



Romancing Lady Rose (The Dowager's Garden #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: She wore a perfect smile over her torment. He knew that mask all too well...

Miss Alice Montroses family teeters on the edge of financial ruin, leaving her with one option—she must marry wealth and restore their standing in society. When she receives an invitation to the Dowager Countess of Fairfaxs birthday celebrations, Alice seizes the rare opportunity to find a wealthy husband. Taken under the wing of the matchmaking dowager and her mysterious Garden society, shes determined to secure a match with the Seasons most eligible bachelor, the Duke of Gainsbury.

Captain Victor Lacey is everything Alice should avoid—scarred by war, wielding a razor-sharp tongue, and fiercely protective of his friend the duke. The insufferable captain brands her a fortune hunter, making it abundantly clear shell never be worthy of his friend. Yet with each cutting remark, Alice finds herself drawn to the one man who sees past her facade to the despair she hides beneath. As the festivities at Fairfax Hall take an unexpected turn, Alice must choose between following the path laid before her or risk scandal for a love that could mend them both.

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CHAPTER 1

The inn at Weybridge looked as though it might fall in on itself at any moment, the roof sagging ever-so-slightly. Alice Montrose stood at the edge of the cobblestone street, her travel coat buttoned tightly. She smoothed her gloves, adjusted her bonnet, and straightened herself—small, practiced movements that most people would not notice.

Her mother, however, would.

With graceful steps, Alice made her way toward her mother, who had collapsed dramatically on a nearby bench. Alice's face remained serene, her expression revealing nothing of the anxiety that coursed through her veins as she recalled her mother's lessons.

Back straight. Hands folded. Smile calm, but not too calm—one mustn't seem slovenly.

For weeks, they had rehearsed every aspect of this journey—from proper carriage etiquette to the precise angle at which Alice should hold her spine. Her calves no longer ached from hours spent practicing deep curtsies, but the muscles remembered. Everything had to be perfect. This opportunity was her only chance to secure a suitable match.

The coachman struggled with their luggage as their maid, Miss Eastridge, offered vapors for her mother's nerves. Mrs. Montrose was not someone who enjoyed travel, especially of the public kind. She sat crumpled, her eyes surveying every detail with

obvious displeasure. Silver had already started dusting her once-golden hair, and the deepening frown lines between her eyebrows had become more pronounced during their journey. The coach had been packed arm to arm, one woman with a wailing infant on her lap, and such proximity to people of lower status had clearly frayed Mrs. Montrose's nerves beyond repair.

"Oh, has it really come to this?" her mother groaned. The light briefly illuminated the facial features that Alice had supposedly inherited, though she hoped she hadn't also inherited her mother's perpetual look of dissatisfaction.

Having stacked the luggage before them, the coachman paused, staring at Alice. Her mind whirled, wondering what he might want. Her mother had taught her countless rules of etiquette, but had never covered the intricacies of coach travel, and Miss Eastridge was too busy trying to assuage her mother to offer any assistance. Familiar whispers crept into her thoughts, unbidden.

Stupid.

Useless .

For a moment, she was lost, until she observed the other occupants pick up their bags and offer the man a small tip for his troubles.

Ah.

With the example of how to act now laid out for her, she dug into her reticule for what little pocket change she had, offering it to the man. He eyed her hysterical mother before snatching the coin with a snort, then turned to see to his horses.

While it was uncomfortable for her to be subject to such a judgmental look, she did not deny that her family presented a strange sight. She stood still for one moment, her

mind spinning while she processed all that she might have done to make that interaction more amiable, only to be brought back to the present by the wailing of her mother.

Feeling as though she had abandoned her poor mama in her time of need, she bit her lip and turned. Dealing with her mother's moods was more comfortable, something she knew how to do with exacting grace. At present, Miss Eastridge seemed put-out, exasperatingly fanning her mother, who seemed to take offense at the woman's attempts to comfort her. If Alice did not know any better, she would have thought they were about to get into a physical scuffle.

Alice leapt into action, approaching the bench and offering to take the fan from their lady's maid, who pushed it into Alice's hands with obvious relief.

"Miss Eastridge, please inquire inside about our carriage to Fairfax Hall."

"Yes, Miss Montrose."

Before anyone could ask the maid anything more, the woman fled, and Alice watched her go as her poor mother flung an arm over her face. If they were not careful, her mother was likely to cause a scene.

"Oh, dear Alice. What did I do to deserve such a base lifestyle?"

"It is through no fault of your own," she said, fanning Mrs. Montrose in just the way she liked. "Such a perilous journey would fray anyone's nerves."

"This is what I get for marrying a man of only ?800 a year! To not afford a carriage of our own, it is unjust!"

"An unfortunate twist of fate."

Mrs. Montrose suddenly stilled, and so did Alice, fan stopped in mid-air. Something had changed in her mother's countenance. Mrs. Montrose whirled around, taking hold of both of Alice's shoulders and shaking her. There was a desperate plea in her eye as her fingers dug into the wool of Alice's travel coat.

"You must listen to me carefully," Mrs. Montrose said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "This celebration at Fairfax Hall is the most important event of our lives."

"I understand that, Mama," Alice said, trying to soothe her. "We've practiced everything thoroughly."

"No, you cannot even begin to understand. The Dowager Countess of Fairfax has invited everyone of consequence to her birthday celebration. A duke will be in attendance."

Alice nodded, but that did not seem to be enough for her mother.

"You must promise me," Mrs. Montrose continued, her fingers digging into Alice's arms through her travel coat. "Promise me that you will follow my every instruction. It must all be perfect. This is our only chance."

This version of her mother frightened her. She had gone completely off script from her usual hysterics. It appeared the further away they strayed from home, the more unhinged her mother's behavior became.

"I-I promise, Mama," Alice replied, startled by this display. "I will remember all our practice sessions."

"Good." Mrs. Montrose's grip loosened slightly, though the wild look in her eyes remained. "This visit must secure our family's future. If it does not, I am not sure I could survive the disappointment."

So this was it. Alice's only opportunity, unless she wished to marry the vicar down the lane from their country cottage, who often spat whilst he talked. And she was certain the vicar did not make more than ?400 a year. Not enough to sate her mother's expensive tastes.

Alice's hands slowly rose to grasp her mother's, the woman's vice-like grip hurting her. She did not wish to have bruises in her ballgown for the party. She pried Mrs. Montrose's hands off of her, then grasped them in her lap.

"I will do everything within my power," Alice said with a soft smile. "You have taught me well. Without you, I would have never received such an opportunity, and I will make sure that it is not in vain. And once I have married a man of fortune?—"

"The Duke of Gainsbury," her mother corrected.

"Of course." Alice paused momentarily. "Once I have secured a match, I will ensure that you always have a carriage at your beck and call. An entire fleet of them."

"And perhaps better staff ..." Mrs. Montrose said, eyeing the door where Miss Eastridge had disappeared.

"All our nerves are on edge after that horrid journey, Mama," said Alice. "I would consider giving Miss Eastridge some grace."

Her mother's look turned sour, and Alice knew she had said the wrong thing. She had veered too far from her mother's expectations, and now she would pay the price of a tongue lashing. If that was the cost of defending Miss Eastridge, then so be it.

But when her mother opened her mouth to speak, a figure hobbled before them, making her mother's jaw snap shut.

“Pardon me, madam, you would not happen to be Mrs. Montrose?”

The man was nothing more than a wisp that could be carried away on the next wind, with shockingly white hair and a pair of rather smudged looking spectacles at the end of his long nose. It appeared he had to ask the question, not out of politeness, but because he could not make out anyone’s identity otherwise.

It took a moment for her mother to adjust to the intrusion, then she nodded.

“I am she,” Mrs. Montrose said, putting on the much more proper voice she always used with strangers.

“ What? ” the man asked rather loudly, cupping a hand over his ear. Her mother looked as though she might hit the man upside the head for a moment before clearing her throat and pulling out her letter of introduction.

“ Yes! I am Mrs. Montrose! ”

The man flashed a toothless grin, not even glancing at the paper. He raised a shaking finger across the cobblestone street where a horse and carriage sat.

“It is your lucky day, madam. Your carriage stands ready.”

They hit a bump and Alice went flying toward the ceiling of the cabin. She had to dig her fingers into the fabric of the seat in order to keep from hitting her head. Miss Eastridge let out a high-pitched yelp. Mrs. Montrose had one arm on the wall and another on the backrest as they all tried to steady themselves through the jarring ride.

The road they traveled on was not made for such speeds. It was a dirt path that wound through a forest, pocked with potholes and sometimes fallen branches that the driver would not see until the very last moment before yanking aside the horses, which

seemed almost stronger than oxen and thrice as fast.

The dowager, who had sent the carriage to collect them, had obviously spared no expense in procuring her horses and carriage—the upholstery and craftsmanship were some of the best Alice had ever seen. However, she had skimped on the most important part—the person driving it.

“Oh goodness,” said Alice, one hand clutching her mother. “I do believe I am about to be sick.”

Her mother’s eyes widened in panic.

“Alice!” Her mother’s voice cut sharp as a knife. “Do not dare soil the Dowager Countess’s upholstery. I forbid it.”

Mrs. Montrose quickly turned toward the door.

“Be careful, Mama, the force?—”

But it was too late. The door to the carriage snapped open, letting in a gust of wind as the already stormy day intensified. The carriage wobbled a bit but did not even deign to pause as Mrs. Montrose forced Alice to lean her head out of the new opening. Alice breathed heavily.

As she leaned there, her body half-suspended over the rushing ground below, she gripped the edge of the door frame as she swayed with each bump and jolt. The unbidden thoughts that had plagued her for years crept in, even amid the chaos.

Weak. Useless.

For a brief moment, she wondered what would happen if she simply let go. It would

take so little—just a slight shift of her weight. The thought seemed to settle in her stomach like a stone.

Then she shook her head, banishing the dark thoughts as quickly as they had come, and refocused on steadying herself against the carriage's violent jarring.

The trees rushed past in a blur of green and brown, the ground beneath a dizzying streak of motion.

Then, there was a flash of red in her periphery as the carriage approached a rider on the road.

The carriage barreled toward the gentleman—a soldier with red hair sitting astride a horse and traveling at an agreeable pace. He swerved at the last moment, expertly pulling on his horse's reins as he was forced to ride off the road entirely and into the brambles. The carriage completely overtook him, and he had already disappeared from Alice's view when she heard the man let out a frustrated yell, followed by a string of curses.

“Watch where you are going, you blasted fool!”

The driver did not stop—indeed; he seemed to speed up after the incident.

Alice's mind pulled back from the precipice of her dark thoughts. She blinked, suddenly aware of the cold air rushing past her face and the precarious position of her body. She gripped the door frame more tightly, steadying herself against the carriage's wild movements.

As she leaned over, gulping in air, Alice gathered some of her strength to attempt to hail the driver.

“Sir? Sir, do you not think we should stop and assist the gentleman?”

There was no answer.

“Sir?”

All the attempts were for naught, and she carefully pulled herself back into the cabin. She had mostly overcome her bout of nausea, having not fallen ill, but was still pale and light-headed. When she caught her mother staring, Mrs. Montrose let out a huff.

“What do you think you are doing, sitting there with all this air flitting about?” she yelled over the wind and the crunch of wagon wheels, as if she had not been the one to insist on opening the door. “Close the door so we may have some peace!”

“Yes, Mother.”

It took a few attempts, Alice almost falling bodily from the carriage and narrowly being saved by Miss Eastridge, but after a few yanks, they could finally snatch the door shut. Everyone now looked completely ridiculous, and Alice could feel clumps of her hair which had escaped her bonnet.

She suppressed a groan, thinking about all the faux pas they had already committed on just this carriage ride.

Alice watched the outside world, wondering whatever happened to that poor man on the road—if he had hurt himself or his horse. If she contemplated it too much, however, it made her stomach churn, and she knew her mother would become apoplectic if she became sick in this cabin.

All she had to do was count her breaths and wait until they arrived at Fairfax Hall.

If they arrived in one piece.

CHAPTER 2

After the incident with the rider, it took Alice quite some time to gather herself. Once she had caught her breath, she spent the rest of the ride in silence, her thoughts spiraling dangerously to the depths. Yet, every time she attempted conversation—opening her mouth to say something that would distract her from the dark pit within—a sudden wave of nausea would overcome her and she'd have to snap her mouth shut to keep it down.

She did not notice Fairfax Hall when they first emerged from the forests surrounding the estate. Mist covered the grounds from the rainy weather, and it was only when the carriage drew closer that the fog seemed to dissipate, falling away to reveal the manor in all its splendor. Alice, skin still tinged green and her stomach doing flips with each jar of the cabin, pressed her cheek against the side of the carriage as she gazed out the window.

It was as though it was situated in the clouds, the marble estate harkening back to the classical Greeks—if those Greeks had possessed significant investments in the East India Trading Company. As the grounds revealed themselves, she noted topiaries and fountains in the gardens stretching out on either side of the drive. A pair of sculptures sat at either side of the entrance to the manor, each one carrying bouquets of flowers in their arms.

Her mother's fingers worried at a shiny lapel pin that differed from her usual brass jewelry. It was a golden flower, which seemed weathered by age but newly shined. Mrs. Montrose had picked up a nervous habit of touching it throughout their journey. Alice had meant to ask her about the mysterious pin, but never found her mother in

the mood for such explanations.

Miss Eastridge seemed to notice Mrs. Montrose's nerves as well, shooting Alice a wary look. The maid was likely thinking the same thing Alice was—that they were in for another round of dramatics. Alice only hoped that her mother would not succumb to such antics around polite company.

Especially polite company with this much wealth and power.

“Are you ... feeling well, Mama?”

“Am I well?” Mrs. Montrose replied, incredulous. “Of course not. Every step of this journey has gone terribly awry, and we are in such a horrid state, I fear for the first impression we will make. That dreadful driver!”

“And that poor man on the road ...” Alice added.

She had replayed the incident a few times in her mind, and each time, it filled her with more shame. They should have stopped to help the stranger, but they had left him to his own devices.

“I am quite certain he is fine.”

“Surely we should say something about him to our hosts?” Alice asked, perhaps being too bold in her speech, especially when her mother was on the brink of a breakdown. But this was worth the discomfort. “He might have suffered an injury. We should not abandon him to the woods.”

“We shall do no such thing,” Mrs. Montrose said firmly, though her fingers continued to spin the gold pin.

“Mother, I implore you?—”

“There is something you must understand. We are here at the invitation of Henrietta, Dowager Countess of Fairfax herself. If you think my standards are high, hers are even higher. This is your only chance at finding a man of worth, and I will not have you creating a disturbance during your first impression.”

There was a desperation in her mother’s voice that caused Alice’s chest to tighten. Of course, she was being foolish. There was probably no reason to fret. The man was likely well, if not perturbed. Part of her conscience ate at her as she released a breath through her nose and gave her mother the most infinitesimal of nods.

The carriage lurched to a halt in front of the main entrance, causing the women to pitch forward in their seats with undignified gasps. Alice steadied herself. Then, after the risk of getting sick passed, movement caught her attention outside.

A couple had emerged from the grand doors, followed by a small army of footmen. The gentleman leading the way was an imposing figure in a perfectly tailored black coat, while his lady was a woman of pale coloring, with a morning dress of soft blue silk. Both strode forward with an authority that was undeniable and a grace unmatched.

The sight sent Mrs. Montrose into a flurry of activity, straightening her bonnet and then leaning over to smooth Alice’s travel-worn skirts. They all finished with the final adjustments just as a footman approached to assist them from the carriage.

The step down was treacherous, and Alice’s legs felt like gelatin. She had to bite her tongue from letting out a yelp as her boot slipped on the slick step. While she recovered her balance with some grace, she could feel her mother’s gaze at her back, eyes boring into her. She would likely hear about it when they were away from prying eyes. Alice’s cheeks warmed in shame.

“Mrs. Montrose, Miss Montrose,” the gentleman said, his voice carrying across the distance as they made their way across the gravel. “I must apologize that we have not been properly introduced before now. I am the Earl of Fairfax, and this is my wife, the Countess of Fairfax. Welcome to our home. My mother is indisposed at present, but she looks forward to greeting you during the opening festivities tonight. I trust your journey was comfortable?”

“Quite the bumpy affair, if I may be frank, my lord,” Mrs. Montrose said, doing little to disguise her vexation.

Lord Fairfax’s countenance tightened momentarily before a polite smile replaced it.

“Ah yes, Matthews can be something of a daredevil, I am afraid. But he’s served the family for decades, and my mother won’t hear of replacing him.”

A raindrop hit Alice’s face, and she sensed the energy of a coming storm in the air. Her mind returned to the man of the road, envisioning him injured and exposed to the elements. And though she knew she might regret it, she had little choice but to say something, given the circumstances.

“Speaking of the bumpy ride, my lord,” Alice interjected, ignoring her mother’s warning glance, “we passed a gentleman on horseback who was forced quite abruptly off the road. Might it be possible to send a man to check that he is unharmed and not trapped in such weather?”

Lord Fairfax’s expression changed, exchanging an anxious glance with his wife.

“Might you describe this gentleman?”

“He was a tall, red-headed military man on a bay horse. I am afraid I couldn’t make out his features clearly, as the journey was quite ... invigorating , my lord.”

“Ah,” Lord Fairfax said, his look of concern dissolving. “Captain Lacey, no doubt. I assure you, the man is more than capable of handling himself.” Fairfax paused and gazed past their shoulders, a weary look entering his eyes. “Speak of the devil.”

As if summoned by name, a figure emerged from the tree line. Even at a distance, the man seemed to carry himself with a military bearing, and Alice let out a sigh of relief that both he and the horse he rode upon seemed uninjured. In fact, he rode with an aggression that seemed to roll off of him in waves. As he drew closer, she could make out his features more clearly. He had short chestnut hair that was swept back from his face and dampened with rain, and his bright coat was splattered with mud, likely from the incident on the road. But it was his countenance that took her aback, his eyebrows arched in displeasure. As he approached them, she could not tell if he was vexed, or if his sharp brow was permanently set in such an unfortunate way.

The sound of horses’ hooves crunched down the gravel drive as he brought his mare to a stop, dismounted with well-practiced grace, and handed the reins off to a startled-looking footman with barely a glance.

“Your driver nearly killed me, Fairfax,” the man said bluntly, without so much as a greeting.

Lord Fairfax’s eyes darted between Alice, her mother, and the newcomer as the lord seemed to process the slight. His attitude changed as he straightened, his tone becoming slightly cooler.

“Captain Victor Lacey,” Lord Fairfax said, “Allow me to introduce Mrs. Regina Montrose and her daughter, Miss Alice Montrose.”

The Captain did not spare them so much as a glance.

“Yes, yes. You curtsy. I bow. We are now introduced. Charmed.”

Alice did not believe he was the least bit charmed. It had started to rain, yet no one made any move to take cover, everyone transfixed upon this show of audacity.

“We were not expecting you, Lacey,” Lord Fairfax said. “Thought you were in London.”

“I would not miss your mother’s celebration for the world. Oh, why so glum? Do I not have a standing invitation?” The captain’s lip curved into something that might be a smile on a man with a less harsh countenance.

Rain saturated the man’s hair, and it did not seem to concern him one bit that everyone was quickly becoming damp. Alice could feel a history between the men, as if this was not the first time Lord Fairfax had dealt with such behavior from the captain. The earl visibly struggled to maintain his composure.

“It is only,” Fairfax said, “the estate is at capacity for guests, and every manor within five miles has no empty rooms available.”

“Are you telling me the Dowager Countess of Fairfax allowed the unwashed masses to stay at her precious Violet Cottage?”

“Erm, no?—”

“Then that is where I shall stay.” Captain Lacey’s tone was final, as if he himself was the lord of the house and not the man standing opposite him. “Is His Grace in attendance yet? I require his time.”

“He arrived only yesterday, and should be taking tea at present.”

At the mention of a duke, Alice couldn’t help but lean forward with interest, knowing that he must be referring to the Duke of Gainsbury that her mother had told her so

much about. But perhaps she was too enthusiastic in her interest, because the captain turned towards her, noticing her perk up.

“Are you acquainted with His Grace?” Captain Lacey asked, and once more, she hadn’t the faintest idea if he was glaring or not. His eyes fixed upon her with a sudden intensity that flustered her from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes.

Alice opened and closed her mouth, trying to find the words to speak, but her mother’s grip tightened on her arm.

“We have not yet had the pleasure of an introduction to His Grace,” Mrs. Montrose replied smoothly. “But I am certain there will be ample opportunity during the festivities.”

The captain’s interest grew, and his eyes raked over the two of them. The scrutiny did not have a hunger—indeed; it appeared he was searching for something specific on their persons. As his gaze swept over Alice’s bonnet, and then her travel coat, she felt suddenly bare before him and let out a small sigh of relief as he found nothing and shifted his attention to her mother. And then his gaze stopped abruptly, eyes narrowing slightly as they fixed on Mrs. Montrose’s gold lapel pin. He pressed his lips together into a thin line.

“Ah. I see.” The words were like chipping ice off a window, and Alice thought he was perhaps attempting to keep his expression neutral, though his brows and barely contained contempt betrayed him.

Without another word, Captain Lacey brushed past their host and strode toward the house, and to Alice’s surprise, no one attempted to stop him. He left a void of silence behind, replaced by the pitter-patter of rain and a chill that worked through Alice’s woolen coat.

Lord Fairfax cleared his throat and adjusted his cravat.

“I must apologize for the intrusion on our conversation. It is not uncommon for my mother to entertain guests who are quite ... prickly in nature.”

They were all surprised as Alice released an unladylike sneeze, the sound echoing in the open air. Her mother’s expression was poisonous, but it seemed to stifle the spell that the rude captain had cast.

“Come,” Lady Fairfax said, speaking for the first time. The sound of her voice, like tinkling bells, eased some tension. “Let us get you out of this rain before you catch a chill.”

Lady Fairfax gave Alice a sweet smile and motioned her to walk alongside as the footmen emptied the carriage of their luggage and Mrs. Montrose chatted excitedly with Lord Fairfax. As she followed their hostess to the manor, she cast a glance over the imposing facade of Fairfax Hall.

The rain fell heavily, thick drops hitting her face and rolling down her cheeks. Alice bit her lip. A fortnight was long, and their trip here had already gone incredibly awry. If any of the guests that this infamous dowager had invited were as prickly as Captain Lacey, then this would be quite the memorable fortnight indeed.

CHAPTER 3

The grand doors to Fairfax Hall swept open for them as they left the growing rainstorm behind and they stepped into an enormous foyer. Mrs. Montrose and Lord Fairfax walked ahead of them, chatting animatedly about the birthday celebrations, but Alice could not hear them, all her attention on their surroundings. The hall's ceiling rose three stories above, painted with blue skies and fluffy white clouds, with cherubs resting in the corners. Marble columns flanked the edges of the space, adorned with carved vines that spiraled up like serpents. Alice let out a soft breath in awe, unable to hide her reaction.

"Do you like it?" Lady Fairfax asked, her gloved hand settling on the crook of Alice's arm in a sisterly way. It startled Alice at first, unsure as she was about the woman's quick geniality, but the lady seemed to do it out of kindness and warmth, so Alice did not let it bother her.

"That would understate it," Alice said, shutting her mouth so she did not look like an absurd sort of gaping fish.

"I am still getting used to Fairfax Hall, and I have been married for over a decade," Lady Fairfax said. "But I trust you will find it comfortable during your stay."

Alice was certain that if the foyer looked like this, the rooms in which they would stay for the fortnight would be more than adequate. She had heard of such grand estates, read about them in novels and in the papers, but had never experienced one herself.

Deep within the house, the sound of ladies' laughter and the echoing melody of a pianoforte floated in the air. It was, indeed, a party—and if what Lord Fairfax said was true, they should expect the manor to be full. She tried to imagine how many people it would take to fill Fairfax Hall and realized that this social event might be even more populated than she had expected.

Their footsteps echoed in the vast space, and Alice knew suddenly that Lady Fairfax must expect her to continue the polite conversation, but her mind was blank. She raced through her internal catalog of etiquette and responses, but the only ones that surfaced were how to engage with a gentleman, not a woman of such power and grace as Lady Fairfax.

Finally, Alice struck up the courage to speak, deciding that even though she might look like a naïve fool, she could not help but admire the surrounding space.

“It is almost as though we have stepped into Eden itself,” she said, studying all the small verdant motifs—the little floral details that were meticulously crafted in every inch of the space.

“You have the dowager to thank for that,” Lady Fairfax said, looking around the room. “She cycled through several carvers before finding one skilled enough to sculpt a rose to her liking.”

“I must admit, the craftsmanship is remarkable,” Alice replied.

“Indeed. The fifth Earl—my husband's grandfather—devoted himself to the gardens at Fairfax Hall, and passed that devotion on to his daughter, who, we say, brought the gardens inside. The Hall has always been a gathering place for all society, but with the dowager present, even more so.”

“It appears the dowager has quite the reputation,” Alice said.

“She, of course, remains the center of all our entertainments,” said Lady Fairfax, shifting slightly in Alice’s grasp, her tone becoming tighter. “Since she still maintains her residence here, you see, despite the perfectly lovely dower house across the lake.”

Alice nearly missed a step. She had not expected a lady of such standing to open up in such a way to a complete stranger, especially upon first meeting them. She tried not to show her shock as she nodded.

“That must make for ... interesting arrangements,” Alice finally said.

“You needn’t be delicate, my dear,” Lady Fairfax replied, eyes sparkling with amusement. “Our acquaintances all wonder how I manage it. I must confess, when I first married Lord Fairfax, I was terrified of stepping on her toes, and I spent the first month asking permission for everything, including my own dinner arrangements.”

“And now?”

“Now we have an understanding of sorts. She rules her domain, I rule mine, and we meet in the middle for tea, or if life is more stressful, wine.” She paused for a moment. “The dowager is a very strong-willed woman. But she keeps herself occupied with various projects .” She glanced at Alice from the side of her eye. “Your mother, best of all, must understand that.”

Alice had no clue what she meant, her mind whirling through every possibility. It felt as though she was in the dark, that she had missed a crucial piece of information that everyone else was privy to. She managed a vague smile, hoping it looked as though she knew exactly what Lady Fairfax was talking about, but the lady seemed to pierce through her facade.

“I mean her Garden , of course,” Lady Fairfax clarified, as if those words would explain everything.

“Her ... garden?” Alice asked. “Yes, silly me, it must be quite the feat, overseeing the estate’s grounds.”

Lady Fairfax let out a light chuckle, then cast a glance to where Mrs. Montrose was conversing with Lord Fairfax. A footman approached to take Alice’s travel coat, and for a moment she was grateful for the distraction.

“No, my dear. Not the garden of the outdoor type. It is the ladies’ club in which your mother is a member,” Lady Fairfax explained, her voice lowered. “Surely she’s told you something about it?”

“My mother mentioned nothing of the sort,” Alice said with a small frown. She had wondered just how her mother was acquainted with such a powerful woman. If she were honest, many parts of her mother’s life were like black pits to her, and she had always wondered why.

“Most of our guests are members, or wish to be.” Lady Fairfax’s attention shifted. “Ah, speaking of which, I must assist your mother. Come.”

They approached a massive gilded oval frame propped up in the center of the hall surrounded by elaborate floral arrangements. A black cloth stretched across the frame like canvas, and flowers bloomed from its center. While she initially thought the frame contained fresh flowers, closer inspection revealed exquisitely crafted fabric flowers of all types pinned to the surface. Blooms had been painstakingly crafted, each petal and leaf rendered in detail. Beside the display, a maid stood with her hands folded, awaiting them with a friendly smile. Her apron had embroidered flowers, matching the theme of the hall.

As they joined Mrs. Montrose and Lord Fairfax, Lady Fairfax motioned toward the frame gracefully.

“I see you wear an older Garden pin, Mrs. Montrose. Let us replace it with something newer, a gift from the dowager,” she said, her voice sounding more like a proper lady than ever. Gone was the sisterly figure who gossiped about her mother-in-law—replaced by a powerful countess. “Please reveal your flower’s name.”

Alice watched in growing fascination as her mother brushed her fingers against the golden pin she’d been fiddling with the entire trip. Mrs. Montrose cast a nervous glance toward Alice, swallowing hard. For a wild moment, Alice wondered if she had accidentally stumbled upon a mysterious society where she would be expected to perform some shadowy ritual or pagan sacrifice.

Finally, her mother let out a breath and spoke.

“Daylily,” Mrs. Montrose said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Lady Daylily, welcome back to The Dowager’s Garden.” Lady Fairfax nodded to the maid, who selected a flower from the frame with practiced ease.

Alice stepped forward to get a closer look, caught by the artistry. The craftsmanship on the flower was extraordinary—each petal of the daylily was cut from a slip of golden silk that caught the light from the windows, its center covered in beads and French knots of amber thread. It seemed more alive than a natural flower.

The maid approached Mrs. Montrose with the flower pin, waiting patiently for her permission before affixing it beside Mrs. Montrose’s more generic golden one.

“Miss Howard here will show you to your rooms,” Lady Fairfax said. “There will be cards in the afternoon, and tonight the opening assembly should be quite the showing. However, I understand if you wish to sit it out after such a journey. Whichever you choose, we are eager to enjoy your company this week, Mrs. Montrose. Miss Montrose.”

“Thank you both,” Mrs. Montrose said as they exchanged polite dips and bows. Though they all acted with complete composure, Alice noticed her mother’s hands were trembling as they brushed against her new pin.

Alice glanced at the gilded frame, studying the flowers. It was now that she noticed large spaces left behind, no doubt from ladies who had already claimed their flowers like her mama. The sun caught the stitching on the petals, and in the distance she heard the tinkling of teacups and laughter. She vaguely wondered how many ladies of import were part of this so-called club.

She was torn from her reverie as Lord and Lady Fairfax turned to exit the hall. Miss Howard stepped forward and motioned them to follow, with Miss Eastridge tailing them.

They followed the maid up the staircase, each footfall a clatter against the marble. Alice stepped next to her mother, who seemed more distracted than usual, and leaned in to speak in hushed tones.

“Mama,” she whispered, “what was that all about?”

“Only a social club,” Mrs. Montrose said, her tone dismissive, but Alice did not heed the warning.

“How is one admitted into such a club?”

“Why, you are handpicked by the dowager.” Her mother’s chest puffed out a bit at that, revealing a hint of pride.

“And just how were you picked by the dowager?”

Mrs. Montrose stopped suddenly, whirling to face Alice with an expression she was

not expecting. She was energized, full of life, looking years younger than she had been just moments ago. Mrs. Montrose touched the petals pinned to her breast, then let out a breath.

“I was chosen for being an exceptional young woman of marrying age. A flower in full bloom.” She reached across the space between them, taking Alice’s chin in her fingers and tipping her face to get a better look at her. “Just like you.”

Alice’s gaze fell to the daylily. It hit her that her mother might have had more than one reason for attending this social event. She was shocked she had not realized it before now. They were not only here to find Alice a suitable husband, but to initiate Alice into this ladies’ club.

This Dowager’s Garden.

CHAPTER 4

Alice and Mrs. Montrose stepped through the second floor entrance to the grand ballroom, and immediately Alice's stomach started the uncomfortable flips it had performed since their horrid carriage ride. She steadied herself for a moment against the gilt door frame as they waited in the queue to be announced.

The ballroom stretched out below them as though from a fairy story. A grand staircase swept down to a polished checkerboard floor, the marble gleaming in the light of a thousand candles. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined the walls, the glass panes reflecting the party within. Though darkness had fallen outside, the room was alight with splendor.

Music from a small orchestra floated through the air, the noise combining with sights and smells to overwhelm Alice's senses. Her breaths came faster as she gazed down toward the partygoers below. Feathers and diamonds—elaborate hair pieces and silk gowns—they moved about the floor like exotic birds. However, it was not the jewels that caught Alice's eye, but the flowers. Not the usual arrangements that decorated such events, but the pins fastened to so many ladies' collars. Each woman seemed to wear a different bloom, crafted with the same painstaking detail as her mother's daylily. Alice had never seen so many people of quality and wealth in one place—her village assemblies now seemed foolhardy in comparison.

"Mrs. Regina Montrose and Miss Alice Montrose," the servant announced, his voice carrying across the ballroom.

Alice's stomach lurched once more. This was her moment. Everything they had

trained for, every lesson—the blood, sweat and tears—it all came down to this precise moment.

Her mother leaned in, voice barely a whisper.

“Remember what we practiced, my dear. You were born for this.”

They began their descent, and Alice had to force herself to look out at the crowd rather than stare at her feet. She prayed she would not trip and fall on her face before God and all His creation.

Following her mother’s instruction, they paused four steps from the bottom to create an appealing tableau. Alice could feel the eyes on her now, the dozens of gazes turning toward the newcomers. Most were curious—others more calculating. But one set of eyes stood out from the rest, seeming to pierce her very being.

“The dowager,” her mother whispered, turning her head slightly toward a raised platform overlooking the room.

Alice could barely contain her shock. The dowager—seated on what could only be described as a throne hewn from flowers—looked nothing like the elderly woman she had imagined. Though her hair was startlingly white, it was thick and healthy, elaborately decorated with golden flowers woven through her updo. Her face, while lined, was sharp, aristocratic, and her bearing suggested a woman in her mid-forties rather than her sixties. She carried herself with such authority that Alice half-expected to find a crown on her head rather than mere flowers.

The dowager’s gaze met Alice’s for a brief moment, and she felt stripped bare, as though the woman could see every flaw, every imperfection, every dark thought that plagued her. She quickly lowered her eyes, remembering her mother’s countless lessons about making too much eye contact.

They completed their descent and Mrs. Montrose steered them toward the platform where a line of guests waited to greet their hostess. Alice's stomach churned as they took their place, watching as each group approached the dowager.

Her mother's grasp on her arm tightened as they waited. Alice ran through every lesson, every rule, but it only made her head spin and her stomach grip, so she instead counted her breaths as they waited. She clutched her mother back so she would not sway on her feet.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, it was their turn. They stepped onto the platform, and Alice felt as though she was approaching her moment of judgment.

"Lady Daylily," the dowager said. "Or should I say Montrose now?"

Her mother dipped into a perfect curtsy.

"It is a pleasure to see you again after all these years, Henrietta," said Mrs. Montrose.

Alice blinked at her mother. She had known her mother was acquaintances with the dowager, but she had not realized they were on a first name basis.

The dowager seemed caught off-guard by this as well, raising her eyebrows at the casual nature of the greeting, her air shifting ever so slightly.

"Montrose . Hm. Perhaps I made an error in not crowning you Lady Rose, but I have been saving that flower for a special case." She clicked her tongue, studying Mrs. Montrose with the same critical eye Alice had endured countless times from her own mother. "But perhaps I was right to name you Daylily. A flower that blooms and withers in but a day ... do you not think that is appropriate?"

Alice's eyes widened as she watched her mother inhale sharply, as if someone had

struck her. In their village, Mrs. Montrose was known for her sharp tongue and cutting remarks, but here, faced with the dowager's casual cruelty, she seemed to wilt like her namesake flower.

"P-perhaps so," Mrs. Montrose bit out.

The dowager's attention shifted, regarding Alice with an expression of boredom. With a lazy motion, she beckoned Alice closer.

"And who is this?"

"May I present my daughter, Miss Alice Montrose?" Her mother's voice steadied slightly. "Perhaps you will find her more hardy and long-lasting than a meager daylily."

The dowager let out a soft hum, then rose from her chair with a surprising grace. Alice dipped into her curtsy exactly as practiced, not one hair amiss, her gaze lowered demurely to the floor. As she rose, she found the dowager had moved closer than expected, being remarkably light-footed for a woman of sixty. The old woman folded her hands behind her back, tilting her head to examine Alice like a horse for auction.

"Well, she certainly is the perfect specimen, is she not?"

A sudden rush of hope filled Alice's breast. This was what they had worked for so long—acknowledgement from the highest levels of the ton. If she could win the dowager's favor, doors might open that could change her family's fortunes.

"And perfect might have been enough ... two decades ago," the dowager continued, her voice dripping with disdain. "But I find young ladies of accomplishment to be rather dull. I'd prefer more of a project." She flicked her fingers dismissively and turned on her heel, strutting back to her seat.

Alice felt as though she had been doused in ice water. The dowager dangled her approval before Alice, only to snatch it away.

“My lady—” Mrs. Montrose started, but the dowager raised a hand for silence, and Alice’s mother’s jaw snapped shut with an audible click.

“Please enjoy the festivities.”

But her mother, to Alice’s horror, did not move. Even when Alice touched her arm in warning, Mrs. Montrose remained rooted to the spot.

“If I may, my lady ... Henrietta . We do not have many social connections here other than yourself. If it would please you, we would be in your debt if you could give us an introduction to?—”

“I have other guests to greet, Daylily.” The dowager’s voice was final. “I am sure you have the tenacity to puzzle it out for yourself. You never did require my assistance, did you?”

Alice tugged on her mother’s sleeve, alarmed by the way Mrs. Montrose swayed on her feet. Finally, after some prodding, she managed to break whatever spell held her mother in place, guiding her away to make room for the line of guests still waiting to greet their hostess.

They made their way to a collection of tall, round tables set off to the side of the ballroom, where people gathered to socialize and rest their drinks. After depositing her quivering mama at one table, Alice intercepted a passing servant, snagging two glasses of wine and pressing one into her mother’s trembling hands.

“I could have sworn ...” Mrs. Montrose mumbled, staring into the glass.

“Take deep breaths, Mama. Everything will be alright,” Alice said, opening her fan to give her mother some air.

“Alright? Alright? Without an introduction to the duke ...” Her mother’s voice quivered. “We’ll be doomed to poverty. Is that what you want, my dear? To watch your father drink away what little we have left while we sit in our crumbling little cottage until you are forced into the life of a governess?”

“Mama, please?—”

“No! I will not give up. I will do anything— anything—to see you married to a man of fortune. We cannot afford failure, my dear. Not when we’ve come so far.”

Alice wished to shush her mother, to point out how desperate—and loud—she sounded, but she bit her tongue. Mrs. Montrose had already endured enough humiliation for one evening—humiliation Alice did not think her mother deserved.

Scanning the ballroom as her mother became a ball of nerves, Alice’s gaze fell upon a familiar face. An admiring group of partygoers surrounded Lord and Lady Fairfax, the latter’s musical laughter carrying over the orchestra.

“What about Lady Fairfax?” Alice asked. “She was more than amiable earlier, and she might extend an introduction.”

Her mother considered her words for a moment, then downed her wine in the most unladylike fashion, as if it would lend her strength.

“Stay here,” Mrs. Montrose said, straightening her spine and pushing a stray hair away from her face. “And remember?—”

“Only three sips,” Alice finished, reciting one of her mother’s strict rules for ball

conduct. “Yes, Mama.”

She watched her mother enter the crowd, hoping against hope that Lady Fairfax’s earlier kindness might extend to the introduction they needed. Lost in her thoughts, she barely registered the figure that appeared at her side until a sardonic voice cut through her reverie.

“Three sips? Do you not think that is overdoing it? Perhaps you should pace yourself, you lush.”

Alice turned in shock, and without his bright red coat, she almost didn’t recognize Captain Lacey until she set her gaze upon his face. She now realized that his arched eyebrows were not, in fact, due to a sour mood, but rather an unfortunate aspect of his countenance. Not that it made his presence any more welcome.

She turned away from the man, desperately trying to recall if her mother’s lessons had covered how to handle a wayward gentleman. They had never considered such a situation—they always assumed her mother would be at her side as a chaperone. Alice now realized that not accompanying her mother to beg at Lady Fairfax’s feet had been a mistake.

“Do I know you, sir?” she asked, settling on feigning ignorance in the face of his blatantly rude behavior.

But he did not miss a beat, flashing a vulpine smile, unperturbed by her social slight.

“You injure me, Miss Montrose. So you do not recall our introduction earlier today?”

“I would not consider that a proper introduction.”

“Even if my introduction at the entrance was improper, we had come into contact

even earlier today. I recall seeing a blonde head sticking out of a carriage whilst it forced me off the road, nearly leading to my death.” He bent over to place an elbow on the table, resting his chin in his hand as though he were a child eagerly awaiting a bedtime story. “Whatever were you up to, Miss Montrose?”

Alice’s discomfort in the presence of this man grew with each passing moment. Captain Lacey was just as insufferable as he had been earlier, and his presence threatened to send her into a nervous spiral even worse than her mother’s.

“Sir,” she said, keeping her voice firm, “I find myself unable to continue this conversation without a chaperone present. If you will excuse me?—”

“I hear you seek an introduction to the Duke of Gainsbury.”

The words stopped her mid-turn. She whirled back to face him, her countenance cracking. This man was closely acquainted with the duke. Perhaps if she were to suffer through his terrible attitude, he might help her.

“H-how did you?—”

Captain Lacey leaned in, his mocking expression falling away to reveal something harder, more serious. Finally, there wasn’t an incongruence between his mood and his countenance, as though the man himself was made for ire.

“The next time you scheme to hunt a man’s fortune, perhaps do not speak so loudly. You never know who might be listening.”

Alice gaped at him, wishing the checkered floor beneath her feet would disappear so that the earth may swallow her whole. All of her mother’s careful instruction disappeared in the face of the direct attack, leaving her floundering for a response. But her mind was empty.

Before she could gather her wits, he plucked the wineglass from her fingers.

“Do not mind me.”

He drained her glass, leaving only what would amount to three sips, then placed it back in her hand with care.

She stood frozen in place as he swept past her, unable to watch him go. Her mind raced, wondering how many others had heard her mother’s desperate plans to hunt a man of fortune. Would such gossip spread around to other guests, making them pariahs for the fortnight? Would they have to leave after just one night at Fairfax Hall in shame?

Stupid.

Foolish.

You are better off dead.

“Alice? Alice! ”

It took several moments before she registered her mother’s voice. When she finally looked up, she found that Mrs. Montrose had returned, accompanied by Lady Fairfax, her smile holding a hint of worry, as if she had sensed Alice’s inner turmoil.

“Just look at my daughter, head always in the clouds.” Mrs. Montrose said, though Alice could hear the tension woven into her voice. “Are you ready, my dear?”

“F-for what?”

“Why, it is time for you to be introduced to the Duke of Gainsbury.”

CHAPTER 5

Lady Fairfax guided them across the ballroom floor with practiced ease, weaving between clusters of guests, avoiding the groups with graceful steps. Alice clutched her wineglass to her chest, Captain Lacey's cutting words eating at her mind. Her mother cast several sharp glances her way, no doubt noting her rigid posture and far-away look.

Her mother leaned in as they walked, ensuring they were not overheard by Lady Fairfax.

"If he asks to dance, remember to have him approach you," Mrs. Montrose said. "Let him work for your dance card."

Certainly Alice would not be afforded a dance tonight, not in the emotional state she was in. Not after her interaction with the captain.

Fortune hunter.

The thought burned into her, threatening to consume her from within. Her stomach churned—whether from hunger or shame, she could not be certain. She had, indeed, fasted to fit into her old ballgown—but she was experienced at abstaining from food under her mother's direction. The room felt as though it was spinning slightly, the countless candles creating halos in her vision as she struggled to maintain her composure.

And now she was about to meet a duke.

They approached a quieter corner of the ballroom, where servants bustled about with bottles of wine and buttery hors d'oeuvres. The mere sight of food made Alice's stomach lurch treacherously. But their destination was not the refreshment table—rather, they were heading toward a solitary figure standing beside it, beaming as he applauded the end of a dance.

He looked exactly as Alice had imagined a young duke might—tall and broad-shouldered, with dark hair that swept across his forehead in an elegant wave. His neck was thick, his arms substantial beneath his perfectly tailored coat, yet there was something unexpectedly gentle in his gray eyes as they sparkled with genuine delight at the surrounding festivities. What struck her most was that, despite his obvious power and status, he stood alone, content to watch rather than command the attention of a crowd.

As they drew near, his thick eyebrows rose and his smile widened.

“Lady Fairfax,” he said, opening his arms in welcome. “It is a pleasure to see you again. Please, do not let me take up your time—I know you are busy with your guests.”

“Are you attempting to wriggle away from conversation already, Your Grace?” Lady Fairfax's tone was playful, causing the duke to flush slightly.

“Oh no, of course not, I would never—” He raked a hand through his hair, betraying a nervousness that seemed at odds with Alice's preconceptions of what a duke should be. The sight of his humanity slowed her racing heart, if only slightly.

His gaze shifted to Alice and her mother, eyebrows rising once more as he glanced back to Lady Fairfax.

“I see you come bearing new friends?”

“Indeed. Your Grace, may I present Mrs. Montrose and Miss Alice Montrose.” Lady Fairfax turned to Alice and her mother. “This is His Grace the Duke of Gainsbury.”

They exchanged curtsies and bows with grace, though Alice could feel her mother’s critical eye upon her, no doubt measuring the exact angle of her curtsy against the countless hours of practice.

“How are you acquainted with the dowager?” Elias asked, his question directed at Alice rather than her mother.

The captain must have addled her wits more than she realized, for all her mother’s careful instruction seemed to flee her mind. Rather than allowing her mother the customary three seconds to respond for her, Alice blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“My mother is part of her strange club.”

A heavy silence fell over their small group, and Alice could practically feel her mother’s mortification radiating beside her. The duke’s eyebrows drew together slightly in confusion, and Alice wished desperately that she could turn back time and sew her big mouth shut.

He seemed to sense her discomfort, his kind eyes softening as he smoothly redirected the conversation.

“Ah, well, I myself know the dowager through a mutual acquaintance who should be in attendance tonight.” He glanced around the room, then his face brightened. “Speaking of whom—here he is now.” He made a sweeping gesture with one large hand. “Lacey!”

Alice’s blood ran cold.

Captain Lacey approached their group with measured steps, and Alice felt both her mother and Lady Fairfax tense slightly beside her, no doubt remembering his earlier display of rudeness. The captain did not spare Alice so much as a glance as he joined them, his attention focused solely on the duke.

“Allow me to introduce—” Elias began, but Alice cut him off, her words sharper than she intended.

“We have met.”

“I would not consider that a proper introduction,” Captain Lacey said, throwing her own words back at her without missing a beat.

“Yet an introduction it still was.”

The entire group looked between them with varying degrees of confusion and concern. Mrs. Montrose’s elbow found Alice’s ribs, a clear warning to hold her tongue. Alice did not know what had come over her—it was as though another person entirely had taken control of her faculties.

And it all stemmed from him —the insufferable captain who had somehow shaken loose every carefully placed lesson, every meticulously practiced response, until her mind felt like a box of tangled string and needles upended upon the floor. His mere presence seemed to strip away years of her mother’s training, reducing her to stumbling through each interaction. That he stood there now, watching with those judgmental eyes, only served to scatter what remained of her wits.

“Does anyone require refreshment?” Captain Lacey asked smoothly, his gaze falling pointedly on Alice’s glass. “Miss Montrose seems to have quite enjoyed the wine.”

Alice froze as her mother’s eyes snapped to the nearly empty glass in her hand, her

eyebrows arching almost as dramatically as the captain's. The smug look on Lacey's face made it clear this had been his intention all along—to draw attention to her apparent overindulgence in order to start a conflict with her mother.

“You are enjoying the wine?” The duke's face lit up with genuine pleasure. “What do you think of it?”

“I—that is ...” Alice stammered, her mother's disapproving gaze burning into her.

“His Grace shipped cases of this vintage back from his Grand Tour as a birthday present for the dowager,” Lady Fairfax interjected smoothly, seeming to sense Alice's distress.

“Indeed,” Elias said. “I must say, the Italians truly understand the art of winemaking. The vineyards near San Gimignano were particularly wonderful.”

Captain Lacey motioned to a passing servant, who moved to refill Alice's glass. Her grip on the crystal stem was vice-like as she fought the urge to refuse. Before she could protest, her mother leaned close, her whisper urgent in Alice's ear.

“You must accept it. Show His Grace that his taste is impeccable.”

“Pardon?”

Alice shot her mother a wide-eyed look of disbelief, but Mrs. Montrose's expression brooked no argument. As Lady Fairfax received her own fresh glass, Alice slowly extended hers, allowing the servant to pour with expert precision.

“Drink,” her mother commanded under her breath. “All of it.”

Alice caught Captain Lacey's eye, noting how his smug expression faltered slightly

as his attempt to get her in trouble with her mother backfired. She quickly shifted her attention to Elias, putting on her most radiant smile.

“Please, Your Grace, tell us more about your time on the Continent?”

Elias’s face lit up as he launched into tales of his travels—of mysterious monasteries where brown-robed friars made wines in ancient cellars, of coastal towns where local boys rode waves onto weathered docks, of sunsets that painted entire valleys in shades of gold and purple. For a moment, Alice forgot the insufferable captain standing opposite her, lost instead in the duke’s storytelling.

There was something magnetic about the man. He possessed a natural charm that drew others in, as though he were the sun and they were mere planets caught in his orbit. His conversation flowed effortlessly, punctuated by graceful gestures and perfectly timed pauses that had them all laughing in delight. He made it look so natural, as though he had been born to command attention while somehow remaining utterly humble.

Alice found herself intoxicated by his presence.

And—she had to admit—by the wine as well.

Throughout their conversation, her mother had continued to prod her whenever she paused in her drinking, and Alice had dutifully complied, choking down the horrid, tannic vintage. Now, on an empty stomach, the wine seemed to curdle inside her, burning a hole through her middle. Though it had taken the edge off her earlier anxiety, her muscles relaxing and laughter coming more freely, it had also made her terribly light-headed. She could feel her pulse throbbing in her temples, and the room had taken on a peculiar, dreamy quality.

As they caught their breath after an amusing anecdote about a nautical mishap in

Venice, the duke turned toward Alice with an almost bashful expression.

“Miss Montrose,” he said, “if I may be so bold, might I have the honor of signing your dance card?”

She caught her breath. Though this was what she and her mother had dreamed of, she had not dared hope it would come so soon. The fortnight’s celebrations had several assemblies, musical evenings, and garden parties, so she had steeled herself, allowing herself time enough to learn if there might be any other eligible gentlemen worth pursuing. To be thrust into the duke’s orbit so quickly felt rather like being pushed into a quadrille without knowing the steps.

Alice extended her wrist automatically, then remembered her mother’s rules about making gentlemen approach her first. She jerked her hand back awkwardly, resulting in a strange gesture that made her look as though she’d changed her mind entirely.

“Oh! I—that is—how silly of me,” she let out a nervous laugh that sounded awkward even to her own ears. “The light is better over there, perhaps?”

But as Elias stepped forward, Alice thrust out her arm again, nearly striking him in the chest. He dodged her with a grace she would only expect from a ballerina on stage, making her feel like an oaf in comparison. There followed a flurry of stumbling apologies from both parties until Alice, mortified beyond belief, simply yanked the card from her wrist and thrust it at him, pencil and all.

“This does simplify matters,” Elias said kindly, handing his glass to Captain Lacey so he might have hands free to sign, using his own thickly muscled thigh as a backing.

Alice caught the captain’s eye once more, her cheeks burning as she recognized the barely concealed amusement in his expression. He seemed to drink in her social blunders with as much relish as he had her wine.

Remembering her mother's command, she took another sip from her glass.

She was so distracted by Lacey's insufferable countenance that she didn't notice the duke's return until he was mere inches away. She froze, terrified of accidentally striking him again. He took her hand in his, and even through her glove, she could feel the warmth of his touch as he raised her wrist to re-tie the dance card. She caught a whiff of him—salt and citrus peels—that sent her reeling.

"I trust we shall be more graceful during our dance," he murmured.

Though his tone held no malice—indeed, Alice was suspecting the duke was incapable of any sort of cruelty—the words still struck her.

Clumsy fool.

Yet even as the dark thought rose unbidden in her mind, she smiled brilliantly and executed a flawless curtsy.

"Thank you, Your Grace."

Elias offered one final, gracious bow, his gray eyes meeting Alice's for a fleeting moment that seemed to stretch forever. There was something in that parting glance—a question perhaps—that made her breath catch in her throat. But before she could decipher its meaning, Captain Lacey had already begun steering him away, one hand placed possessively upon the duke's shoulder as though marking his territory. Alice watched them retreat through the crowd, the captain's head bent close to his friend's as they spoke, and she could not shake the unsettling feeling that they discussed her.

Lady Fairfax lingered only moments longer before Lord Fairfax appeared at her elbow, murmuring something about a matter requiring her attention. Their hostess

departed with an apologetic smile, leaving Alice alone with her mother and the distinct impression that she had somehow failed a test.

Her mother immediately began a swift, whispered critique of Alice's every misstep, but the words seemed to come from very far away. Alice took another sip of wine, her gaze following the duke's retreating form. Despite her gracelessness, despite Captain Lacey's obvious disdain, despite the genuine possibility that the duke already knew of their fortune-hunting schemes, she could not deny the man's charm. Even if it was hopeless, even if she was destined to fail, she would try her best to win him.

After all, what choice did she have? This, indeed, was the only chance at happiness she would likely be afforded. And she would do everything in her power to claim it.

CHAPTER 6

The world tilted precariously as Alice placed her hand in the duke's. She searched for some spark or flutter at his touch, but found only the growing void in her stomach—threatening to consume her whole. His grip was warm and steady, yet it failed to ignite anything other than panic in her breast. This was supposed to set her heart aflame, and the fact that it did not was another piece of evidence that she was fundamentally broken.

She felt the weight of countless eyes boring into her from every direction. Her mother's gaze burned from where she had left her, no doubt still seething about her lackluster introduction. But her mother was not the only displeased guest in attendance. From his position against one of the marble pillars, Captain Lacey watched from the shadows with crossed arms and a sour expression, as though he had attempted and failed to dissuade Elias from this dance. And above them all, the dowager watched from her flowered throne with such profound disinterest that it made Alice's face pale—the most important moment of her life apparently nothing more than a passing amusement to the powerful woman. The dowager leaned close to Lady Fairfax, whispering something to her daughter-in-law. Alice's skin prickled with anxiety.

She forced herself to breathe through her nose and focus on Elias. He was everything a duke should be—charming, graceful, possessed of a calm confidence that seemed to wrap around him like a warm quilt on a winter's day. When he caught her watching, he turned his brilliant smile upon her, and she responded with what she hoped was the perfect expression of pleasure. Her efforts appeared to please him, for he leaned closer, his breath warm against her ear.

“Please forgive me if my dancing is lackluster,” he murmured. “It has been quite a while since I have danced a waltz.”

A waltz.

Her stomach made a nauseating flip, and she swallowed hard to maintain her composure. She had been so distracted by everything else that she hadn’t examined her dance card. The duke had chosen one of the most intimate dances possible—a modern and slightly scandalous choice for an unmarried couple. Though she had practiced the steps with her mother, she had not devoted nearly as much time to it as the quadrille, thinking it unlikely a gentleman would ask her to dance something so salacious.

And now—with the wine churning in her stomach and the room already spinning around her—she wasn’t entirely certain she could manage it.

Alice cleared her throat.

“I am certain you will be a lovely dance partner.”

Her words brightened his countenance as they took their positions among the other couples who were brave enough to attempt the scandalous dance. She couldn’t help but notice that most of the women were older, with salt and pepper in their hair, wearing flower pins upon their breasts. They stood close to their husbands with the serene confidence of high society ladies who had everything they ever wanted. Envy coursed through her. She was the only one without a flower, making her feel like an imposter.

Outsider.

You do not belong.

She shook her head, attempting to dislodge the dark thoughts before they could take root. She would not allow them to poison this moment with the duke. As the orchestra began their waltz, Elias placed one hand at her waist, the other clasping her gloved fingers. Again, she searched for some spark, some flutter of any happy feeling, but her mind was too consumed by the darkness within to notice anything but the growing unease in her stomach.

The duke must have sensed something amiss, for his head tilted slightly, a question forming on his lips. But before he could say anything, the music swelled and the surrounding couples moved, giving them no choice but to follow.

Elias proved to be as accomplished in dance as he was in conversation, the same energy that had animated his storytelling now flowing through him. His every movement was perfect, his physical presence so commanding that Alice suspected that even a complete novice would have no issue following his lead. She allowed herself to be swept along, grateful that at least one of them seemed to know what they were doing.

As the dance continued, however, Alice knew she must speak—her mother had drilled into her that silence during a dance was improper. She gathered her courage, despite feeling incredibly light-headed.

“Your Grace, for someone who claimed to be out of practice, you dance remarkably well,” she said, flushing at her own forwardness.

“I beg your pardon?” Elias leaned closer to hear over the orchestra. “Did you say I smell?”

“Well!” she squeaked, mortification flooding her. “I said you dance well, though now I fear I’ve made a mess of the compliment entirely.”

A laugh escaped him.

“Ah, then I must confess my earlier modesty was perhaps a touch theatrical.” His eyes sparkled. “I’ve always believed that, in order to have a good party, everyone must take it upon themselves to be educated in the art of dancing. One can hardly expect to keep the merriment alive if one trips over his own feet.”

He executed a particularly graceful turn as if to demonstrate, and Alice clutched at him, her stomach lurching at the sudden movement. His hand tightened over hers in response—a silent reassurance that he was in control.

Seizing upon this thread of conversation, Alice pressed on.

“You move with such ...” she searched for a word that wouldn’t sound improper, “... certainty . But what do you do when you are not practicing?”

This seemed to please him, for his face lit up as he guided her through another turn.

“Apart from practicing my steps, I find myself drawn to any gathering where people come together. Balls, assemblies, musical evenings—there’s nothing quite like the energy of a celebration.” His smile grew warmer. “The music, the laughter, sharing a conversation with a beautiful lady ...”

Alice felt heat rise in her cheeks at his words, and he quickly guided her through another turn, as though to give her a moment to compose herself, but it did the opposite as the wine sloshed precariously in her stomach. She struggled to keep her face carefully neutral.

“I feel as though I’ve spoken so much about myself,” he continued, his voice low. “I wish to know more about you, Miss Montrose. How do you spend your leisure time?”

The simple question sent her mind spinning. Leisure time? The very concept seemed strange to her—her every waking moment filled with endless practice, repetition, correction, and criticism. Replies floated through her mind. She could say pianoforte, drawing, languages. But before she could grasp any of them, they were overrun by the jeering of her inner demons.

A flash of red hair at the edge of her vision made her stomach lurch—Captain Lacey was still watching, and she could feel his judgment viscerally. The room seemed to spin twice as fast as it should, the couples around them becoming no more than colored blurs.

“I ... erm ...”

The world tilted dangerously. Everything was too loud—the clinking of glasses, the murmur of conversation, the pounding rhythm that she slowly realized was not the orchestra’s drums—but rather her own heart thundering in her ears.

Louder, and louder, and louder.

“Miss Montrose?” Elias’s voice seemed far away. “Are you quite alright? You look as pale as a sheet.”

His words jolted through her like a bolt of lightning, and suddenly she felt as though she had fallen from a great height. They came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the dance floor, drawing gasps from the crowd and grumbles from the surrounding couples, who were forced to sweep around them.

Elias’s hands flew to her shoulders, steadying her as though he feared she might swoon at any moment. The motion brought him closer than propriety allowed, and the scent of his citrus cologne—which she had found so pleasant earlier—now pushed her over the precipice she had been teetering upon all day.

To her absolute horror—and that of every person in attendance—Alice became violently ill, her sick splattering unceremoniously across the duke's pristine white cravat and evening coat. The terrible Italian wine that her mother had insisted she drink now stained the fabric a horrifying shade of red, as though she had inflicted a mortal wound upon him.

The orchestra screeched to a halt.

For one terrible moment, complete silence fell over the ballroom. Elias remained frozen, his hands still gripping her shoulders, looking as though lightning had struck him. Then the whispers began, spreading through the crowd like wildfire, accompanied by gasps of shock and barely suppressed laughter.

Alice clapped a hand over her mouth, praying desperately that this was nothing more than a terrible nightmare from which she would soon awaken. With strength she didn't know she possessed, she wrenched herself from Elias's grasp. Her gaze darted wildly around the room, taking in the reactions of all those watching.

Her mother's face had gone chalk white, her expression cycling through shock, mortification, and fury in rapid succession. But it was Captain Lacey's reaction that caught her attention—gone was his usual sardonic pose, replaced by rigid attention. Rather than the smug satisfaction she had expected at her humiliation, his expression was strange, almost alarmed, as though a shattering revelation had suddenly dawned upon him.

She had no time to decipher his reaction, her eyes drawn inexorably to the platform where the hostess of this gathering sat. The crowd around the dowager had rushed to the balustrade for a better view of the catastrophe, Lady Fairfax's hand pressed to her mouth in shock. But through the press of bodies, Alice could see the dowager herself—and the change in her countenance made Alice's blood run cold.

Gone was the haughty boredom—the dismissive air that had cut Alice to the quick earlier. Instead, the dowager leaned forward in her chair like a cat spotting a particularly interesting mouse. Her eyes gleamed in the candlelight as she reached for one of the elaborate flower arrangements beside her throne. With deliberate grace, she plucked a single bloom and raised it to her nose.

A pink rose.

It was the last thing Alice registered before hands seized her arms from behind—her mother’s fingers digging into her flesh as she hissed words that Alice couldn’t quite make out. She allowed herself to be dragged away from the still-stunned and silent Elias—away from the scene of her complete social ruin—the image of the dowager’s satisfied smile burned deeply into her mind.

CHAPTER 7

Sleep eluded Alice. She sat upright in her bed in the darkest hours of the morning, listening to the silence of Fairfax Hall. Her chambers adjoined her mother's, connected by a door that Miss Eastridge had wisely locked the moment they'd returned from the ball, pressing the key into Alice's trembling hands before setting about preparing her charge for bed. Their maid's intervention had likely saved Alice from the full force of her mother's wrath, though she suspected the reprieve was temporary at best.

Mercifully, Mrs. Montrose had not attempted to force entry, allowing Alice a few precious hours of peace. She had kept down some water and fallen into a fitful sleep, only to wake when the moon was highest in the sky, her mind refusing to grant her further rest.

Unable to bear the confines of her bed any longer, Alice crossed to the windows, drawing back the heavy curtains. Her room overlooked the grand gardens, with their expertly manicured hedge maze stretching out beneath her window. Beyond the grounds lay a small lake, its surface dark and still. Between copses of trees in the distance, she spotted a flickering light and a wisp of smoke rising from a chimney. The Violet Cottage perhaps, where Captain Lacey had taken up residence? The very thought of him—of his knowing smirk as she'd made a complete fool of herself—sent her hands flying to the curtains, yanking them shut.

She turned to face her chamber, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. It was an elegant room, every surface decorated in the floral motif that seemed to thread through all of Fairfax Hall. The wallpaper displayed delicate rose patterns; the

furniture was carved with trailing vines, even the bedposts twisted upward like growing stems. Crossing to the fireplace, she stoked the dying embers and added a fresh log, then wrapped herself in a thick robe before sinking into a high-backed chair.

As the flames grew stronger, she allowed her mind to replay the events of the evening. The dark thoughts she usually fought so hard to suppress now had free rein, and she sank deeper into despair with each passing hour.

Time passed slowly, the light changing behind the heavy curtains. The sounds of the house stirring to life pushed through her dark thoughts—the footsteps of servants, soft murmurs in the corridors. Then came three sharp, decisive raps against the connecting door to her mother's chamber.

Panic seized her chest. She had to face her mother eventually—it might as well be now.

Alice blinked away from the flames, her vision spotted from staring too long into the fire. She rose from her chair, swaying slightly as her empty stomach reminded her she still hadn't eaten in nearly two days. Steadying herself against the chair back, she heard another impatient knock.

"I'll be right there," she called, her voice rough.

The key turned heavily in the lock. The moment the door opened, Mrs. Montrose swept in like an avenging angel, Miss Eastridge trailing in her wake with a worried expression. Her mother, already fully dressed for the day, barely spared Alice a glance as she crossed to the bell-pull. Miss Eastridge hurried to throw open the curtains, flooding the room with harsh morning light that made Alice wince.

"Dress her," Mrs. Montrose ordered bluntly, and their maid jumped to obey.

The silence grew unbearable until Alice could stand it no longer.

“Say something, Mama,” she whispered. “Anything.”

The words ignited something within her mother, who whirled to face her with blazing eyes.

“What would you have me say?” Mrs. Montrose’s voice cracked with fury. “What would you have me do? You have ruined us completely. We are in tatters, and now we must leave with our tails between our legs like beaten dogs.”

“Leave?”

“Of course we are leaving. As soon as we can procure a driver. I shall immediately make the request of Lord and Lady Fairfax myself, along with our sincerest apologies for the spectacle you created.”

“S-should I join you?”

Her mother barked out a laugh.

“After all you have done? You will stay in this room and hide your face in shame until we can make our escape from this place.”

Alice stared at the floor, feeling numb.

“I am so sorry, Mama. I know I have failed you, failed our family. It is all my fault.”

The words seemed to drain the rage from her mother. Mrs. Montrose crossed the room and gathered Alice close, allowing her daughter’s head to rest upon her shoulder. Alice knew she ought to cry—knew a few well-placed tears might help

restore her mother's favor—but she felt hollow, emptied of all emotion since the previous night's disaster. She remained still as her mother's fingers combed through her hair.

“Oh, my baby.” Mrs. Montrose's voice softened. “Perhaps I share part of the blame. It was all too much, too soon. I demanded more than your delicate spirit could bear.”

Alice remained silent, afraid any word might rekindle her mother's ire.

“We will return home and find you a match more suited to your constitution. I expected too much. Too much.”

The duke's shocked face flashed through her mind, his pristine cravat spattered with wine. The thought of never seeing him again felt like a door slamming shut in her face forever.

After several moments of gentle comfort and whispered assurances, her mother stepped back, wiping away her own tears. Alice kept her gaze lowered, using her apparent shame to hide her lack of emotion. The ploy seemed to work.

“Poor thing,” Mrs. Montrose murmured before exiting the room, leaving Miss Eastridge to prepare Alice for their journey home.

She avoided her reflection as her maid dressed her, staring at nothing while Miss Eastridge pulled her stays uncomfortably tight, each tug leaving her more breathless than the last.

A knock at the door interrupted their packing. Alice expected her mother's return, but to her surprise, a small procession of servants entered, each bearing bouquets larger than Alice's torso. They placed their vases on every available surface while she and Miss Eastridge watched in stunned silence.

The butler stepped forward, presenting a silver tray.

“Miss Alice Montrose?”

“Yes?”

“You have a message.”

Alice lifted the missive, aware that none of the servants showed any sign of departing to grant her privacy.

“Read,” the butler instructed, “and all will be clear.”

The note was brief, written in an elegant hand:

Some flowers bloom and wither in but a day.

Others require careful pruning so that they might grow into their full magnificence.

Your pruning shall begin presently.

The letter was signed—not with a name, but with the careful illustration of a rose.

It did not, in fact, make anything clearer, as the butler had claimed. Rather, she was more confused than ever.

“The Dowager Countess of Fairfax requests your immediate presence.”

“But my mother?—”

“I have strict orders that she is not to follow. You must come alone.”

Alice turned helplessly to Miss Eastridge, who stepped forward to grasp Alice's forearm.

"Do as he says," the maid whispered. "I will deal with your mother while you're gone."

"Thank you."

Only then did Alice truly notice the type of flowers that filled her room—dozens of roses of the palest pink, their petals perfectly arranged. She drew a steadying breath and nodded to the butler, who motioned for her to follow. As the servants fell into step behind her, Alice wondered exactly what the dowager had in store for her.

CHAPTER 8

The servants led Alice through the grand corridors of Fairfax Hall, their footsteps echoing against marble floors. Each guest they passed—couples and ladies adorned with their own blooms headed to breakfast—slowed to stare, like deers caught in a glade. The dark thoughts that usually plagued her mind grew louder with each step, whispering that she was a fool to follow, that she should have remained in her chambers to await the carriage home.

Yet as they drew closer to their destination, something shifted within her—even as they passed people who whispered behind raised hands, causing her inner demons to clamor for attention. Alice ignored them the best she could. It felt as though she was being drawn forward by something greater than herself. Providence, perhaps. Fate.

The butler halted before a grand door painted with blooms—irises and tulips, lilies and roses rendered in exquisite detail. Alice's breath caught in her throat as she studied the artistry. She glanced down the empty hall, wondering if there was still time to flee, but the realization struck her that things could hardly get worse by walking through those doors. She looked at the butler and gave a slight nod.

He opened the doors and stepped inside. There was a small entry alcove with a polished table against one wall, its surface adorned with a shining crystal vase overflowing with fresh blooms. The flowers were artfully arranged—roses and lilies mixed with others she did not recognize, their combined perfume filling the enclosed space.

“Wait here,” the man said, momentarily stepping into the room to talk in hushed

tones.

A small portrait caught her eye, positioned carefully beside the vase. She reached out and picked it up, bringing it closer to appreciate the work. The brushstrokes rendered the subject with remarkable detail. The woman wore a modern dress and wire-rimmed spectacles. She held a slim olive green volume in one hand, and there was something knowing in her expression, as though she shared a private joke with the viewer. The slight curl at the corner of her mouth suggested barely contained mischief.

Footsteps approached from the room beyond, and Alice quickly returned the portrait to its place, not wishing to be caught touching the dowager's things. The butler appeared, his expression revealing nothing of what awaited her within. She followed him as he motioned her toward the room proper.

“My lady, Miss Alice Montrose for you.”

The delicate sound of china clinked from within.

“Enter, my dear. Let me see you.”

Alice drew a steadying breath, closing her eyes for a moment before stepping out of the alcove and into the room beyond. The space took her breath away. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the gardens in full bloom, and the walls were adorned with hand-painted flowering vines. Fresh bouquets filled every surface, their perfume heavy in the air. A marble fireplace dominated one wall, its mantle carved with trailing roses. The furniture was upholstered in rich fabrics embroidered with delicate blossoms, each seat positioned to take advantage of the spectacular garden view.

The dowager sat at a table set for tea, a steaming pot and two teacups arranged on their saucers before her. A tiered silver tray held an array of delicacies—fresh fruits,

cucumber sandwiches, and buttery biscuits filled with jam. It was the finest spread Alice had ever seen, and the moment she took it in, her mouth watered. Her stomach growled so audibly that the dowager's eyebrows rose in amusement.

The older woman was resplendent, as if watching Alice's social destruction had infused her with youthful energy. Her morning dress was of the finest silk, adorned with subtle floral embroidery that caught the light. She motioned Alice forward with an imperious wave.

"Do not just stand there gaping like a fish, girl. Come, sit and eat. I am sure you are famished after last night."

Indeed, she was famished. Alice approached the table with hesitation, years of her mother's training warring with her desperate hunger. Every fiber of her being screamed that a lady must show restraint, must never appear eager for sustenance. Even now, with her reputation in tatters, the urge to maintain perfect manners felt carved into her very bones.

The dowager's eyes caught her hesitation.

"Your mother's teachings run deep, I see." She gestured to the spread before them. "But if you are to be in my Garden, you must eat. I give you permission to have a meal like a human being rather than a porcelain doll."

Something broke loose inside Alice at those words. She moved forward quickly—almost desperately—and began piling whatever looked most appetizing onto her plate. Her mother's voice echoed in her mind, horrified at such unseemly behavior, but Alice pushed it aside. Her reputation lay in ruins, after all. She had thrown her careful instruction to the wind the moment an obstacle presented itself. What more damage could possibly be done?

The dowager sipped her tea, watching with knowing eyes as Alice devoured the first few bites with decidedly unladylike haste. For the first time in her life, Alice felt permission to simply be hungry.

“I have been told your mother has requested a carriage back to Weybridge.”

The statement came just as Alice had taken an enormous bite of sandwich. Part of her feared her stomach might reject the food, but to her relief, it seemed to welcome the sustenance. She covered her mouth apologetically, chewing quickly while the dowager waited with an impatient expression—one Alice recognized all too well from her mother’s countless corrections. She wondered distantly if this was where Mrs. Montrose had learned her techniques.

“We are, sadly, called back home due to unforeseen circumstances,” Alice managed once she had swallowed.

“Oh, I do believe the circumstances were very much seen.”

Heat flooded Alice’s cheeks, and she looked down at her empty teacup, reaching for the pot to pour herself a drink. The action gave her hands something to do, and surely she needed the fortification for whatever this conversation might bring. The tea bubbled as the golden-brown liquid filled her cup, the dowager watching her every movement. Alice stirred in cream and sugar before bringing the cup to her lips for a deep gulp.

“I have denied your mother’s request,” the dowager continued. “Sadly, our driver cannot fulfill it.”

Alice nearly spat out her tea, choking slightly on the mouthful.

“Are there not other able-bodied men in your service who could take his place?”

“I am certain they are all needed, this being such a busy week.” The dowager’s eyes glittered. “Why such a rush to leave in the first place?”

Alice blinked, wondering if the woman’s advanced age had addled her wits, but as she studied the dowager’s shrewd expression, she knew this woman’s mind was likely sharper than her own.

“Is it not obvious?”

“It is unfortunate that you caused such a commotion at my introductory assembly,” the dowager mused. “But you are not the only one here who has caused a scandal—some of my ladies have stirred up far more in their day.”

Alice leaned back in her chair, trying to imagine what could possibly be worse than vomiting all over a duke at one’s first real high society gathering. She shook her head, not wanting to contemplate it further.

“I am certain none of them are worse off than I.”

The dowager let out a low chuckle that sent a shiver down Alice’s spine.

“What do you know about my Garden, girl?”

The Dowager’s Garden. Again and again, people had mentioned it, this mysterious social club, but the more whispers she heard, the more frustrated she became with all the secrecy.

“Not enough, to be frank, my lady,” Alice said. “I had not heard of it until we received your invitation, and while many people have spoken of it in passing, I feel as though they deliberately omit exactly what the nature of this club might be.”

“Yes, well, few might wish to admit they were part of such a society.”

A prickle of anxiety ran through Alice at those words, wondering if she had stumbled into something uncouth. The dowager seemed to read her thoughts, her lips curving into a knowing smile.

“It is a matchmaking club. Your mother was actually one of my firsts,” she said. “Such potential ... back then, after my husband first died—Lord pray for his burning soul below—I found girls in society whom I felt had the beauty and pedigree, but not the social graces nor family ties to make adequate matches. At first, I took one lady under my wing, and when she was married, two more, and then when they were married, another two, until I had rather a large grouping at hand that needed a name.”

“The Dowager’s Garden,” Alice murmured.

“The very same. And so you see, my dear, I was in the business of preparing ladies for marriage, in hopes the matches would be spectacular. And indeed, many women rose above their station.” Her sharp gaze pierced Alice. “At least, most of them did.”

It was a direct jab at her parents. Alice knew that with certainty. If this dowager’s club was a sort of matchmaking scheme, it seemed she had done a poor job with Mrs. Montrose, who had made it clear to everyone in her vicinity that she had married quite below her station.

The dowager cleared her throat.

“We cannot win every game of hearts, I suppose. But the ladies I initially chose started to bore me senseless. I cannot tell you how many times I had to sit through a perfect pianoforte piece. They thought they were so original, but they all chose the same composers, the same sheet music. They drew portraits of their sisters and landscapes from their dull country estates. Oh, another sunset. Lovely. Oh, another

Handel piece. How pleasant. Yes, I know you can speak Italian. Non mi interessa affatto! I grew weary of them. A line of girls who gave so much but amounted to so little. And so, I branched out.”

She leaned forward, her eyes alight with passion.

“I found the girls on the edges of the ballroom. The girls in the shadows. The girls with spectacles and blemishes and injuries. The spinsters thrown away and approaching the fate of becoming thornbacks. And even those who were ruined beyond repair, as long as I saw a path to redemption. These girls became my flowers, and what I found was work more meaningful than I could have imagined.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Alice asked, though she feared she already knew the answer.

“Your mother was one of the perfect ones, and so, I am sure she made you in her image, hoping for a chance at my Garden should our paths cross one day.”

Alice nodded. Though she had only recently pieced it together, it explained why her mother had been so regimented throughout her life—why she had brought her to Fairfax Hall.

“And while your wardrobe is not fashionable, you certainly have that same air of perfection that sends me into fits of boredom.” The dowager paused, studying Alice with fresh interest. “I suppose first impressions are not everything.”

Alice was momentarily shocked that she gave out any hint of perfection when there were so many flaws the dowager could have pointed out, even before she had become sick on the duke. But of course, the woman saw through her facade.

“And so now I am ruined enough to join your club?”

“ Exactly. The social scandal was so perfectly awful that all you have now is one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“Why, pure potential, my dear.”

“And so you have decided to plant me in your Garden? Is there some ritual? A chant I must perform?”

The dowager laughed, the sound rich and genuine. She snapped her fingers for a servant.

“What flower am I to be, then?” Alice continued. “A nightshade? Perhaps a weed?”

“It is my birthday, and never in my life has someone completely ruined one of my celebrations so wonderfully. And so, I think you should be rewarded for it, Lady Rose.”

Alice sputtered, unable to form words as the dowager motioned to a servant—the same woman from the entryway with her embroidered apron. The maid passed a piece of pink fabric to the dowager, who presented it to Alice with surprising gentleness.

It was a rose, crafted with such detail that it took her breath away. Glass beads caught the morning light like drops of dew upon the petals. The dowager pinned it to Alice’s dress with aggression.

“There. You have no clue how long I’ve been waiting to find my rose.”

“I suppose I should see this as an honor?”

“Yes. An honor you do not deserve. Not yet.” The dowager’s countenance took on a fox-like cunning. “Now, let us sit and have your first lesson.”

CHAPTER 9

“Y ou have a guard dog issue.”

Alice blinked and looked up from her plate, a second helping of the delicacies half-assembled before her. Her fingers hovered over a sandwich filled with thin apple slices and soft cheese as the dowager’s words registered. She could feel those piercing eyes boring into her, studying her every movement with unsettling intensity.

“A ... dog?”

The dowager hummed thoughtfully, lifting her teacup for a long, deliberate sip. The china clinked softly after she drained the last drops, leaving only dregs behind. Alice sat patiently, attempting to decipher the strange woman across from her. She was unlike any of the elderly ladies Alice knew from her village—there was something almost predatory in her bearing, like a cat toying with its prey.

“It appears, from the very start of the ball, your mother had her eyes set on the Duke of Gainsbury.”

Alice swallowed hard, flushing at the mention of the duke’s name, the bite of sandwich suddenly dry in her mouth. That was, in fact, precisely their aim, but Captain Lacey’s cutting remarks about fortune hunting still stung fresh, his words a mocking echo in her mind.

‘The next time you scheme to hunt a man’s fortune, perhaps do not speak so loudly. You never know who is listening.’

Though she knew she could hardly fall lower in the dowager's estimation, the truth of her mother's intentions made her cheeks burn with shame. They were, as the captain had so accurately observed, nothing more than fortune hunters. Alice looked down at her plate, unable to meet the older woman's knowing gaze.

"It is obvious to anyone with half a brain what she was attempting," the dowager continued, "begging for any chance at an introduction. Even my daughter-in-law saw through it, though you will find her more placating than I. However, in granting you the introduction, she did you a disservice."

"I beg your pardon?" Alice asked. "I am not sure I catch your meaning."

"A man of his standing and fortune, at most gatherings, would have had his own entourage of devotees—mamas and their daughters, such as yourself, hanging on his every word." The dowager leaned forward slightly. "Yet, how did you find His Grace at the party?"

Alice furrowed her brow, trying to push past the traumatic memories of her ruin to recall their initial encounter. The memory surfaced slowly, like something dredged from murky depths.

"He was alone."

The dowager nodded, a satisfied gleam in her eye.

"And one might ask just why that was. But then you likely discovered the answer yourself. As soon as your mother blared her purpose here, for all the room to hear, who was the first person who crossed your path?"

Alice froze, her teacup halfway to her lips as she remembered the flash of chestnut hair, the haughty air of the man who had dressed her down and stolen her drink. Her

fingers tightened on the delicate china.

“Captain Lacey.”

“The very same. Victor is a faithful hound, following the duke’s coattails and nipping at anyone who dares get too close to his master.”

“A guard dog issue,” Alice echoed, finally understanding the metaphor.

The dowager’s lips curved into a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. She reached for a biscuit, breaking it precisely in half before continuing. “While most people in attendance this week are happily married flowers in my garden, I have more than my fair share of bachelors in attendance. So the next question I must ask is: are you serious about pursuing the duke, or should we focus our efforts elsewhere?”

Alice had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from letting out a bark of hysterical laughter. She had vomited all over the Duke of Gainsbury, and his reaction had been one of frozen shock—a scene that would be forever burned into her memory, haunting her until her dying day.

“Even if I wished to have him,” she said carefully, “I do not think he would ever have me.”

“And how do you know that is so?” The dowager arched one silver eyebrow.

“You saw it yourself last night. I made a fool of us both.” Alice’s voice cracked slightly. “Who would want anything to do with such a wretched and ghastly woman?”

The dowager merely hummed again, taking a nibble of her biscuit.

“Until he has told you straight from his mouth, do not discount him. I’ve seen love sprout from much poorer soil.” The dowager set down her biscuit and leaned forward, her expression turning deadly serious. “If you are to be part of my Garden, I must have your full participation, and that includes your candor. You must tell me what is in your heart, the ugly parts and all, if we are to weed out what’s keeping you from blooming. And so my question is, do you wish to pursue the duke?”

Alice fiddled with her hands in her lap, pondering the question. Her brief interaction with Elias had been built on a flimsy foundation, and she had felt poorly during their entire dance. Yet he had been so charismatic, so genuinely kind despite their difference in station. Even if she hadn’t felt the immediate spark described in novels, he seemed like a perfectly fine man to marry. Perhaps, given the opportunity to know him with a clear head and steady stomach, something might stir within her breast.

Finally, she nodded.

“Yes, I would very much like to pursue him.”

“So then, you first must rid yourself of his dog.”

“And just how should I go about doing that?”

“Victor may be a prickly man, but you can bring him to heel. You must convince him you are worthy of his master’s time.” The dowager’s eyes glittered with amusement.

“I do not think Captain Lacey wishes to be in my presence.”

“I will see what I can do about that.” The dowager’s smile turned knowing. “We can find ample opportunity for you to prove yourself to the man, to stop him from yapping. And if you are lucky enough to get into Victor’s good graces, well, that would be the first step toward winning the duke’s heart. But there is one condition

you must follow.”

“And what is that?”

“You must do all this with minimal input from your mama. I will not assist you otherwise.”

Alice’s breath caught in her throat. It all felt as though it was happening too fast. She did not know why this woman believed she could accomplish anything without her mother’s guidance. As difficult as Mrs. Montrose could be, she had taught Alice everything, and they had always shared the majority of their waking hours together. To be without her felt like stepping off the edge of a cliff into a bottomless ravine.

“After Victor is persuaded, the rest shall be easier,” the dowager continued, eyeing Alice’s dress with obvious distaste. “We will have to get you a new wardrobe, of course—we cannot have you in whatever that is. Thankfully, Lady Fairfax has quite the collection and a seamstress of her own in residence at Fairfax Hall.”

Alice glanced down at her dress, knowing the dowager was correct. The garment was several years old, having been adjusted to follow the year’s fashionable silhouette time and again by their maid. While Miss Eastridge had made a valiant effort, the dress was nothing close to what the other women wore. The contrast was stark—she seemed more like a weed than a rose.

“You do not have to.”

“Oh, but I do,” the dowager insisted. “Now, I have been told your mother is quite the stickler in terms of your etiquette lessons.”

“Where did you?—”

She raised a hand, cutting off Alice's question.

"I have my sources. I understand she has taught you extensively in the art of manners, and it shows through in your overall air when you are not vomiting upon a duke. You have quite an agreeable countenance that one is content to be around. But I wonder ..."

The dowager took her empty teacup and passed it to Alice, who stared at it as it clinked against its saucer.

"While your outer veneer is quite lovely, I wonder what goes on in your mind. So, if you may, please humor me in serving me tea." She motioned to the steaming teapot. "The only stipulation is that I wish you to speak aloud your thoughts as you do so."

The dowager sat back, waiting expectantly. Alice's head spun at this request. No one had ever asked her to open up and spill out everything inside. Only she knew the rotten core within, the uncontrolled thoughts that took her over at every moment, and the despair they caused. While the dowager had demanded pure candor, she knew she couldn't be perfectly honest about what went on within, and so she began to carefully edit her words.

"First, I must ensure the cup is positioned just so," Alice began, adjusting the teacup with trembling fingers. "Not too close to the edge—what if my sleeve should catch it? The tablecloth would be ruined. The tea must be poured at precisely the right angle, not too quickly or it might splash, not too slowly as to annoy. One must smile while pouring, but not too broadly—that would seem overeager. Perhaps a gentle curve of the lips?"

But then, as though it had been waiting for years for just such a chance, the darkness that clouded every thought pressed insistently against the invisible dam that always held it inside of her. Her stream of consciousness grew more frantic every second,

each possible disaster catalogued and analyzed, each tiny movement dissected and judged. The dark pressure strained against Alice's delicate facade until it cracked. What started out as a trickle became a stream, then a river, then a furious torrent that burst out of her at last while the dowager watched with growing astonishment.

“But then, what if my hand shakes? What if I spill? What if the tea is too strong or too weak? I should have asked to sample it beforehand—oh heavens, what if the Dowager Countess finds it undrinkable? What if she sends me away in disgust? The milk must be added in just the right proportion, but some prefer it without—should I have asked? What if she thinks me presumptuous for adding milk without permission? What if this entire display proves I am not worthy of her Garden at all? The sugar tongs must be handled delicately, the cubes dropped in without splashing, but my hands won't stop shaking—they never stop shaking when it matters most—and if I ruin her dress she'll surely cast me out, and Mama will never forgive me, and I'll have failed at the one thing I was born to do ...”

When she finally fell silent, the dowager looked thoroughly dumbfounded. Alice's cheeks burned as the older woman took a careful sip of the tea she had just prepared.

“Did I do something wrong?” Alice asked.

Instead of answering, the dowager reached for Alice's own cup, dregs of her finished tea sloshing at the bottom. With effortless movements, she poured fresh tea.

“What do you imagine I am thinking as I do this?” the dowager asked.

Alice shook her head slowly, watching as the older woman's hands moved with grace. The silence stretched between them, broken only by the gentle splash of tea against porcelain.

“Nothing,” the dowager said at last. “Absolutely nothing. Not a single thought

crosses my mind as I pour. My hands know what to do without instruction or worry.” She added a precise measure of milk, then two sugar cubes that dropped into the tea with quiet plunks.

The woman’s words struck Alice like a slap. All her life, her mother had demanded perfection. Every one of her movements analyzed, every gesture critiqued. That one could simply ... exist— could perform tasks without the constant internal commentary that plagued her—seemed impossible.

The dowager stirred the tea with smooth, unhurried movements before setting it in front of Alice with a gentle clink. Her eyes, when they met Alice’s, held something that might have been sympathy.

“I do think,” she said slowly, “I have my work cut out for me.”

CHAPTER 10

Alice stepped out of the dowager's chambers into the corridors of Fairfax Hall, her new pin catching the morning light. The quiet felt oppressive after the intensity of her meeting with the dowager, broken only by the distant sounds of breakfast service echoing up from below. She touched the rose at her breast, still amazed by its craftsmanship, as she began her search for her mother.

Descending a curving staircase to the ground floor, Alice's mind raced with how to explain her meeting with the dowager. Her mother had always insisted on being present for every significant moment in Alice's life—every lesson, every social call, every interaction with potential suitors. To have something of such magnitude occur without her oversight would surely cause distress.

Lost in thought, Alice rounded a corner too quickly and nearly collided with Miss Eastridge. Their maid's quick reflexes saved her as she caught Alice's elbows, steadying her before she could stumble.

"Careful now, Miss," Miss Eastridge said, her grip gentle but firm until she was certain Alice had found her balance. The maid's cap was slightly askew, as though she had been rushing about the enormous manor.

"Your mother is currently breakfasting with the rest of the guests," the maid said before Alice could ask.

"Breakfasting? But I thought we were preparing to leave."

Miss Eastridge shifted uncomfortably, her eyes darting to the elaborate wallpaper as though it held great interest.

“The staff informed your mother that the carriage had broken down after such a vigorous journey. They say it will take two full days to repair it.”

Alice studied their maid’s nervous expression, wondering if this convenient mechanical failure was truly chance, or if the dowager had instructed her servants to buy Alice time. Given the older woman’s cunning, she strongly suspected the latter.

“Thank you,” Alice said. “How is she?”

“Your mother is ...” Miss Eastridge pursed her lips, “very cross.”

Alice nodded, well acquainted with her mother’s temperament when denied her wishes. Squaring her shoulders, she turned toward the breakfast room, bidding her maid farewell, her heart pounding at the thought of facing the ton after last night’s disaster.

The breakfast room was as large as some assembly halls she’d attended, set up with multiple tables as though it were some public tea house. Groups of guests gathered around trays similar to the one she’d shared with the dowager, their quiet conversation filling the air with a gentle noise.

As she entered, heads turned in her direction. Some faces registered awkward shock—clearly surprised she hadn’t fled in the night—but the worst were the sympathetic looks, as though she were some wounded creature. She half-expected them to approach and pat her head as though she were a whimpering puppy in the gutter.

Her mother sat at a far table in the corner, and Alice could not determine whether the

isolation was self-imposed out of shame or if the other guests were deliberately avoiding them now that they were social pariahs. Either way, Mrs. Montrose's expression darkened further when she spotted her daughter approaching.

"My dear, where have you been?" Her mother's whisper was sharp and raw. "And what are you doing out in public? Do you not see how they look at you?"

Alice opened her mouth to explain, but her mother cut her off.

"I have had the worst of mornings. Who knew that wealthy people lacked the resources to do such simple things as fetch a carriage?—"

Mrs. Montrose's words died in her throat as her eyes fell to the pin at Alice's breast. She went still, like a hare spotting a fox. Alice knew this pause was an opportunity to speak, so jumped at it.

"Something strange has happened, Mama," Alice said, sliding into the chair beside her mother and leaning forward to grasp her hands. "While you were away, the Dowager Countess requested me, and she made the queerest offer."

Her mother remained silent, but Alice could see color rising in her cheeks as she stared, transfixed, at the rose pin.

"I understand why you were quiet about your intentions in coming here," Alice continued, squeezing her mother's hands. "That you wished me to become a flower as well, and now it has happened! She has offered me assistance in finding a match. Is that not wonderful, Mama?"

Mrs. Montrose snatched her white napkin from her lap and threw it onto the table with sudden violence. It landed in her teacup, the fine linen slowly soaking up the dark liquid. Her countenance had turned thunderous, and for once Alice could not

comprehend why. This was exactly what her mother had wanted ...

Wasn't it?

"I cannot believe you accepted such a thing without my permission!" Her mother's furious whisper carried further than intended. Alice's eyes darted around the room, noting how several guests had turned at her outburst. She watched as a lady with a tulip pin leaned in to whisper something to another wearing a daisy.

"Mama, I did not mean to?—"

"Here you are, sneaking behind my back with the dowager when I did not know where you were. Disgraceful!" Her mother's eyes narrowed. "What flower did she give you? A thistle?"

Alice frowned in confusion. Surely her mother had seen the rose—her eyes had fixed upon it just moments ago. As if drawn by the thought, Mrs. Montrose's gaze dropped once more to the pin, and her face flushed an even deeper shade of red. She stood abruptly, her spine rigid.

"Well, if it is only the dowager you wish to receive instruction from, I think perhaps I should make myself scarce."

Before Alice could formulate a response, her mother pushed past her and stormed from the room, practically vibrating with fury. Alice stared after her, utterly bewildered by what she had done wrong. Her fingers brushed the rose at her breast as she glanced around at the other breakfasters, who quickly pretended they hadn't been watching the entire scene with avid interest.

Though she considered following her mother, she knew her presence would only further inflame the woman's temper. Instead, she remained at the isolated table, the

untouched food before her. She had already breakfasted with the dowager, but to avoid looking awkward, she filled a plate and pushed the food around while staring out at the rain-dampened gardens. Though rays of sunlight had pierced the clouds, the warmth they brought did nothing to improve her spirits.

As breakfast drew to a close, groups dispersed, leaving only a few tables occupied by those lingering over their tea. Alice sat lost in thought, wondering if she should even remain at Fairfax Hall if her mother was so opposed to her participation in The Dowager's Garden. Without a proper chaperone, how could she possibly build a connection with the duke without ruining what remained of her reputation?

A shadow fell across her table, and before she could react, someone dropped into her mother's vacated chair in a decidedly ungentlemanly manner. Alice turned to confront the intruder, only to find Captain Victor Lacey lounging beside her, resplendent in a fresh red uniform free of yesterday's mud and grime. Without so much as glancing her way, he plucked her mother's sodden napkin from the teacup and dropped it unceremoniously to the floor.

"Pardon me, sir," Alice began, but he ignored her, his attention fixed on the platter of remaining food. His gaze swept over the offerings before settling on Alice's plate. With swift precision, he stole a cucumber sandwich from her dish and took a large bite, then slouched back in his chair, propping his gleaming boots on the table.

Alice gasped at his scandalous behavior. Her mother would have expired on the spot if she'd ever attempted such a thing. She glanced anxiously at the remaining guests, but none seemed to notice—nor care about—the captain's shocking breach of etiquette.

"I was told you wished to speak to me?" he drawled, then stuffed the remainder of her sandwich into his mouth.

Alice struggled to process the scene before her. Once again, her training failed her, leaving her feeling like a carriage that had lost its wheel. Then she remembered the dowager's promise to help facilitate a connection with Victor. This must be her doing.

"I, erm ..."

"Pass the biscuit, please," Victor said, pointing at her plate. When Alice selected a buttery one, he shook his head. "No, not that one—the one with the dusted sugar. Yes, that's the one. Cheers."

He devoured the biscuit in one bite, and Alice could not help but notice identical treats sat well within his reach on the serving tray. It seemed the captain enjoyed taking what was hers, just as he had done with her wine at the assembly.

"I did wish to speak with you," Alice said, smoothing her skirts. "I just was not expecting you to call so soon and must admit that I find myself quite out of sorts."

"Still nauseated from last night?" His grin was sharp enough to cut steel.

Alice drew herself up, determined not to let the rude man needle her.

"I am quite alright, no thanks to you."

"I am afraid I do not take your meaning." He batted his eyelashes with false innocence, though his knowing smile remained firmly in place. They both knew he had been the one to set off the chain of events that led to her ruin.

"Have you spoken with His Grace since ...?" Alice's voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Since you splattered your sick all over him? I have, coincidentally."

“Is he ... well?”

Victor’s barking laugh drew startled looks from across the room. Alice gave the onlookers a placating smile before frowning at his vulgar display.

“Do you think this is all a jest?” Alice demanded.

“It is quite funny,” he mused. “His Grace asked the very same thing about you.”

Heat flooded Alice’s cheeks as Victor motioned to her plate once more.

“Is that apple and brie?”

Rolling her eyes, Alice simply pushed the entire plate toward him. A flash of disappointment crossed his face, as though he took particular pleasure in bothering her for each individual morsel.

“I have thought about what you said, Captain Lacey,” Alice began carefully, trying to marshal her thoughts into perfect order. “When you commandeered my wine.”

“About your fortune hunting?”

Alice paused, swallowing hard at the words that still stung.

“Yes. About that. And I must say that I agree.”

The captain tipped his head to one side, finally dropping his boots to the floor and leaning forward, elbows planted firmly on the table in the most unbecoming manner.

“Do tell.”

Taking a deep breath, Alice forged ahead.

“When we first accepted the invitation to this celebration, I knew it would be an opportunity to seek a match.” She lowered her gaze, but Victor remained unmoved. “I knew little about the Dowager Countess or her ... projects ...” Her fingers brushed the rose at her lapel, and she noticed how Victor’s eyes widened slightly at the sight. So he knew about the Dowager’s Garden. “I did not realize how desperate my mother had become for a man of fortune, and while I do not wish to speak ill of her, I realize she was out of line last night. I am sorry you overheard it.”

“So you mean to tell me the fact that the Duke of Gainsbury has a vast fortune does not interest you?”

Alice met his piercing gaze. Everything about him seemed designed to cut through pretense, and once again, his scrutiny sent a chill down her spine. She knew instinctively that any lie would be detected instantly. There was something in his very bearing that demanded truth.

“To be perfectly frank, sir, I do not believe a vast fortune would make me happy.” Because nothing could make me happy. “But it would give my mother peace to see her only daughter settled well. And while I wish to give my mother that peace, I will not consider a match in which I am ill-suited only because of that man’s fortune.”

“So you would go against your mother’s wishes?”

Alice turned to stare out the windows, wrestling with the question. She had always honored her parents—was that not what ladies of virtue were supposed to do? She cherished her mother’s advice and felt dismayed whenever she fell from favor, as she had now. But the dowager’s words were at the forefront of her mind. She must forge this path without her mother’s help.

Finally, she nodded.

“I am not here to trap His Grace, or woo him in some unseemly manner. I barely even knew of him until my mother pushed for an introduction. But what I wish to have ... is an opportunity.”

“From this vantage, it appears as though you had an opportunity and quashed it.”

“Do you not believe in second chances, Captain Lacey?”

He huffed and looked away, his expression distant. When he finally spoke, his voice was uncharacteristically soft.

“Some things cannot be undone.”

Alice nodded, certain now that the dowager had misplaced her faith in her. It was foolish to think there was any potential in someone so thoroughly embarrassed—so fundamentally broken.

“But ...” Victor said, standing and brushing powdered sugar from his jacket, “while your showing last night was particularly dramatic, I do not believe it is entirely unforgivable.”

Alice’s breath caught as her gaze snapped up to meet his, but he was already turning to leave, as abruptly as he had arrived. He threw up a casual hand in farewell.

“I will see you around, Lady Rose .”

CHAPTER 11

Mrs. Montrose had decided to give Alice the silent treatment, and if her mother was attempting to deter her spirits, Alice had to confess it was working. She felt utterly wretched the entire day and into the next morning, making feeble attempts to smooth things over. But each overture went awry—her mother would inevitably catch sight of the rose pin and seem to vibrate with barely contained rage. And so Alice found herself adrift in the vast manor, unable to take part in the festivities as she wished.

She had complained of a sour stomach to avoid dinner, remaining in her chambers that evening while her mind whirled with dark thoughts. Not wishing to court further scandal, she took to wandering the halls of the manor instead of joining the planned morning events. Still, she could not help her curiosity as she passed the room where an animated game of charades was underway.

Alice allowed herself just a peek into the space, her eyes immediately drawn to the duke's broad back as he acted out some dramatic scene. The other players called out guesses amid bursts of laughter, clearly delighting in his performance. She longed to stay and watch Elias in what seemed to be his element, but the memory of their last encounter was still too fresh, too mortifying.

Instead, she made her way out into the gardens. The weather had vacillated between thick clouds and bright sunshine. At present, steel-gray skies threatened rain—a boon to Alice, as it meant the dowager's lavish grounds were deserted.

The gardens stretched out before her in perfectly manicured splendor. Gravel paths wound between elaborate topiary and beds overflowing with late-summer blooms. A

hedge maze rose to her left, its walls thick with glossy leaves, while ahead a white gazebo perched on a small rise overlooking an artificial lake. The water's surface rippled in the rising breeze, dark as smoke under the clouded sky.

Alice's fingers traced the edge of her rose pin as she walked. The dowager's expectations were clear, but how could she possibly navigate society without her mother's guidance? She already teetered on the knife's edge of ruin. One wrong step, one minor scandal, and she would cut herself beyond repair.

The crunch of feet on gravel interrupted her brooding. She turned to find Lady Fairfax approaching, one hand raised in greeting.

"There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you, Miss Montrose. You were not in your rooms or with the others." Lady Fairfax closed the distance between them, linking their arms together with sisterly warmth. The gesture brought Alice unexpected relief—perhaps Lady Fairfax might help her navigate mixed company, though she dared not ask such a favor.

"I apologize," Alice said. "Ever since you spoke about the gardens, I have wished to see them for myself."

Lady Fairfax's gaze dropped to the rose pin, something flickering in her expression before vanishing just as quickly.

"It appears this is not the only Garden you have wandered into."

"The Dowager Countess was ... unexpectedly kind," Alice ventured carefully.

"Kind is not a word often associated with her," Lady Fairfax said with a small laugh. "But she sees potential where others might not. You mustn't let her intimidate you too thoroughly."

“I confess, I hardly know what to think of it all.”

“They are all uncertain at first. But the Dowager Countess has a gift for seeing the truth in people—who they are beneath whatever veneer they keep.” Lady Fairfax squeezed her arm. “Come, I have something to show you.”

She guided Alice back into the house and up a curving staircase to a large chamber Alice had not seen before. Racks of magnificent gowns and rows of wooden drawers filled the room. A servant stood ready beside a changing screen, and the walls were lined with tall mirrors that caught the morning light.

Lady Fairfax gestured to encompass the space.

“Since the Dowager Countess wants you properly outfitted as soon as possible, I thought perhaps you might make use of some of my own dresses.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly?—”

“Nonsense. We are of a similar build, and many of these will simply go to waste, worn once or not at all.”

Alice twisted her hands together.

“There is no way I can ever repay you.”

“Do not worry,” Lady Fairfax’s eyes sparkled with something akin to mischief. “This means the dowager owes me a favor, and it is rare I get such an opportunity.”

Before Alice could respond, the door opened and the dowager herself swept in. Lady Fairfax moved to greet her with an effortless grace, though Alice detected an undercurrent of tension beneath their polite exchange.

Alice dropped into a curtsy as the dowager approached, studying her with critical eyes.

“Oh, lovely,” the dowager said. “You look utterly mediocre. That should make the transformation all the more sweet.”

Lady Fairfax shot Alice an apologetic look behind the dowager’s back, mouthing silent apologies.

“I saw that,” the dowager said dryly. “There are mirrors all over this room.”

Lady Fairfax pressed her lips together and awkwardly turned to the racks of clothing while the dowager took Alice’s arm, steering her toward one of the gleaming mirrors. Alice studied her reflection, wondering if “mediocre” had been too kind. She looked lanky and awkward, her skin blotchy and pale, as though a strong wind might topple her at any moment. Her hair hung limp and lackluster. They would need nothing short of divine intervention.

“Now, let us see what we can do with our Lady Rose.”

What followed was a whirlwind of silk, muslin, and lace. Dress after dress was brought forth for inspection—emerald green, sapphire blue, soft lilac, deep crimson. The dowager rejected most with a wave of her hand, though some warranted closer examination. While Lady Fairfax’s gowns fit well enough in the arms, she was taller than Alice, necessitating countless pins that pricked and scraped as the servant made adjustments.

Alice tried not to yelp each time a pin found flesh, determined to bear it with grace. Her head spun with the parade of different fabrics and styles until, finally, the dowager’s eyes lit up at a particular gown in the palest pink.

“Yes, do you not think it fitting that Lady Rose should wear a rose-colored dress?”

“It is thematically appropriate,” Lady Fairfax agreed.

“What do you think, Miss Montrose?”

Alice blinked at her reflection. The gown was exquisite—silk the color of dawn with delicate lace trim at the neckline and sleeves, tiny pearls scattered like morning dew across the bodice. The skirts fell in graceful folds, swishing pleasantly when she moved.

“I do not believe I deserve this dress, nor am I fitting for any of them.”

“Pshaw, we’ll go with this one. Martha, you may make the proper adjustments on this, the lilac-colored gown, and the one with the ivy motif.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But before you do, we must complete the transformation,” the dowager announced, studying Alice in the mirror.

She clapped her hands sharply, and more servants entered, including a wide-eyed Miss Eastridge, who looked as bewildered as Alice felt. The maid’s expression clearly asked, ‘What in heaven’s name is going on here?’

A servant produced a wooden box, revealing an array of powders, glass bottles, and elaborate headpieces.

“We will teach your lady’s maid everything she needs to know about turning your face into a work of art. Now, begin.”

If Alice had felt like a pincushion before, she now felt like a canvas. The servants covered her face with every potion and powder at their disposal, the head servant carefully instructing Miss Eastridge in their proper application. To Alice's surprise, her maid showed no resistance to extra duties. Instead, she seemed genuinely eager to learn, as though seeing this as an opportunity rather than a burden. If her overworked maid could view the situation so positively, Alice determined she must do the same.

They moved on to her hair, Lady Fairfax presenting various pins and decorations for the dowager's approval. The piece they selected matched her rose pin perfectly—fabric flowers interwoven with pearls. Alice's breath caught as she held it, afraid she might somehow damage its delicate beauty.

"It is beautiful," she whispered.

"Let us see it on you," the dowager commanded.

After what felt like hours of tugging, pinning, and adjusting, Alice was guided to the mirrors for a final inspection. The woman who looked back was a stranger. Her skin appeared soft and even, with just the right touch of pink in her cheeks. The cosmetics had been applied with such skill that she appeared to have been born with such perfection. Her hair was braided and coiled into an elegant updo, crowned with the rose hairpiece. The pink gown flowed to the floor like water, the lace catching the light.

She looked almost as if she belonged in such finery.

It was, of course, a lie.

Lady Fairfax and the dowager appeared on either side of her, all three women studying their reflection.

“Now there we are,” said the dowager. “It is a start. What say you, Lady Fairfax?”

“I certainly think your rose is starting to bloom.”

“I will send all the supplies to your room for use throughout your stay. The dresses may take some time, but I believe we should have this one ready by tonight.” The dowager’s eyes narrowed. “I noticed you did not join the festivities?—”

“My mother was not in such a good mood.”

“And what did I say about involving your mother in this?”

“I need a chaperone?—”

The dowager raised her hand.

“We will see to it that you are properly watched over.”

“You need only ask, and I will accompany you,” Lady Fairfax added, touching Alice’s arm with warmth.

Alice’s heart leaped at the offer—exactly what she had hoped for, but dared not request.

“I will expect to see you at luncheon today,” the dowager said, “and the croquet tourney following. It shall be a jolly time.”

With that declaration, she nodded to the seamstress to remove the gown for alterations. The dowager and Lady Fairfax took their leave, though not before the older woman whispered something that made Lady Fairfax’s spine stiffen slightly. The door closed behind them with a decisive click, leaving Alice to wonder what she

had gotten herself into—and whether her transformation could ever be more than skin deep.

CHAPTER 12

A lice walked beside Lady Fairfax, hyperaware of the stares that followed their progress across the garden towards where the croquet tournament was to be held. The cosmetics and elaborate hairstyle from that morning's transformation seemed to have changed how others viewed her—where before she had received pitying glances, now she noted genuine interest in their expressions. She felt exposed, like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis before its wings had properly dried.

“Why do you suppose they look at me so?” Alice asked, resisting the urge to touch her carefully arranged hair.

“Because they know exactly what is happening.” Lady Fairfax's smile held a hint of satisfaction.

“What?”

“Most in attendance went through this process themselves,” she said. “With the Dowager Countess. And now, as they see the change in you, as they notice the rose on your chest, they understand the dowager has a new project.”

Alice's fingers brushed the rose pin.

“And is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“I think,” said Lady Fairfax, “it is mostly good, because when they look at you, they see themselves. Maybe it was a year ago, or five, or ten, but most stood on the

precipice of ruin, just as you have. You might remind them of it.”

They walked in companionable silence for a moment, winding their way through the gardens toward the croquet tournament. Alice pondered Lady Fairfax’s words, turning them over in her mind.

“If you find people treating you queerly, I would not take it personally,” Lady Fairfax continued. “They may unconsciously react to that version of themselves before they met the Dowager Countess. To that lady in progress. To that woman they used to be.”

The words sparked a sudden understanding in Alice’s mind. Her mother’s face flashed before her—not as she was now, but as she must have been years ago, wearing her own daylily pin. She had never considered that her mother’s fury might stem from her own experiences with the dowager. From what little Alice had gathered, Mrs. Montrose’s time in the Garden had not yielded the results she’d hoped for. The realization eased something tight in Alice’s chest—perhaps her mother’s pain wasn’t entirely Alice’s fault after all.

As they approached the tournament grounds, Alice took in the elaborate setup. Multiple games were arranged across the vast lawn, with painted wooden balls lined up neatly. Small tables draped in white linen held crystal decanters of lemonade and plates of delicate cakes. Ladies in their finest morning dresses flitted between the pavilions, their parasols twirling above their heads. The dowager held court from her shaded perch, surrounded by women wearing an array of flower pins, their combined laughter carrying over the yard.

A flash of red caught Alice’s eye, and her stomach tightened instinctively as Captain Victor Lacey approached, a croquet mallet tucked casually into the crook of his arm. She felt Lady Fairfax stiffen beside her, and Alice’s own body seemed to brace for whatever chaos the man might bring.

“Lady Fairfax, Miss Montrose, lovely day for a game, is it not?” His tone was almost amiable, the words themselves so unexpected that Alice found herself momentarily struck dumb.

“Quite,” replied Lady Fairfax. “How is Violet Cottage treating you?”

A muscle worked in Victor’s jaw, the only crack in his typically sardonic demeanor.

“I had to remove a dust cover or two ...” he said, his words trailing off into loaded silence.

Alice remembered the flickering lights she’d observed from her window in the darkest hours of the previous night. Despite her better judgment, and perhaps emboldened by her transformation, she ventured to speak.

“Is it the building across the lake?” she asked. “I noticed it the other night ... the lights all ablaze in the wee hours of morning.”

Something shifted in Captain Lacey’s countenance at her words, as though a blade had been unexpectedly dulled. His usual sharp edges seemed to soften ever so slightly.

“The space is not particularly conducive to peaceful sleep,” he said stiffly.

Lady Fairfax’s mouth drew into a thin line.

“You should have sent word ahead of your arrival. We would have arranged proper accommodation at Fairfax Hall?—”

“It is of no consequence.” The captain’s tone brooked no further discussion.

But Lady Fairfax's attention remained fixed on Captain Lacey, her expression troubled. There seemed to be an undercurrent to their exchange that Alice couldn't quite grasp—something deeper. She glanced past the sweeping lawn and tranquil lake to where the building stood in the distance, its walls draped in climbing ivy, surrounded by carefully trimmed hedges that seemed designed to obscure it from view.

With a fluid motion that suggested years of military drilling, he extended his croquet mallet toward Alice. The casual offer seemed at odds with his previous behavior, and she could only stare at him, thoroughly confused. As the moment stretched uncomfortably, Captain Lacey rolled his eyes and practically thrust the mallet into her free hand. She released Lady Fairfax's arm to grasp it properly, shooting her companion a questioning look.

"The games should begin shortly," Victor said, impatience creeping into his voice.

"I haven't the slightest notion of how to play croquet, sir," Alice protested. "Surely it would be better for all involved if I were to abstain."

Captain Lacey clicked his tongue against his teeth.

"What a pity. I had intended to include you in a game with His Grace so you might properly socialize, but if you would rather not ..."

Alice drew in a sharp breath. She had assumed their interaction at breakfast had gone poorly, yet here he was, extending what appeared to be an olive branch. Something fluttered in her breast—hope, perhaps? She turned to Lady Fairfax for guidance. The woman gave her the slightest of nods, but it was enough encouragement to steel her resolve.

"On second thought ..." Alice began.

“There we are,” Victor said, turning to stand beside her and extending his arm as though it were a peace offering.

Her stomach lurched at the prospect of touching him, as if he were made of poison oak rather than flesh and blood. But as she slowly reached out, her gloved hand contacting the wool of his scarlet jacket, his presence sent an unexpected jolt through her nerves. The physical power and control of a military man showed through even the thick fabric. She suspected that his seemingly uncouth behavior was carefully choreographed, just as she had for her own social performances.

“Lady Fairfax,” he said in farewell.

“Victor,” Lady Fairfax replied coolly, dropping all pretense of titles.

As they crossed the lawn toward their appointed game, Alice glanced back at the main pavilion. The dowager’s eyes were fixed upon them, a small smile playing about her lips that made Alice wonder if this, too, was part of some greater plan.

“I feel I must warn you,” Captain Lacey said, his voice pitched for her ears alone. “His Grace is remarkably accomplished in most games he attempts, but he will probably allow you victory on account of your sex. I, however, intend to do no such thing.”

“I neither wish you to, nor do I desire His Grace to hold back out of mere pity,” Alice said.

“Do you not consider it chivalrous for a gentleman to allow a lady to prevail?”

“I find it rather a slap in the face.”

The moment the words left her mouth, Alice realized she had inadvertently criticized

His Grace's character. Horror flooded through her as she stumbled to correct herself.

"I-I do not mean ... that is to say?—"

Captain Lacey gave her an odd look, the corner of his mouth twitching as though suppressing laughter. But before she could mortify herself further, they arrived at their destination—and there stood the Duke of Gainsbury himself.

Elias cut an impressive figure in the morning light, his broad shoulders filling out his perfectly tailored blue coat, his dark hair swept back from his forehead in artful waves. The physical activity of setting up the game had brought a healthy color to his cheeks, and when he turned toward them, his gray eyes sparkled with genuine pleasure. Alice's breath caught in her throat at the sight of him.

"Lacey," Elias said, his face brightening. "There you are, we were about to?—"

His words faltered as his gaze fell upon Alice. The same expression she'd seen at the ball crossed his features—shock and uncertainty—and a flush crept up his neck. He seemed to forget his own sentence entirely.

"We were just speaking of you, Your Grace," Victor said.

"O-Oh?" Elias managed, his eyes darting between Alice and his friend.

"Yes, Miss Montrose is of the opinion that any gentleman who permits a lady victory out of courtesy is nothing short of a deplorable cad of the basest nature."

Alice's cheeks blazed.

"I assure you I said nothing of the sort!"

“I may have taken some creative liberties with the exact phrasing,” Captain Lacey admitted as he selected a croquet ball that matched his coat.

“Well, I should hate to be considered a deplorable cad,” Elias said, offering Alice a conspiratorial wink that made her falter. His smile, directed solely at her, seemed to make the rest of the world fall away.

The memory of their dance—and its disastrous conclusion—rose unbidden in her mind, causing her throat to tighten.

“You may play however you deem appropriate, Your Grace.”

“And I shall thoroughly trounce you both,” said Captain Lacey.

Another couple joined them; the lady wearing a begonia pin on her pelisse. The newcomers appeared somewhat taken aback by the competitive energy crackling between Alice, Victor, and Elias as they took their positions.

Victor proved true to his word, approaching each shot with tactical precision while offering razor-sharp commentary. When his scarlet ball sent Alice’s pink one spinning off course, he gave her an expression of exaggerated innocence.

“My deepest apologies, Miss Montrose. Years of cavalry charges have made me rather particular about hitting my mark—be it French soldiers or croquet balls.”

“Lacey,” Elias chided gently, “perhaps war talk isn’t quite suited for a garden party.”

But Alice barely registered the duke’s mild reproach. There was something in Victor’s tone that caught her attention—not his words themselves, but a fleeting shadow beneath his haughty manner. Though he smiled, she noticed how his fingers flexed on the croquet mallet, a subtle movement she might have missed if she hadn’t

grown familiar with masking her own disquiet.

He's broken just like you.

She pushed the thought away, determined to focus her energy on the duke. Not his very disagreeable friend.

"Come now, Gainsbury," Victor said, his usual sardonic tone returning. "I am merely speaking in jest."

After Victor's comment, it was Elias who truly shone at the game. His natural athleticism showed in every movement as he lined up each shot with careful consideration. When his ball passed through three wickets in succession, his apologetic smile did little to disguise his obvious pleasure in the achievement. Though he played to win, he tempered each successful strike with genuine kindness—particularly toward Alice.

She warmed to the game despite her initial reservations, caught up in the friendly competition. Though she missed more shots than she made, neither man made her feel foolish for her lack of skill. Indeed, Elias seemed to pay particular attention to her attempts, offering gentle suggestions for improvement that never felt condescending.

Then, after some fine shots, Alice's ball stuck fast against a wicket, leaving her at an impossible angle. As she surveyed the hopeless position, Elias approached her.

"If I may?" Elias asked, stepping closer with careful propriety. "The trick lies in the angle of the strike."

"Please," Alice said, finding herself oddly at ease as he moved behind her.

“First, your grip must be just so.” His gloved hands settled over hers on the mallet’s handle, adjusting her fingers with utmost delicacy. Though he maintained a respectful distance, she could still feel subtle warmth radiating from him, the familiar scent of citrus and salt.

It was pleasant, she decided. Comfortable, even. Like sitting beside a fire—warm but not overwhelming. Yet she couldn’t help but notice the absence of the feelings she had expected now that she was well. No racing heart, no trembling hands, no heightened awareness of every breath. Just a gentle contentment that left her wondering if something was wrong with her that she couldn’t feel more.

“Now, if you angle your stance thus ...” Elias demonstrated the proper position, his voice dropping to a gentle murmur near her ear.

And as he stood back to allow her the space to practice her swing, Alice felt like this would be the only opportunity to say the things weighing upon her spirit.

“Your Grace, I feel I must apologize for my behavior at the ball?—”

“No,” he interrupted, his expression earnest. “I must beg your forgiveness. I should not have been quite so ... vigorous in our dance.”

“The fault lies entirely with me,” Alice said. “I was so eager to accept your dance that I failed to mention my indisposition.”

“Eager, you say?” A hint of pleasure colored his tone.

They both flushed at the implication, gazes darting away from each other. Alice became intensely interested in the handle of her croquet mallet while Elias seemed to find the distant hedgerows fascinating.

“Well, if truth be told,” he finally ventured, “I was perhaps overly enthusiastic myself. So much so that I neglected to ensure your comfort.”

They had somehow stumbled into an elaborate dance of apologies, each attempting to claim the greater share of blame. The ridiculousness of their situation struck Alice suddenly—here they were, a duke and a gentleman’s daughter, arguing over who bore more responsibility for her sudden illness.

“Your Grace, I must thank you for your kindness,” she breathed. “Many men would not wish to stand within five yards of me after such an incident.”

His expression softened.

“Then they would have missed out on something rather extraordinary.”

The words hung between them until Captain Lacey’s voice cut through their private moment.

“If you two have finished your tête-à-tête,” he called, “some of us would like to complete this game before the next century dawns.”

The other players exchanged knowing looks, hiding smiles behind their hands. Alice felt her cheeks warm, though whether from embarrassment at the attention or frustration at Victor’s interruption, she could not say. Elias stepped back immediately, ever mindful of propriety, though his eyes lingered on her face.

Heat flooded Alice’s cheeks as they rejoined the group. Victor’s knowing smirk suggested he had observed every moment of their exchange.

“How generous of His Grace to offer such ... personal instruction,” he said, making Alice’s flush deepen.

They resumed play, with Elias suddenly flustered, making poor shot after poor shot. To everyone's surprise, Alice was not far behind. Perhaps it was due to providence, or maybe the duke's instruction had made a difference. But every stroke she made from that point onward seemed charged with luck. While Elias's victory seemed a foregone conclusion in the last moments of the game, Victor's aim went mysteriously awry. His ball somehow knocked Alice's through the final wicket, securing her an unexpected victory over the duke.

Everyone gasped and clapped, even Elias's face lighting up at losing the game. Victor's clap was slow and deliberate, his unfortunate countenance cutting through her.

"Did you just do what I think you did?" she whispered furiously as they both retrieved their balls.

Captain Lacey's face was all innocence as she threw his ball in the air and caught it with a sudden swipe.

"What can I say?" He shrugged, lowering his voice for her ears alone. "I am a deplorable cad."

CHAPTER 13

The gown arrived at Alice's chamber just before the evening's social gathering, a sparkling spectacle of pale pink silk. She sat on her bed, running her fingers over the fabric as her mind wandered back to the afternoon's croquet tournament. Something about the duke's easy forgiveness left her unsettled. It seemed too simple, too clean a resolution after such mortification. Deep within, a voice whispered that such kindness must be false—that no one could truly be so forgiving.

Ruin is what you deserve.

A sharp knock at the connecting door between her chamber and her mother's startled her from her dark thoughts. Alice hesitated, her heart quickening at the prospect of confronting Mrs. Montrose after their quarrel. But there was nothing for it—they would have to face each other eventually. She crossed to the door and opened it.

Her mother stood perfectly coiffed for supper, her silver-threaded golden hair arranged fashionably beneath a lace cap, her evening gown of deep blue silk complementing her features. Though lines showed at the corners of her eyes and mouth, Mrs. Montrose carried herself with the same grace that must have caught the dowager's attention all those years ago.

"Mother," Alice said softly.

"We shall be tardy if we dawdle," Mrs. Montrose replied, as though the previous day's tension had never existed. She swept into the room, bringing with her the familiar scent of lavender water.

“Are you certain all is well? I must apologize if I?—”

Her mother raised a hand, cutting off Alice’s words. “We need not speak of it.” She gestured to Miss Eastridge, who had followed her into the room. “Come, we must prepare you properly.”

As the maid began her work, Mrs. Montrose paced the chamber, outlining her plans for smoothing things over with the duke. Alice tried several times to explain that relations with His Grace had already improved, but her mother spoke over every attempt, lost in her own strategies. The dowager’s warning about excluding Mrs. Montrose from her efforts to win the duke’s favor seemed more prescient with each passing moment.

Miss Eastridge worked her magic once again, and Alice barely recognized the elegant creature who stared back from the mirror. But her mother seemed uninterested in the transformation, focused entirely on dispensing advice which Alice let wash over her, unheeded.

After some time, Alice gathered her courage, knowing she must say something before they entered society.

“Mama, I wonder if perhaps ... if I might attempt to resolve this situation myself?”

Mrs. Montrose went still, her face draining of color. Quickly, Alice pressed on.

“It was my error that created this predicament, after all. I made this bed, as they say, and I feel I should be the one to address it. I would not wish to cause you any additional distress.”

To Alice’s horror, her mother’s eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, my poor darling girl.” Mrs. Montrose pressed a handkerchief to her trembling lips. “You must be so frightened.”

“Mama—”

“To face such ruination alone! No, no, I cannot allow it.”

You are a worthless daughter.

“You are a wonderful daughter,” Mrs. Montrose said, pulling Alice into a fierce embrace. “We shall weather this storm together. Even if His Grace will have nothing more to do with you after such a catastrophe, I shall support you through it all.”

Alice caught Miss Eastridge’s eye over her mother’s shoulder, and they shared a wide-eyed look. There would be no reasoning with Mrs. Montrose tonight. Alice simply patted her mother’s back, maintaining a polite silence as they prepared to join the evening’s entertainment.

They followed the sound of music to Fairfax Hall’s grand music room, where tall windows draped in gold silk were pulled back to expose the twilight sky beyond. A lady wearing a perfectly crafted daffodil pin sat at a carved pianoforte, her fingers dancing across the keys with grace.

The space had been arranged to accommodate dancing, with chairs and settees pushed against the walls to create an open area in the center. Though more intimate than the last ball, the gathering still hummed with energy. Small groups clustered near the windows, while others gathered in the center to prepare for what looked like a country dance.

Alice’s eyes found Elias immediately. He stood in the center of the forming sets, waiting to begin the next dance with a lovely young woman Alice did not recognize.

She searched herself for jealousy at the sight but found only a hollow ache—not for his attention, she realized, but for her own failings.

“To think she believes herself worthy of His Grace’s attention,” her mother whispered, eyes narrowed at the woman speaking to Elias. “How provincial her movements are—His Grace is far too kind to endure such company.”

Alice’s stomach clenched. A footman approached with a tray of wine glasses, but she waved him away, unwilling to risk a repeat of her previous disaster. They found a spot along the wall to observe the festivities, but before they could settle in, a stir at the entrance drew every eye in the room.

The Dowager Countess swept in on the arm of Captain Victor Lacey, his scarlet coat a shocking splash of color against her pearl-gray silk. There was something unsettling about how matched they seemed—two predators perfectly at ease in each other’s company. Victor leaned down to whisper something into the dowager’s ear, and to Alice’s astonishment, the older woman threw back her head in genuine laughter. Not her usual calculated social titter, but real, unrestrained mirth.

Alice remembered Victor’s casual mention of his standing invitation to Fairfax Hall, and suddenly wondered exactly how deep his connection to the dowager ran. As if sensing her thoughts, both turned to study her with eerily similar expressions—sharp, assessing, almost cunning in their intensity.

Alice suddenly wondered if the joke had been at her expense.

When they began making their way toward her, Mrs. Montrose muttered some excuse and practically fled. Alice reached for her mother’s sleeve, but she was already gone, leaving her daughter to face the approaching pair alone.

Alice smoothed her skirts and dropped into a curtsy, almost faltering when Victor

executed a bow of such perfect grace that it seemed to mock his usual uncaring demeanor.

“Good evening, my lady, Captain Lacey,” she managed.

“Good evening, Miss Montrose,” the dowager replied. “I see you’ve already been snubbed by His Grace.”

Alice glanced toward Elias, waiting with the rest of the couples as the musicians took their places. The candlelight caught in his dark hair, highlighting the firm line of his jaw as he smiled down at his partner. He held himself with the same natural grace she’d observed during their croquet match, though this time his athletic build was displayed prominently in his evening attire.

“I have only just arrived, as you have,” Alice said carefully. “The duke had already secured a partner when I entered, and there was nothing to be done about it.”

“Ah, well.” The dowager’s eyes glittered as she looked up at Victor. “I find it most unseemly for a young lady of your quality to stand on the sidelines without a dance partner. Perhaps Captain Lacey might oblige while His Grace is otherwise occupied?”

Victor’s expression suggested he’d been stabbed.

“Dance? With a-a lady?”

The dowager’s fingers tightened on his arm like talons.

“It is the gentlemanly thing to do. Come now, we would not want you causing a scene.”

She practically shoved him toward Alice, and for the first time since they’d met,

Victor appeared genuinely flustered. His hands trembled slightly as he took hers, and then— oh . The scent of him hit her like a physical force. Iron and musk, utterly masculine and devoid of artificial perfumes. Just him, raw and overwhelming. The smell seemed to carve holes in her defenses, her entire body humming with awareness as he led her to take their places in line on the opposite side of the duke and his partner.

Elias caught sight of them as they took their places, offering a cheerful wave that Alice could not help but return. But when she turned back to her partner, Victor's expression had darkened like storm clouds gathering on the horizon, his thoughts clearly far from the dancing about to begin.

“Do you not usually dance with ladies at such gatherings?” she ventured.

“I do not,” he replied curtly.

The music began—a lively country dance that required them to weave between other couples, their hands meeting and parting in intricate patterns. Given his earlier stammering reluctance, Alice had expected him to be a poor dancer, yet he moved with surprising grace, each step precisely placed. The difference between his obvious skill and his earlier hesitation puzzled her.

“You seem quite comfortable with the Dowager Countess,” Alice said when they came together again. “Are you perhaps related?”

“No.”

“Then how long have you been acquainted?”

“Five years,” Victor said, his shoes clicking against the floor as they turned about each other.

“Do you often accompany her to such events?”

He remained silent through several measures of music, and Alice feared she’d overstepped. But as they came back together, he finally spoke, his voice pitched low for her ears alone.

“I do not. Though I make it a habit to join the Dowager Countess for tea as often as I am able.”

“Oh?”

They separated again, moving through the pattern of the dance that took them around other couples. When they next joined hands, Victor’s impressive eyebrows had drawn together in obvious concern.

“This may seem absurd, particularly given the sizable crowd her birthday celebration has drawn, but I believe the woman to be lonely.”

“Lonely?” Alice could not keep the surprise from her voice. “But she has her son and daughter-in-law here at Fairfax Hall. And then there is her Garden?—”

“I suppose you are right,” Victor conceded, though his tone suggested otherwise.

Alice studied him with fresh eyes as they moved through the steps.

“Are you telling me you spend your leisure hours in the company of elderly ladies out of compassion? If I did not know any better, I would say that was quite the kindly thing to do.”

He rolled his eyes, but a smile played at the corners of his mouth as they came together, forearms touching as they spun around each other. When he spoke, his voice

dropped to a whisper that sent shivers racing down her spine.

“Please, do not speak so loudly. I have a reputation for wickedness to maintain.”

A most unladylike snort of laughter escaped Alice before she could stop it. Victor’s answering grin was positively devilish as he stepped away, hands folded properly behind his back.

They continued their dance, Alice’s mind whirling at this new image of Victor as the dowager’s confidant. Just as she gathered her courage to probe deeper, to peel back more layers of this puzzling man, the music drew to a close.

Without ceremony or farewell, Victor executed a stiff bow and practically fled, leaving her standing bewildered in the middle of the floor. Her brow furrowed as she watched him retreat, wondering what she could have possibly said to provoke such a reaction.

Perhaps she had overstepped after all.

Shaking her head, she turned to see Elias still conversing with his partner, his rich laughter carrying across the room. As she watched him charm the assembled company, she hoped she might yet have another chance to finally prove herself worthy of his attention.

Her mother reappeared at her side as the next dance was forming, looking perfectly composed despite her earlier retreat.

“Mama, were you attempting to avoid the dowager?” Alice asked quietly.

“Nonsense, my dear. I merely needed to refresh myself.” Mrs. Montrose adjusted her lace cap with steady fingers, though Alice noted she kept glancing toward the corner

where the dowager still held court. “Now then, what are your intentions regarding His Grace?”

Alice watched as Elias concluded his conversation with his previous partner. He stood alone for the first time that evening, and her heart lifted at the prospect of dancing with him.

“I thought perhaps I might?—”

“You mustn’t approach him,” her mother cut in sharply.

“But Mama, surely after the croquet match today?—”

“The croquet match?” Mrs. Montrose’s eyes widened. “You did not tell me you had interaction with His Grace this afternoon.”

“I was attempting to earlier, but?—”

“No matter. The situation remains delicate.” Her mother’s grip tightened on her arm as Elias glanced their way. “After such a disaster, it would be unseemly to appear too eager. A man of his station must be the one to smooth things over.”

“I do not think?—”

“Men enjoy the chase, my dear. It is like hunting—they must believe they are the ones pursuing the quarry.” When Alice opened her mouth to protest, her mother pressed on. “Trust me on this. I have far more experience in these matters.”

Elias began moving in their direction, a warm smile playing about his lips. Alice’s heart leaped—but before he could reach them, her mother practically dragged her toward the refreshment table.

“Mama, I believe he meant to speak with us.”

“Precisely. And now he shall have to work harder for the privilege.” Mrs. Montrose selected a glass of lemonade with satisfaction. “You must make him prove he is truly a gentleman.”

Alice watched helplessly as another group of guests intercepted Elias’s path. The opportunity slipped away like water through her fingers. She could not help but remember the dowager’s warning about pursuing this without her mother’s interference.

“Are you certain this is wise?”

“My dear girl,” Mrs. Montrose said, patting her hand. “There are rules to this game. The sooner you learn them, the better.”

But as Alice observed Elias being drawn into another dance, she couldn’t shake the feeling that her mother’s rules belonged to a different game entirely.

And those rules might cost her everything.

CHAPTER 14

The morning dawned crisp and bright, blessing them with perfect weather for the planned excursion to the grounds surrounding Fairfax Estate. Alice emerged from the manor with Mrs. Montrose into the morning sun, pausing momentarily to allow the rays to warm her skin, hoping they might lend her strength for the hours ahead.

A fleet of carriages and open-air phaetons waited in the circular drive, their horses stomping with impatience as servants stood ready to help ladies into their seats.

“Oh, so now they have every carriage imaginable at the ready,” her mother grumbled with disdain.

If her mother hadn’t already known the dowager had lied to keep them at Fairfax Hall, she did now. Alice did not wish to pursue that line of conversation, so instead patted her mother’s arm, pulling her down the stairs as they watched various parties sort themselves into groups for the journey.

“Remember,” Mrs. Montrose whispered, “you must maintain a proper distance from any gentleman and make them work for your attention. None of that enthusiasm.”

Before Alice could respond, movement caught her eye. Turning her head, she spotted Captain Lacey emerging from the stables astride his magnificent bay horse. He moved as though man and mount were one creature. His riding coat fit his broad shoulders perfectly, the morning light catching the auburn of his hair until it seemed aflame. As if sensing her attention, he turned in the saddle to meet her gaze, offering a sardonic smile before urging his mount forward toward the head of the caravan.

They assigned Alice and her mother to the third carriage, where they shared space with a middle-aged couple—the woman wearing a chrysanthemum pin. Standing outside while they waited to depart, the woman immediately engaged Mrs. Montrose in cheery conversation about the dowager’s previous birthday celebrations, leaving Alice to observe the other passengers as they socialized in groups.

It was then she caught sight of His Grace, assisting the dowager down the stairs toward the lead phaeton where Lord and Lady Fairfax waited. The dowager attempted to wave him away, stubborn to take on the stairs herself, but he wouldn’t relent, dipping his head to speak with her until a smile appeared on her lips. So he had charmed the dowager as well—Alice was not surprised. If Captain Lacey could find favor with her, it would be easy for a man of character, such as Elias.

However, Alice tensed as she noticed another person sharing the phaeton—a dark-haired woman she had seen dancing with the duke the night before. The lady curtsied as he approached, no flower pin in sight. While the dowager did not spare her a glance, Elias gave her a polite and charming greeting. Alice wondered what they were saying, her stomach now in knots.

They were told to enter their carriages, and Alice sank into her spot, watching the trees in the distance as her mother chatted. She was too lost in her worries to speak, and it was probably for the best she kept silent. The journey took them through some of the estate’s most picturesque grounds—rolling hills giving way to perfectly maintained woodlands, the trees vibrantly green. Captain Lacey rode ahead as though he were some kind of scout. She’d catch glimpses of him on the road, occasionally disappearing around bends, only to reappear at the crest of the next hill like an overly-excited hound on the scent.

When they finally reached their destination and the gentlemen helped the ladies from their carriages, Alice couldn’t help but gasp. The grassy knoll offered a stunning view of the surrounding countryside, with Fairfax Hall visible in the distance, nestled next

to the shining lake among its emerald gardens. Servants had ridden ahead, having already set up tables laden with refreshments beneath a grove of ancient oak trees.

“Quite the view, is it not?”

Alice turned to find Victor standing beside her, his sharp eyes brighter than usual as he studied her. His hair was wind swept beneath a top hat, his cheeks reddened by exertion. The effect seemed to soften his harsh nature, setting Alice more at ease than on edge.

“I used to ride up here often as a boy,” he said. “My parents have an estate in the area. The climb was considerably more entertaining on horseback than your bumpy carriage.”

“The ride must be far more strenuous, no?”

“The more strenuous, the better.”

Alice searched for a response, aware that her mother watched her conversation with the man, her gaze boring into them, but she stayed a few steps away, as though he had a nasty smell about him. Mrs. Montrose had not interacted with Captain Lacey as Alice had, other than their unfortunate introduction. Not wishing to garner her mother’s disapproval, Alice settled on a noncommittal hum that made Victor’s eyes leave her. She watched the change in him as he seemed to study the crowd, his predatory air taking over as his gaze settled across the grass.

Elias was still speaking with the previous evening’s dance partner—the lovely, dark-haired woman who seemed to demand every moment of his attention. Alice frowned, wondering if there was any way she could get a minute with the duke with this woman staking her claim.

“Oh, do not look so glum, Lady Rose.” Victor took a few strides away, turning on his heel to tip his hat toward Alice and her mother before striding off.

“What an odious man,” her mother said disapprovingly as she swept in to fill the space beside her. “I hope he did not suggest interest in you.”

“You shall have to take my word for it, Mama. That would be the furthest thing from the truth,” Alice replied, crossing her arms against her chest.

As she looked on, Captain Lacey strode purposefully toward the couple, stalking them like a jungle cat, until Elias had to step away momentarily. It was then the predator struck, positioning himself just behind the young woman’s shoulder. Whatever he whispered in her ear made the poor woman pale visibly. She stammered something—perhaps a weak excuse—and practically fled, leaving the duke looking bewildered when he returned with two drinks, for himself and the young woman. Victor swiped one with a grin and walked away.

It dawned on Alice that she had witnessed something very much like what she had experienced with Captain Lacey at her first ball. The way he had so casually strode up to her and launched his verbal attack was quite the sight to see from the outside. Alice’s eyes flicked to the girl, who seemed to have some sort of anxious reaction with her mama, who was patting her arm and glaring at Captain Lacey. Despite being in competition for the same man, Alice suddenly felt bad for the poor girl, and she could feel the heat rising in her face and ears.

Alice started towards Victor, ignoring her mother, who attempted to stop her with a huff. Her mother could wait—this could not.

“Whatever you said to that girl,” Alice said as she approached the man, who was taking a sip of bubbling lemonade, “it was unkind.”

He caught her by the arm and casually strode with her along to the refreshment table. While his touch sent a thrill along her skin, she realized he had done so purposefully to evade her mother, who had attempted an approach, but backed off, seemingly intimidated by the captain. They now had a table between them, giving them a moment to chat.

Victor placed his empty glass down and selected a decorated cake with care.

“I am not sure I know what you mean.”

“Do not feign ignorance. I saw you frighten that poor girl away.”

“Did you?” His outrageous eyebrows arched innocently. “Perhaps she merely had a previous engagement.”

“So this is what you do, then? Stand guard like some hound, swooping in to say cruel things to ladies—keeping away anyone you deem unworthy?”

Victor gave a noncommittal shrug, placing the entire dessert in his mouth before speaking with stuffed cheeks. “Hith Grace requireth protection from thotho who would take advantage.”

He swallowed, and Alice wrinkled her nose at his complete lack of manners.

“And you appointed yourself to this position?”

“Someone must.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the dowager, who had appeared rather suddenly, as though out of thin air, one eyebrow raised.

“I cannot fathom what caused Miss Jennings such distress,” she said, joining them at the refreshment table, eying the upset young woman across the way.

Alice glanced momentarily at her mother, who looked apoplectic now that the dowager had joined their conversation. Mrs. Montrose made her way quickly over when, before, she had been cautiously staying back in the captain’s presence.

“Perhaps she found the conversation with His Grace lacking,” Victor drawled.

Alice shot him a sharp look.

“Or perhaps someone made her feel unwelcome?”

The dowager glanced between them, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly, but she did not speak outright. Alice did not quite like that look—there was a question in it that she couldn’t parse without asking directly, and she would not do that, especially with her mother entering the fray.

“There you are, Alice,” Mrs. Montrose said, then turned to greet the older woman. “Dowager Countess of Fairfax.” She said the woman’s name as though it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“Daylily, how kind of you to join us,” replied the dowager smoothly.

“My dear, you must come see the view from this particular angle. The light is quite spectacular.” Her mother’s fingers dug into her arm, but the dowager’s own hand shot out, taking hold of Mrs. Montrose.

“Actually, Daylily, I do believe His Grace was interested in taking the short stroll to the East Point Lookout, just a quick walk down the knoll. Perhaps we should allow the youths to go sightseeing while you and I chat?”

The dowager nodded to Captain Lacey, and like the hound he was, he wiped the powdered sugar from his face and turned on his heel toward the Duke, fetching him for the dowager.

Mrs. Montrose, however, looked absolutely shocked.

“To have two unmarried people walking alone together in such a way? Do you wish to invite scandal?”

“It is only a short stroll,” said the dowager, motioning down to a path that ended in a singular point of the outlook. “And we can keep our watchful eyes on them most of the way, to ensure nothing untoward occurs.”

“I still do not think it proper. I shall accompany them?—”

Alice looked between the dowager and her mother, realizing at once that they were at odds, and she would have to choose between them. She thought of the dowager’s words, that she had to wiggle out from some controls her mother had on her. However, her mother was the reason why she was here in the first place, the only reason she had the social graces she did, and all Alice had done since she arrived was muck things up.

Alice placed her hand on her mother’s arm.

“All will be fine, Mama. We will not take long.”

She had chosen the dowager.

Instead of fighting, her mother became perfectly still. Alice had never seen such a look upon her mother’s face and it sent a chill through her. Before anything else could be said, Captain Lacey returned with Elias.

The Duke stepped forward with an amiable smile.

“Miss Montrose, would you care to join me for a brief walk to admire the view?”

Her mother still looked furious, and Alice noticed Captain Lacey watching the woman intensely, almost like a cat about to pounce. Alice decided to go before her mother or Captain Lacey could make a scene. The dowager gave her an encouraging nod before she strode off with Elias toward the lookout.

They made their way down the winding path, careful to get away from the over-eager old ladies watching them. Alice searched for something—anything—to break the silence.

“The ... weather has certainly improved since our arrival,” she ventured.

“Indeed.” Elias cleared his throat. “Though I confess I rather enjoy a bit of rain now and then. Nothing better than a cozy room on a drizzly day.”

“Yes, I agree.”

Another stretch of silence followed, broken only by the crunch of their boots on gravel and the distant laughter from the picnic. When they reached the lookout point, Alice was grateful for the distraction of the view. She stepped forward, drinking in the sweeping landscape before them.

“Oh my,” she breathed. “From here, the lake at Fairfax Hall looks like a mirror—see how it catches the light?”

Elias moved to stand beside her, careful to maintain a proper distance. His whole countenance brightened, as though an idea had hit him all at once.

“I hear they keep several boats at the boathouse,” he said. “Perhaps you would do me the honor of accompanying me for an afternoon row tomorrow?”

The sudden invitation caught her off guard. She blushed and turned away bashfully.

“I would enjoy that, Your Grace.”

They walked in companionable silence after that, both smiling and looking in opposite directions.

After they had gone a short distance, Elias glanced over his shoulder and chuckled.

“I must admit, your mother’s expression suggests she’d like nothing more than to bite my head clean off.”

“Yes, well ...” Alice sighed. “She can be rather particular about how things ought to be done.”

“I’ve noticed.” His tone was light, but there was a tinge of concern that made Alice’s chest tighten.

They rounded a bend in the path where a small clustering of bushes and trees blocked them from view of the picnic. Alice shook her head.

“I must apologize for her behavior.”

“Please, do not trouble yourself. I have dealt with far worse behavior in the past.”

“Yes, I imagine you have,” Alice said without thinking, “being so closely acquainted with Captain Lacey.”

Elias tilted his head, his thick brows knitting together.

“Well, yes, he can be a little prickly?—”

She let out a bark of laughter.

“A little ?” The words tumbled out before she could stop them. “I just watched him bully a girl to tears simply to get her away from you.”

Elias blinked.

“Did you overhear what he said?”

“Well ... no.”

“Then how do you know he bullied the woman if you did not hear the content of their conversation?”

“Because I have been on the receiving end of his tongue lashing,” Alice retorted.

“Victor can be... direct,” Elias said carefully, “but I assure you, his intentions are good. He is protective of those he cares about.”

“Protective? Is that what you call his behavior? He seems to delight in causing others distress.”

“You misunderstand him completely. Everything he does has purpose?—”

“And just what purpose could there be in making young ladies cry and stealing their drinks?”

“If you would only give him a chance to?—”

“I swear! That man will find it near impossible to secure a wife with such a disagreeable character.”

Elias stopped so abruptly that Alice nearly continued on without him. When she turned back, the change in him was shocking. The amiable nature had vanished, replaced by something cold and hard. His grey eyes blazed with an intensity she’d never seen before. As he drew himself up to his full height, she suddenly realized she was alone, out of sight, with a man who could easily overpower her. She had never felt threatened by him before, but now something fundamental had shifted.

“How dare you,” Elias ground out, the muscles in his neck bulging as he stepped closer, looming over her. “Captain Lacey is one of the finest men I have ever known. He has sacrificed everything—indeed, risked his very life—in the noble service of his country. He was pivotal to Napoleon’s defeat in the war. Every one of us should be on our knees thanking him for what he has done, and treating him with the respect he deserves.”

“I-I did not know?—”

“And that is the problem, is it not? You speak incredibly freely of things you do not understand, casting aspersions upon a man who has known more pain and suffering than you could ever dream of. I?—”

He caught himself then, huffing out an angry breath through his nose and stepping away to rake a hand through his now-wild dark locks. He closed his eyes as he found his composure, but when he spoke again, his tone remained tight.

“Forgive me,” he said finally. “I should not speak to a lady in such a way.”

Alice clutched her hands together, her vision beginning to blur with unshed tears.

“Here,” Elias motioned for her to walk ahead of him, back toward where the picnic was being held. “Let us return.”

Alice shook her head, unable to face the others after such a rebuke. Elias hesitated for a moment, working his jaw and kicking at the grass, hands on his hips.

“I shall take my leave then.”

And then he was gone, leaving Alice alone with tears staining her cheeks as she looked out at Fairfax Hall in the distance, knowing that she had completely destroyed her only path to happiness.

CHAPTER 15

A lice sat on the grass, staring blankly out at the landscape. Her knees had weakened in the very spot Elias had left her, and she had stayed crumpled on the ground for who knew how long. The duke's anger echoed in her mind, his words cutting deeper with each replay. How dare you ? The intensity in those grey eyes, the disgust in his voice—she had never felt smaller, more foolish.

Stupid.

Worthless.

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, trying to dispel the dark thoughts that threatened to overwhelm her. But they persisted, hissing from the corners of her mind.

Eventually, a hand gripped her arm, pulling her to her feet. She understood distantly that it was her mother, dragging her listless form back down the trail. Mrs. Montrose's furious whispers flowed around her, but they went in one ear and out the other, meaningless sounds that couldn't penetrate the fog of her despair.

As they approached the picnic, Alice finally seemed to wake from her reverie. She clutched at her mother's arm like a drowning woman grasping for a lifeline.

“Please,” she begged, still on the edges of where people chatted and enjoyed the outing. “Please do not make me face them again.” The whites of her eyes were wide with panic. “I beg of you, Mother. Pray, do not force me back there.”

She could not face the duke again. Could not bear to see that contempt in his eyes.

Mrs. Montrose stared at her daughter for a moment, shocked by the display. Alice knew she must look like a madwoman—wisps of hair having escaped her updo, eyes wild with desperation. Finally, her mother's mouth set in a thin line and she nodded, steering Alice around the entire party toward one of the carriages. Alice distantly heard her mother making excuses to the driver about her daughter not feeling well.

All Alice could do was stare into the distance as her mother arranged their departure. Were they watching her? Probably. She had been nothing but a string of scandals since she had set foot on this horrid estate. They were probably jeering. Probably whispering. Probably all staring at her.

But when she turned, no one was looking at all.

Which was—somehow—worse.

No one cared. Why would they? She was a nobody, a stain on this entire celebration. Just a silly girl who did not belong here, or anywhere, for that matter.

As her gaze swept over the crowd, she was surprised to find she was wrong. There was one person staring at her.

Captain Lacey.

A hot wave of shame flooded over her. Victor seemed like he had seen a ghost, frozen in place, face paler than usual. Had the duke told him of her words? Most likely. She could not face him either, and so she tore her gaze away as the driver opened the door and helped them up into their seats.

Once the door closed behind them, and the carriage lurched to a start, her mother

erupted.

“How dare you embarrass me like this?” Mrs. Montrose’s voice trembled with fury. “Everything I have worked for—everything I have sacrificed—and you throw it away with both hands!”

“Mama, I?—”

“Do not ‘Mama’ me! You ungrateful child. I have spent years preparing you for society, teaching you everything you need to know, and at the first opportunity, you behave like a common trollop!”

Alice flinched at the words, but her mother wasn’t finished.

“Becoming sick upon a duke, walking alone with a gentleman, and now this spectacle! Running away like some hysterical creature! What will people say?”

“I only meant to?—”

“You meant to ruin us completely!” Mrs. Montrose’s face had gone red with anger. “You are exactly like your father—weak, foolish, a lush—unable to maintain even the most basic standards of proper behavior!”

Mrs. Montrose’s voice grew sharper with each word.

“Do you know what they will say about us now? That we are fortune hunters who couldn’t even manage that properly. That we are country nobodies who dared to reach above our station. That my daughter is addled in the head!”

Alice tried once more to speak, but the words died in her throat. Her mother was right. About everything. The reality of it settled over her, suffocating any protest she

might have made to stand up for herself.

Her silence seemed to infuriate her mother even more.

“Now you choose to hold your tongue? After everything? Look at me when I speak to you!”

But Alice couldn't. She stared at her hands folded in her lap, feeling hollow inside.

The sharp crack of her mother's palm against her cheek shocked her into looking up. Alice's hand flew to her face, eyes wide with disbelief. Mrs. Montrose hadn't struck her since she was a small child. The sting of it seemed to wake something in her—not anger or fear, but a deeper understanding of just how far she had fallen.

She deserved this.

Mrs. Montrose rapped on the roof of the carriage with shocking violence.

“Stop! Stop this instant!”

The carriage jolted to a halt, nearly throwing them from their seats. Her mother's face was a mask of cold fury as she turned to Alice.

“Get out.”

“What?”

“If you wish to act like a willful child, then you may walk back like one. Perhaps the exercise will clear your addled mind.”

“But Mama?—”

“ Out! ”

Alice stumbled from the carriage, her legs shaking beneath her. Her mother’s words cut through the air like a whip.

“Enjoy this last taste of freedom. For when you return, we shall remain in our rooms until this ghastly celebration ends. I cannot trust you in society any longer.”

The carriage door slammed shut with finality, and Alice watched it roll away, leaving her alone on the road. With trembling fingers, she reached up and unpinned the rose from her dress. She stared at it for a long moment, watching how it caught the sunlight, before throwing it to the ground and leaving it behind.

She began walking, her steps mechanical and leaden. The cheek where her mother had struck her still burned, though the physical pain was nothing compared to what was happening within. The unbidden thoughts that had plagued her all her life rose up, no longer whispers but roaring in her mind, drowning out everything else.

You have destroyed everything your mother worked for.

Her entire life had been building toward this fortnight—every lesson, every correction, every moment spent practicing proper behavior. And she had ruined it all in a matter of days.

You are a disappointment.

The duke’s face flashed in her mind, his features twisted with disgust. Even his kindness had its limits, it seemed. And Captain Lacey—she had been so carelessly cruel with her words about him.

Everyone is better off without you.

The road stretched endlessly before her, winding through the countryside like a river. It had been quite the journey by carriage to the outlook, and it was proving even more difficult on foot, especially in shoes not made for such a trek. The pebbled ground pulled at her heels, forcing her to walk in the middle of the road where the earth was firmer. Her feet screamed in protest with each step, but she barely felt the pain. Physical discomfort seemed distant and unimportant compared to the crushing weight of despair that consumed her entire being.

This was her future stretching out before her—an endless road of disappointments and failures. She would remain a burden on her mother, watching helplessly as their family's prospects dwindled further. Her father would fall deeper into his cups, and she would become a spinster. Perhaps they would be forced to dismiss Miss Eastridge, to sell what little they had left. And it would all be her fault.

Then she heard it. A carriage.

The sound cut through her dark thoughts like a knife. She turned her head to look down the road, recognizing the source immediately. The driver from their arrival—his shock of white hair unmistakable even at this distance—was urging the horses forward at a reckless pace. Too fast. Incredibly too fast, and showing no signs of slowing. She wondered if he would even see her until it was too late.

And suddenly, as the thought hit her, then reverberated through her mind, all the pain vanished. Gone like a candle snuffed out in the wind. The solution was so simple, so elegant. She didn't have to do anything. All she had to do was stay in her spot and all would be well. No more disappointments. No more burden on her family. No more constant battle against the darkness within.

And so Alice turned from the sound, hands balled into fists at her sides, and kept walking down the middle of the road, her head a little higher. This would be easier.

This would be better for everyone.

For the first time in years, the thoughts that had tormented her fell silent. There was a strange peace in her decision, a clarity she had never known before. The approaching thunder of hooves and rattle of wheels seemed almost musical—a grand finale to her brief and disappointing life.

Alice closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 16

W ham.

Something hit Alice hard, knocking all the air from her lungs and sending her flying. She expected to fall beneath the thundering hooves of the horses at any moment, but instead found herself suspended in the air, held aloft by a powerful grip on her waist.

Her eyes flew open as she realized she was being clutched by a man on horseback. He let out a string of expletives entirely unsuitable for a lady's ears as they careened off the road, the carriage rushing past behind them close enough that she felt the wind of its passage.

The man's grip became unsteady, and he lost his hold, sending her tumbling into a pile of leaves and bushes at the side of the road, followed by another round of curses. The bay horse let out a frightened whinny as the rider dismounted in one fluid motion.

Alice groaned, her entire side aching from where she'd landed. As she turned onto her back, a familiar face came into view above her.

Captain Victor Lacey.

He seemed more concerned than vexed, breathing hard from the exertion, but despite his harsh countenance, he approached her with urgency.

"Are you injured?" His hands found her shoulders, gently helping her to sit up, eyes

searching for any sign.

Alice realized in that moment exactly what had happened. Captain Lacey had brought his horse to a gallop and plucked her from the road with one arm, barely saving her life. She blinked up at him, unable to form words.

“Can you stand?”

He gingerly helped her to her feet, and she moved her arms and legs, searching for injuries. Her ribs felt slightly tender, but other than that, she was fine. And alive.

She should not be alive.

Once he was certain she was uninjured, Captain Lacey allowed the vexation to work into his words.

“Just what were you thinking, walking in the middle of the road like that, you could have been—” The words died on his tongue as he seemed to find something in her countenance. It was as though his sharp gaze pierced through her, laying bare the truth of what she had been attempting.

His voice lowered, gentler than before, but not without bite.

“Just ... why were you walking in the first place?”

Alice looked off toward where the carriages had disappeared around the bend.

“It seems as though whatever I do, whatever I try, I am a disappointment,” she finally said. “My mother thought a walk would help me come to my senses.”

Victor pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers and let out a steadying breath,

face tipped to the sky. When he finally looked at her again, she could see he was barely containing a boiling rage.

“Do you mean to tell me that your mother forced you from the carriage to walk miles back to Fairfax Hall?”

Alice glanced at the ground in shame.

“I deserve worse.”

He reached out and gripped her arm, firm enough to get her attention.

“Do not say such a thing. You deserve more than a modicum of respect, Miss Montrose, whether you believe it or not. Do you understand?” When she did not reply, he shook her. “Understand?”

“I suppose.”

“Good.” Victor released her, stepping back with his hands on his hips to take her in. “Now. This will be unacceptable if you wish to spend the afternoon socializing with His Grace.”

Alice let out a hysterical, snorting laugh. This was utterly ridiculous, and part of her knew she didn’t have to hold back around this man.

“Any plans have most definitely been cancelled. I have burned down all the good will I might have had with His Grace. He has made it perfectly clear that he does not wish to be in my acquaintance.”

Victor raised an eyebrow. “It went that poorly?”

“He did not tell you what happened?”

Victor shook his head, then folded his arms across his chest and waited. Alice didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the ridiculousness of it all.

“We quarreled about you . I said that you would have quite a difficult time finding a wife with such a disagreeable character, and he got very still and ... and he seemed to explode.”

Victor seemed to tense for a moment, then relaxed, a wicked half-smile creeping onto his face.

“Oh, that would do it. Did he really give you a proper tongue lashing?”

Alice stepped closer, gesticulating as she spoke.

“He was angrier than I’ve ever seen. I did not think the man had it in him.”

That seemed to please Victor very much, because his half-smile turned into a full grin.

“So you brought out His Grace’s temper. What a treat. There are few who are so privileged to see it.”

“Is His Grace truly an angry man?”

“Oh no, he would not hurt an innocent. I once watched him stop his sister from killing a spider just so he could save it by whisking it into the gardens.” Victor tapped the side of his nose. “But if you land on a topic in which His Grace is particularly passionate about, the claws come out. You just happened to stumble upon one.”

Alice hadn't realized she'd hit such a tender spot with Elias, and she wasn't going to ask exactly why. Obviously, the two men were like brothers, and she had been a fool to speak so carelessly.

"I apologize for being so uncivil," she whispered. "I should not have said it in the first place."

"Oh, I most definitely deserve it," said Victor. "Probably worse. I will make sure His Grace knows how insufferably I have treated you, and perhaps that will make him feel poorly about using his temper against you."

The casual way he offered to take the blame made something twist in Alice's chest. After everything she had thought about him, everything she had said, here he was trying to help her. Again.

His eyes traced her figure with the detached scrutiny of a military man.

"We must get you back, but before we do, I shall fix you up. Wouldn't want anyone to see you as disheveled as you appear now."

"It is not as though it will make any difference, as my mother has told me I must stay in our rooms for the rest of the event."

Victor motioned for her to come closer.

"We shall see about that. Now turn around, Lady Rose."

She did as she was told, and he started picking brambles from her dress and dusting off her skirts. Her dress bow had come loose in the chaos, and he tied it properly, tightening it.

“I have a maid to do such things, you know,” Alice said.

“Well, the war is over. After selling half my commission, I have been pondering a career change. What do you think, would I make a proper lady’s maid?”

Alice could not help but laugh, despite how terrible she felt inside.

“Sir, if I was hiring a lady’s maid and you walked through my door, I do believe I would box your ears on the spot.”

His voice lowered, rumbling deep in his chest playfully.

“Oh, I would quite like to see that.”

The way he spoke sent a shock down her nerves, and her breath quickened more than it had during the daring rescue. She cleared her throat, unsure how to reply to something so brazenly flirtatious.

“Now turn toward me,” Victor said, and she did.

But all the flirtation was gone, and he gave her what seemed like a judgmental look. His fingers brushed her cheek, and he suddenly went still as stone, his touch ghosting over where her mother had slapped her. His nostrils flared, rage flickering across his features before he shook his head as if to clear it. Then, with forced casualness, he licked his thumb and rubbed it against her cheek, like a mother cleaning up her child. She made a disgusted face, working her nose.

“Urgh!”

“Please,” he said, rolling his eyes, “You were willing to spill your innards across the lane only moments ago, and now you are cringing at a bit of spit shine?”

Alice sucked in a sharp breath, her heart nearly stopping. He knew. Of course he knew—he had seen right through her actions on the road. The darkness she carried inside, the desperate thoughts that had driven her to stand before that carriage ... her deepest shame laid bare before him. She felt naked—exposed in a way that had nothing to do with impropriety.

Victor let out a long sigh, then moved onto her hair, plucking sticks from it.

“Between us,” he said, his voice becoming softer. “There was a man in my regiment, and one day, near the end of the war, he received the most terrible news from home. His family had died suddenly. Tragic, really.”

She tensed as he spoke, confused by this sudden shift in conversation. Yet something in his tone made her stay silent, as though he were revealing an ancient secret.

“And when he came back after our victory at Waterloo, well ... ‘twasn’t pretty. He was belligerent, unable to cope with the loss. One night, a group of our old military crew were out at a pub, being fools as men are wont to do. He was deep in his cups, but instead of getting louder, he went quiet, even when the rest of us were rowdy. But there was no despair on his face. No. He was as content as a cat with cream, as if he was soaking in every moment. Most did not notice when he slipped out into the night. But I did. Had a feeling in the pit of my stomach. Searched for the fool, thought he’d slipped away from me, then I finally found him.” Victor took a leaf out of her hair, then stopped. Alice glanced at him sidelong, and he was staring listlessly at the leaf, spinning it in his fingers. “He was on a bridge, on the wall, one arm hooked around a lamppost, staring down into the water. I’ll never forget that face as long as I live. He was at peace, as if to step from the bridge and into the icy waters below would be the sweetest gift.”

“What happened?” Alice asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “What did you do?”

“What anyone would do. I hauled him to the ground, dusted him off.” Victor brushed some dirt off her sleeve. “And then I got him back home in one piece.”

“Did he ... did he ever get better?”

Victor gave her a long look, then glanced at the ground.

“It took some plodding along with him. Day by day. Hour by hour. Moment by moment. But eventually, this man’s cups were not as deep, and his pain—not too cutting. He stopped visiting the bridge at midnight, dangling his life over the water whilst the city slept. He survived, but I cannot tell you he lives a charmed life. Only that he lives one.”

Alice let out a breath she had not realized she was holding, feeling the prick of tears in the corners of her vision. It took several moments to fight them down.

“That is quite the story, sir,” she said, her voice tight. “But I do not know how it is relevant to my current situation.”

That smile crept back onto his face, and he faced her fully, then took a lock of her hair, tucking it gently behind her ear.

“Why, Lady Rose,” he murmured. “I believe you have misunderstood me, as I was only attempting to fill the air.”

But that knowing look he gave her—in that moment, they both understood exactly what he had done, and why he had told that story. She should have felt poorly, for having to sit through what amounted to a backhanded lecture. But it did not feel that way. It felt as though he had sensed the darkness living in Alice’s heart, feeding off her pain, seen it and then reacted not with cruelty, but kindness—in his own insufferable way.

“Oh, I forgot,” he said, then reached into his jacket pocket and revealed the rose pin she had thrown to the ground earlier. He dusted it off, a few of the petals now slightly bent on one side, and then leaned forward to pin it to her. She could feel his breath on her skin, reacting to his warm presence. And while she had come close to the void, she did not feel any heavier in his presence, as though the darkness in her heart relaxed around him.

He finished pinning it. “There,” he said, placing his hands on his hips. “Not too bad, if I say so myself.”

“I will have to take your word for it,” she replied flatly.

“Come,” he said, offering his arm with an exaggerated flourish. “Help me track down my horse, and perhaps we can make it back to Fairfax Hall before my dreadful riding skills become the subject of tomorrow’s gossip.”

CHAPTER 17

Alice settled in front of Victor on his horse. The steady rhythm of hooves against earth filled the silence between them. As the initial shock of her rescue faded, the full force of what she had almost done hit her. Her hands shook violently, her whole body trembling like a leaf.

Victor noticed immediately. Without a word, he reached around her, his large hand covering both of hers without comment. The warmth of his touch steadied her, and she unconsciously leaned back into his solid presence. It was confusing, how someone so thoroughly disagreeable could provide such comfort.

As they approached Fairfax Hall, Alice noticed a small crowd had gathered at the entrance. Apparently, the occupants of the carriage had witnessed the incident on the road and raised the alarm. Lady Fairfax stood at the forefront, her face etched with concern. When they drew near, Victor dismounted smoothly before turning to assist Alice. His hand was firm as he helped her down, giving her fingers a reassuring squeeze before releasing her to face the approaching group.

Mrs. Montrose pushed through the crowd, her face pale.

“My dear girl!” she cried, putting on a show of maternal concern. “You must come inside at once, where it is safe.”

Alice felt Victor go rigid beside her, then he swept forward, and for a moment, Alice wondered if her mother felt what a defenseless French soldier on the battlefield might have when faced with his wrath. When Captain Lacey spoke, his voice carried across

the gathered crowd with deliberate clarity.

“How fascinating to see you so concerned with your daughter’s safety now, Mrs. Montrose.”

Her mother’s brows drew together. “I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Tell me, Mrs. Montrose,” Victor’s voice cut like a blade, “is it common practice in your household to abandon young ladies on dangerous country roads?”

“I hardly think this is appropriate conversation?—”

“I should think the act of abandoning one’s daughter would be far more inappropriate than merely speaking about it after the fact.” His eyes narrowed as he studied her. “Though perhaps such behavior is to be expected from someone whose reputation is nothing but a string of vulgar scandals. One might think you’d show more compassion, given your own sordid history.”

Mrs. Montrose’s fingers flew to her daylily pin.

“You dare?—”

“I dare quite a lot, madam, especially when I witness a mother’s hypocrisy destroying her daughter’s spirit.”

A collective gasp rose from the onlookers. Alice should have felt shocked at Victor’s brazen rudeness to her mother, but instead found herself filled with an unexpected energy. His words about her mother’s history puzzled her—she had never heard any whisper of scandal about her youth, though it would explain quite a few things. After the slap, after all the berating, Victor was giving voice to things she had never dared say herself, while hinting he knew more about her mother than she ever did.

Lady Fairfax pressed a gloved hand to her mouth before stepping forward.

“Captain Lacey, I must insist you not speak to our guests in such a manner.”

Victor’s jaw clenched, practically vibrating with barely contained fury. Alice glanced around the growing crowd and caught sight of Elias hovering at the edges, his face creased with concern. Yet he made no move to intervene, content to watch from a safe distance like all the others. She noticed movement at the side of her vision, and had not realized that another carriage had arrived, its occupants drawing closer to the conflict, one of them being the dowager.

The older woman’s voice cut through the air.

“Lady Fairfax is quite right, Captain Lacey. Do mind your tongue.”

Alice watched as Victor visibly fought against his desire to argue with the old woman. But one pointed look from the dowager seemed to make him heel, though his jaw remained set in defiance.

“Perhaps,” the dowager continued smoothly, “Mrs. Montrose and Miss Montrose would care to join me in overseeing the preparations for the Whist tournament?”

Alice did not know whether to laugh hysterically or fall into pieces before them all. Such a task seemed more appropriate for the lady of the house, not a woman who had only just stood at the threshold of death’s door. It seemed absurd. Impossible. She glanced at Lady Fairfax, catching a fleeting look of surprise before the countess quickly masked it with a gracious smile.

“What a lovely idea,” Lady Fairfax added. “We would so appreciate your help.”

Before Alice could respond, Mrs. Montrose shook her head, seeming to barely hold

herself together.

“I-I believe I require rest before the evening’s entertainment,” Mrs. Montrose said.

There was a desperate quality to her mother’s gaze that made Alice’s chest tighten. But something had shifted between them—the slap, the abandonment, Victor’s defense—and Alice found herself reaching deep within and finding some semblance of strength to move forward, even if it seemed utterly outrageous.

“I would be happy to assist the Dowager Countess,” she said softly. “I hope you will join us at the tournament, Mama.”

The despair that crossed her mother’s face was palpable. While it pained Alice to watch her mother retreat in such obvious distress, there was something that released slightly at having finally stood her ground.

Even as the dowager motioned her to follow, Alice felt shell-shocked by the events of the day. She watched as Victor made his way to Elias, taking hold of his friend’s arm and steering him toward the gardens.

She could plod along. She would have to.

The dowager led her to a large room where tables had been arranged for the tournament. As Alice passed a table, she picked up a deck of cards, studying the intricate illustrations. Each king and queen wore elaborate floral headdresses, the artwork clearly commissioned specifically for the celebration. She wondered at the expense of such details, at the wealth required to create something so beautiful for a single fortnight’s entertainment.

“Now then,” the dowager said, pausing before an elaborate floral centerpiece that crowned one of the card tables. She tapped her finger against her chin, studying Alice

rather than the flowers. “What would you change about this arrangement?”

Alice approached the display, her mind drifting between the delicate blooms before her and the events on the road. How peculiar that such minor details could matter so much now. Roses and lilies formed the heart of the composition, their heavy blooms demanding attention, while delicate sprays of smaller flowers filled the spaces between.

A strange lightness bubbled in her chest as she considered the flowers. Her thoughts instead wandered to how Victor’s gentle hands had smoothed her hair—straightened her dress—touched her cheek.

“Take your time,” the dowager murmured. “A lady must learn to trust her eye.”

Alice continued her inspection. She pointed to the left side.

“The balance is off. See how the right catches the light? The left needs something to answer it—perhaps more baby’s breath? Just there, to create a sense of movement.”

Alice was amazed at how naturally these trivial observations came to her now. It felt as though floating through a dream, a dream that would not end.

“Interesting.” The dowager’s expression revealed nothing. “And you would not add more roses instead?”

“No, my lady.” Alice’s fingers traced the edge of a petal. “The roses are beautiful, but too many would overwhelm the composition.”

A slight smile played at the corner of the dowager’s mouth. Without comment, she moved to a side table where crystal decanters and glasses had been arranged. She poured a measure of punch and handed it to Alice.

“The servants prepared this earlier. Tell me your thoughts.”

Alice took a careful sip, letting the liquid rest on her tongue. She swallowed, focusing on the present moment. Sweet notes of berry and wine dominated, but underneath ...

“The balance is off here as well,” she said. “The sweetness drowns out the subtle flavors. More lemonade would brighten it, let the others shine through.”

“And if I told you this recipe came directly from the Duchess of Kent?”

She hesitated only a moment before responding, “Then I would say that even duchesses occasionally misjudge proportion, my lady.”

The dowager’s laugh was sharp and delighted. “Well said! Thompson,” she called to a hovering servant, “bring us more lemons. It seems we have some adjustments to make.”

As the servant hurried off, the dowager gave Alice an appraising look. “You have quite the eye for detail, my dear. And you’re not afraid to speak your mind, when asked directly. Both valuable qualities in a?—“

In a duchess.

Then dowager caught herself, smile turning mysterious. “Well. In many situations.”

Through the open windows, movement in the gardens caught Alice’s eye. She spotted Victor and Elias, and her heart quickened—not from fear this time, but from something else entirely. They were sparring, their coats discarded, wearing only their light undershirts with buttons loosened against the afternoon heat.

Alice found herself drawn to the window. Elias moved with the same grace he

showed in dancing, his muscled forearms exposed where he'd rolled his sleeves to the elbows. The two men circled each other with practiced ease, trading playful jabs and laughing between bouts.

"How vulgar men can be," the dowager said, appearing at Alice's elbow. "Though I notice you do not seem particularly offended by the display."

When Alice didn't react at all, staring out into nothing, the dowager's tone shifted slightly.

"I couldn't help but notice His Grace seemed rather vexed after speaking with you earlier."

When Alice remained silent, unable to find the words to explain, the dowager changed tack.

"No matter. It seems you've managed something far more impressive—bringing the dog to heel. Even more so, I do believe Victor may think you are part of his pack now. Not many could have managed that."

"I do not think anyone could bring Captain Lacey to heel," Alice said softly.

The dowager let out a bark of laughter.

"Oh, you would be surprised. That one is easily tamed by the right woman." She sighed, her gaze drifting past the gardens. Something in her expression seemed distant, lost in memory.

Then she shook herself, turning back to Alice with renewed purpose.

"Here, I need your help with this ..."

The dowager turned away from the window, motioning Alice toward a table laden with decorations still waiting to be arranged. But Alice's mind lingered on that curious moment—on the dowager's words about Captain Lacey. There seemed to be layers of history there that Alice wasn't sure she wished to dig into.

Not long ago, she had stood in the middle of the road, ready to let darkness claim her. Now she found herself arranging flowers and tasting punch, watching men spar in gardens. She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath.

She should be hysterical, her tears should be staining her dress... that would be the normal reaction to such a dramatic event, wouldn't it?

Not whatever this was. Perhaps this was what plodding on looked like. In her mind, she was back on the road, Victor's breath near her ear.

Day by day. Hour by hour. Moment by moment.

CHAPTER 18

The whist tournament filled one of Fairfax Hall's grandest rooms with laughter and excited chatter that echoed off the gilt-edged ceiling. Guests crowded around tables draped in emerald velvet, their voices competing with the gentle clink of crystal as players shifted in their chairs. Marble columns rose above, wrapped in fresh roses and trailing ivy, their perfume mixing with the heady scent of punch and excitement.

Alice entered on her mother's arm, her fingers trembling slightly against Mrs. Montrose's sleeve. Her side ached where Victor had plucked her from death's path, and she was certain a spectacular bruise bloomed beneath her gown where she'd landed in the brambles. She wore one of the new gowns that seemed to appear at her chamber door with alarming frequency—gifts from the dowager that felt oddly timed, given it was her birthday they celebrated. This one was of pale blue silk that whispered against the floor when she moved, its color shifting from robin's egg to twilight, depending on how the light caught the fabric. The effect made her feel simultaneously more confident and more exposed than she'd felt in days, especially given the events of the afternoon.

Mrs. Montrose had spent hours apologizing profusely while Miss Eastridge prepared Alice for the evening.

"My nerves quite got the better of me," she had said again and again, wringing her handkerchief as she paced the chamber. "You do understand, my dear?"

Alice had watched her mother's reflection in the mirror as she dressed, maintaining what she hoped was an empathetic expression, while darkness writhed in her chest.

She had accepted the apologies, feeling hollow inside as Miss Eastridge added rouge to her cheeks.

“However did your hair get in such a state?” Miss Eastridge had asked during a quiet moment. Her quick fingers worked through the snarls, her expression growing increasingly puzzled. “This is not the way I fixed it this morning.”

Alice couldn’t bring herself to admit that it had been Captain Lacey who had fixed her appearance after saving her life—that his deft hands had proved surprisingly gentle as he’d smoothed her hair and straightened her dress. She’d almost been sad to see his handiwork undone. Instead, she’d mumbled something about attempting to fix it herself, earning a disapproving click of the tongue from their maid.

And now she stood with her mama, glittering in the lights, as if the morning’s events had not happened at all.

They paused at the refreshment table, where footmen moved with practiced grace between crystal decanters and silver trays. Mrs. Montrose sampled the punch and made a face.

“Far too much lemon,” she declared, setting her glass down with a sharp clink. “Whoever mixed this batch should be dismissed immediately.”

Alice did not have the heart to tell her she had been the one to approve of the drink.

“I rather like it,” Alice said, surprising herself with the casual disagreement. The tart brightness of the drink matched her mood—sharp and uncertain. Just a week ago, she would have nodded along with whatever assessment her mother made.

She must be going mad.

Lady Fairfax approached them then, her movements as fluid as water. She wore a gown of deep violet silk that caught the silver embroidery at the neckline, drawing the eye to a diamond broach. No common flowers for the countess. Her light hair was arranged in elaborate coils adorned with precious stones that winked in the candlelight.

“That gown suits you beautifully, Miss Montrose,” Lady Fairfax said warmly. “Much better than it ever looked on me.”

Mrs. Montrose’s eyes widened. “This is your gown?”

“Indeed.” Lady Fairfax’s smile held no trace of falsehood. She gestured to one of the nearby Whist tables where two women already sat, their own flower pins catching the light. “Mrs. Montrose, won’t you join our table? We’re in need of a fourth.”

They approached the table, and Alice watched her mother’s quick assessment of the single empty chair.

But before Mrs. Montrose could voice the obvious issue of seating, a familiar voice spoke from behind them.

“There is room at our table for you, Miss Montrose.”

Alice nearly jumped out of her skin at Captain Lacey’s voice. When she turned to face him, something shifted in her perception, like a painting viewed in an entirely new light. His chestnut hair caught the candlelight like burnished copper, and even his perpetually furrowed brow seemed somehow ... appealing. The officer’s uniform he wore fit his broad shoulders perfectly, emphasizing the military bearing that radiated from his very stance.

She took a quick sip of punch to hide her confusion at this new awareness of him, the

lemon tartness shocking her back to her senses.

“What do you say, Miss Montrose?” Victor’s eyebrow arched as he motioned to the adjacent table, his expression deceptively casual. “Fancy a game?”

Her stomach dropped as she spotted the Duke of Gainsbury at the table. Elias shuffled a deck of beautifully illustrated cards, the backs decorated with intricate flower patterns in gold leaf. He hadn’t noticed her yet, and every muscle in her body tensed at the prospect of facing him again.

“How absolutely lovely!” Lady Fairfax clapped her hands together. The obvious delight in her voice made Alice suspect a conspiracy—one confirmed when she caught the dowager raising her crystal glass in a knowing wink from across the room.

“Enjoy yourself, Mama,” Alice said with forced cheer as Lady Fairfax finally coaxed her mother to the other table.

But Alice herself remained frozen, staring at the back of Elias’s head. His dark hair was perfectly arranged, yet she could see tension in the set of his shoulders, in the way he held himself just a fraction too still.

Victor stepped closer, his voice dropping to a low murmur.

“Do not worry. He does not bite.”

“No, but he can land a punch,” Alice replied, glancing sidelong at him. “Or ten.”

Victor’s face transformed into an expression of exaggerated shock that somehow made his severe features even more striking.

“Were you spying on us, Lady Rose?”

“If by spying you mean I witnessed His Grace thoroughly trounce you in the garden, then yes.”

“Well, trust me when I say he will not strike you.” Victor extended his hand. “Come.”

When she hesitated, rooted to the spot, his fingers wiggled playfully. Despite her racing heart at the prospect of facing Elias again, she found herself reaching for Victor’s offered hand. Something steadying flowed through the contact—like finding solid ground after walking on ice. When he released her to pull out her chair, she felt suddenly unmoored.

Elias had noticed her by now. He rose stiffly, his chair scraping against the floor as he executed a proper—if somewhat mechanical—bow. When he straightened, he cast Victor a look of unmistakable displeasure.

“I thought Miss Montrose might join us for the tournament,” Victor said with a false innocence.

“I need not stay if His Grace would prefer otherwise,” Alice ventured carefully.

“Nonsense,” Elias replied, though his jaw remained tight. “Please, join us.”

Lord Fairfax chose that moment to rise and address the room, his rich voice carrying over the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we shall play in progressive rounds. The victors of each table will advance until we crown our champion, who shall receive the title of Garden Sovereign and wear the ceremonial wreath for the remainder of the evening.”

A footman stepped forward, bearing an elaborate crown woven from fresh flowers

interspersed with delicate sprays of baby's breath and trailing ivy. The creation earned appreciative murmurs from the crowd, though Alice noticed Victor's lip curl slightly at the sight.

As they took their seats, he turned to Mrs. Montrose at the next table.

"I personally think His Grace would look lovely in flowers. What say you?"

Both Alice and Elias shot him exasperated looks as they gathered their cards. The tension between them crackled like lightning before a storm—Elias wouldn't meet her eyes, his usually carefree expression replaced by obvious strain.

The first hand proceeded in painful silence. Alice studied her cards without really seeing them, too aware of every slight movement from the duke beside her. Their arms nearly brushed once as they both reached to play, causing them both to freeze momentarily before jerking away.

After watching this stilted display, Victor rolled his eyes heavenward.

"You are both insufferable."

"I do not know what you expect us to do," Alice said, laying down a card with more force than necessary.

"Must I act as your nursemaid?" Victor set his cards face-down with deliberate care, his tone shifting to something harder. "Very well. Here is the truth of it. I treated Miss Montrose abominably—spied upon her, spread rumors, stole her drink to paint her as a lush. I chased away Miss Jennings by informing her that her father's gambling debts would make her a most unsuitable match for any gentleman of means."

After his confession, Victor played his card with precise, almost military efficiency. His sharp gaze moved between Alice and Elias as he continued his litany of sins, each one punctuated by the soft snap of cards against velvet.

“So you see,” he concluded, “she has every reason to despise me, especially since I just won the trick. Your turn, Your Grace.”

Elias set down his entire hand and buried his face in his hands, his broad shoulders slumping. “Good Lord, Lacey, what have you done?”

“Mucked things up beyond repair,” Victor replied cheerfully, gathering the cards for the next hand. “But it is not too late for you.”

Elias shook his head, muttering under his breath before turning to Alice. The candlelight caught in his grey eyes, making them look almost silver. “Miss Montrose?—”

“Perhaps this is not the best venue for such a sensitive conversation,” she interrupted quickly, glancing at the nearby tables where other players were already straining to listen.

“Then let us speak tomorrow morning, on the lake.” His voice dropped lower, meant for her ears alone. “Just you and I. Would that please you?”

Alice’s heart fluttered uncertainly. Her relationship with the duke seemed as changeable as April weather—sunshine one moment, storms the next. But perhaps away from scheming mamas and meddling captains, they might finally understand one another.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I would like that very much.”

“Excellent,” Victor declared, dealing the next hand with practiced efficiency. “Now play your cards before the Dowager Countess sends someone to hurry us along.”

The tournament progressed through several rounds, each victory bringing them closer to the final table. Alice relaxed as the game continued, even managing to laugh when Victor dramatically clutched his chest after she played a particularly clever card.

“Such betrayal!” he declared, though his eyes sparkled with genuine amusement.

The final table formed with both Victor and the dowager among its players. The older woman’s eyes glittered dangerously as she played, matching Victor’s intensity with her own brand of calculated strategy. Other guests gathered around to watch, their whispered commentary beneath the snap of cards.

When Victor emerged victorious, the room erupted in delighted laughter as he was brought forward to receive his crown. The wreath sat rakishly atop his auburn hair, and Alice couldn’t help but notice how the blooms brought out the green flecks in his olive eyes. He looked absurdly handsome despite—or perhaps because of—the silly decoration, especially when he struck an exaggerated regal pose for his audience.

“Come,” Elias said beside her, offering his arm. “Let us listen to the pianoforte. I hear the lady is the best in the county.”

Alice hesitated, glancing toward Victor. He caught her eye across the room and gave an almost imperceptible nod of approval before turning away to accept congratulations from the other guests. Something warm bloomed in her chest at his silent blessing.

As she took Elias’s arm and allowed him to lead her away, Alice felt strangely steady on her feet. Whether that steadiness came from the duke beside her or the captain they were leaving behind, she couldn’t quite say.

Perhaps she didn't need to know just yet.

CHAPTER 19

S unlight sparkled across the lake's surface as Alice approached, her boots crunching softly against the gravel path. She caught sight of two figures near the small dock—Elias and Victor standing close together, deep in conversation. Their heads were bent toward each other, Victor's hand gripping the duke's shoulder with obvious urgency. Neither had noticed her approach.

As she drew closer, she could make out the tension in Elias's stance, the way his hands moved as he spoke in low, intense tones. Whatever they discussed seemed deeply important. She cleared her throat delicately, announcing her presence before she could overhear anything not meant for her ears.

Both men turned sharply. Victor's serious expression melted into something more casual as he stepped back from his friend.

"I shall make myself scarce," he said, pausing briefly beside Elias, his voice dropping to barely more than a whisper. "Give her the Poet's Treatment."

Though Alice couldn't make sense of the strange instruction, Elias seemed to understand perfectly. He gave a solemn nod.

"I will."

Victor offered them both a quick bow before sauntering off toward Fairfax Hall, his red coat a bright splash of color against the morning green. Alice watched him go, a curious warmth spreading through her chest.

“Good afternoon, Miss Montrose,” Elias said, bringing her attention back.

“Your Grace,” she replied, her words more clipped than he would have liked.

Elias approached the small rowboat tethered at the dock, his movements precise as he steadied it against the wooden planks. His grip was firm but gentle as he helped Alice aboard, the vessel rocking slightly beneath her feet. She settled onto the cushioned seat, arranging her pale yellow skirts carefully around her ankles.

The duke joined her with surprising grace for such a large man, though his weight made the boat dip precariously for a moment. He took up the oars, and soon they were gliding across the mirror-smooth surface of the lake.

The water spread out before them like polished glass, broken only by their rippling wake. Beyond its far shore, Alice could make out Violet Cottage nestled among towering oaks, its ivy-covered walls seeming both inviting and somehow melancholy in the morning light. Wisps of smoke rose from its chimney, curling lazily into the cloudless sky.

Alice leaned over slightly, catching her reflection in the still water. Her new morning dress—another gift from the dowager—was the color of fresh cream with delicate embroidered rosebuds at the collar and cuffs. The sun beat down with surprising intensity for the season, and she opened her parasol, creating a small bit of shade.

Elias rowed them toward the center of the lake with smooth, practiced strokes. The silence between them grew taut, broken only by the gentle splash of oars and distant birdsong. Alice’s mind whirled with all the things left unsaid between them, each passing moment making her more acutely aware of his presence.

Finally, he spoke.

“I must apologize for how I have treated you,” he said, his voice carrying clearly across the small space between them. “It appears some cruel twists of fate have dealt us a rather bad hand again and again. Despite that, it is no excuse.”

“You keep apologizing, and I will continue to tell you there is nothing to apologize for.” Alice met his gaze steadily. “You were right to come to your friend’s aid.”

He rubbed his hands together, looking out across the water as though gathering his thoughts. “You know what they’re trying to do, do you not? Your mother, the Dowager Countess, Lacey, even Lady Fairfax ...”

She let out a breath through her nose.

“It has come to my attention that many of our acquaintances are playing the matchmaker.”

“May I speak frankly, Miss Montrose?” When she nodded, he continued, “I must confess, I am not very good at this.”

“At what?”

“At difficulty.” He shifted in his seat, the boat rocking slightly. “To be a duke is to live a charmed life, and I, the youngest with three sisters—why, I was doted upon, given a dukedom—a fortune. It opens so many doors that when one closes, it does not require me to face it. I move on to the next thing my fortune affords me.”

“It sounds as though you are very lucky indeed,” Alice whispered.

“I am. But it has not led to the life I wish for, caught in a cycle of fruitless endeavors. I am in my thirtieth year and have not yet taken a wife, whilst everyone around me is already wed with children. And here I am.”

“Surely you will find a suitable lady, no matter whom you choose.”

His face softened at her words, recognizing the truth in them. He reached for her hands, and she found herself struck by their warmth, their strength. These could be her husband’s hands, if she only played her part well. She offered him her prettiest smile in return.

“You are lovely,” he said, “when you are not overcome with illness or within the general vicinity of Captain Lacey.”

Alice sighed, closing her eyes as she squeezed his hands.

“I know it was wrong to gossip, and I?—”

“It is understandable. There are times I forget just how dark that man’s heart can get.” Elias stared into the water, some memory clearly weighing on him before he blinked it away. “But he remains one of the most important persons in my life. And if I were to contemplate matrimony, she who becomes my wife would need to abide his presence at social gatherings for the rest of our days. If you truly find him so intolerable, then this cannot proceed any further.”

Alice nodded. It was a reasonable request, though it vexed her that Victor Lacey should have such influence over her potential happiness.

“I have spoken with him about tempering his poor manners,” Elias continued, choosing his words with care. “And while I cannot expect promises from you, as we are not engaged to each other ... it would mean a great deal to me if you were to cultivate an amiable relationship with the man.”

“I understand. Thank you for being so forthright.”

“As much as I adore the people in that building,” he gestured toward Fairfax Hall, “there’s a way we dance around our problems rather than meet them directly. I must admit, it is something I admire about Captain Lacey. In the past few years, he has determined to free himself of most social obligations.”

“You’re telling me he was not always so direct?”

“He has always been somewhat rough around the edges, but there was a time when he was the very model of genteel behavior.”

“What happened?”

“It is not my story to tell. He is a private man, but perhaps he will confide in you once he warms to you.”

Alice nodded, her gaze drifting back to Fairfax Hall, gleaming in the distance. The dowager’s words echoed in her mind—that Victor had already warmed to her, despite his prickly exterior. She wondered at the disparity between what everyone seemed to see in the man.

A question that had been nagging at her suddenly surfaced.

“This morning, when I arrived, Captain Lacey said something to you. ‘Give her the Poet’s Treatment.’ What did he mean by that?”

Elias took up the paddles again, adjusting their position on the lake. He paused with the oars suspended, droplets falling like diamonds back into the water as he considered his response.

“There was a person we both knew, whom we nicknamed the Poet,” he said carefully.

“This person was kind to anyone, almost to a fault. I believe Victor wished me to

show you similar consideration.”

“The Poet’s Treatment,” she echoed softly.

“I promise you, I rarely lose my composure as I did yesterday,” Elias said as he rowed them around the lake, his muscles working visibly beneath his coat. “Though I have had my share of altercations with rogues and scoundrels at various establishments, only my sisters and Lacey have witnessed such displays of temper. Should you ever find me in such a state again, pray, correct my behavior. I would be grateful for it.”

“I shall hold you to that promise.”

He paused for a moment, then took a breath.

“I do not mean to be too forward or speak out of place,” Elias said as they floated listlessly. “But I feel a tug to say it, anyway. If you need someone to speak to, an ear of someone who will truly listen, know that I am willing to be that. Anytime you need.”

She gave him a queer look, unsure why he thought she would need his ear, unless he had sensed perhaps the chaos of her interior life. But she finally nodded, and that seemed to be enough for him.

“I look forward to knowing you better during the remainder of this holiday, Miss Montrose.”

“And I, you.”

She watched as he rowed—the sunlight catching the powerful lines of his shoulders, the graceful movement of his arms. He was everything a woman could want—kind,

capable, and undeniably handsome. Yet her thoughts kept straying to his condition about Victor. She shook her head slightly, trying to banish the captain from her mind. She should focus on the duke before her—this beautiful gentleman who could be her salvation.

When they reached the dock, Elias jumped out first, his boots splashing slightly in the shallow water. He extended his hand to help her from the boat, and when she was safely on solid ground, he did not release her. She turned to face him and found him much closer than expected, his grey eyes intense as they met hers.

He lifted her hand to his lips, maintaining eye contact as he pressed a kiss to her gloved knuckles. She could feel the warmth of his mouth through the thin fabric, and waited for her heart to race, for her breath to catch, for any sensation at all.

She should feel it. Love. Adoration.

Something.

The moment was more than perfect—the sunlit lake, the handsome duke, his tender gesture—and she felt only a mild flutter, like a bird beating its wings against a cage, trying to reach something outside, bright, and shining and real, just beyond its grasp.

Still, she offered him her most radiant smile—the very picture of a young lady enchanted by a duke’s attention.

And in that moment, he believed her performance entirely.

CHAPTER 20

The next few days passed in a blur of carefully orchestrated activities. While mornings and evenings featured structured entertainments, the afternoons offered more freedom to explore the estate grounds. Elias took Alice horseback riding, patiently teaching her the basics despite her obvious inexperience. She could only compare it to her frantic ride with Victor after her rescue, but Elias was a gentle instructor, and she caught on quickly enough to earn his genuine praise.

Another afternoon found them touring the house with Lord and Lady Fairfax and Mrs. Montrose as they viewed the family's impressive art collection. While many paintings depicted still lifes of flowers, others showed family members or grand mythological scenes. Elias always offered his arm as they walked, making clever observations that drew laughter from the entire party. Alice studied him during these moments, noting how his strong features caught the light, how his perfect manners and effortless charm seemed to win over everyone around him.

As she spent more time in his company, felt his touch, and shared in pleasant conversation, the emptiness she'd initially felt in his presence grew warmer. It wasn't an all-consuming fire, but perhaps it was enough to warm her hands on a chilly night. Sometimes, she told herself, that had to be enough.

One particularly fine morning found them taking breakfast tea on one of Fairfax Hall's many terraces. Climbing roses wound their way up ornate stone pillars, their blooms cascading over the iron latticework overhead, creating a natural canopy above the crisp white tablecloth. Steam rose from the fine china teapot as Mrs. Montrose settled into her chair, her fingers already twitching with barely contained enthusiasm

to begin her conversation with the duke.

The sound of boot heels clicking sharply against marble echoed through the space. Alice turned toward the sound to find Captain Lacey at the terrace doorway. He stood perfectly still, one eyebrow arched impossibly high as his gaze swept over their gathering. The corners of his mouth turned downward, deepening the lines around his eyes. The peaceful morning air seemed to chill several degrees as he surveyed them, his fingers drumming once against the doorframe before he stepped forward into their sanctuary.

Mrs. Montrose went rigid in her seat, her teacup frozen halfway to her lips. The captain had made no secret of his disdain for her, having publicly dressed her down for abandoning Alice on the road. His accusations about Mrs. Montrose still burned in Alice's memory, and the way his eyes fixed on her mother now held no hint of remorse.

"Ah, Lacey!" Elias rose with obvious pleasure, either oblivious to or choosing to ignore the sudden tension. "Perfect timing. Will you join us for tea?"

Victor's gaze swept the terrace, lingering briefly on Alice before returning to Mrs. Montrose with predatory intensity.

"Your Grace is too kind."

An uncomfortable silence fell as Victor took his seat directly across from Alice. She could practically feel the fury radiating from him, matching the enraged expression on her mother's face. The very air seemed to crackle with hostility.

Elias cleared his throat, his usual easy manner somewhat strained.

"Captain Lacey, perhaps you have something you wish to say to Mrs. Montrose?"

Victor's jaw worked as though he were chewing glass. His hand tightened around the arm of his chair until his knuckles showed white. Finally, through gritted teeth and with the falsest smile Alice had ever witnessed, he spoke.

"Mrs. Montrose." Victor's words emerged clipped and precise. "I must ... apologize for my unseemly behavior. It was unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman to speak so forcefully about matters that should remain private."

The careful emphasis he placed on certain words made it clear the apology was anything but sincere. Alice watched her mother's fingers tighten around her teacup until she feared it might shatter. After several tense moments and a pointed look from Elias, Mrs. Montrose managed a curt nod.

"Your apology is accepted, Captain Lacey." The words seemed to physically pain her.

"Excellent!" Elias beamed, though something in his expression suggested he wasn't entirely convinced by the exchange. "Now then, shall we begin? I believe Mrs. Montrose had just asked about my family."

A footman appeared to serve Victor, who accepted his tea with mechanical politeness. As her mother launched into her questions about Elias's sisters, Alice felt something brush against her leg beneath the table. She stifled a gasp, glancing up to find Victor watching her with dangerous intensity. His eyes flicked meaningfully to her plate, then back to her face.

She recognized this game now—his particular way of stealing food from her plate. Holding in a sigh, Alice let her hand hover over the various offerings. The cucumber sandwich earned a slight shake of his head. The melon received similar disapproval. When her fingers paused above a sugar-dusted biscuit, his eyebrows rose in obvious interest. The man was an unabashed sweet tooth.

Without breaking from her perfect posture or missing a beat in the conversation, she slipped the sweet onto his plate. Then, feeling rather daring, she gave him a swift kick beneath the table—perhaps harder than intended.

Victor let out a strangled yelp that drew everyone’s attention. He coughed violently, pounding his chest with one fist as Elias half-rose in concern.

“Wrong pipe,” he managed between coughs, his face having gone a deep shade of red. The duke lowered himself back to his seat, brow furrowed.

Mrs. Montrose’s lips pressed into a thin line of disapproval before she turned back to Elias, her voice growing warm with enthusiasm.

“As I was saying, Your Grace—your sisters all being married with children—you must be eager to start a family of your own. Alice comes from excellent stock, you know.”

“Mother!” Alice protested, mortified. She risked a glance at Victor, whose expression had grown suddenly distant.

“Excellent stock indeed!” Mrs. Montrose continued, undeterred. “And Alice has always wished for a large family.”

Elias shifted slightly in his chair, though his smile remained perfectly pleasant.

“Children are certainly a blessing. My sister Elizabeth only just gave birth to the most delightful twins?—”

“Oh, twins!” Mrs. Montrose clasped her hands together. “How fortunate you mention that. Alice’s grandmother bore twins twice. It runs in the family, you see.”

Alice stared into her teacup, wishing she could disappear into its depths.

“Mama, surely His Grace does not wish to discuss?—”

“And Alice has such a gentle disposition!” Mrs. Montrose gestured toward Alice as though she were displaying prize livestock. “A most valuable virtue in managing a household.”

“Indeed, I must concede that point,” Elias managed.

“One must think of these things,” Mrs. Montrose pressed on. “A duke requires heirs, after all. And Alice has such wide hips—excellent for bearing sons.”

Alice felt her cheeks burning as she glanced up at Elias, who tugged at his cravat nervously. She could hardly bear to look at anyone, but she could not help noticing how Victor’s knuckles had gone white where he gripped his teacup.

Victor cleared his throat, before his drawling voice cut through the air.

“I find childbearing to be a rather dull topic of conversation. Wouldn’t you say, Your Grace?”

Alice watched in fascination as something passed between Victor and Elias—some silent communication that made the duke pale. He fumbled with his words, his usual poise momentarily deserting him before he smoothly redirected the conversation.

“I, erm ... quite. Mrs. Montrose, might you tell me more about your village life? Where did Alice spend her childhood? I confess I know little of the area.”

As her mother launched into details about their modest country existence, describing gardens that could hardly compare to Fairfax Hall’s splendor, Alice noticed Victor

had grown unusually quiet. His elbow rested on the table—a shocking breach of manners—with his hand partially covering his mouth as he stared into the distance. Something in his expression made her chest tighten. She had never seen him look so lost before, as though his mind had wandered somewhere far beyond their pleasant morning tea.

Without thinking, she stretched her foot beneath the table, tapping his boot playfully. The contact jolted him from whatever strange mood had claimed him, his attention snapping to her face. She offered him a questioning smile, curious what thoughts could have drawn him into such obvious distraction.

The change in him was immediate and striking. Warmth crept into his expression, an answering smile growing beneath his partially hidden mouth. Whatever had troubled him moments ago vanished completely as their eyes met across the table. His foot found hers again, returning the gentle tap, but then stayed pressed against her. The contact sent warmth spreading through her entire body, catching her breath in her throat.

“Alice?” Her mother’s sharp voice cut through the moment. “His Grace asked you a question.”

“I beg your pardon?” Alice turned to find Elias watching her with an odd expression. She wondered if he had noticed her silent conversation with Victor.

“I merely wondered if you shared your mother’s love of decorating,” he said carefully.

“Erm ...”

Before she could respond, a servant appeared to refresh their tea. Victor withdrew his foot, leaving Alice feeling strangely bereft. As cups were filled and plates rearranged,

she found her attention drawn repeatedly to his hands—the way they moved with precise control, how his fingers curled around the delicate china with surprising gentleness. She wondered at the contradiction of him—how a man could be simultaneously so harsh and so careful.

The conversation drifted to safer topics, but something had shifted in the air between them. Each time their eyes met, that same spark of curiosity passed between them. She had so many questions about him, about what lay beneath that mask he seemed to don.

When the tea finally concluded, Elias rose to escort Mrs. Montrose inside, ever the gentleman. Alice reached for her shawl, but Victor was quicker. He stood with fluid grace, gathering the fabric in his hands.

“Allow me,” he said, his voice low enough that only she could hear.

Alice’s breath caught as he stepped behind her. Time seemed to slow as he draped the shawl across her shoulders, his fingers deliberately brushing against the bare skin at the nape of her neck as he adjusted the fabric. The touch lasted barely a moment, yet heat bloomed wherever his skin met hers. When she turned to thank him, the intensity in his gaze made her heart stop entirely.

Then he was gone, striding away across the terrace, his scarlet coat a bright flame against the morning light. Alice pressed her hand to her chest, trying to steady her racing pulse. She had thought tea would be another bid to win His Grace’s favor, yet somehow it had become something else completely.

“Miss Montrose?” Elias called from the doorway. “Shall we join the others?”

She gathered herself, smoothing her skirts before turning to follow. But she could still feel the phantom warmth of Victor’s fingers against her neck, like a brand against her

skin.

And that feeling, she decided firmly, was something best forgotten entirely.

CHAPTER 21

Alice gathered her skirts as she made her way along the exterior path of the hedge maze. Their designated meeting place lay on the far side of the lake, at the boathouse near Violet Cottage. Though her mother had, of course, insisted on accompanying them, Alice had orchestrated her escape with care. Social etiquette was more relaxed in the countryside with regard to walking with gentlemen, but she knew she couldn't maintain her composure with Mrs. Montrose hovering about. The day was far too important to risk such a distraction.

She'd enlisted Miss Eastridge's help, sending the maid to occupy her mother while she slipped away. The guilt of such deception pricked at her conscience, but she pushed it aside. This was the only way—at least, that was what the dowager had told her.

As she rounded the path toward the boathouse, she found Victor already waiting. He leaned against the weathered structure with an air of impatience, his eyes sharp as he watched her approach.

"You look rather like a mouse fleeing a cat," he said.

"Something of the sort," she replied, reaching up to ensure no wayward curls had escaped her careful arrangement. Victor rolled his eyes at her preening.

"You look perfectly adequate," Victor said flatly. "His Grace would think you handsome if you arrived wearing the Queen's jewels or a pauper's rags."

Alice shook her head in exasperation.

“You are a fool.”

“Oh? Enlighten me.”

The words seemed to pour forth of their own accord, as though years of her mother’s lessons had taken possession of her very tongue.

“To think that such details are of no consequence. You may claim that appearances count little in matters of the heart, but even if we do not make these assessments purposefully, the smallest details work upon our judgment, like clockwork gears turning in the back of our minds.”

Victor’s brow arched impossibly higher.

“You believe that if a man is truly in love, a hair out of place would sway his affections? Then I say such a man was never in love to begin with.”

“And do you believe His Grace is in love with me?” The question slipped out before she could stop it.

He tilted his head, studying her with an unsettling intensity before his lips curved into an enigmatic smile. Then he raised his hands in surrender.

“I was merely attempting to be agreeable with you. Is that not why we find ourselves here?”

“I suppose so,” Alice said, her face heating as she looked away.

Starting their outing with a lecture hardly boded well for the rest of the day. She

scanned the path around the lake for any sign of Elias, but saw nothing. Beside her, Victor pulled out his pocket watch with obvious impatience.

They waited in uncomfortable silence until a figure appeared hurrying along the path—not the duke, but rather a maid from Fairfax Hall. The woman dropped into a quick curtsy before them.

“Miss Montrose? Captain Lacey?” When Alice nodded, the maid continued, “I regret to inform you that His Grace has taken ill with a headache and cannot join you today. He hopes you both might enjoy the walk without him and looks forward to seeing you at supper this evening.”

Alice turned to Victor with concern, but found him looking altogether too amused by this development.

“Do you find something amusing, sir?” asked Alice.

“Surely you do not believe His Grace truly has a headache?”

The realization hit her like a thunderbolt. This was no accident—Elias had orchestrated the entire thing. He wished for them to spend time together, to prove she could tolerate Victor’s presence in her life. She shook her head slowly.

“He deceived us.”

Victor’s smile widened as he gestured toward the tree line where the path began.

“Shall we proceed, then? Ladies first.”

Alice cast a longing glance back at Fairfax Hall, regretting sneaking off without her mother. To be alone with Captain Lacey, even in the relatively permissive

countryside, might prove risky to her already precarious reputation.

“Or,” Victor added, his tone deceptively light, “I could inform His Grace that you found my company so objectionable you refused to walk with me at all.”

Alice’s hands tightened on her reticule as she glared at him. He seemed entirely too pleased with himself, wielding the threat like a perfectly aimed pistol. Without deigning to respond, she swept past him onto the path.

“There we are,” he said, smugness dripping from every syllable.

The forest path twisted before them. Dappled sunlight streamed through ancient oaks to paint patterns on the moss-covered ground. The uneven terrain proved challenging in her walking boots, requiring all her concentration to navigate without falling on her face. The physical demands provided an excuse to avoid conversation with her unwanted companion.

Victor followed at a considerate distance, allowing her to set the pace. Though she knew he could easily overtake her with his long, unhurried strides, he made no complaint about their slow progress as she scrabbled along the path, face flushed and breath coming in quick gasps. His very presence seemed to press against her back, driving her to near madness—all the more so because she could practically feel his calm, measured breathing behind her while she struggled forward like a flustered hen. This went on for some time, the sunlight warming during its descent.

“My, but you’re chatty today,” he finally said, breaking the silence.

“Pardon me, sir,” Alice said, out of breath, “but I am only attempting to focus on my footing so as to not fall on my backside.”

“One would think such wide, childbearing hips would make the journey effortless,”

Victor said, the sarcasm dripping like venom from his mouth.

Alice let out a scandalized gasp as she sidestepped a treacherous mud puddle. When she reached solid ground, she whirled to face him.

“I must admit, I cannot bear you any longer.”

“And here I thought we were having such a pleasant stroll.”

She ignored him, the words spilling out before she could stop them.

“I wish to have an amicable relationship with you, sir. His Grace considers it important that we speak without constantly snapping at one another. That is why we are here.” Her fingers twisted nervously with her reticule’s strap. “I should be able to walk with you. I should be able to manage this simple task as any other lady would.”

Victor watched her outburst with those sharp eyes, his brows arched in curiosity as she continued.

“I can be the proper lady society expects when I am with His Grace. He makes it easy for me to fall into that role—to be the genteel woman I was trained to become. But that persona vanishes entirely in your presence. Every misstep, every failure seems to occur when you are near or on my mind.” She caught the slight arch of his brow at those last words, a fleeting change in his expression that made her heart stutter. “His Grace expects that perfect lady to win your friendship, but she disappears like morning mist, and I fear it shall cost me everything.”

Victor was quiet for a long moment, as though turning her words over like stones in his mind.

“Why would anyone wish you to be anything other than yourself?”

The question tore through her, though she fought to maintain her composure.

“Because the woman before you makes herself sick upon dukes at parties. She lacks even a modicum of grace or decorum. The woman before you is not a lady, but a fraud. The lady I wish His Grace to know does not make such blunders, does not speak out of turn, does not—” she faltered, “—does not go on woodland outings with men unchaperoned.”

She had expected mockery, but Victor’s expression remained thoughtful as he brought two fingers to his chin.

“And this is ... my fault?”

“Yes ... no! Gah!” She kicked at a root in frustration, immediately regretting it as pain shot through her toe. She bit her lip to keep from cursing. “You see? Propriety abandons me in your presence, and I cannot fathom why. I wish I could change it, wish I could maintain my facade for even a moment for His Grace’s sake, at least. If you could cease whatever spell you have cast upon me, I would be eternally grateful.”

A small smile played at the corners of his mouth as he slipped his hands into his pockets.

“Here, follow me. I recall there being a pleasant spot just ahead.”

Alice wished to argue—he had completely dismissed her concerns—but what could he truly say? Even if he somehow curbed his insufferable behavior, his mere presence was enough to unsettle her. Yet she followed anyway, her fingers digging into her reticule as she sped up to match his pace. He moved quickly, rushing ahead, only to pause and wait for her to catch up, like an eager hunting dog on the chase. Though he showed no signs of impatience, that only heightened her agitation.

Finally, they emerged onto a grassy overlook crowned by a giant gnarled oak tree. Victor turned to face her, hands on his hips.

“It seems we have some issues to work through.”

“Indeed,” Alice replied dryly.

Then, to her absolute horror, Victor began loosening his cravat. She spun around as he shrugged off his coat, her cheeks blazing.

“Sir! What in heaven’s name are you doing?”

“I believe you have some unresolved aggression that needs releasing. Now’s your only chance. We end it here and now.”

“And you propose to accomplish this by ... undressing ?”

She heard the soft thump of his coat hitting the grass, followed by the rustle of fabric as he rolled up his sleeves.

“Hit me.”

Alice turned back slowly, certain she had misheard.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Sometimes the best way to resolve an issue is to fight it out. We did it often enough in the regiment. Works wonders with His Grace when he’s in one of his moods—you saw it yourself.”

“Do I look like a common foot soldier to you?” She gestured at herself in

exasperation.

“Are you telling me you do not wish to have a go?” When she merely stared at him, he pressed on. “Not even one tiny strike? Just here?” He tapped his cheek with one finger.

“I do not know what sort of woman you take me for, but I am not some common brute.”

His eyes glittered dangerously.

“No? The lady who kicked me over afternoon tea seemed particularly brutal.”

He stepped closer until he was within arm’s reach, his athletic bearing making him seem larger than life. Though not as physically imposing as Elias, there was something wild about him that set her heart racing.

“Come now,” he goaded. “Surely you can do better than standing there like a startled fawn.”

With a cry of frustration, Alice flung her reticule at him, hitting him in the shin. She lunged forward to slap him, but he dodged with infuriating ease.

“I thought you wished for me to strike you,” she snarled.

“I never said I’d make it easy. Show me how much you wish to win His Grace’s heart.”

That insufferable smirk drove her to action. She yanked at the ribbon securing her bonnet, tossing it his way and missing. His bark of laughter only fueled her fury as she began unbuttoning her pelisse, needing freedom of movement. She threw that at

him too, causing him to giggle as he snatched it out of the air, tossing it over his shoulder.

“You odious, terrible, insufferable?—”

“Well, well, Lady Rose shows her spirit.”

She charged forward, fists connecting with his chest. He responded with a swift poke to her side that made her yelp—not painful, but startling.

“You cannot touch a lady in such a manner!”

“Oh, can I not?”

Another poke to her ribs sent her into a frenzy. She launched herself at him, raining blows against his chest and arms, carefully avoiding his face despite her rage. All the tension that had built between them, all her frustrations, came pouring out in a torrent. She cried out with each strike, cursing in a manner that would have given her mother apoplexy.

But it wasn't just her anger at Victor flowing out. It was everything—years of endless practice and correction, her mother's suffocating expectations, every misstep and failure since arriving at this cursed estate. She let it all go in a storm of fists and fury.

Victor's initial laughter faded as he seemed to sense the shift in her assault. Though he dodged some blows, he allowed others to land, accepting them as though pelted by the softest feather pillow. He retreated slowly until his back met the oak tree's trunk. Tears streamed unbidden down Alice's cheeks, but she barely noticed them as she continued her useless assault against his chest.

Finally, his hands caught her wrists, holding them firmly but gently. His gaze was

steady as she struggled against his grip.

“Let me go!” she demanded.

“You’ve proven yourself quite thoroughly.”

She twisted in his grasp.

“How would you like being held thus?”

Something flickered in his eyes before he allowed her to wrench free. She took the opportunity, moving to pin his wrists against the tree trunk.

“See? Not so pleasant, isn’t it?”

Their chests heaved with exertion, and Alice felt as though every nerve in her body was aflame. Though she knew he could easily break free, he allowed her to hold him there, appearing almost helpless despite his strength. His eyes had grown heavy-lidded, lips parted as he drew quick breaths. A healthy flush colored his cheeks.

“Well?” she demanded. “Have you nothing to say for yourself?”

He paused, studying her with that unfocused gaze before the words fell from his lips like honey.

“There’s a good girl.”

The phrase sent shivers cascading through her entire body. She became acutely aware of every detail—their mingled breath, his intoxicating scent, the heat radiating from him. If she leaned forward just slightly, their lips would meet. The very thought terrified her.

This was dangerous beyond measure.

After several tense moments, she released him and spun away, desperate to hide the turmoil on her face and the burning in her cheeks.

“Does that feel better?” he asked, his voice still rougher than usual.

She couldn’t answer immediately, still trying to comprehend what had transpired. Rather than releasing tension, their encounter had created something new and frightening within her—a pressure building like steam in a kettle.

“I am not certain,” she finally managed.

“Did it at least help you release some of that pent-up frustration?” he asked. She could hear the smirk in his voice.

“Perhaps such methods work for settling scores among soldiers,” she said stiffly, still facing away, “but I doubt the fairer sex is made for fighting.”

“Ah, using your sex as an excuse for weakness? And here I thought you had real fire in you.”

The taunt hit its mark. Alice whirled around, intending to strike his cheek, but her aim went awry. The butt of her palm connected solidly with his nose, far harder than she’d intended, channeling all her confused feelings into the blow.

His head snapped back, and they both froze in horror.

Within moments, blood began dripping freely from his nose onto the grass below. But when he looked at her again, his expression wasn’t one of anger—rather, he appeared thoroughly impressed.

“Now that,” he said, touching his bloodied nose gingerly, “is precisely what I was speaking of.”

CHAPTER 22

“O h heavens, there is so much blood!” Alice exclaimed. “I am so, so sorry. I do not know what overcame me.”

She stepped back as crimson droplets fell from Victor’s nose, beading on the emerald grass. Her stomach lurched at the sight—still not believing she had truly struck a decorated officer of His Majesty’s army.

“I shall be fine,” Victor said, his voice nasally and muffled. He prodded his nose gingerly, wincing at the touch.

“Is it broken?” she asked, hopping up and down on the balls of her feet anxiously.

Alice took a hesitant step forward, her hands hovering uncertainly in the space between them. She did not wish to touch him again, lest she cause another disaster, yet she felt wholly responsible for his condition.

“I do not believe so.” He pulled his hand away briefly, fresh blood immediately flowing down his chin. “Looks worse than it is.”

Alice barely heard his reassurance, her mind whirling with what she had done. She, who had struck no one in her life. The very thought made her feel lightheaded.

“We must call for a physician immediately,” she said, pacing back and forth. “We can return to Fairfax Hall and?—”

The words died as she looked up at the sky through the oak's branches. The afternoon light had grown dim, the sun lower on the horizon than she had expected. How long had they been out in the wood? Time seemed to move differently in Victor's presence—hours passing quickly. It was strange to note, as all other moments of her waking hours seemed to stretch—agonizing and endless.

"I did not even realize the time," she said. "It shall be night before we can return."

Victor tilted his head back, still attempting to stem the flow of blood. The sight of him—coat discarded, cravat missing, shirt spattered with crimson—made her bite her lip. If they returned to Fairfax Hall in such a state, the scandal would eclipse even her previous social missteps.

"Violet Cottage is on the way," Victor said through his plugged nose. "We might stop there so I can make myself presentable, and they shall be none the wiser during supper."

"My reputation already hangs by a thread merely being here with you," she hissed. "Do you think it would improve if I were to be discovered alone with you at Violet Cottage?"

He threw up his hands in exasperation, causing fresh blood to flow. A string of sputters escaped him as he pressed his palm back to his face, fingers now sticky with red.

Alice let out an exasperated sigh and retrieved her thrown reticule, withdrawing a fresh handkerchief.

"Here," she said, offering it to him. The delicate embroidered edges—which she had stitched herself—were about to be ruined.

His fingers brushed hers as he accepted it, sending goose pimples across her flesh. Victor pulled away and pressed the handkerchief to his nose.

“We must return to Fairfax Hall immediately,” Alice continued, wringing her hands as if that would rid her of the electric current his touch had given her. “Every moment we tarry makes this situation worse. What if someone has noticed our absence? What if they send out a search party?”

“Violet Cottage lies but a short distance from here. We need not stop for long.”

“Absolutely not.” Alice shook her head violently. “I cannot be seen anywhere near that cottage with you. Think of my reputation!”

Victor dabbed at his nose with the handkerchief. “And what of your reputation when we arrive at dinner looking as though we’ve been in a common brawl?”

“That is hardly?—”

“From my vantage,” his voice took on an edge of finality, “you have three choices: we can either walk through the doors of Fairfax Hall looking as we do now, you can traverse these woods alone, or you can wait at the entryway of Violet Cottage while I make myself presentable.”

Alice studied the darkening sky. Though she had courted death mere days ago, something within her had shifted. The thought of wandering these woods alone held no appeal. She was not ready to surrender to darkness, not when she had only just felt its grip loosening.

“I cannot show up with you in such a state,” she said, “and I cannot walk these woods at night, therefore ...”

“Excellent.” The word emerged slightly garbled as he gestured to his discarded coat and cravat. “Might you assist me then?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Alice gathered his things and approached. Her fingers trembled slightly as she helped him into his coat, doing her best to smooth the wrinkles from the fabric. When she tucked his cravat into his pocket, she realized how comfortable she had become in his presence. Their earlier altercation had changed something between them, though she could not quite say what.

“You should not have goaded me into violence,” she said, straightening his lapels with perhaps more force than necessary.

“On the contrary, I think it did you well.” Despite his bloodied state, his eyes held a hint of mischief. “Though perhaps next time we might practice with less damaging results.”

“Next time?” Alice stepped back, scandalized. “Sir, there shall not be a next time.”

“If you say so,” he said skeptically. Victor offered his arm. “Shall we?”

The forest grew darker as they walked; the path becoming treacherous in the failing light. Victor kept her close as they navigated fallen branches and exposed roots, his steady presence a comfort in the growing darkness. Though he occasionally muttered oaths when branches caught at his clothing, she found his coarse language oddly reassuring.

“Despite the unfortunate state of my nose, I would say the afternoon went rather well,” Victor said, touching the bridge where new bruising formed.

“Well? His Grace will take one look at your face and know something is terribly amiss.”

“I shall simply tell him I got into a scrape and you valiantly came to my rescue. I can convince him all is perfectly well between us.”

Alice studied his profile in the dim light.

“Is it? Well, between us, I mean. How do you not despise me after all this?”

“My dear Lady Rose, I know despicable people, and you are not one of them.”

“You seemed quite certain I was despicable when you accused me of fortune hunting.”

Victor shrugged with nonchalance.

“I may have changed my mind on that score. I would not have spoken to His Grace on your behalf if that was still my belief.”

The knowledge that he had defended her to Elias sent an unexpected warmth through her chest. They walked in silence for several moments before Victor spoke again.

“What is it you admire about His Grace?”

Alice’s breath caught at the directness of the question and she had to take a few moments to think it over.

“He is unfailingly kind,” she said carefully. “And I daresay handsome—but he always conducts himself as a true gentleman should. When he enters a room, all the energy seems to flow toward him, as though he carries sunlight with him wherever he goes.”

Victor looked off into the shadows of the woods, his expression difficult to discern in

the growing darkness.

“It is true. He is all those things.”

“What do you like the most about him?” asked Alice. “He is your dearest friend, after all.”

“... I think his greatest skill is his ability to mend broken things.”

“Broken things?”

“People, mostly.” His voice had grown distant, as though he spoke from somewhere far away. Then suddenly he turned to her, his gaze sharp even in the dim light. “He is one of the few men I know who has been lucky enough to be untouched by the world and all its cruelties. And while some might call him naïve for it, I think that is something to treasure.”

Alice’s heart constricted painfully in her chest. Why would such a man—one with such purity of heart—give her shriveled, damaged soul a moment’s consideration? She was utterly unworthy of such goodness, such light.

She managed a small nod, which seemed to satisfy Victor. He returned his attention to guiding them through the darkening woods, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

When they emerged from the woods, stars appeared in the sky. Fairfax Hall glowed in the distance across the lake, its windows reflecting in the water like a vanity mirror. However, their destination lay closer—Violet Cottage, a two-story residence behind carefully trimmed hedges. The building, despite its name, bore no trace of violet coloring. Instead, ivy crept across its stone walls.

Victor led her through an iron gate that creaked loudly, the sound making Alice jump.

“Calm,” he said, as if trying to steady a horse. “This gate always protests. One of many things that need attending to. This house hasn’t been lived in for quite some time.”

They followed a stone path to the entrance, light spilling from within—someone had lit fires and candles to prepare for Victor’s return. Alice’s heart fluttered wildly as she crossed the threshold. This was entirely improper—to be alone in a gentleman’s private residence, without chaperone or pretense. The mere thought sent thrills of mingled fear and excitement racing through her veins. No respectable lady would dare enter such a situation, yet here she was, following Victor deeper into his domain.

The interior was well-appointed yet austere, clearly a residence meant for the distinguished, though currently it seemed to house only Victor. The intimacy of being in his personal space made her breath catch.

“You should have seen it when I first arrived,” he said, gesturing at the drawing room. “Dust covers everywhere. Took me half a day just to make it habitable while the staff were busy in Fairfax Hall.”

“What is this place?” Alice asked, her voice echoing in the quiet space.

“It was meant to be the dower house. But she does not use it at present, and so it rots.” His voice trailed off as he exhaled heavily, looking worse than ever with the dried blood cracking across his face.

“You look positively frightful,” Alice said, surprising herself with her boldness.

Victor clicked his tongue, wagging a finger between them.

“Not very kind of you, Lady Rose,” he said, though his eyes showed amusement, then he nodded to the room before them, leaning against the doorframe as he entered the

drawing room.

Alice inspected the space. The furniture was of good quality though somewhat dated, and signs of Victor's residence were scattered about—a book left open on a side table, a half-empty glass of wine, a black coat draped carelessly over a chair.

But it was a small portrait that drew her attention—she recognized it as nearly identical to the one she'd seen in the dowager's chambers. The subject was a striking woman with dark, wavy hair and wire-rimmed spectacles holding a small green book. Despite the unusual choice to be painted wearing spectacles, she appeared entirely confident in her unconventional decision.

Alice studied the woman's face, noting the slight curl at the corner of her mouth, as if she privately found something amusing. The artist had captured an intelligence in her expression that made Alice wonder about the woman's identity.

"I saw a similar image at Fairfax Hall," she said as Victor watched her from the doorway. "Who is?"

She broke off at his expression. His entire body had gone rigid, his face carefully controlled in a way that frightened her more than any display of anger. Without a word, he crossed to the table and turned the portrait face-down with deliberate care.

"I will not be very long," he said flatly, then left the room.

As Victor disappeared deeper into the house, Alice stared after him, certain she had stumbled upon something prickly. Her eyes fell to the small green book lying beside the overturned portrait—the same volume the woman held in the painting. The coincidence seemed too obvious to ignore.

She glanced toward the door, listening for Victor's return. When she heard only

silence, she carefully lifted the worn tome. The binding was well-loved; the corners softened from frequent handling. She opened it with utmost care, not wishing to damage something so clearly precious to its owner.

The poetry inside was lovely but melancholy, speaking of love and loss in equal measure. Small notes marked many passages in the margins, as though someone had repeatedly revisited them, discovering new meaning each time. Some pages showed signs of water damage, though whether from rain or tears, Alice could not say.

Her heart beat faster as she turned to the front of the book. An inscription made her breath catch:

To my beloved Violet,

Whose heart contains more poetry than all these pages combined.

Forever yours, Victor

The words were written with obvious care and tender-heartedness. But it was the facing page that made her hands tremble. There, written in elegant feminine script, was a name.

This book belongs to: Violet Lacey

CHAPTER 23

Violet Lacey.

Alice stared at the name in an elegant script, reading it over and over as though repetition might somehow change its meaning. Her mind raced through possibilities, each more unsettling than the last. Perhaps she was a mother? But no—a man would not address his mother so intimately, using only her Christian name. A sister then? Yet that failed to explain why an earl's cottage would bear her name.

The last possibility loomed before her, though her mind shied away from it. It was the simplest answer, the one that explained everything, yet somehow made her chest constrict painfully.

Victor Lacey had been—or perhaps still was—a married man.

As she studied his handwritten dedication, searching for some clue she might have missed, footsteps sounded behind her.

“What are you doing?”

She whirled around, the book still open in her trembling hands. Victor stood in the doorway, having changed into a fresh shirt that gleamed white in the dim light. Though he had cleaned away all traces of blood, angry purple bruises bloomed beneath his eyes, spreading outward from his nose like ink pooling in water. His gaze fixed on the volume in her hands with an intensity that made her breath catch.

“I apologize. I was only trying to pass the time,” she blurted. “I saw the book and I ...” She swallowed hard before asking, “Who is Violet?”

Her words seemed to knock the air from his lungs. He moved with frightening speed, crossing the room in two long strides to snatch the book from her grasp. He clutched it to his chest, his breathing ragged as though he’d run for miles.

“Out.” The word emerged as barely more than a whisper.

Alice let out a nervous laugh, shaking her head in confusion.

“What?”

“Get out.” His voice had grown harder, his shoulders rigid with barely contained emotion.

“But it is dark outside and?—”

“I do not care what you do as long as you leave me .”

The last words tore from his throat with such violence that Alice stumbled backward. Her chest tightened painfully as she recognized she had crossed some terrible line. Though tears threatened, she refused to let them fall. She would not cry simply for picking up a book, no matter how viciously he reacted.

“I ... I ...”

Before she could form a response, another voice filled the room like a sudden breath of chill air.

“What a splendid idea, Captain Lacey.” Lady Fairfax’s words were sweet, though her

eyes held daggers as she regarded Victor. They had been so distracted neither of them had heard her enter. “Miss Montrose is missed at Fairfax Hall, and it is time for her to be returned to her mother. Do you not agree?”

Victor turned to face Lady Fairfax, his lips pressed into a thin line as though caught in some unsavory act. He set the book down on a nearby table with exaggerated care, then cleared his throat, his gaze fixed on the floor.

“Indeed. I think that is for the best. Miss Montrose.”

Alice glanced between them, unable to comprehend the sudden shift in the atmosphere. Victor stood as though a shadow had fallen across him, while Lady Fairfax’s expression suggested she might strike him dead with a single look. When the countess turned to Alice, her features softened with obvious effort.

“Pardon me, Miss Montrose. There is a carriage waiting outside to take you safely and discreetly to Fairfax Hall. The Dowager Countess awaits your company within.”

Alice’s stomach dropped at the mention of the dowager. Whatever conversation awaited her in that carriage would surely be uncomfortable.

“Are you not joining us?” she asked Lady Fairfax.

“Oh,” Lady Fairfax clasped her hands together. “I must have a private word with Captain Lacey. My driver has been informed to return the carriage to fetch me once you are safely back.”

Alice glanced at Victor, who had found something fascinating to study on the ceiling, his hands balled into fists at his sides and jaw clenched tight enough to crack teeth.

“If you would please, Miss Montrose,” Lady Fairfax said.

Taking the clear dismissal, Alice executed a stiff curtsy. She cast one last look at Victor before fleeing the room, pressing her hand to her mouth once she was out of sight. The front door stood open, and no servants were present to attend it. She supposed she should be thankful for the lack of staff. Fewer eyes meant less gossip. As she crossed the threshold, she paused. At the end of the path, beyond the hedges, she could make out the carriage's dark silhouette against the glittering lake and the warm glow of Fairfax Hall.

Just as she gathered her courage to face whatever awaited her, voices drifted from within Violet Cottage. She stepped to the side of the doorway, concealing herself from view as the conversation grew heated.

"You utter fool," Lady Fairfax's voice had lost all its musical qualities, replaced by venom. "This has gone far enough. We could excuse the drunkenness for a time. The belligerence. The brawling. But to ruin a poor young woman on your mother-in-law's birthday?"

Mother-in-law? The words struck Alice like a thunderbolt, but before she could process their meaning, Victor's bitter laugh cut through the air.

"Ruin her?" he said. "I was only trying to help her."

"By bringing her to your private residence. Without a chaperone. At night? You must be mad, for no person of right mind wouldn't see the implications of such a poor decision."

"You do not understand, I was injured and?—"

"It is always some excuse with you. I can understand you need to grieve, but it has been years Victor, and there is only so much your family can take of this. Yes, Violet loved you. But that does not mean we have endless patience. That does not mean you

may waltz in whenever you please, act as though you own the place, and then take advantage.”

“I was not taking advantage.”

“Really? Because from the outside, it appears that way,” Lady Fairfax snapped. “You are lucky the Dowager Countess has such a sharp eye and her guests are easily distracted. The girl’s mother, however, is a mess, thinking the worst. And she should be worried. No man would marry her now, having been caught in such a situation. His Grace included.”

Alice pressed a hand to her chest, her heart pounding so violently she feared they might hear it from within. Everything she and her mother had worked for, everything the dowager had attempted to salvage—all of it crumbling because of one impulsive afternoon.

“His Grace trusts me,” Victor said, his voice tight.

“And he is a fool for doing so.”

The silence that followed was stark. A cool breeze rustled through the ivy covering the cottage walls, making Alice shiver in the growing darkness.

“I do believe,” Lady Fairfax continued, each word precise as a knife stroke, “that one can forget that it is not the dowager who runs Fairfax Hall, but me . And it is well past time I use that power to protect the people beneath my roof. You will attend supper tonight. The Dowager Countess expects you. But you will not speak unless it is to her. You will be amiable and quiet for the rest of this cursed birthday week, and then, the moment you wish her a happy birthday, you will leave Fairfax Hall and never come back. Do I make myself clear?”

The pause that followed seemed endless before Victor finally responded, his voice barely audible.

“Crystal.”

“Good.” The musical quality had returned to Lady Fairfax’s tone, its artificial sweetness more frightening than her anger.

Fearing discovery, Alice carefully pulled the front door closed and hurried down the stone path. She paused at the iron gate, knowing its loud protest would betray her presence. With trembling hands, she pushed it open as slowly as possible, wincing at each metallic groan. When no one emerged from the cottage to confront her, she released a shaky breath and practically ran to the waiting carriage.

The driver helped her into the small cabin, and immediately the enclosed space seemed to shrink around her. Her breath caught as memories flooded back—the rattle of wheels on gravel, her mother’s cold dismissal, the terrible peace that had settled over her as she’d stood waiting in the road. The same road that had brought them here, to this moment.

The dowager sat watching her with one eyebrow arched, but Alice barely registered her presence. Her hands gripped her skirts as she took a seat. She could almost hear her mother’s sharp words, clear as day.

“If you wish to act like a willful child, then you may walk back like one.”

But she hadn’t walked back. She had stood still, waiting for oblivion.

Until Victor had saved her.

The thought of him—how he had plucked her from death’s grasp, had shown her

kindness in his own prickly way—made something crack inside her. All at once, the events of the past week crashed over her like a wave—her mother’s violence, her moment of despair on the road, Elias’s fury, Victor’s bloodied nose, and now whatever had transpired at Violet Cottage. Great, wracking sobs tore from her chest as she struggled to draw breath.

“I—I am s-so sorry,” she managed between gasps, though she wasn’t sure if she was apologizing to the dowager or to herself for ever thinking death was the answer.

The dowager watched her display with cool detachment before rapping sharply on the carriage roof. The sudden forward motion jarred Alice from her spiral of memories, though tears continued flowing freely down her cheeks.

“Whatever happened?” the dowager asked, her tone brooking no evasion.

The entire story spilled from Alice in a torrent—the fight in the woods, their retreat to Violet Cottage, the discovery of the book, and finally the devastating conversation she had overheard. As she reached the part about Violet, she noticed a subtle shift in the dowager’s bearing, though the older woman’s expression remained carefully neutral.

When Alice finally fell silent, the dowager released a long breath.

“Yes, Victor is a widower. We rarely speak of it in his presence—he has a history of ... difficult behavior when Violet is mentioned.”

“Who was she?” Alice asked carefully.

“My daughter.” The dowager’s voice carried a weight Alice had never heard before. “She married Victor during the war. And we lost her three years ago.”

“So then, Captain Lacey is your son-in-law?”

“Was.” The word fell between them like a stone. “He no longer holds that position now.”

Alice shifted uncomfortably in the upholstered seat.

“It seems very kind of you to maintain his standing invitation to Fairfax Hall.”

“Perhaps I was mistaken to do so,” the dowager said, “especially since he seems determined to undo all my matchmaking ventures.”

Her sharp eyes fixed on Alice, who could not maintain the gaze. Instead, she looked out the window toward Violet Cottage, remembering the raw anguish in Victor’s eyes when she’d discovered the book. She wiped fresh tears from her cheeks with trembling fingers.

“You are playing with fire, my dear,” the dowager continued. “I see how he affects you—how chaos seems to follow in your wake whenever you two cross paths. If you wish to salvage any hope of a respectable match, you must now keep your distance.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Lady Fairfax will ensure Victor poses no further threat to your reputation for the rest of your stay. This should give you ample opportunity to secure His Grace’s affections.”

Elias . The name felt hollow in her mind.

“Of course,” Alice said.

The carriage jerked to a halt before Fairfax Hall. As Alice moved to exit, the dowager's hand shot out to grasp her wrist.

“Remember, my dear—some roses bloom best when pruned back severely, while others wither at the slightest touch. Which will you choose to be?”

CHAPTER 24

When Alice returned to Fairfax Hall that evening, her mother had embraced her with unexpected tenderness. Mrs. Montrose's arms shook slightly as they wrapped around her daughter, and Alice found herself stunned by the display of maternal affection.

The dowager stood nearby, offering a gracious explanation for Alice's tardiness during the afternoon walk—something about one of the elderly groundskeepers taking a spell of dizziness while tending the hedges, and Alice waiting with him until help could arrive. Mrs. Montrose practically groveled in gratitude, while Miss Eastridge observed from a careful distance. Alice wondered if gossip had already begun circulating among the servants about her true whereabouts.

Her mother's uncharacteristic gentleness continued as they prepared for supper, fussing over Alice's appearance without a single criticism. Perhaps she still felt guilty about the carriage incident, treating her daughter with newfound care. When Alice attempted to apologize for causing worry, Mrs. Montrose merely pressed her lips together and adjusted Alice's hair with trembling fingers.

Supper came before Alice had time to catch her breath.

The grand dining room glowed with hundreds of candles when they entered, their light reflecting off the polished silver and crystal that adorned the long table. Footmen moved efficiently, directing guests to their assigned seats marked by decorated name cards. Alice found her place and settled into her chair, her stomach tightening as Elias joined her.

“Good evening,” he said softly.

His presence should have been comforting—his broad shoulders and gentle demeanor usually provided an anchor in social situations. And yet, guilt twisted through her chest as she managed a squeak, having to clear her throat before trying again.

“Good evening, Your Grace.”

Servants filled their glasses with wine as Alice took in the seating arrangements. The dowager commanded attention from the head of the table, while Mrs. Montrose sat between Lord Fairfax and their hostess, her fingers worrying at her napkin. Lady Fairfax’s musical laugh carried from further down the table where she sat beside—

Alice’s breath caught as her gaze fell on Victor. The bruising around his nose had deepened to an angry purple, spreading beneath his eyes in deep pools. He stared resolutely at his empty plate, refusing to look at anyone.

Beside her, Elias stiffened. His grey eyes darted between Alice and Victor, and she could practically see him piecing together the evidence before him. She plastered on her brightest smile, though it felt odd on her face. His frown only deepened at her obvious playacting.

“And just how was your walk earlier?” he asked carefully.

“Oh, uneventful,” she managed, the lie tasting bitter on her tongue.

“It certainly seems some sort of event transpired.”

Alice lifted her wineglass, buying time as her mind whirled. Elias turned to study Victor again, his usually warm expression growing troubled.

“Something happened, didn’t it?” he asked.

“Oh, no, no. Everything is ... everything is ...” She set her glass down slowly, the crystal making a soft clink against the tablecloth. The lie pressed against her chest until she could hardly breathe. This seemed to concern Elias further, for he leaned closer until his words could only reach her ears.

“Do not lie to me, Alice.”

The use of her Christian name startled her. She turned to face him fully, taking in his alert posture and tense jaw. Of course, he would be concerned—his closest friend bore the marks of violence, and both she and Victor were acting strangely. The urge to tell him everything warred with her instinct for self-preservation.

Their conversation paused as footmen served the first course—a delicate cream of mushroom soup. Alice stared into the steaming bowl, gathering her courage.

“I am so sorry, Your Grace. I tried, I really did. But I do believe Captain Lacey despises me down to his bones.” The memory of Victor’s fury at Violet Cottage made her voice crack slightly.

Elias shook his head, letting out a sound between a scoff and a laugh.

“You must trust me on this—that man does not despise you.”

“And you must trust me, Your Grace, when I say that the walk was an abject failure.”

He studied her face for a long moment, his expression growing more concerned with each passing second.

“I wished to lie to you,” Alice continued softly. “I am sure Captain Lacey would play

along so that everything went splendidly. But just look at him. It was a disaster of our own making, though not for lack of trying from both parties.”

“Then I thank you for your honesty,” Elias said. “But then the question becomes just how Victor came to have such an ugly mark?”

Alice drew in a steadying breath.

“... I hit him.”

Elias set his spoon down with exaggerated care, the silver making barely a whisper against fine china. He stared at her as though she had announced her intention to join a circus.

“You ... what? “

“I hit him, Your Grace.”

“Good Lord.” He ran a hand through his dark hair, ruffling the careful arrangement. “I trust you had good reason to do such a thing?”

She could tell him everything—how Victor had goaded her into violence, how the afternoon had spiraled into ruinous chaos. But what would that accomplish? They would still be at odds, still trapped in this web of tension and unspoken things.

“He did not treat me untoward, if that is your question.”

The words were true, yet felt like ashes in her mouth. She could still feel Victor’s warmth as she had pinned him against the tree—could hear his voice—rough with something dangerous as he’d praised her. She was the one who had acted untoward. Heat flooded her cheeks, and she focused intently on her soup, stirring the creamy

liquid without taking a bite.

“Ah.” Elias’s halfhearted smile did not reach his eyes. “Well, I am glad you both gave it an honest try, at the very least.”

The disappointment in his voice cut deeper than anger would have. He seemed about to say more, then thought the better of it, turning his attention to his meal. The silence between them stretched taut.

Alice glanced toward her mother and found Mrs. Montrose watching them with barely concealed panic. Though she couldn’t have heard their low conversation, her mother’s instincts for social disaster were finely honed. Her face had gone pale as she clutched her wine glass like a lifeline.

The remainder of the meal passed in waves of obvious discomfort. Though Elias made several attempts at pleasant conversation, each topic seemed to fade into awkward silence. By the final course, he had grown somewhat warmer, though hesitation colored his every word.

But worse than Elias’s disappointment were the looks from others around the table. The dowager’s sharp gaze missed nothing, while Lady Fairfax’s perfect mask of civility couldn’t quite hide her fury.

And then there was Victor.

Every time Alice’s gaze crossed the table, their eyes met like flint striking steel. Once, the shock of their connection made her drop her fork with a jarring clatter. Each glance left her breathless, while Victor seemed to curl in on himself like a wounded animal. She tried to focus solely on Elias, but somehow she could still feel Victor’s presence—his stare burning against her skin like a brand.

When supper concluded, Victor sprang from his chair with such suddenness that several guests startled. He strode from the room without waiting for the other gentlemen to retire for drinks, his hasty exit drawing curious murmurs from those assembled.

Alice watched him go, guilt settling in her stomach. She rose to curtsy to Elias, but before she could withdraw, his hand caught her wrist. The impropriety of touching her before so many witnesses seemed to dawn on him immediately, for he released her just as quickly.

“Alice,” he whispered. “Do not despair. I see you are trying. And that is all any of us can do.”

His kindness struck her for a moment. Here was everything she should want—a handsome, gentle duke offering comfort with perfect sincerity. Her throat tightened.

“Your Grace?—”

“Call me Elias,” he murmured.

“Then I will try—not to despair, that is—Elias.”

His smile brightened at her use of his name, but before he could respond, Mrs. Montrose appeared at Alice’s shoulder.

“Your Grace,” her mother executed a perfect curtsy. “Thank you for being such a delightful dinner partner to my daughter.”

“It was my pleasure, Mrs. Montrose. Miss Montrose. I will see you shortly in the drawing room.”

They left him to enjoy his after-dinner drinks, and the moment they entered the hall, Mrs. Montrose seized Alice's arm.

“Well? What did he say? Did it go poorly? I saw his face—he seemed dejected.”

“I ... I do not know, Mama.” The words came out thick with exhaustion. For once, it was the complete truth—she felt utterly overwhelmed by everything.

The drawing room hummed with activity as ladies settled in to await the gentlemen. The dowager gave Alice an approving nod, apparently pleased by her recovery with Elias. But Alice could not shake the hollow feeling in her chest. The duke had made it clear that his relationship with Victor was paramount—and she had thoroughly destroyed any hope of harmony there.

Victor.

Even as the evening wore on, as the men joined them for cards and conversation, as the pianoforte filled the air with elegant music, her thoughts returned to him again and again. Mrs. Montrose had patted her arm, retiring for the night, but Alice knew she was too antsy to join her, convincing her mama her reputation would be fine among the other ladies. After Mrs. Montrose was truly gone, Alice retreated to the open terrace doors, letting in the cool night air. Wrapping her arms around herself against the chill, she gazed across the moonlit grounds toward Violet Cottage.

The sight sent emotions cascading through her chest—guilt, confusion, and something deeper that she dared not name. She turned her gaze from it quickly, only to spot a solitary figure standing at the lakeside gazebo. He was somewhat difficult to spot, somewhat obscured by flowering vines and hedges. The man's scarlet coat caught the moonlight as he leaned against the balustrade, cutting a lonely figure against the silvered water.

She knew at once who it was. Something deep within her chest pulled taut, like an invisible thread connecting her to that solitary man. Alice looked over her shoulder, checking to see if anyone in the dwindling party was looking her way, and found everyone distracted. Her feet carried her forward before her mind could protest, drawn by a force she dared not examine too closely.

CHAPTER 25

A lice should not have done it.

The dowager and Lady Fairfax had worked tirelessly to salvage her reputation after the incident at Violet Cottage. Yet here she was, making her way alone through the darkened hedge maze, guided only by moonlight and an inexplicable pull toward its end. Her thoughts spiraled as she navigated the twisting paths.

What would she find there? She did not fully know.

But she had to go—even if it meant risking everything her family had worked for, everything she and her mother had sacrificed. But something in his posture had drawn her to him like a moth to flame. She owed him at least a conversation—if not her life—for saving her on the road.

The hedges loomed above her, their shadows stretching across the gravel path like slabs of obsidian. Each turn could lead to another dead end or bring her closer to her destination. The night air held a chill she could not shake.

Just when she thought she must have lost her way completely, the maze opened before her. Moonlight flooded the clearing, illuminating the gazebo that overlooked the lake. Beyond its elegant white columns, she could make out the dark shape of Violet Cottage in the distance.

And there he was.

“Victor,” she breathed.

He straightened at the sound of her voice, quickly wiping at his face with one hand. Though the darkness obscured his features, she could sense his distress in the rigid set of his shoulders.

“You should not be here,” he said, his voice rough. “We cannot be caught together.”

“I do not care.”

“You should.”

Victor looked away from her, his attention fixed on some distant point across the lake. Alice approached slowly, carefully, as though he might spook like a nervous horse if she moved too quickly. When she reached the gazebo, she took her place beside him at the railing, her hands resting on the smooth stone as she followed his gaze out over the water.

“Speak to me,” she finally urged. “I beg of you. I cannot take this silence any longer.”

He turned his head to study her, and something in her expression seemed to crack his facade. His perpetually arched brows drew together, creating deep furrows in his forehead.

“At the cottage,” he began haltingly, “I know I did not act gentlemanly. But there is a reason I acted thus.”

“Violet.”

The name seemed to freeze him in place, every muscle going rigid. His hands gripped the railing until his knuckles showed white in the moonlight. Alice’s fingers twitched

with the urge to cover his hand with her own, to offer that simple comfort, but propriety held her still. Even so, something in her expression must have reached him, for the tension drained from his frame as he released a long-held breath.

The carefully constructed walls around him crumbled, and at last he spoke.

“I was married.” He let out a bitter laugh. “ Married. It seems strange to say it now. She was not a typical beauty, a spinster when we met, despite having a matchmaker as a mother. She had a wit about her that drew me in completely. It was a love match—as Elias would say, ‘the love match to end all love matches.’ We were ensnared in a short whirlwind of a romance that shocked everyone. I suppose that is the only way I know how to fall in love.”

He turned his face from her, his gaze fixing on the distant cottage.

“Being the fourth son, I was hardly the preferred choice for an earl’s daughter. But it happened, and eventually her family warmed to me. Henrietta especially. Her brother never did, the cad. But I made my stake in the military, bought my commission. Was a cavalry officer and enjoyed every moment of it. But then I had to leave Violet for the Continent and the war.”

Victor’s voice softened as he continued.

“She sent me letters every day, and I wrote back just as often. She was with child and moved into the dower house across that lake while I was away, to be with her mother. I was bereft to be gone, but I held onto thoughts of our future together. And then ...”

He fell silent, his profile sharp against the night sky as he tipped his head back, lost in memory.

“The letters stopped. Not even family wrote. Everything came to a deafening pause.

After some days, I finally learned what had happened.”

Alice watched as grief transformed his features, aging him before her eyes.

“Fever. At eight months along ... it was too much for either of them to bear. And so they left this world, for someplace better, I suppose. They both died in that house. Violet Cottage, now.”

His fingers worried at something in his pocket—the small poetry book, Alice realized. She remained silent, allowing him space to continue.

“I received the letter a day before Waterloo. Could not parse it properly. They said I could leave the front, but it had not yet sunk in. And so I went to battle, and there I dealt with their deaths. I left every part of myself on that battlefield. I tore my soul apart fighting the French.” His laugh held no humor. “I wished to die there, on that stupid farm. But I survived.”

He shook his head slowly.

“I survived. And I was without her. A dead man walking. But, I came back home as a hero. A widower. I fell into drink, into debauchery, into anything that could numb the pain. I haven’t even visited their graves—have not stepped foot in our church—not in three years. I could not bear the thought of them in the ground. Sometimes I wonder if I ever will.

“Then one day, I was out with a group of old friends. Elias was there.” Victor’s voice grew distant. “And suddenly I realized I wasn’t for this world anymore—that I could not be part of their laughter, their joy. So I watched them, forcing them into my memory, soaking in every last moment. Then I slipped out. The bridge called to me, and I heeded it.”

His hands tightened on the railing again.

“I basked in the peace it offered. The water seemed like a friend. A final embrace. And then I would be with them again. I would be free from this mortal coil.” He took a deep breath. “But Elias had other plans.”

Victor turned to face her fully, his expression raw with pain.

“He took that choice from me. And I can never forgive him for it, but I will forever be in his debt.”

“I am so sorry, Victor,” Alice whispered.

He looked down at his hands, shoulders slumping.

“That day, when you quarreled with Elias, I saw parts of myself in you. And it frightened me. I followed you on horseback, and when I found your rose pin on the ground, I somehow knew I was right.”

The look he gave her was that of a man shattered and then broken again, held together only by sheer force of will.

“Elias pulled me from the depths. He dragged me from that bridge the night he saved me. I owe him a life debt. As I found bits of myself in you, I thought maybe he could heal that darkness in you, too. He could drag you from your own bridge.”

Alice stood speechless for several moments, processing his words.

“Victor,” she finally said, “I do not believe it is fair to place such a burden upon Elias.”

He looked away, obviously distressed by her response.

“You must understand,” Alice continued. “I do not know why I stood before that carriage. Only that ... I am tired. Oh, so tired. My family’s future has rested upon my shoulders since I was a girl. Every movement I make, every breath, every thought even, is measured again and again and again. And I am done . I cannot do it any longer. On that day, on that road, it seemed the easiest way out. And now, it feels foolish but?—”

“You are not a fool,” Victor interrupted firmly. “Do not say such things. You are simply hurting.”

“Nevertheless, I cannot marry a man just to mend a wound.”

“Please,” Victor said, taking her hands in his. “Do not make me beg like the dog I am.”

He fell to his knees before her, grasping her hands, the raw desperation in his voice making her chest constrict painfully. It was almost as if he were about to ask for her hand.

“Swear to me,” he continued, “that when he proposes to you, you will say yes.”

Victor truly believed Elias could heal her, just as he had done for him. But as he knelt there staring up at her, clasping her hands, unbidden memories flooded her mind—the way he had looked at her beneath the oak tree, his eyes blazing with something deep and unending, the countless moments when the world had seemed to narrow to just the two of them.

“What about ... you?” The words escaped her before she could stop them, barely more than a whisper.

His grip on her hands loosened slightly, and something in his expression closed off.

“I-I have no part in this. My ...” He paused, his voice growing distant. “My heart is blackened. It has nothing left to offer.”

His words pierced through her. The wound that Violet’s death left was still too painful, the loss too deep. Heat crept up her neck at her own presumption. That he would ever harbor such feelings for her—or anyone for that matter.

“Please,” he said again. “Promise me.”

Looking down at him, seeing the desperate plea in his eyes, she knew she could not deny him this. Even if every fiber of her being rebelled against it.

“I swear,” she whispered, forcing out every syllable as if it pained her. “If His Grace proposes, I will say yes.”

The relief that flooded his features made her release a shaky breath, but it felt all wrong, like a key turning in the wrong lock. She pulled her hands from his grasp.

“I—I must go,” she stammered, and though he rose quickly to his feet, she was already turning away, fleeing into the maze. The hedges seemed to close in around her as she ran, branches catching at her dress and hair.

She did not want Elias’s gentle healing, his perfect sunlight. She wanted iron. She wanted the darkness that recognized her own. She wanted ...

But she could not finish the thought. It was too dangerous, too destructive. It would ruin everything—her family’s hopes, her mother’s dreams, her own chance at respectability.

So she ran, leaving her heart behind in the moonlit gazebo with a broken man who thought he could save her by giving her away.

CHAPTER 26

The days following her midnight encounter with Victor passed in a fog. Alice walked through the gardens with her mother, barely registering the meticulously maintained flower beds and carefully pruned topiaries. Her mind kept drifting to Violet Cottage, where lights burned in the windows during the darkest hours—hours she spent staring out from her chamber rather than sleeping.

Victor's presence at planned events had grown sparse. He appeared only at suppers, where he would fulfill his duty to the dowager before vanishing like smoke, always before Alice could catch his eye. The weight of their shared moment pressed against her chest whenever she glimpsed his retreating form.

"You are awfully quiet as of late," Mrs. Montrose said, her grip tightening on Alice's arm as they passed the entrance to the hedge maze.

Alice's gaze lingered on the spot where she had fled that night, leaving Victor alone with his grief. The memory still felt raw, like pressing on a fresh bruise.

"I am fine, Mama."

"Can you believe the celebrations are nearly over?" Mrs. Montrose's voice held an edge of desperation. "You have precious little time remaining to secure what is rightfully yours."

Alice turned to stare at her mother as though she had grown a second head. While she had maintained polite interactions with Elias over the past days, thoughts of securing

his hand had been far from her mind. His gentle attention felt hollow now, tainted by Victor's desperate plea for Alice to accept the duke's healing presence.

She let out a soft scoff and looked away. Her mother's face twisted at the dismissive sound, something vulnerable flickering across her features.

"Perhaps," Mrs. Montrose said carefully, "it is time I told you more about my experience with the Dowager's Garden."

Alice's attention sharpened. Her mother rarely spoke of her past, keeping those memories locked away like family silver, too precious for daily use. They paused beside a stone bench, and Mrs. Montrose sank onto it, patting the space beside her.

"I was about your age when I first met Henrietta," she began, her voice taking on a distant quality. "We were both in London for the Season. My parents ..." She paused, smoothing her skirts. "I've told you little of your grandparents. They were wealthy, and we moved in the same circles as the Dowager Countess. She saw something in me—potential, she called it."

Mrs. Montrose's fingers worried at her daylily pin as she continued.

"We attended parties together as friends, and she played matchmaker just as she does now. She helped me catch the attention of a duke. He was handsome, unmarried, and everything a young lady could want in a match. Much like your Duke of Gainsbury. We walked together in Mayfair, danced at least twice at every assembly."

Her mother's voice grew tight as she gripped Alice's hand.

"Then I met your father. He was an older man, charming in his way, with a dangerous air about him. People warned me, but I was too naïve to heed them. And then ..." She looked away, her gaze distant. "We were caught. The duke himself found us in a

darkened hallway, sharing what I thought was an innocent kiss.”

Alice’s breath caught as her mother’s grip tightened painfully.

“Everything fell apart after that. They forced your father to marry me—thank the Lord, he agreed. My parents had to provide an enormous dowry to secure the match. The scandal destroyed my relationship with them completely.”

Mrs. Montrose’s voice had grown bitter, each word sharp with remembered pain.

“We were in all the papers. People jeered in the streets. Every invitation disappeared overnight. The Dowager Countess dropped me without a backward glance. We had to elope to Gretna Green, then retreat to the countryside. Even now, I cannot show my face in London without that cloud of scandal hanging over me.”

Alice’s gaze drifted toward Violet Cottage across the lake. The weight of her own recent indiscretion pressed against her chest. If word got out about her nighttime visit, would Victor feel obligated to marry her, as her father had done for her mother? The thought made her stomach clench.

She placed her hand over her mother’s, finally understanding the crushing pressure that had shaped their relationship. The specter of that old scandal had wrapped thorny vines around them both, taking root in every moment of Alice’s life.

“I tried to do for you what the dowager did for me,” Mrs. Montrose continued. “When we received this invitation, I thought it a blessing. But then she chose you for her Garden, and I found myself relegated to the shadows once again. The jealousy ... it consumed me.”

Her mother turned fully toward Alice, grasping both her hands.

“Everything I did, I did to help you shine.”

Alice couldn't find words to respond. Despite all her mother's efforts, she felt anything but radiant.

Movement caught their attention—the dowager and Elias walking arm-in-arm on a nearby path. The duke noticed them and flushed, tipping his hat in greeting.

“You see?” Mrs. Montrose's voice brightened. “You are well on your way to righting my mistake.”

As they moved to join the dowager and Elias on their stroll, Alice felt disconnected, barely hearing her mother's words. Her attention had drifted to the lakeside gazebo, where she remembered Victor's silhouette against the moon.

And like a breath, the vision was gone, and Elias was taking her hand in his.

He pressed his lips against her knuckles, causing the older women to titter excitedly. And she smiled into those warm grey eyes, despite herself.

“Hold still, Miss,” Miss Eastridge murmured as she arranged Alice's hair, incorporating all the new techniques she'd learned during their stay. Alice barely registered the gentle tugs, lost in her own thoughts.

“Only a few events remain,” the maid continued, filling the silence. “The lantern lighting tonight, Sunday services tomorrow, the grand birthday ball on Monday, then back home after a day's rest.” Her fingers worked swiftly through Alice's curls. “The staff says the birthday ball will be at least ten times as magnificent as the opening assembly.”

Alice stared at her reflection.

“Hopefully not as mortifying.”

“Hush now,” Miss Eastridge scolded, then lowered her voice. “I am sure you’ll be perfectly fine ... as long as you stay away from a certain captain.”

Alice’s breath caught, her eyes darting to meet her maid’s reflection in the mirror. But Miss Eastridge looked away quickly, focusing intently on her work.

“There have been ... whispers downstairs.” The maid’s hands slowed in their movements. “About late-night visits across the lake.”

Color drained from Alice’s face.

“Nothing untoward happened.”

“People still talk, Miss.” Miss Eastridge’s voice held a careful neutrality. “Though such rumors often circulate among servants without reaching the family’s ears. It will probably come to nothing, provided you maintain proper distance from here forward.”

Alice nodded mutely, her fingers twisting in her skirts. After a moment, Miss Eastridge spoke again, her tone unusually forthright.

“Is His Grace truly what you want?”

“He is the best option available to me.”

The maid gave her a pointed look in the mirror.

“You are not your mother, Miss.”

“That’s quite enough,” Alice said, but her words weren’t as harsh as they were exhausted. Her hands continued worrying at her dress.

“Of course, Miss.” Miss Eastridge worked in silence for several moments before humming thoughtfully. “A duchess. Well, if that’s what you desire, I can certainly make you look the part.”

Alice studied her reflection—the elaborate hairstyle, the perfectly arranged gown, the rose pin gleaming at her breast. Was this what a duchess looked like? The very idea felt impossible, like trying to force herself into stays that didn’t quite fit.

Still, she managed a smile, settling into the familiar mask of proper behavior.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Please make me look as much as a duchess as possible.”

But as Miss Eastridge continued her work, Alice’s mind drifted. She stared unseeing into the mirror, wondering if she would ever feel worthy of the title everyone seemed so desperate for her to claim.

The woman who reflected back to her looked like a stranger—a duchess.

Perfectly arranged, perfectly beautiful ...

Perfectly empty.

CHAPTER 27

A lice was late for the lantern lighting. Her mother had gone ahead without her, allowing her a moment to steady her fraying nerves. She remained in her chambers, a forbidding feeling pressing against her chest as her stomach twisted into knots, nausea threatening her. It reminded her of her first night's disaster at Fairfax Hall, but she was determined not to repeat such a spectacle—not when everything was finally proceeding according to plan.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, one hand pressed against her stomach as she fought to catch her breath. Only a few days remained of the celebration, and this one was nearly over. The thought should have brought relief, yet something heavy settled in her chest.

“You can do this,” she whispered to her reflection.

You cannot do anything right.

Her words felt strange on her tongue, hollow somehow. When her stomach seemed to settle, she finally tore herself from the mirror and left her chamber, pink silk trailing after her. The halls stretched empty before her, most guests having already gathered outside. Through the large windows, she could make out the crowd assembling on the grass near the lake. Servants had arranged elaborate paper lanterns in preparation, and a wooden platform had been erected for dancing, complete with musicians tuning their instruments. It promised to be a proper party, yet exhaustion had settled in her bones. She found herself rooted to the spot before the window, utterly drained by the endless celebrations.

“Alice.”

The voice sent an electric current through her blood. She closed her eyes, drawing a steadying breath before turning toward its source. Victor stood at the end of the corridor in disarray. His chestnut hair was disheveled, his jacket misbuttoned, and though the bruises beneath his eyes had faded slightly to yellow, he still looked thoroughly battered. More than that, something in his bearing seemed off—a tension she hadn’t seen in him before.

He started toward her, but she raised a hand to halt his approach.

“Was it not you who said we should not be seen alone together?” She turned to leave, but he crossed the space between them with alarming speed, catching her gloved hand in his bare one.

“Stop!” The word emerged too loudly, and he immediately softened his tone. “Do not go out there. Not just yet. Can you join me for a moment? Only a moment. Then you may go enjoy the rest of your evening.”

There was something deeply wrong in his voice—a desperate edge that gave her pause.

“Is everything alright?”

His expression shifted, and he released her hand, straightening his posture as though donning a mask not unlike her own.

“Everything is perfect. Going swimmingly.” He offered his arm with all the grace he could muster. “Please, join me in a turn.”

Alice studied his offered arm, then his face. They should not do this—being seen

together could spark fresh scandal, especially given her frequent appearances with the duke. Yet something about Victor drew her in. As she placed her hand on his arm, it felt like releasing a long-held breath. But while she relaxed into the contact, he seemed to grow more tense, his muscles rigid beneath her touch.

They walked through the halls together, pausing occasionally to gaze through windows at the scene beyond. Servants passed them with sidelong glances that made Alice's stomach tighten—she didn't wish for the staff to spread rumors, but there was little she could do about it now. Victor guided her toward a side entrance at the opposite end of the house, where a small twisting path led through a less frequented section of the gardens.

This area held sculptures and a modest herb garden, clearly not the prized portion of the dowager's estate. Still, the fragrant herbs perfumed the evening air as marble cherubs and satyrs gazed down upon the greenery with frozen expressions.

"I am leaving soon," Victor finally said.

"Are we not all leaving? At the end of the celebration, that is."

"Yes, but..." He hesitated, his jaw working. "Let us just say Lady Fairfax is very cross with me after the walk and Violet Cottage. I will give the Dowager Countess my birthday wishes at the celebratory ball and leave the county that night, a few days before the other guests are to depart."

"Where will you go?"

"Manchester, I think. I have unfinished business there that I must attend to."

Alice glanced at him, her heart constricting at the resignation in his voice. She understood now—he wasn't merely leaving, he was being rejected by the family he'd

grown close to.

“Well, I wish you the best with your ... business?”

His answering smile didn't reach his eyes. They reached an alcove next to the house where two marble columns flanked a small, bubbling fountain. Victor paused to withdraw a ha'penny from his pocket, tossing it into the water with practiced nonchalance.

“You will make a good wife for him, you know,” he said, his voice warm despite its tightness. “A handsome, happy couple.”

Alice barked out a laugh, then quickly pressed her hand to her mouth, as if to cover the unladylike sound.

“What is so funny?”

“I do believe you are putting the cart before the horse, sir. His Grace has been lovely, indeed, but he has shown no sign of proposing.”

Victor released a soft hum, then shrugged, his expression growing more serious than she'd ever seen it. He went very still beside her, and she gripped his arm tighter, turning to study his face. Their eyes met, and what she saw there made her breath catch—guilt, despair, and something else, something burning beneath the surface that threatened to consume them both.

She remembered their first meeting, how his gaze had cut through her defenses with exacting precision. Then, his eyes lacked all hunger. Now, they raged with it—deep and unending, like staring into an abyss.

She opened her mouth to speak, but managed only a shallow breath before he moved,

drawing her against his chest with startling swiftness. Her hands pressed against the wool of his jacket as all air left her lungs. The thought of discovery flashed through her mind, and apparently his as well, for he pulled her deeper into the alcove beside the fountain, his back against the wall.

The position reminded her of their moment beneath the oak tree, when she'd pinned him there in anger. But this was different—this was him coming undone beneath her touch in an entirely new way. They stood frozen in the shadows, breathing each other in. His scent, the one that had haunted her throughout the celebrations, seemed to set her entire being aflame.

She could pull away from him. All it would take was for her to step back, since he had essentially pinned himself against the wall. But even as she pondered it, she knew she could never bring herself to do so.

“I should slap you for this,” she whispered.

“Oh,” he sighed, the words coming from deep in his chest, “please do.”

Before she could form a coherent thought, he ended her torment, bending down to close the gap between them. His lips pressed against hers with desperate intensity, taking what he could. She gasped softly at the novel sensation—never in her life had she been kissed. His hand rose to cup her cheek, rough fingers caressing her skin with surprising gentleness despite the urgency of his touch. Everything about him burned like fire.

But before she could lose herself completely in his lips, he gently pushed her away, still keeping her close.

“Victor,” she breathed, watching emotions war across his features. It was so overwhelming, she had to tear her gaze away.

He brought his fingers beneath her chin, tipping her face to meet his once more.

“You must promise me, here and now. Forget this moment. Forget this selfish act—this selfish man. Strike it from your mind forever, as if it never happened. I shall remember it for the both of us, Lady Rose.”

Her heart trembled in her chest, mind still cloudy from the lingering warmth of his kiss. He seemed to be soaking her in, clutching her like a lifeline, studying every detail, even in her distress.

“But I do not understand,” she whispered, her voice catching. “You told me your heart was closed to love—that I must accept Elias’s proposal. And now ...”

“Nothing has changed. Other than that I have proven myself a scoundrel,” he said, his voice rough with self-loathing.

“Do not say such things,” Alice said, her hands gripping his coat. “Victor, you’ve spent days pushing me toward another man, only to—” She broke off, frustrated. “What am I to make of this?”

Victor’s shoulders tensed. “You are to make nothing of it. That’s precisely what I am telling you.”

“How dare you say that? How can you kiss me like that and then demand I pretend it never happened?”

He slipped away from her, leaving an aching void in the space between them. Running a hand through his already disheveled hair, he attempted to compose himself, though it did little good. When he looked at her again, his eyes still burned with that same desperate intensity.

“There are countless things I regret. But I would make the choice to kiss you again a thousand times. Elias be damned. This entire world be damned. And you should never forgive me for it.”

Alice could only stare at him in shock.

He gave her one last lingering look before a voice called across the garden.

“Miss Montrose?”

Alice blinked, and Victor was gone, his footsteps crunching across the gravel path. She stumbled back from the wall, fingertips pressed to her lips, staring unseeing at the bubbling fountain.

Lady Fairfax appeared at her elbow, though Alice barely registered her presence at first. Despite the flurry of hosting duties that must have demanded her attention, the countess had somehow found time to seek her out.

“My dear, I had the footmen searching all over for you,” she said, her voice as cheerful as ever. “One of the maids mentioned seeing you head this way. You are about to miss the lantern lighting!”

Alice cleared her throat and nodded mutely.

“Whatever brought you all the way out here?” Lady Fairfax asked, glancing around the secluded spot with mild curiosity. “Though I must say, the gardens are lovely at twilight.”

“I-I was ... I suppose admiring parts of the garden I didn't realize existed.” The lie came easily.

“Her vegetable and herb garden is indeed splendid, but nothing like our roses.” Lady Fairfax took her arm. “Come, we are missed.”

They made their way down toward the grass, Alice still reeling from what had transpired. How dare he kiss her like that, then abandon her to sort through the aftermath alone? Yet even as anger flared in her chest, she wished she could track him down and demand he do it again.

He had told her to forget him.

But how could she possibly forget?

The scene before them took her breath away. Hundreds of lanterns dotted the grounds, some floating on the lake’s surface while others hung suspended from tree branches, their soft glow reflecting off the water like fallen stars. Musicians played a gentle tune as couples swayed on the wooden platform. The entire scene seemed lifted from a fairy story, yet Alice felt oddly removed from it all.

Lady Fairfax guided her somewhat impatiently toward the front of the crowd, where a familiar figure stood holding two lanterns.

Elias.

He offered her a warm smile.

“Fashionably late, I see.”

Lady Fairfax dropped into a polite curtsy before stepping back, leaving them alone despite the crowd. The lantern light softened Elias’s handsome features, creating an intimacy that made shame and guilt tear through Alice’s chest. She had just been kissing this man’s closest friend in a shadowy alcove. Could he sense it somehow?

Could he see the evidence of Victor's touch written across her face?

Elias extended one lantern toward her. After a moment's hesitation, she accepted it. He demonstrated how to release his own lantern, the delicate creation drifting upward to join the others dotting the night sky.

"Your turn," he murmured near her ear.

She let her lantern go, watching as it floated up to dance beside his. For a moment, the sight genuinely enchanted her, the memory of Victor's kiss temporarily forgotten as she gazed upward at the glowing display.

A collective gasp from the crowd drew her attention back to earth. Her heart nearly stopped.

Elias had dropped to one knee before her.

"My dearest Miss Montrose," he began, his voice pitched to carry across the assembled guests. "From the moment we met—or perhaps more accurately, from the moment you decorated my finest evening coat—I knew you were different from any lady I had encountered before." A ripple of gentle laughter moved through the crowd. "Your grace, your wit, and your genuine spirit have captured my heart completely. Though our first dance ended rather memorably, I find myself hoping you might agree to dance with me for the rest of our lives. Would you do me the extraordinary honor of becoming my wife?"

Alice's gaze swept across the crowd, taking in familiar faces. Her mother stood weeping happy tears into her handkerchief. The dowager looked supremely satisfied, her matchmaking efforts having paid off. Lady Fairfax clasped her hands together in delight.

She felt as though she had borne false witness to every last one of them, and the darkness within her started to bubble up, the voices on the edges of her mind:

Liar.

Trollop.

Fortune hunter.

And then she saw him. There, at the very back of the crowd, stood a solitary figure in a scarlet coat. Victor's eyes met hers with such raw desperation that it stole her breath—the same haunted look he'd worn in the gazebo when he'd made her promise. His hands clenched at his sides, as if physically holding himself together.

He gave her a single, pleading nod.

Her heart ached with the memory of her vow to Victor—how could she break it now, when he looked as though the slightest wrong move might shatter him completely? She had promised him, and despite everything that had happened between them, despite her own confused feelings, she could not bear to be the one who finally broke him.

Alice looked back at Elias, aware of the tears that had fallen down her cheeks. In that moment, she understood with perfect clarity that she had been forced onto a stage, expected to play out the most important scene of her life. Something within her rebelled against the performance, but when she met Elias's earnest grey eyes, she could do nothing but deliver her prescribed lines. She transformed those tears into those of joy, fanning her face as a proper lady should, her smile pristine and bright, though it felt like a blade twisting in her chest.

“Yes!” The word emerged from a tightened throat, but it was enough.

The crowd erupted in cheers as Elias rose to his feet, taking her hands in his with perfect propriety, squeezing them. Well-wishers descended upon them immediately, blocking her view of the spot where Victor had stood. When she finally managed another glimpse in that direction, he had vanished completely.

Just as he'd promised he would.

CHAPTER 28

Alice sat rigidly in the cramped country church, her side pressed against Elias as sunlight streamed through the stained glass windows. The entire guest list from Fairfax Hall had descended upon the modest building, forcing the regular congregation to shuffle and squeeze into unfamiliar pews. Though there was some quiet grumbling from the locals, they managed to accommodate everyone—if only just.

Mrs. Montrose fanned herself vigorously in the stuffy air as the vicar delivered his sermon. From their position, Alice could see Lord and Lady Fairfax seated with the dowager in the front pew, but her eyes searched in vain for a flash of scarlet among the assembled crowd. Of course, she would not find it—Victor had told her himself that he had not stepped foot in this church since Violet's death.

“Just think,” Mrs. Montrose whispered, leaning close enough that her breath tickled Alice's ear, “soon we shall read the banns in our own parish.”

The banns. The words were like a bucket of ice water. She was engaged—truly engaged—to the man beside her, and it was finally sinking in. When it came time for hymns, Elias lifted the book between them, holding it so they could share. The familiar scent of citrus and salt wrapped around her, but instead of comfort, it brought only confusion. She yearned for an entirely different scent—iron. Sharp as the edge of a knife. Her mind wandered to the dripping of bright blood on emerald grass, to the delicious feeling of snaking her fingers through chestnut locks, to the heat of desperate lips against hers ...

Mrs. Montrose's sharp elbow connected with her ribs, startling Alice from her improper thoughts. She had stopped singing entirely, staring into space as the congregation's voices rose around her. Clearing her throat quickly, she lifted her voice to join the hymn, though the words were slightly off key. When she glanced at Elias, his warm smile held a hint of concern that made her cheeks burn with shame.

They would be horrified to know she had been fantasizing about kissing another man—and in church, no less. Not just any man, but her fiancé's dearest friend. Heat crept up her neck as she forced her attention back to the service. She was engaged to a duke. She would be a duchess. This was everything they had worked for.

When they sat again, Elias returned the hymnal to its place, then reached for her hand. Alice went still, unsure how to respond, but he simply took her fingers in his and held them through the remainder of the service. Though the gesture should have brought comfort, she found herself hyper-aware of the contact, her entire arm growing tense as stone.

She could feel Elias glancing at her periodically throughout the sermon, but she kept her gaze fixed forward, pretending to be deeply engrossed in the vicar's words. In truth, she heard nothing but the thundering of her own heart, her mind consumed by the weight of her secret. If the man beside her was the one she would covenant with before God, why did thoughts of another man feel so sacred?

When they finally rose for the blessing, Elias placed his other hand over their joined ones, the gesture unexpectedly tender.

"You were so attentive," he whispered. "I usually find myself nodding off during such lengthy sermons. I only stayed awake because I would have felt terribly guilty beside you."

"To be perfectly honest," Alice replied, "I did not hear a single word. I am only good

at acting as though I had.”

The truth of her words was like a slap. The acting never stopped—not for a moment.

As they filed out of the church behind the other guests, the vicar stood at the door, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries with his congregation. The morning air held a crisp freshness that made Alice’s head spin after the stuffy confines of the church. She walked beside Elias toward the waiting carriages, their path taking them past an iron gate that led to the church grounds.

A figure emerged suddenly from behind the gate, causing Alice to startle. Her breath caught as she recognized Victor, though he wore a black coat rather than his usual military red. The change made him seem somehow smaller.

“Ah, apologies,” he said, executing a stiff bow when he noticed them. “Gainsbury.”

His eyes moved to Alice and seemed to freeze there, the moment stretching a heartbeat too long. Elias’s head tilted slightly, his brows drawing together as he observed the exchange. Victor cleared his throat.

“Miss Montrose. You must pardon me. I have not offered my congratulations on the happy news.”

Alice could only stare.

“Thank you, Lacey,” Elias said when she did not reply. “Were you in attendance? I did not see you inside.”

“Oh, no. I am only waiting for the Dowager Countess. I am picking her up for a cup of tea at the cottage.”

As Victor spoke, Alice noticed details that had escaped her at first glance. His fingers were clenched around something—a handkerchief she recognized as the one she'd given him, still bearing traces of blood. His eyes were rimmed with red, as though he had been weeping.

She pushed the thought away quickly.

“If you'll excuse me,” Victor said, bowing again. “Ah, here she is.”

He withdrew before Alice could say anything, leaving her staring after him as Elias frowned thoughtfully.

“He was acting rather strange, was he not?” Elias glanced between Alice and Victor's retreating form.

“I suppose. Though he is not one to act with any sense of normalcy.”

Elias shook his head. Something clearly troubled him. After a moment's hesitation, he turned to Alice with an apologetic smile.

“I have something I must attend to,” he said. “I will meet you at the carriage.”

Before she could respond, he strode off in the direction Victor had taken, his long legs carrying him swiftly across the grass. Mrs. Montrose remained deep in conversation with the vicar near the church entrance, suggesting they wouldn't be leaving immediately.

Alice's attention drifted back to the iron gate where Victor had emerged. Her heart seemed to stop as she realized what lay beyond—the church cemetery. Ancient headstones rose from the grass like grey pillars, some simple slabs, while others displayed elaborate carvings. But among the weathered stone, a splash of color

caught her eye.

A fresh bouquet of violets lay before a grave.

Her hands shook as the weight of what she'd witnessed settled over her. After years of avoiding this place, Victor had finally visited his late wife's grave. And she, of all people, had interrupted that private moment of grief.

The urge to follow him—to offer comfort or seek forgiveness, she wasn't sure which—rose within her. But she remained rooted to the spot, remembering his words from their last encounter.

‘Forget this moment. Forget this selfish act—this selfish man.’

How could she possibly forget when every breath seemed to urge her closer to him?

Lady Fairfax had joined their table for tea in one of Fairfax Hall's elegant sitting rooms. Elias had not accompanied them, citing some unnamed business that furrowed his brow as he helped Alice into the carriage. She had smiled and nodded, but watched through the window as he wiped a hand across his face when he thought she couldn't see. The gesture left her wondering what thoughts troubled him—and whether they centered on Victor.

Her teacup clattered against its saucer as she set it down, earning a sharp look from her mother. But nothing could dampen Mrs. Montrose's spirits today—not when her greatest ambition was finally within reach.

“Of course, the wedding breakfast must be held at Gainsbury House,” Mrs. Montrose declared. “Though we would be honored if you would advise us on the arrangements, Lady Fairfax. You've done such a magnificent job with the birthday celebrations.”

“How kind of you to say.” Lady Fairfax’s musical laugh filled the air. “I would be delighted to assist. Have you given thought to the flowers? And of course, the guest list must be considered carefully ...”

Alice stared into her empty cup as the women’s voices washed over her. They discussed colors and decorations, seating arrangements and wedding clothes—her mother having apparently planned every detail down to the color ribbon Alice would wear.

“How wonderful to have a mother so attentive to every particular,” Lady Fairfax remarked.

“Yes,” Alice murmured.

They were describing a dream—a beautiful dream, but false nonetheless. The perfect duchess, the perfect wedding, the perfect life stretched out before her like a path paved in gold. Yet she felt nothing but hollow emptiness at the prospect.

There was another path, she knew. One she had not allowed herself to think of. It was too impossible, too messy. A path paved in social ruin and broken hearts.

But it would allow her to be with him.

With Victor.

She reached for the teapot as the women continued discussing potential honeymoon destinations. As she poured, something strange happened. Her mind, usually whirling with anxious thoughts about proper angles and careful movements, went completely still.

She watched, almost fascinated, as the dark liquid filled her cup. When it reached the

brim, she did not stop. Tea spilled over into the saucer, then onto the pristine tablecloth, spreading in a growing stain.

“Good heavens, child!” Mrs. Montrose snatched up her napkin, dabbing frantically at the spreading puddle. “Whatever has gotten into you?”

Alice set down the teapot calmly, a strange laugh threatening to bubble up in her throat as she stared at her reflection in the spilled tea. The woman who looked back at her was not a duchess—would never be a duchess.

“I beg your pardon, I must excuse myself,” she said, rising from her chair and dropping into a curtsy executed with perfect precision. Then she turned and fled the room, that peculiar laughter still threatening to escape.

Once in the hallway, she pressed her back against the wall, one hand clamped over her mouth as hysterical giggles finally broke free. For her entire life, her every breath had been so tightly controlled. And now, as she’d listened to them planning out the rest of her days, something had released inside her.

The pressure of holding everything in—every gesture, every masked emotion—had finally grown too great. Like tea overflowing a cup, she could contain it no longer.

She wanted something else entirely.

CHAPTER 29

Fairfax Hall was lonely at night. Each room filled with guests, no space for even one more person, yet the stillness crept into Alice's very bones.

She held her dressing gown closer; the fabric providing little protection against the chill of the marble floors beneath her slippers. Her heart thundered in her chest as she glanced behind her, searching for any sign of movement in the darkened corridors. No one could see her—this almost felt worse than sneaking around with Victor, kissing in alcoves.

Miss Eastridge had given her precise directions, and Alice counted doors carefully as she made her way down the hall. When she reached what she hoped was the correct chamber, she stood frozen before it, gathering her courage. Finally, she raised her hand and rapped gently against the wood.

She waited for a beat and heard movement from inside. After trying once more, a voice called out.

“One moment!”

Though she had expected him to be asleep at this hour, she still felt impatient as she hugged herself tightly, listening to the sounds of scraping and movement within. Finally, the door opened and Elias's face emerged. His dark hair was disheveled as though he had just risen from bed, and he wore a hastily donned robe over his nightclothes.

Upon seeing her, his expression shifted from surprise to confusion.

“A-Alice? What are you doing here? It is hardly appropriate?”

The words died in his throat as he seemed to notice something in her countenance.

“Remember on the boat,” she blurted. “You told me if I needed to speak to you, if I needed anything at all. I only ...” She swallowed hard. “Anytime, you said.”

“I did not realize anytime would mean the middle of the night.”

“It cannot wait.”

Elias’s face hardened for a moment, then he nodded.

“Of course.” He glanced down the hall to ensure they were alone before stepping out and carefully closing the door behind him. “You look like you need a cup of tea. Come, follow me.”

They moved through shadow-filled corridors, passing doorways in silence. As they descended the grand stairs, moonlight cast a blue glow across half of Elias’s face. They took winding paths through Fairfax Hall until they reached the servants’ area of the manor. He opened a door, leading her into a long room. The kitchens. A large preparation table dominated the center, with a stove and bread oven along one wall. Glass jars lined the cabinets, accompanied by various baskets of ingredients. At the far end stood a long table where staff would take their meals.

Alice hesitated at the threshold, feeling as though she was intruding in a space that wasn’t meant for her. But it was too late for any staff to be about, and too early for the cooks to begin breakfast preparations.

“Sit,” Elias said, gesturing to a stool beside the table.

“Should we not call for someone?”

“I do not think we need a servant to heat water,” Elias said.

He moved to the hearth, where embers still glowed beneath the ash. He stoked the fire easily, adding kindling and small logs until flames licked upward. The copper kettle he selected bore the marks of daily use rather than ornamental display. The familiar domestic motions seemed strange coming from a duke’s hands.

“I have never heard of a duke making his own tea,” Alice said.

He turned to give her a half-smile while poking the fire.

“Perhaps I am not quite what you’d expect from a duke.”

The words made her heart constrict painfully. He was being so kind, so warm and charming. She watched as he went about preparing their tea, fetching simple ceramic cups from the staff’s cupboard rather than the fine china used upstairs. He searched the walls of jars until he found what he sought.

“What are you making then, Your Grace?”

“The dowager’s garden does not just grow flowers. Her herbal collection is one of the most considerable.” He selected a few glass jars. “Sometimes I think people forget that with all her obsession with roses and lilies. Though ...” he gave her a knowing look, “I have no complaints about her flowers.”

Alice studied him as he prepared the herbs and strained them, pouring steaming water over the mixture. She had never seen the duke like this—his hair disheveled, collar

open to reveal dark chest hair beneath, small circles shadowing his eyes. Guilt pricked at her for waking him, though she wondered if those shadows came from more than just tonight's interrupted sleep. His hands drew her attention as he worked, sleeves pushed up to reveal arms marked with tiny nicks and scars. These weren't the hands of a duke raised with a silver spoon—they spoke of experience she knew nothing about. She realized how many layers remained between them, how many secrets her supposed future husband might hold.

But she wasn't sure she was meant to be the one to uncover them.

He passed her the brew, and she took a careful sip. The taste was slightly floral, with a hint of honey.

“Elias—”

“I think I know why you are here.”

“You cannot?—”

He raised a hand, the gesture silencing her despite his casual state. Even in his nightclothes, he carried a duke's authority.

“I will allow you to speak, but you must hear me out.” He wrapped both hands around his cup. “When I arrived at Fairfax Hall last week, I knew few people. I had previously become acquainted with Lord and Lady Fairfax at a wedding four years ago.”

“Victor and Violet's.”

He nodded.

“So you know about her.” He released a long breath, shaking his head with a knowing smile. “Not long ago, I asked Victor to assist in finding me a wife. The Dowager Countess ensured there were eligible ladies in attendance at her birthday celebration, so I decided to join Lacey here. Then I met you. After our first introduction, Victor told me to stay away from you at all costs. And then I danced with you and something ... changed within him. I do not know what. Perhaps it was love at first vomit.”

He smiled wryly as Alice blushed a deep shade of red. Then he paused, weighing his next words. “But from that point forward, he was completely obsessed with my courting you. And why wouldn’t I be interested? Despite our rough beginning, you are beautiful, charming, lovely to be around. I was perfectly content following his suggestion.”

He let out a long breath. “I have noticed something between the both of you, and I thought it to be animosity. But still he insisted it was fine, that you would be the best wife I could find, and why wouldn’t I trust my friend? He is the only person I know who has found love. A true love so deep that it caused a pit equally deep when it ended. I think ...” He paused, searching the dark corners of the room. “I think that deep pit kept him from admitting to himself that he had fallen in love again. And instead of facing that fact, he placed that upon me for whatever reasons he had. I know he had only good intentions, but now I see perfectly.

“After church this morning, I sought him out,” Elias continued, his voice growing softer. “I knew something was terribly wrong. Victor has always been disagreeable, but lately ...” He shook his head. “At first, he denied everything. Claimed there was nothing to tell. But I pressed him—I had to know what tormented my dearest friend so. Finally, after what felt like hours, his walls crumbled.”

Alice’s heart thundered in her chest.

“What did he tell you?”

“That he loves you. More deeply, I believe, than even he thought possible. I have known Victor since we were boys, watched him grieve Violet until I feared he might follow her to the grave. But this ...” He drew a slow breath. “I have never seen him so utterly heartsick. The man I spoke with today was a shadow of himself, convinced that his own happiness must be sacrificed for ours. He truly believed he was doing right by us both.”

“Elias ...”

He met her gaze firmly.

“I can see myself loving you. We could grow old together and have a gaggle of children. I could give you the Poet’s Treatment for the rest of my life and still be happy for it. I am not there now, but I can clearly see a future where we build that love and trust. I could give you my heart ... But you could never give me yours. Because it belongs to another.”

She pressed a hand to her mouth, fighting back tears that threatened to fall.

“I am s-so sorry, Elias. I did not mean to do this. There was so much pressure, so much?—”

He left his cup and walked to her, offering his hand. When she took it, he helped her to her feet and drew her into an embrace. His hold was strong but comforting, more like that of a brother or father than a lover. When he pulled back, his hands rested on her shoulders as he gave her a gentle smile.

“I should have known sooner. You two are like alley cats. Very wet, very angry alley cats.”

Alice couldn't help but let out a tearful laugh, wiping her eyes.

“What about you?”

“I am a duke. I will weather a broken engagement with some finagling. I am more worried about you. This will be in the papers. Are you sure you wish to do this?”

Alice hadn't considered that aspect. She pondered the social backlash, turning over all the worst possibilities in her mind. But as her thoughts spiraled through every terrible outcome, something strange happened—the familiar darkness did not rear its ugly head. She pressed a hand to her chest and laughed, not quite believing it.

“I ... I do not care.” She looked at Elias as though seeing something entirely new, another tear rolling down her cheek as she laughed again, placing a hand on her head. “I do not care one bit! Ha!”

Elias smiled back, shaking his head.

“Perhaps you both are more alike than I thought.” He patted her shoulder and crossed back to his cup, giving her a conspiratorial look. “And if that is the case, let us talk about tomorrow's ball.”

CHAPTER 30

Alice and Mrs. Montrose stepped through the second floor entrance to the grand ballroom, and for the first time in her life, Alice felt perfectly content. She paused near the gilt door frame as they waited in queue to be announced, taking in the spectacle before them.

The ballroom stretched out below, transformed beyond recognition for the dowager's birthday celebration. Where the opening ball had been elegant, this was otherworldly. Thousands of fresh flowers covered every surface—roses and lilies draped across marble columns, delicate orchids spilling from crystal vases, and garlands of ivy twisting up the grand staircase. Petals carpeted the checkered floor, releasing their perfume with each step of the dancers.

Acrobats in costumes embroidered with floral motifs performed feats of balance on raised platforms, drawing gasps from the assembled crowd. Even the servants had been dressed for the occasion, their livery adorned with hand-stitched blooms that matched the dowager's signature style. Musicians played from a bower woven entirely of flowering vines, their instruments decorated with trailing ribbons and fresh blossoms.

“Mrs. Regina Montrose and Miss Alice Montrose.”

The assembled guests turned as one to watch their descent. Alice knew they would—her transformation over the fortnight had been the talk of the celebration. She wore a gown specifically chosen by the dowager for this evening, the silk the precise shade of a sun-kissed rose petal. Tiny crystals gleamed against the fabric,

catching the light with each movement as though dusted with starlight. Her hair had been arranged in elaborate braids beneath a delicate headpiece that matched her rose pin, which sat proudly at her breast.

Her mother leaned close, voice barely above a whisper.

“Look at them all,” she said. “They adore you. A duchess! Can you believe it? It will be in all the London papers.”

It certainly would be—though not for the reasons her mother imagined.

They began their descent, and Alice’s gaze swept the crowd with practiced ease until she found the figure she sought. Despite their late-night conversation, Elias showed no signs of fatigue. If anything, he seemed more energized than usual, standing tall near the refreshments. When their eyes met, he gave her a slight nod, raising his glass of red wine in acknowledgment. Everything was proceeding according to plan.

Her mother attempted to pause four steps from the bottom—their usual choreographed moment—but Alice swept past, forcing Mrs. Montrose to catch up, her skirts rustling as she hurried to match her daughter’s pace. Though her mother sputtered in surprise, she dared not criticize someone who was to become a duchess, especially not before such a distinguished audience.

Alice could feel the weight of countless stares as she passed the platform where the dowager held court without so much as a wave in the direction of their hosts. Her mother’s eyes widened at this clear breach of protocol, but Alice pressed on. While it might appear a snub, she needed the assembled company to witness this moment. Her reputation would require such careful social positioning in the hours to come.

Elias met her at the bottom of the stairs, leaving his wineglass on a passing servant’s tray. The musicians had tuned their instruments, preparing for the next dance. He

reached for her with such obvious devotion that the watching ladies tittered behind their fans. When she took his hand, he drew her close with practiced grace.

“The Dowager Countess will not appreciate that entrance,” he murmured as he led her toward the dance floor.

“Well, it got everyone’s attention, and the dowager will receive her birthday present soon enough.” Alice squeezed his hand gently. “Do I appear suitably in love?”

He brought them to a stop among the other couples forming sets.

“Of course you do,” he replied softly. “Because you are. Though perhaps not with your current dance partner.”

The music began, and Alice and the duke performed their roles to perfection. Their movements flowed together with practiced grace, their expressions carefully crafted to show deep affection. The smoldering looks they exchanged caused more than one observer to reach for their fan. This would indeed be the talk of society—exactly as they needed it to be.

When the music faded, the applause thundered louder than usual, accompanied by excited whispers. Alice caught her breath, maintaining her radiant smile as Elias guided her through a turn, then brought her hand to his lips in a very public kiss. But movement on the platform caught her attention, drawing her gaze upward.

Victor stood before the dowager in his scarlet coat, bowing over her hand in what appeared to be a birthday greeting—though Alice knew it was truly a farewell. Lady Fairfax watched with barely concealed fury as Victor exchanged words with the dowager, whose expression had grown troubled. He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew something, pressing it into the dowager’s hand. She stared at the object, her face paling visibly. When Victor didn’t immediately withdraw, Lady Fairfax grasped

his arm. He shrugged off her touch with a sneer and turned to leave, executing one final bow before striding quickly from the platform. Lady Fairfax followed, no doubt to ensure his departure.

Alice's stomach clenched. She had less time than anticipated. From across the ballroom, waiting against a wall, was Miss Eastridge. Alice signaled the woman, and the maid slipped away into the shadows. Next, Alice caught Elias's eye, giving him a slight nod. It was time to present the dowager with her birthday gift.

Her mother hurried to join her as she approached the platform, practically glowing with maternal pride.

"Oh, my darling girl," Mrs. Montrose gushed, "how perfectly in love you both are! To think, everything I couldn't achieve, you have managed so beautifully."

Alice drew a steadying breath as they climbed the steps. The dowager still gazed toward the door where Victor had disappeared, her attention fixed on his retreat. As they drew closer, Alice noticed a small green book resting on the dowager's lap—Violet's poetry book, the same volume Victor had guarded so fiercely at the cottage. The dowager's fingers worried at the cover's frayed edges, her expression unusually vulnerable as she stared toward where Victor had gone. Alice's stomach clenched with a strange dread. Why would Victor part with his most treasured possession now? But before she could go down that train of thought, the dowager's gaze finally turned to them, brightening with forced composure.

"Ah, good," she said. "Better news, I trust. You put on quite the show, my dear, though I did not appreciate your rushed entrance."

"I apologize for my earlier indiscretion. Happy birthday, Dowager Lady Fairfax," Alice said, executing a perfect curtsy.

“Look how my rose has bloomed,” the dowager replied, though her eyes held a hint of uncertainty. Beside Alice, Mrs. Montrose shifted uncomfortably.

“About that, my lady.” Alice straightened her spine. “I have your birthday present to deliver.”

The dowager’s eyebrows rose with obvious curiosity. “And what might that be?”

In one smooth motion, Alice reached up and unpinned the rose from her breast. She approached the dowager’s throne, extending the gift with both hands. The older woman stared at the fabric flower, making no move to accept it.

“I do not understand.”

“I must thank you for everything you have done for me during this fortnight,” Alice said carefully. “I have learned more about myself than I thought possible. But ...” She drew a steadying breath. “I cannot be your rose.”

“Why give this back now when you have already—” The dowager’s face drained of color as understanding dawned. She rose from her seat, drawing herself to her full height. “Please tell me,” she said, voice dropping to barely more than a whisper, “you are not doing something foolish.”

Alice met her gaze steadily, lowering her voice so only those on the platform could hear.

“The engagement has been called off.”

Mrs. Montrose’s sharp gasp cut through the air. Alice grasped her mother’s arm before she could cause a scene, shaking her head in warning.

The dowager accepted the rose pin, studying it as though it might provide answers.

“But ... why?”

“Because I am not a rose,” Alice said. “Perhaps I am a weed, or an herb, or perhaps even a daylily.” She turned to her mother, squeezing her arm gently. “A bloom that had its moment in the beautiful sun, and now must forge its own path.”

“What are you doing, girl?” Mrs. Montrose’s voice shook.

The dowager’s gaze drifted toward the door where Victor had disappeared, and understanding transformed her features.

“No,” she breathed, gripping her flower-covered throne for support. “Victor?”

“Yes.” Alice lifted her chin. “And while I do not need it, I would appreciate your blessing and the gift of discretion ... for now.”

The dowager shook her head slowly, then let out a genuine laugh that seemed to surprise even her. She threw her head back, her shoulders shaking.

“It has been quite some time since I have been truly shocked.” Her eyes glittered with something that might have been respect. “But what can I say? Like mother, like daughter. You may go.”

Alice beamed, grasping her mother’s arm, guiding her quickly from the platform. Before they could fully withdraw, the dowager called after them.

“Oh, and do hurry, my dear. It seems the lady of the house wants the captain gone as soon as possible.”

As they reached the bottom of the platform, Mrs. Montrose spun to face her, grasping Alice's shoulders with trembling hands, whispering furiously.

"Alice, Alice! What is happening? The engagement—what have you done?"

Alice caught her mother's hands in her own, squeezing gently.

"Mother, I know that everything you've done has been to prevent me from sharing your fate. That you wished me to right the wrongs of your youth. But I am your daughter," she pressed one hand to her mother's cheek, "and though I love you dearly and do not wish to cause you pain, perhaps I am like you in some ways."

The blood drained from Mrs. Montrose's face.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"It means," Alice said, drawing a steady breath, "I must choose my own path, Mama. I only hope that when I return, it does not destroy our relationship as it did with your parents."

"Alice—"

But she had already pulled away, no time remaining for further comfort or explanation. Her mother would have to carry those last words in her heart, and Alice could only pray they would not become something she would later regret.

CHAPTER 31

Alice burst into the cool night air, her heart thundering against her ribs as she emerged from Fairfax Hall with urgency. The same grand entrance where she had first arrived now felt transformed by moonlight. Lady Fairfax stood with her back turned, arms crossed tightly over her chest as she watched Victor attend to his bay horse. Servants held the reins while he made final preparations, his movements mechanical as though every gesture pained him.

At the sound of Alice's footsteps, Lady Fairfax spun around, her eyes widening before her jaw set in some sort of grim determination.

"You should leave, Miss Montrose."

Victor tensed at the sound of her name, then turned slowly. The sight of him pulled at her very core—his face drawn and pale, shoulders slumped in defeat. He looked utterly powerless, as though he had accepted some terrible fate. The very thought made her chest constrict painfully.

That expression of resignation sparked something within her. She lifted her chin and stepped forward to address Lady Fairfax directly.

"My lady, you have been incredibly welcoming during my stay at Fairfax Hall. I know Captain Lacey and I could have caused great scandal for you."

Victor's attention snapped fully to her now, abandoning his horse to the servants' care as questions filled his expression. Lady Fairfax's own countenance remained

carefully neutral.

“You need not concern yourself,” Lady Fairfax said. “Captain Lacey was just leaving.”

“As he should,” Alice agreed, watching Victor wince at her words. “I only ask that you allow him a few more hours here at Fairfax Hall—to make amends.” She paused momentarily, hoping her playacting was convincing enough. “His Grace has discovered the truth about our indiscretion at Violet Cottage, and the situation is ... delicate. The Duke of Gainsbury is hoping to exchange some words with Victor before personally seeing him off the property.”

“Wait one moment, I do not see why—” Victor began, stepping forward.

Alice silenced him with a single look, surprised by the power she seemed to hold over him at that moment. She turned back to Lady Fairfax, who studied them both with obvious suspicion.

Just then, a figure stepped out from the grand manor, the light of the hall at her back silhouetting her figure. The maid stepped forward in obvious distress.

“My Lady,” Miss Eastridge said, her voice quivering with trepidation. When Alice had involved her in their scheme, she had not realized how talented the maid was at changing her emotions. Perhaps working in the Montrose house had its perks.

“What is it?” Lady Fairfax asked, her attention warring between Alice and Miss Eastridge.

“Pardon me for the interruption, but one of the footmen slipped on a flower petal and now a half dozen glasses of wine are shattered on the ballroom floor.”

Both Alice and Lady Fairfax blinked, shocked. When Alice had asked her to make a diversion, she never expected something like this. Lady Fairfax's mouth became tight, eyes flashing from Alice to Victor, then back to Miss Eastridge. She let out a very loud grumble.

"I must attend to this," the countess finally said to Alice. "His Grace may work out whatever disagreement between you, but I will not have a scandal of a duel at the dowager's birthday party. Is that clear?"

When Lady Fairfax made no move to withdraw, Alice gave her a half-hearted nod, then gestured toward the lantern-lit path leading to the rose gardens.

"The duke awaits just this way, Captain Lacey."

Victor executed a stiff bow to Lady Fairfax before falling into step beside Alice. The moment they were out of earshot, he seized her arm.

"What is this about Gainsbury?" he demanded in a fierce whisper.

Alice's fingers shook as she walked, her mind racing. Everything hinged on this moment—her entire future balanced on whether Victor could accept what she offered. But what if Elias had been wrong? What if Victor's feelings were nothing more than momentary passion? What if his heart remained too wounded? The questions threatened to overwhelm her, stealing her voice.

They reached the rose gardens where moonlight painted silver patterns through climbing vines. The night air hung heavy with perfume from countless blooms, their petals glowing like pearls in the darkness. Victor's grip tightened on her wrist, bringing them to an abrupt halt.

"What is going on?" His voice held an edge of desperation. When she didn't

immediately respond, his other hand rose to her chin, tipping her face up to meet his gaze. “Has something happened? What is wrong?”

“The engagement is off.”

The words seemed to strike him like a ball bearing to the chest. All the color drained from his face as he shook his head slowly.

“Was this because he found out about our time at Violet Cottage? Did you explain to him that nothing happened? I-I can fix this, I can?—”

Alice shook her head.

“I only said that to deceive Lady Fairfax. We did not end the engagement for any reason other than we are not meant to be together.”

“No.” His voice emerged rough with emotion. “No, you must marry him.”

“I cannot,” Alice said firmly.

“You promised,” he said. “You gave me your word that you would?—”

“I promised to say yes when he proposed,” she cut in. “Nothing more. I never vowed to follow through with the marriage itself.” She stepped closer, taking his trembling hands in hers. “I thought I could love Elias, but it would be a lie. I can no longer pretend my heart belongs to anyone but you.”

Victor released a strangled breath, his expression twisting with something between agony and desperate hope. His hand rose to cup her cheek with exquisite gentleness.

“No, I beg of you,” he whispered. “Elias can heal you. A man as damaged as me ... I

do not think I can.”

“But it must be you.” She met his gaze steadily, despite the tears threatening to fall. “When I think about facing this life—plodding along day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment—in my mind’s eye, you are always there, by my side.”

His lips trembled as moisture gathered at the corners of his eyes. For a moment, she thought he might break down completely. Instead, he drew her close with sudden urgency, claiming her mouth with his. They crashed together like waves breaking against stone, her fingers tangling in his hair as his hands cradled her face. Though passion burned between them, his touch remained reverent, as though she might shatter if handled too roughly.

Her mind emptied of everything but the sensation of his lips on hers, her heart lighter than she’d ever known it could be. When they finally parted, his forehead rested against hers as an uneven laugh escaped him. Tears glimmered on his cheeks in the moonlight.

“I thought,” he said, his voice lowered, “that I had been blessed beyond measure to know love once in this life. I had accepted my fate—to walk alone until my dying day.” His thumb brushed a tear from her cheek as bittersweet joy transformed his features. “I never imagined I could be fortunate enough to find such love again. I was wrong, so terribly wrong.” His fingers traced the line of her jaw with infinite care. “My heart is yours entirely, Alice.”

“And mine, yours,” she whispered back.

He kissed her again, deeper this time, as though trying to pour years of loneliness and longing into a single moment. They clung to each other desperately, afraid to let go lest they be swept apart. When Alice finally drew back, her hands gripped his coat to steady herself.

“In an hour,” she said carefully, “a carriage will arrive at Violet Cottage.”

He blinked at her, still dazed from their kiss. Understanding dawned slowly across his features as she continued.

“It will take us to the inn at Weybridge, where there is a coach to Scotland.” She tightened her grip on his lapels, willing him to read the depth of her devotion in her eyes. “Come with me.”

“Elope?” The word emerged barely above a whisper.

“Yes.”

His gaze drifted toward Violet Cottage, its darkened windows barely visible across the lake. She could see memories in his expression—all he had lost, all the pain that still lingered. Love was one thing, but binding himself forever when his heart remained so tender was another entirely.

“You are a madwoman,” he finally said. “We have known each other but a fortnight.”

“If you do not wish to?”

“The answer is yes. I will follow you anywhere,” his voice was completely certain. A bark of laughter escaped him as he pressed one hand to his forehead in disbelief. “Good Lord, but can you imagine the scandal? Your mother and the Dowager Countess will be apoplectic, and Gainsbury—what will he think?”

A deep voice emerged from the shadows.

“He would give his full blessing.”

They turned to find Elias standing at the entrance to the rose garden, his dark hair stirred by the night breeze. He approached with measured steps, hands clasped behind his back.

“And he would wish you all the happiness in the world,” he said.

Before either could respond, Elias seized Victor in a fierce embrace that made the smaller man grunt in protest.

“Ow! You could be gentler,” Victor complained as Elias released him.

“Are you certain about this?” Victor continued, his expression growing serious. “It will sully both your reputations.”

Elias clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“Perhaps I deserve to be knocked from my perch,” he said, then nodded toward the glowing windows of Fairfax Hall. “But your lady love and I put on quite the romantic display back there. That should keep the ton distracted, at least for a few days.”

“Who knows about this plan?”

“Mrs. Montrose. The dowager. Soon enough, Lady Fairfax.” Elias’s smile held a hint of mischief. “I shall employ every charm at my disposal to keep this contained until the celebration ends. Enjoy your peace while you can.”

“Thank you, Gainsbury,” Victor said softly.

Elias merely smiled and gestured toward Violet Cottage. “Go. I’ll have Miss Montrose’s things sent with the carriage. If you’re caught here, I cannot promise you won’t make the morning papers.”

With a final nod, Elias turned and strode back toward the hall, then paused at the entrance of the rose garden.

“Oh, and Lacey?”

“Yes?”

“Give her the Poet’s Treatment.”

And he left them alone beneath the stars. Alice looked up at Victor, and he took her hand, weaving their fingers together. Something electric passed between them at the contact.

“Come, Lady Rose.”

Alice shook her head, touching the empty spot on her breast where the pin had been.

“I gave up my flower.”

“Then come, future Mrs. Lacey.”

They ran through the moonlit gardens, past the carefully tended roses and through gaps in the hedges, their laughter echoing across the grounds. As they passed the lakeside gazebo where they had laid their broken hearts bare, Alice felt lighter than the wind. The darkness that had plagued her for so long seemed to lift, replaced by something warmer—not the blinding sunlight Elias had offered, but the gentle glow of starlight reflecting off still water.

A light she could live with, day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, for all the days to come.

EPILOGUE

MONTHS LATER

Alice woke to the rustle of sheets and quilts, the twitter of birds drifting through open windows. Judging by where sunlight fell across the far wall, she had slept far later than usual. She turned toward the form beside her, watching as Victor's chest rose and fell with each steady breath. Even in sleep, that signature furrow remained between his brows. She reached out, running her fingers through his chestnut hair, and the wrinkle eased momentarily.

He stirred at her touch, eyes opening slowly as he rolled to face her. The intensity of his gaze still caught her off guard, as though he could pry open her chest and examine every corner of her heart. A smile played at his lips as he propped himself on one elbow, the movement causing the blanket to slip lower on his bare chest.

"Good morning," she whispered.

"Good morning, Mrs. Lacey."

Before she could respond, he moved with the fluid grace she'd come to expect, gathering her into his arms. His lips found her face, pressing playful kisses across her skin until their shared laughter filled the air. When he pulled back to study her face, his expression held such contentment that it made her chest ache.

They had shared countless kisses in their many months of marriage, yet each one still felt like the first. As their lips met again, a breeze carried the scent of lavender and

herbs from the garden through the open windows. The sounds of morning drifted up to their small cottage bedroom, reminding them that the day wouldn't wait forever.

But perhaps an hour more would suffice.

Victor stood at the drawing-room window later that morning, wearing his robe, his hair still mussed from bed. He studied the newspapers spread before him with sharp attention, scanning for any mention of Montrose, Lacey, or Gainsbury.

"Come to tea," Alice called from the breakfast table as she added two sugar cubes to his cup, stirring with care.

He released a long breath and joined her, spreading the papers across the table before reaching for the teapot to prepare her cup exactly as she preferred it.

"Anything of interest?" she asked.

"Nothing this week. We may have weathered the worst of it."

He placed her steaming cup before her with gentleness, turning it so it was angled just so.

Though Victor had forbidden her from reading the society pages, she knew he ensured every gossip rag and newspaper arrived at their cottage. Each edition went directly into the fire after his careful scrutiny. Their story had caused quite the stir—first the broken engagement to a duke, then their own hasty marriage at Gretna Green. They'd retreated to this small cottage owned by Victor's family, far from London's prying eyes, but he remained vigilant about monitoring their reputation.

"I do not understand how you can read any of it," she said.

He reached across the table to grasp her hand, his thumb tracing circles on her palm.

“Information gathering is the best part of any defense.”

She rolled her eyes, earning a cheeky grin. As he finished his tea and reached for a second cup, something seemed to occur to him. He rose suddenly, crossing to the entrance hall.

“Speaking of news, letters arrived.”

He returned with a small stack, passing one to Alice. Her stomach lurched as she recognized her mother’s handwriting. She pressed a hand to her chest, trying to steady her breathing.

Though she had written frequently to Mrs. Montrose, replies had been scarce. Her fingers trembled as she broke the seal, and something fluttered to the table. Her breath caught as she lifted the object—her mother’s daylily pin glinted in the morning light. Victor watched her carefully as he opened his own correspondence, his protectiveness clear in the way he studied her reaction.

Alice read the letter twice, hardly daring to believe its contents.

“She’s invited us for Christmastide,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “At their residence.”

“Any mention of the elopement?”

She shook her head, scanning the words again. There was no reference to her disappointing choice, no comparison to her mother’s own indiscretions, no lecture. Mrs. Montrose wrote as though the scandal had never occurred. But the daylily pin said more than any letter could.

“I believe it is a peace offering,” Alice muttered.

“Thank heavens. I was not looking forward to writing a scathing reply to my mother-in-law.”

His attention returned to his own letter, his eyebrows rising sharply as he stood in shock. For a moment, Alice thought something was terribly wrong, that they had received bad news of the worst kind.

“What is it?”

“An invitation.” He passed the heavy cream-colored paper to her.

The elegant script announced the forthcoming nuptials of His Grace, Elias Yates, Duke of Gainsbury, to a Miss Eleanor Stanton. The wedding breakfast would be hosted at his sister’s London manor.

“Well,” Victor said, a knowing smile playing at his lips, “it seems your scandal did not hinder his pursuit of happiness.”

“I am glad,” Alice replied. “Though our presence at a London wedding will certainly cause quite the stir.”

Victor crossed to her chair, pressing a kiss to her temple.

“All will be well.”

And she believed him.

Months had taught her more about Victor than their fortnight at Fairfax Hall ever could. She’d learned that nightmares of the war still plagued him, sending him pacing their creaking floors in the darkest hours. She discovered his love of being read to—he would rest his head in her lap while she combed her fingers through his hair, her voice carrying them through histories, adventures, and poetry until well past

midnight.

And she learned the true depth of his grief.

She gave him space when the darkness took him, when memories of Violet seemed to press against his chest until he could hardly breathe. He would always return to Alice, gathering her in his arms as though she might slip through his fingers like autumn mist. They would stand locked together, heartbeats gradually falling into rhythm, until the shadows receded.

He had learned her patterns too. When the unbidden thoughts grew too loud, threatening to drag her under, he would appear at her side as though summoned. His fingers would thread through hers, tugging her outside for long walks down empty country roads. Sometimes he would goad her into sparring matches that inevitably ended quite differently than they had at Fairfax Hall.

Life was not perfect. Victor still spoke with his mouth full and left his belongings strewn across the cottage. Some days, the darkness crept closer than others. But they had carved out their own paradise here—not the pristine garden of a grand estate, but something wilder and more rare.

As Alice studied him across the breakfast table, his attention already returned to the morning papers, she found herself smiling. She wouldn't trade this—any of it—for all the duchy titles in England.

The gifted daylily pin caught the morning light, and Alice lifted it, turning it between her fingers. She was no Lady Rose, but Alice had found her own garden to bloom in, thorns and all.