stay so far?” Austin said while placing one hand on

Kaitlyn's waist and took her opposite hand in his own.

"The experience is definitely new to me," Kaitlyn said, also placing her free hand on his shoulder and concentrated on settling into the dance. The last person she wanted to look foolish in front of was standing right in front of her; she was not going to let this go wrong. "I confess I was pessimistic about the whole idea, but society has proved me wrong." As she said this, she smiled slightly. She had enjoyed her dances tremendously thus far, and the people she met through the evening had been extremely welcoming. True, she wasn't the beauty of the ball nor were hordes of men vying for her attention, but that suited her just fine.

"I knew you wouldn't have any trouble once you got here," Austin replied. "This may not be your element, but I think the goddesses are watching out for you. No one would have guessed that this was your first ball."

Kaitlyn looked down for a moment at his compliment. She was unaccustomed to flattery from anyone but her father, and it was even more unsettling that this man was the one saying such things. "Thank you, my lord," She replied. Instead of meeting his eyes, however, she fixed her gaze on a place beyond his shoulder.

"Please," Austin said, but he paused until Kaitlyn looked up into his eyes. "Let's not stumble over the polite necessities. You may call me Austin."

Kaitlyn didn't respond, but she nodded and then continued looking over his shoulder. In turn, Austin sighed. He knew that her interactions with men her age or at least of partnership age were limited. She was used to working her father's fields and raising their moderate collection of animals, not attending social events or flirting with gentlemen.

A minute later, the dance ended, and the two stepped back before bowing and curtsying. Austin was just about to lead her to Yorick when he stopped short. Lord Absolom was a few feet

away from them, and he was fast approaching.

“Austin,” Absolom greeted with a grin. “It’s always good to see you. You don’t have to take Kaitlyn back to her father; she and I will be sharing the next dance.”

Austin looked at his friend for a moment before slowly letting go of Kaitlyn’s arm. He noticed her lack of hesitance as she approached Absolom and took his arm. Austin wanted to have something witty to say to the couple, but he just stared at them. He had managed to steal Kaitlyn away for the last dance, but there was no way that he would be able to gain a few extra moments without seeming to rude. With a bow, he left the two.

He had meant to seek out someone else to dance with, but he found that he couldn’t keep himself from standing aside and watching the dancing couples, with his eye on one in particular. Absolom and Kaitlyn were not an extraordinarily matched pair, but Austin couldn’t help but notice their fluid grace as they danced. Absolom, sporting jet black hair and glacial blue eyes, was a great physical contrast to Kaitlyn who had light brown hair and gray eyes. Absolom’s tall, muscular figure also contrasted with Kaitlyn’s slender form. Kaitlyn certainly did not look as good with Absolom as she had with *him*. His own chestnut hair, green eyes, and complexion complimented her coloring, and he knew, of course, that they danced better together.

He had just enough restraint on himself to keep from staring when he first spotted her. When he had first met her, she had been wearing a simple day dress that enabled her to move freely and work among the garden. Tonight, however, she was wearing an elegant dove gray gown that brought out her eyes, and her hair was swept up in an elegant hairstyle. Most women her age donned a necklace to accent the neckline of the gown, but she had no such item. That fact had nearly made his mouth water.

He snapped out of his reverie. He had only met Kaitlyn once before tonight, and he was

acting this way with no cause to do so. He couldn't stop thinking about Kaitlyn and how much he wanted to spend more time with her tonight, yet he needed to stay within the boundaries of social etiquette. That meant he only had one more dance with Kaitlyn.

He'd better make it count, he concluded as he turned around in order to find someone to chat and pass the time with.

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The last few notes of the dance hung in the air and Kaitlyn and Absolom stepped away from each other. "Would you care to accompany me outside for some air?" Absolom asked and held his hand out.

"Thank you, my lord," Kaitlyn said while trying to catch her breath and fan herself at the same time. Absolom grinned as he watched her. When she turned to make her way out onto the terrace, Absolom glanced behind him and found Austin across the ballroom.

Watching with eyes sharper than a hawk's.

Absolom grinned to himself and followed Kaitlyn outside. "You have a very beautiful home, my lord," Kaitlyn began, trying to find a way to start conversation. She felt silly saying that since she was certain he had been told that many times before, being the future Fourth Lord. He did, however, have a very beautiful home, one that was larger and grander than any she had spent time in.

Absolom's upper lip curved slightly. They reached the end of the terrace, and Absolom leaned his back against the banister; Kaitlyn stood next to him, looking out at the grounds. "I much prefer when my parents throw smaller events, but they would not be persuaded this time. They give this ball annually, and they were not about to stop this year."

Kaitlyn looked over at Absolom and found him gazing at her. She did not feel the same

uneasiness that she did around Austin, but she couldn't help but sense that Absolom was assessing her in some way. She let him think what he would; she had nothing to hide. As well, he was a High Council Member, her finding a suitable partner had nothing to do with him.

Instead of continuing with the conversation, the two turned to face the house and stood in silence. Neither spoke but simply watched as couples were in the middle of their dance.

After a few minutes, he said without turning to her, "I trust you've been enjoying yourself, especially since this is your first ball?"

Kaitlyn smiled as she turned to him, and he glanced down at her. "I couldn't have hoped for a better experience," she answered, and Absolom tilted his head in response.

"I'll be sure to let my parents know. They were talking about you after you spoke with them. They seem to have a fond interest in you." Absolom said. Just then, he suddenly removed himself from against the banister, and Kaitlyn glanced at him questioningly. Looking up, she saw why Absolom had moved away from her. Austin had made his way out onto the terrace, his eyes gleaming when they settled on the couple.

"Absolom," he said through gritted teeth. "May I speak to you for a few moments?" She watched Absolom lift his chin in acknowledgement, but he said nothing. Without saying a word herself, Kaitlyn brushed past the two and reentered the ball room.

"What the devil was that about?" Austin said as he flexed his hands at his side. No doubt Absolom had noticed Austin's preference for Yorick's daughter, yet he had brought her outside as if nothing mattered.

"I danced with a perfectly amiable young woman," Absolom said, looking up at the First Lord. "We both needed some fresh air, so we decided to step out. I don't see what has you in such a fix."

Austin took a few deep breaths and counted to himself in Rockwell's native language. After a few moments, he spoke. "It looked like more than just an innocent pass outside," he said, still flexing his hands at his sides.

"What seems to be the problem?" Absolom asked as he moved back to lean on the banister.

"Damn it, Absolom, I don't know," Austin said as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"You like her?" Absolom asked calmly. Even though the words were phrased as a question, they both knew the answer. Austin looked over at Absolom incredulously, wondering if Absolom actually expected him to answer.

When neither of them said anything for a few moments, Austin began. "I don't know, Ab. We met a few weeks ago when I went to her father's house for some business. Ever since then, I've been anticipating seeing her again."

"Do you at least know why you feel this way?" Absolom asked the First Lord. They had both seen men who proclaimed being in love without knowing why, and they always laughed at the absurdity of the situation. Absolom's question was intended to keep Austin from doing the same.

Austin contemplated the question. In truth, he hadn't spent too much time with Kaitlyn, but he knew that he wanted to get to know her better. He had been instantly attracted to her, and he also liked everything that he learned about her. She seemed possessing of a steady sense of control, but Austin knew that her bite, when she chose to use it, was that of a viper. There was more to her that he still wanted to find out. Without verbally answering Absolom's query, Austin nodded.

"Don't think about going near her," Austin said after a moment, and he looked at the

other lord. At that, Absolom simply chuckled.

Austin became instantly infuriated, which Absolom could see, so he clarified, “I’m the last person who will be going after Kaitlyn. I’ve got my own swan to hunt.”

At that, Austin turned questioningly at his friend, who smiled. Absolom looked into the ballroom with a searching glance before grinning. “Have you met Maegan?” Absolom asked as he continued looking through the windows onto the dance floor.

“Maegan?” Austin wondered out loud. When he himself looked into the ballroom, he saw just who Absolom was referring to. Maegan was the daughter of a moderately successful land owner, and she, like Kaitlyn, was here enjoying her first set of social events. She sported the same shade of hair as Absolom’s, though her brown eyes held a level of warmth that many people had a hard time finding in Absolom’s blue ones due to their abnormally light quality. She was of average height and build; knowing his friend, Austin could understand why Absolom was taken with her.

“We hadn’t met until recently,” Absolom said as he watched Maegan stand by her mother. “I was only planning on attending Lord Gregory’s dinner party and declining most other invitations before I met her.” He paused, and Austin grinned. Obviously, that hadn’t worked out according to plan.

“Are you courting her?” Austin asked when Absolom finally turned away from looking at the windows.

Absolom smiled slyly. “As of tonight I am.”

Austin shared his friend’s expression. “She would have to be mad not to accept you,” he concluded.

Absolom turned to Austin but was silent for a few seconds. “I could say the same for you

and Kaitlyn.”

All in all, her first social gathering had gone marvelously well, Kaitlyn thought to herself as she stood at the side of the room watching people dance one of the more lively dances of the evening. She had declined to participate in this dance simply because of her sore feet. She was going to have to get used to this if she and her father planned to attend such events several times a week for the next few months.

“You look as if you’ve enjoyed yourself, daughter,” her father said while walking over to stand next to her.

Kaitlyn nodded and looked up at Yorick with a fond smile. “I’m glad I came. My first ball couldn’t have gone any better.”

“I’m glad,” Yorick said, returning his daughter’s smile. “The Fourth Lord and Lady have been asking about you. They seem to like you very much.”

Kaitlyn grinned as she turned to find the subjects of her father’s statements. She happened to see the Fourth Lady as her eyes found Kaitlyn, and the two waved to one another.

“I did not think social gatherings could be this entertaining,” Kaitlyn said as she turned to watch the couples finish their dance. “I half expected to be bored to death.”

Yorick nodded in understanding. “With our background, that’s certainly understandable, but balls and parties are entertaining in their own right. Now, I see some friends of mine I wish to speak to. Will you be all right for this last dance?”

“Of course,” Kaitlyn responded, and she watched her father walk away before she looked around one more time.

She was so busy taking in these last few minutes of the ball that she did not notice Austin

walking toward her and then stopping. When she turned around, she saw him watching her some distance away, and then he began moving toward her slowly. She wanted to pretend like she had someone to talk to right now, but she stayed where she was.

His company was not terrible in any way, Kaitlyn had to admit to herself. Her only problem was with how intimidating she found him. He had been kind to her, and the dance with him had been more than pleasant. Or perhaps a bit more than pleasant, if she was honest with herself.

Just then, Austin reached her. Without saying a word, he held out his hand and met her gaze.

All of her thoughts escaped her at the moment as she looked at Austin; almost automatically, she silently took his hand. He led her out to join the other dancing couples, and they eased into the waltz. They didn't speak for some time. At first, neither looked directly at the other, but after a while they regarded each other steadily as they continued their silent dance.

"There is no chance that you could be a servant," Austin whispered. Kaitlyn tilted her chin up slightly as she continued to gaze at Austin.

They continued to dance, and their gazes did not waver. For those few moments, Kaitlyn lost track of the other people in the ballroom. She was dancing with the First Lord of Rockwell, and that was what mattered at the moment.

A few minutes later the music drew to a close, but Austin maintained his hold. Kaitlyn looked up at him questioningly.

"Kaitlyn," he said, his voice huskier than normal. "May I have your permission to court you?"

Kaitlyn's eyes widened in surprise as she realized that he was being completely serious.

She couldn't move for a moment.

“Yes,” she barely managed to reply. Austin stepped back and took her hand in his. Without looking away, he slowly raised her hand to his lips. When he had previously kissed her hand, the action had been brief, but this time he remained for an extra second.

When he finally pulled back and stepped away, Kaitlyn had to keep herself from fleeing like a startled doe. Instead, she politely curtsied before turning and hurrying away.

She found her father quickly, and he smiled down at her before taking her arm and walking with her to the entrance of the ballroom.

“I'm happy for you,” Yorick said as he squeezed his daughter's arm lovingly. Startled, Kaitlyn looked up at him, his eyes shining with warmth and affection. “Lord Austin would make you a fine partner not because of his status but because of his character.” Still Kaitlyn said nothing but her father nodded in understanding.

“He came to me while you were dancing with Lord Absolom,” Yorick explained. “The boy is infatuated with you.”

Kaitlyn blinked in surprise but silently nodded. Aside from her intimidation, she was anxious inside. She hadn't even let herself entertain thoughts about the possibility of anything with Lord Austin, yet he had approached her.

With that thought, Kaitlyn glanced around briefly while she continued walking.

Austin was standing at the far side of the room looking at her, his gaze promising of more intimacies to come.