



# Tame A Rake Duke (The Harrington Sisters #1)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Independent and fearless, Rosalind faces loves greatest challenge. Can she surrender her heart without losing herself?

Lady Rosalind Harrington isn't your average Regency debutante: with a fiery wit and an independent streak that blazes bright, she's the very last person the ton expected to secure a brilliant match.

Alexander Fitzwilliam, Duke of Somerton, is a man ruled by duty and haunted by secrets from his past. Though his family appears illustrious, there's more than one skeleton in the closet that threatens to bring the dynasty crumbling down.

When fate brings these two together, will their match burn even brighter? Or will their past and present overwhelm and extinguish them both?

If you are a fan of Bridgerton and Regency Romance novels, you wont be able to put this book down.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Lady Rosalind's emerald eyes darted between her sisters; their father's announcement still hung in the air like a gathering storm cloud. Amelia, the eldest daughter of the house and ever the picture of grace and composure, sat with her hands folded neatly in her lap, but Rosalind could see the tension in her fingers.

Isabella, on the other hand, seemed to shrink into herself, her delicate features etched with worry as she nibbled on her lower lip.

The silence in the drawing room was deafening, broken only by the ticking of the ornate clock on the mantelpiece. Rosalind's mind raced as she tried to make sense of her father's words.

A courtship with the Duke of Somerton? Rosalind thought incredulously. It was unthinkable. The man was a notorious rake, known for his scandalous affairs and cold demeanour.

Rosalind's admittedly fiery spirit bubbled to the surface, and she turned to face her father, her voice cutting through the heavy stillness. "Father, how can you possibly consider this? The Duke is hardly a suitable match for any of us. His reputation precedes him, and I cannot fathom why you would want to subject one of your daughters to such a fate."

Rosalind knew better as soon as she spoke: Lord Matthew Harrington, Baron of Highmore, was not a man given to jesting. Lord Harrington's eyes narrowed. With steel in his voice, he replied, "Rosalind, you will mind your tone. The Duke is a man

of great influence and wealth, a Peer of the Realm; a match with him would secure our family's future. It is not your place to question my decisions."

Rosalind bit back a retort, her cheeks flushing with indignation. She glanced at Amelia, hoping to find an ally in her sister's calm reasoning, but Amelia's gaze was fixed on the floor, her expression unreadable. Lady Amelia Harrington had long ago mastered the art of looking serene in the face of conflict and trial. It was a skill that eluded Rosalind, who constantly found herself being chided for "making faces out loud."

Isabella's soft voice broke the tension, barely above a whisper. "Father, must one of us truly marry the Duke? Surely there must be another way..." Her gentle voice trailed off into silence.

Lord Matthew's features softened slightly as he regarded his youngest daughter. Though she was a young lady, she still held the position of baby of the family, and Lord Matthew was always a soft touch with her.

"Isabella, my dear, I understand your reservations, but this is a matter of great importance. The Duke has expressed his interest, and it is our duty to consider his proposal." He paused, an inscrutable look passing over his face. "Our family is in a precarious situation."

Rosalind's heart clenched as she watched Isabella's eyes fill with tears. She knew her sister's gentle spirit was ill-suited for the harsh realities of a loveless marriage, to say nothing of the pressures of marrying to save her sisters. Amelia, too, seemed to be struggling with the weight of their father's words; even her normally placid expression was troubled.

Rising from her seat, Rosalind took a deep breath and faced her father, her voice steady despite the turmoil within her. "Father, I beg you to reconsider. We are not

mere pawns to be traded for social standing. We deserve a chance at happiness, at a love that is true and pure." Despite her boldness, she was trembling within herself—it was against the natural order of her world to speak out so against one's father. Moreover, it was a radical idea she voiced, one completely out of sync with most of society.

Lord Harrington's gaze hardened, his voice taking on a sharp edge. "Rosalind, you forget yourself. It is not your place to dictate the future of this family. One of you will marry the Duke, and that is the end of it. I will hear no more of this rebellious talk," he said with finality.

Rosalind's heart sank as her father's words echoed in the drawing room. She watched as Lord Harrington paced before them, his voice and face unyielding.

"The Duke's intention to choose one of you as his bride is an opportunity that should not be missed," he declared, his eyes sweeping over his daughters. "This alliance could secure our family's future and elevate our standing in society." He paused again, and fixed Rosalind with his grey-blue eyes. "Would you really deny your sisters the chance at security?"

Rosalind exchanged a glance with Amelia, but her face was once again carefully blank. If Rosalind didn't know better, she would think that Amelia had placidly accepted her father's directive. Isabella, seated beside them, seemed to shrink further into herself, her delicate hands clasped tightly in her lap.

Lord Harrington began to pace before the fireplace, his tone growing more insistent. "I am well aware of the rumours that have been circulating about the Duke's morals, but I assure you, they are nothing more than false and unfair accusations. His decision to find a duchess is a clear attempt to prove society wrong and demonstrate his commitment to his title and responsibilities."

Rosalind felt a flicker of anger at her father's dismissal of the rumours. How could he be so willing to overlook the Duke's questionable reputation for the sake of social advancement? she wondered. Something about her father's insistence prickled in her brain, but she could not articulate why.

"Our family has had a long-standing alliance with the Duke's," Lord Matthew reminded them, lowering his voice slightly. "I have known him since he was a boy, and I trust in his character. He is a man of honour and integrity, despite what some may say. It's nothing more than petty jealousy—the usual sickness of the ton."

Rosalind wanted to protest, to argue that if the Duke's past actions spoke louder than any assurances of his character, then where did the speculation about him come from? She bit her words back, knowing that her father would not take kindly to further opposition. She clamped her teeth together tightly to keep herself from arguing.

Lord Harrington's gaze swept over his daughters once more, his expression growing stern. "I must admonish you girls for your romantic notions. The idea of love and fairytale scenarios has no place in the reality of our world. You should feel honoured by the Duke's interest, and recognise the opportunity that has been presented to you."

Rosalind's heart clenched at her father's words. She knew well enough that one of the watchwords for a young lady was supposed to be "duty", but that particular lesson paled for Rosalind in the face of notions of love and friendship.

"I expect you all to put aside your childish fantasies and approach this matter with the gravity it deserves," Lord Harrington concluded, his tone leaving no room for argument. Rosalind's mind raced, considering the implications of the Duke's impending arrival and the potential impact on her life and future.

"Father, surely you cannot expect us to make such a life-altering decision so quickly. How much time do we have to...prepare ourselves?" she asked carefully.

Lord Harrington sighed, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. "There is no time for deliberation, Rosalind. The Duke of Somerton, Alexander Fitzwilliam, is paying us the compliment of a visit this afternoon. You and your sisters must be prepared to receive him and make a favourable impression."

The room fell silent again; Lord Harrington may as well have dropped a mortar shell in their midst for all the impact his words had. Rosalind exchanged glances with her sisters, seeing the disbelief and apprehension etched on their faces. The urgency of the situation heightened the tension, and Rosalind felt her heart pounding in her chest.

"This afternoon, Father?" Amelia repeated, her tone a little disbelieving. "That's hardly enough warning to prepare a proper reception! Have the servants been warned? And we must have time to ready ourselves as well, we've not had a hairdresser call on us for weeks, and..." She continued in this manner, fretting about the duties of a hostess.

Rosalind's own worries drowned out her older sister's concerns. Her mind raced, considering the implications of the Duke's impending arrival.

What kind of man is he, truly? Could the rumours of his scandalous behaviour be trusted, or were they merely the product of idle gossip? What sort of life could one hope to build with such a man, should the rumours prove true? Angry, but refusing to provoke her father further, she turned her head away sharply, her gaze fixing on the front windows of the parlour they were gathered in. The cheery yellow walls seemed a cruelly ironic contrast to their dark moods.

## Page 2

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### Chapter 2

As the Duke's gilded and crested carriage pulled to a stop before the Harringtons' fashionable townhouse, Rosalind felt a knot of apprehension tighten in her stomach. She glanced at her sisters. Amelia, ever the picture of poise, stood tall and regal, her golden curls perfectly framing her face. Isabella, on the other hand, seemed to be doing her level best to simply disappear into the ground, her eyes fixed on her feet.

All three sisters had been carefully coiffed, powdered, and dressed in the most flattering day dresses they owned. The high waists of their muslin and printed cotton dresses were accentuated with ribbons in colours that flattered their complexions: purple for Rosalind, delicate pink for Amelia, and cornflower blue for Isabella.

The three sisters and their father were assembled on the tiny patch of grass on one side of the short path from the street to the townhouse's front door. Opposite them, the servants were likewise assembled, standing in a neat line to greet the Duke, aprons and collars stiffly starched. To see them, no one would ever guess that despite their serene appearances, the house had been in a chaotic furore over last-minute preparations. Secretly, Rosalind suspected that her father would likely get an earful from the housekeeper on the subject.

A footman hustled forward and opened the carriage door, the Duke's crest gleaming in the sun as he did so. Everyone assembled seemed to collectively hold their breath as the Duke emerged, one hand steadying his dove-grey top hat.

Rosalind's breath caught in her throat as she took in his imposing figure, his dark hair and piercing eyes giving him an air of authority and power. He moved with a

confident grace, his exquisitely tailored marine blue jacket accentuating his broad shoulders and lean frame.

Lord Harrington stepped forward, a broad smile on his face as he greeted the Duke. "Your Grace, welcome to Harrington Manor. It is an honour to have you here." The assembled crowd all bowed and curtsied in unison as the Duke descended the carriage steps and accepted Lord Harrington's proffered hand.

The Duke inclined his head, his gaze sweeping over the assembled family. "Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Harrington. I have heard so much about the...charms of your daughters that I am delighted to finally meet them."

Rosalind felt a flicker of annoyance; though the Duke's words were polite enough, there was a twist of irony in his tone that set her teeth on edge. Rosalind was quite sure that she and her sisters were more than mere objects to be admired and appraised. Though a little untoward for a lady to do so, she met his gaze defiantly, determined not to be cowed by his presence or the expectations placed upon her. There was something of a challenge on her face, fairly daring the Duke to note her.

Lord Harrington began the formal introductions, starting with Amelia. "Your Grace, may I present my eldest daughter, Lady Amelia Harrington. She is a young lady of many accomplishments, an ornament wherever she goes."

Rosalind scoffed inwardly, unable to completely resist rolling her eyes. Why didn't Father simply erect an auction stage and be done with it? she thought snidely.

Amelia, however, curtsied deeply, her movements fluid and practised. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Grace," she said, her voice soft and demure. "Welcome to Harrington House."

The Duke took Amelia's fingers, bowing over them so closely that Rosalind thought



for a moment that he would drop a kiss on them. "The pleasure is all mine, Lady Amelia. I have heard much about your beauty and accomplishments from many green-eyed ladies of the ton."

Amelia blushed accordingly and demurred again, exactly as was expected of her. The Duke, for his part, seemed bemused and pleased by the response.

Rosalind watched the exchange, her stomach churning with unease. She knew that Amelia was the most likely choice to become the Duchess, given her impeccable manners and poised demeanour, but the thought, of her sister being trapped in a marriage, with a man of questionable intent, no matter what her father said, made Rosalind chafe.

Rosalind found herself studying the Duke, trying to discern the man beneath the polished exterior. There was an air of arrogance about him, a sense of entitlement that set her teeth on edge. She wondered what kind of husband he would make, and whether he would treat his wife with the respect and kindness she deserved.

Despite her reservations, Rosalind knew that she had to play her part in this charade. She curtsied gracefully when her turn came, meeting the Duke's gaze with a cool politeness. "Your Grace," she said, her voice steady despite the turmoil raging within her.

The Duke's eyes lingered on her for a moment, a flicker of recognition sparking in their depths. "Lady Rosalind," he replied coolly, "I have heard much about your wit and spirit. I look forward to becoming better acquainted."

Rosalind felt a shiver run down her spine at his words, unsure whether to be flattered or unnerved by his attention. She knew that the coming days would be a test of her resolve, as she navigated the treacherous waters of courtship and societal expectations, to say nothing of her father's expectation.

For now, all she could do was smile and nod, playing the role of the dutiful daughter, her face not feeling like her own as she kept a cheery expression plastered on. The Duke was ushered into the drawing room where tea was waiting, Amelia playing the part of consummate hostess.

As they filed into the house, Rosalind managed to catch her sisters' eyes in turn, and found that, though outwardly determined or serene, there was an undeniable tension in their bearing.

Rosalind trailed along after Amelia and the Duke, her heart still pounding from the initial introduction. As they traversed the corridors of Harrington House, the Duke's attention was drawn to the paintings adorning the walls. His eyes widened with appreciation as he took in the intricate brushstrokes and vibrant colours.

"These paintings are exquisite," the Duke remarked, his gaze lingering on a particularly striking landscape. The subject was simple enough, a humble watermill on a brackish pond, but the sky above was a riot of colours alive with wind and clouds. "Who is the artist behind these masterpieces?"

Rosalind seized the opportunity to speak up, her voice filled with pride. "They are the creations of my younger sister, Isabella. She has an incredible talent for capturing the beauty of the world around us."

The Duke turned to Isabella, who blushed under his scrutiny. "And in oils, no less? I thought young ladies were confined to dabbling in watercolours." Rosalind opened her mouth, ready to argue with him, but Amelia put a hand on her arm, silencing her. "You have a remarkable gift, Lady Isabella. Your paintings are truly breathtaking," the Duke said with a degree of sincerity that he had hitherto not shown.

Isabella mumbled a quiet thank you, her eyes downcast as she shied away from the attention. Rosalind felt a pang of protectiveness for her younger sister, knowing how

uncomfortable she was in the spotlight.

Amelia, clearly recognising Isabella's discomfort as well, gently encouraged everyone into the drawing room where tea was laid out. An assortment of cakes and dainty little sandwiches were arranged on trays, which were ferried about the room by a pair of footmen.

When the sisters were all settled with teacups in hand, the Duke cast a cool, appraising eye over them, settling on Rosalind. "I don't recall seeing you at many social events this season, Lady Rosalind," he commented, his tone casual, but his eyes challenging.

Rosalind met his gaze, her green eyes sparkling with a mix of defiance and curiosity. "I find my time is better used on other pursuits," she replied evenly.

The Duke raised an eyebrow, intrigued by her response. "And what pursuits might those be, Lady Rosalind?"

Rosalind hesitated for a moment, weighing her words carefully. She knew that her opinions were not always in line with the expectations of society, but she refused to hide her true self. If the Duke wished to make a match, then it was only fair that he knew her character precisely.

"I am fascinated by the ideas of progress and change, Your Grace. I believe that women have the potential to contribute so much more to society than what is currently expected of us." She paused, fixing her gaze on the sugar bowl, which the Duke was reaching for. "I've recently been taken with the debate on the morality of sugar, for instance."

"Sugar?" the Duke repeated, his hand hesitating.

"Sugar," Rosalind confirmed. "There are some who find it to be a great evil, being the product of slave labour, a sign of the worst sort of decadence." She sipped her tea, her eyes finding the Duke's over the rim of her cup.

"Rosalind," Lord Harrington said into the silence that followed, his voice a warning.

The Duke arched a brow aristocratically, amused by her bold statement. Deliberately, while maintaining direct eye contact with Rosalind, he dumped another spoonful of sugar into his teacup and stirred it slowly, and the sound of the spoon on china made Rosalind grit her teeth.

"That is a rather unconventional view, Lady Rosalind. Do you not believe that concerning yourself with such things is detrimental to a woman's role to be a dutiful wife and mother?"

Rosalind felt a flare of anger at his words, but she kept her voice steady. "I believe that a woman's role should be whatever she chooses it to be, Your Grace. We are capable of so much more than simply being decorative objects or bearers of children."

The Duke studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable. "And what do you believe is the true nature of happiness and fulfilment, Lady Rosalind?"

Rosalind met his gaze unflinchingly, her voice filled with conviction. "I believe that happiness and fulfilment come from living a life true to oneself, Your Grace, from pursuing one's passions and making a difference in the world, regardless of the expectations placed upon us by society."

The Duke's lips twitched into a small smile, his eyes glinting with a mix of amusement and admiration. "You are a devotee of Mary Wollstonecraft then, Lady Rosalind?"

"You know her work?" Rosalind asked, unable to keep the surprise from her voice. She leaned forward, interested despite herself.

The Duke offered a one-shouldered shrug, all casual composure. "I've read her pamphlets. I must admit, I find your perspective rather refreshing," he said with another bemused tilt to the corners of his mouth.

Rosalind felt a flutter of satisfaction at his words, but she knew that her outspokenness could also be seen as a liability in the eyes of a potential suitor. She glanced at her father, who was watching the exchange with an expression caught between disbelief and apprehension. He cleared his throat pointedly, and Rosalind sullenly sat back again.

"The weather has been abnormally fine lately," Amelia blurted into the awkward silence that followed.

The Duke's gaze, which had still been fixed on Rosalind, slid reluctantly to Amelia. "It has," he agreed flatly.

Rosalind resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the banality of the types of conversation that were considered suitable for young ladies to engage in. She withdrew into herself, becoming a spectator rather than a participant, exactly as was expected of her.

The grand clock in the hall chimed four times, announcing the hour. The Duke stood, preparing to take his leave. He bowed slightly to Lord Matthew. "Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Harrington. It has been an..." He paused, searching for the correct word. His eyes flicked to Rosalind. "An illuminating afternoon. Your daughters are a credit to you."

Lord Harrington beamed with pride, his chest puffing out slightly at the compliment. "You are most welcome, Your Grace. It has been an honour to have you here."

The Duke's gaze swept over the three sisters as they rose to curtsy and murmur their own polite farewells, lingering on each of them in turn. "Ladies, it has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I must say, I am thoroughly impressed by your wit, intelligence, and beauty."

Rosalind felt a flicker of unease at his words, unsure whether to be flattered or wary of his attention, unsure of his sincerity. She watched as he took Amelia's fingers, squeezing them gently. "Lady Amelia, you are a most congenial hostess. You would make a fine wife to a lucky man indeed."

Amelia blushed, her eyes downcast as she murmured a quiet thank you. Rosalind's heart clenched at the sight, knowing that her sister's fate hung in the balance. She hated everything about it, knowing that this man had the power to choose her sister's fate.

The Duke turned to Isabella next, and Rosalind tensed up further, worried that he might upset her in some way. To her surprise, his voice softened with admiration. "Lady Isabella, your artistic talents are truly exceptional. I confess I've never seen their like, and I have no doubt that you will be appreciated for them."

Isabella's cheeks flushed with pleasure at the praise, but Rosalind could see the underlying tension in her shoulders. She knew that her younger sister dreaded the thought of being thrust into the spotlight, of being the centre of attention that being such a high-ranking nobleman's wife would entail.

Finally, the Duke's eyes settled on Rosalind, his gaze intense and searching. "Lady Rosalind, your wit and intelligence are as bracingly refreshing as a cold breeze in winter. I have never met a woman quite like you before."

Rosalind met his gaze steadily, refusing to be cowed by his words. "I am honoured by your praise, Your Grace, but I must confess, I am not one to be easily swayed by

flattery." From the corner of her eye, she could see her father give a hapless flap of his hands in frustration.

The Duke's lips twitched into a small smile, his eyes glinting with amusement. "I would expect nothing less from you, Lady Rosalind."

With that, the Duke exited the drawing room with Lord Harrington, promising to call again soon.

When the Duke left, the tension seemed to leak from the room. Exhaling through her mouth, Rosalind flopped in a most unladylike manner onto the upholstered settee. She turned to Isabella, and seeing the mix of fear and uncertainty in her eyes, grabbed her hand and encouraged her to sit next to her. "What do you think will happen now?" Isabella whispered, her voice trembling slightly.

Amelia shook her head, her face oddly pale and wan. She, too, sat on the settee, wedged between Isabella and the arm, but perched right on the edge as if she would bolt up at a moment's notice. "I don't know, Isabella. But we must be prepared for whatever comes our way."

Rosalind tilted her head at Amelia, something in her oldest sister's manner bothering her. Her mind raced. She knew that the Duke's decision would have far-reaching consequences that would affect all of them.

Rosalind couldn't shake the feeling that their lives were about to change forever. She glanced out the window, catching a glimpse of the small garden behind the house, watching as the sun began to set behind the other London houses, casting a warm glow over the carefully maintained hedges.

### Chapter 3

Rosalind wandered through the lush gardens of Harrington House, her mind heavy with the weight of the Duke's attentions. After his initial visit, he had called on them a number of times, even escorting them about Regent's Park.

The fragrant blooms and gentle rustling of leaves did little to soothe her troubled thoughts as she sought solace in the tranquil and familiar gardens of her home. Absently, she reached out and plucked a flower from one of the hedges, tearing the petals from it as she walked, leaving them scattered in her wake.

As she rounded a bend in the path, Rosalind spotted her sisters, Amelia and Isabella, seated on a stone bench beneath a towering oak tree nestled in a corner of the garden. Their faces mirrored the same concern and uncertainty that plagued Rosalind's heart.

"Amelia, Isabella," Rosalind called out, her voice carrying across the garden. "I'm glad I found you both."

Amelia looked up, her golden curls catching the sunlight as she offered a weak smile. "Rosalind, we were just discussing the Duke. It's all so overwhelming, isn't it? The idea that one of us could be a Duchess so soon...married and settled," she said, her voice cracking a little at the end.

Rosalind's brow furrowed in concern, but she nodded, taking a seat beside her sisters. "It is. I can't help but question his intentions, and the thought of being forced into a marriage of convenience fills me with dread."



Isabella's blue eyes widened, her voice barely above a whisper. "I don't want to lose my freedom to paint, Rosalind. The idea of having to abandon my art for the sake of husband and duty... It's all too much." She twisted her hands into the skirt of her calico day dress as she spoke, her knuckles going white.

Rosalind reached out, gently taking Isabella's hand in her own. "I know, Isabella. It's not fair that we're expected to sacrifice our happiness for the sake of societal expectations."

Amelia sighed, her eyes distant and sad. "It's not as if we have much choice, Rosalind. Besides, Father has made it clear that this is an opportunity we cannot refuse, and he's not wrong. We must marry, and marry well, since—since our brother—"

Amelia stopped short, swallowing hard. "There's no one to look after us once Father is gone. We need safety and protection, which the Duke can provide," she said, but it was clear that she was trying to convince herself as well.

Rosalind shook her head, her fiery curls bouncing with the motion, refusing to accept Amelia's words. "We should have a choice, Amelia. We should be able to decide our own futures, to marry for love and companionship, not just for the sake of advantageous alliances."

"But the Duke is a powerful man, Rosalind," Amelia countered, her voice tinged with resignation. "To refuse his proposal could bring shame and scandal upon our family."

Rosalind stood abruptly, pacing the garden path as her frustration mounted. "And what of our own desires, Amelia? Are we to be nothing more than pawns in this game of politics and power?"

Isabella's soft voice broke through the tension. "I don't want to be a pawn, Rosalind,

but I also don't want to bring ruin upon our family. How would we live?"

Rosalind turned to face her sisters, her green eyes blazing with determination. "There must be another way, a way to navigate this situation without sacrificing our own happiness and dreams."

Amelia's delicate brow furrowed in thought. "But what can we do, Rosalind? We're bound by the expectations of our society, by the rules that govern our lives as women. We've no experience of the world—what do you want us to do, take in washing?" she asked rhetorically. "The only one of us who has a chance in that regard is Isabella, and even then, how many women are able to live by the brush?"

Isabella's eyes darted back and forth between the sisters, her eyes wide with alarm.

Rosalind's shoulders slumped, the weight of their predicament bearing down upon her. "I don't know, Amelia, but I refuse to accept that we have no say in our own futures."

As the three sisters sat in the garden, the sun began to dip below the horizon, casting long shadows over the garden as it sank behind the London skyline. The sounds from the streets beyond the walled sanctuary of the garden began to fade with the light. The serenity of the moment stood in stark contrast to the turmoil that raged within their hearts.

"Rosalind, I know this is difficult, but we must think of our family's future," Amelia said softly, her golden curls giving her an angelic aspect as she spoke. "An advantageous match with the Duke could secure our position in society and ensure our continued prosperity. Whichever of us he marries will be able to support the others, and in time, find advantageous matches for them as well."

Rosalind sighed, unable to argue with the truth of her sister's words. She knew

Amelia was right, that their duty as daughters of a noble house was to make strategic alliances and uphold the family name. It still seemed too much to ask of them, when they had been raised in a house with so much love to forego it once they were married.

"You don't think we're worthy of love?" she demanded, staring straight into Amelia's eyes.

Isabella, who had been sitting quietly beside them, suddenly spoke up, her voice tinged with melancholy. "Love is nothing more than a dream, a fleeting illusion that only brings pain and disappointment."

Rosalind and Amelia's expressions quickly shifted to ones of surprise and worry, taken aback by the sadness and pessimism in their youngest sister's words. Isabella had always been the most vibrant and creative of the three, her spirit filled with joy and wonder. To hear her speak so despondently was a stark contrast to her usual demeanour.

"Isabella, what makes you say that?" Rosalind asked gently, resuming her seat and reaching out to take her sister's hand in her own. She glanced over Isabella's downturned head to Amelia again. "Has something happened to make you feel this way?" she pried, trying to be delicate, but Isabella shrank in on herself further.

Isabella's eyes filled with tears, her lower lip trembling as she shook her head. "Please, I don't want to talk about it. It's too painful."

Amelia leaned in, her voice soft and soothing. "Is this about your young beau, Isabella?"

Isabella's shoulders trembled as she fought back a sob, her hands clenched tightly in her lap. "I can't... I don't want to discuss it. Please, let's not speak of it anymore," she

said with a vehement shake of her head.

Rosalind and Amelia exchanged another worried glance. Rosalind could see the same concern and tender feeling for their youngest sister on Amelia's face that was in her own heart. Rosalind knew from experience that pushing Isabella to open up would only cause her more distress, so she respected her wishes and changed the subject tactfully.

"What about your dreams for the future, Amelia?" Rosalind asked, hoping to steer the conversation in a more positive direction. "I know you've always had a passion for helping others, for making a difference in the world."

Amelia smiled softly, her eyes distant as she contemplated Rosalind's question. "I've always dreamed of establishing a charity, of using our family's resources to help those less fortunate. I suppose that should I marry the Duke, I would be well-placed to do that now."

Rosalind smiled a little sadly—Amelia had always been the most kind-hearted of the three, so it was no surprise that she was already imagining how to turn her prospective new position into a force for good.

The unspoken truth in Amelia's words was that this would all be subject to the whims of her husband. Amelia was good and dutiful, but Rosalind didn't doubt that even she would begin to chafe under the yoke of duty.

"And what of you, Rosalind?" Amelia asked, turning her attention to her fiery-haired sister. "Have you any hope for the future?"

With a sigh, her words coming slowly at first as if the idea were forming as she was saying it, she replied, "I want to be free, Amelia. Free to make my own choices, to follow my own path, but I fear that freedom may be nothing more than a distant

dream, a luxury we cannot afford as daughters of the ton."

### Chapter 4

Rosalind's mind wandered to the countless sacrifices her own mother had made, the compromises she had endured for the sake of her family's standing.

Lady Harrington had been a bright and vibrant beauty in her youth, but that vivacity had faded with each passing year.

She remembered the sadness that had often lingered in her mother's eyes, the wistful sighs that had escaped her lips when she thought no one was watching.

Rosalind had never known what her mother had wanted of life; by the time she was old enough to ask such a thing, Lady Harrington was deep in the throes of the fever that would eventually claim her life.

Is this to be my fate as well? To live a life of quiet desperation, forever bound by the chains of duty and obligation? Rosalind wondered bitterly, her eyes fixed on the garden gate without really seeing it. Some part of her longed to stand up and run out the gate, out into the London street beyond, to try and live what life she could by herself, for herself.

As these thoughts swirled through her mind, Rosalind felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. She started a little and looked up to see Amelia and Isabella watching her with concern.

"Rosalind, I know this is difficult," Amelia said softly, her voice filled with compassion. "But we're here for each other, no matter what happens. None of us has

to do this on her own."

Isabella nodded, her own eyes glistening with unshed tears. "We'll face this together, Rosalind. As sisters, united in our love and support for one another."

Rosalind felt a wave of emotion wash over her, the love and solidarity of her sisters filling her with a sense of strength and determination. She knew that the road ahead would be difficult, that there would be challenges and sacrifices to be made. But with Amelia and Isabella by her side, she felt a glimmer of hope that they could weather any storm, that they could find a way to navigate the treacherous waters of society and emerge stronger and more united than ever before.

As the three sisters sat in the garden, Rosalind laid her hand on Isabella's and squeezed it. Amelia, in turn, placed her hand overtop theirs, and all of their fingers wove together in solidarity. Whatever the future held, whatever compromises they might be forced to make, they would face it together, drawing strength from their unbreakable bond and their unwavering love for one another.

The sound of the gong rang out from the house, announcing that it was time to dress for dinner and bringing them all back to reality sharply. Amelia withdrew her hand, standing suddenly. Rosalind, her eyebrows raised in surprise, looked up at Amelia.

"We've been too long in the garden," Amelia said flatly, her face a careful mask of blankness. "It's time we go in." Though she spoke simply and truly, there was a weight to her words, as if she weren't simply discussing their need to prepare for dinner. There was a grim set to her mouth, all trace of the gentle hope that had been there just moments before gone.

Rosalind's brow furrowed with concern as she watched Amelia's face, searching for any clue as to what had caused this sudden shift in mood. She reached out, gently placing a hand on her sister's arm. "Amelia, what's wrong?"

Amelia didn't respond. Instead, she abruptly pulled away from Rosalind's touch, her arm sliding from Rosalind's hand. She turned and fled into the house, the light sprigged cotton robing of her dress fluttering behind her as she did so. Her hurried footsteps echoed on the stone path, growing fainter as she disappeared into the house.

Rosalind exchanged a worried glance with Isabella, who had been quietly observing the exchange. Without a word, the two sisters set off in pursuit of Amelia, crashing through the fashionable French doors at the back of the house in a manner that would have made a number of society matrons purse their lips in disapproval.

Rosalind caught a glimpse of Amelia's light pink silk shoes and airy cotton dress disappearing up the stairs to her apartments. She quickened her steps, grabbing the bannister and swinging herself up onto the stairs as if she were a boy.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she followed the sound of her sister's footsteps up the grand staircase and down the hallway that led to all of their rooms.

Isabella kept pace with Rosalind, her blue eyes round and worried. "What do you think happened?" she whispered, her voice barely audible over the soft thud of their slippers on the plush rug that lined the hallway.

Rosalind shook her head, her brow creased with worry. "I don't know, but we need to find out. Amelia's not one to run off like this."

As they approached Amelia's door, Rosalind raised her hand to knock, but hesitated. She could hear the muffled sound of sobbing from within, and her heart squeezed at the thought of her sister in such distress. Without preamble, Rosalind entered Amelia's bedchamber. The sight that greeted her made her stop short: Amelia, careful and quiet, sat on her bed, her usually pristine appearance marred by the tears that streamed down her face. In her trembling hands, she clutched a letter, the paper crumpling under the force of her grip.



Rosalind approached her sister with gentle steps, the slow creaking of the wooden floor the only sound other than Amelia's quiet sobs. She sat down beside Amelia, the mattress dipping under her weight, and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. The warmth of her touch seemed to break through Amelia's anguish, and she leaned into Rosalind's embrace, her body shaking with silent sobs.

Isabella followed close behind, her own mien one of concern; she stood before them for a moment, wringing her hands with worry, unsure what to do before finding a chair. She took a seat nearby, her hands folded in her lap as she watched her sisters with wide, troubled eyes.

"Amelia, my dear," Rosalind murmured, her voice tender and soothing as she stroked Amelia's back gently. "What troubles you so? This is most unlike you – let us help."

Amelia drew in a shuddering breath, her grip on the letter loosening slightly. She turned to face Rosalind, her eyes red-rimmed and puffy from crying. "It's...it's this letter," she whispered, her voice hoarse with emotion. "From...from him."

Rosalind watched as Amelia's hands trembled, the letter she held fluttering like a trapped bird. Her sister's voice quivered, each word a struggle against the tide of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. "I.. I have been keeping a secret from you both," Amelia began, her eyes fixed on the crumpled paper in her grasp. "A secret that I have carried in my heart for months now."

Rosalind drew back a little, holding Amelia at arm's length. She'd never have guessed that Amelia harboured some secret in her heart – Amelia had ever been the perfect daughter, the one to which all other girls of the ton aspired to be like. More importantly, she had never seen Amelia so distraught, so consumed by a pain that seemed to radiate from her very soul. Rosalind searched Amelia's face for meaning.

"It's – there's a...a young man," Amelia whispered, her voice barely audible over the

hitch in her breath. "A...a soldier I have been corresponding with."

"Amelia!" Rosalind breathed, half in shock and half in admiration. "You've been writing to a man?"

"It's not like that," Amelia sniffed, dabbing at her nose with a handkerchief she fished out of her pocket. "I met his sister first. She was involved with helping me to set up that new school in Manchester—you know, the one for the factory workers? Her brother was there that day, and then... We would go for walks and talk, the three of us, and then he had to go back to the front," she said, her eyes filling with fresh tears. "She writes to me, and encloses Thomas' letters to me in her own for the look of it."

"Does Father know?" Isabella asked, her voice low in case they were overheard.

Amelia gave Isabella a baleful look that answered that question. "I'd always hoped—he'd made promises, you see, and...and now..."

Rosalind's eyes widened, a flicker of understanding dawning in their emerald depths. She had always noted that Amelia was always eager for the arrival of the postbag, but had never suspected she had a secret suitor.

"I love him," Amelia confessed, the words tumbling from her lips like a dam had burst. "With all my heart, with every fibre of my being. We have shared our dreams, our hopes for a future together after the war."

Tears spilled down Amelia's cheeks, leaving glistening trails in their wake. Rosalind reached out, her hand finding her sister's and squeezing gently, a silent offer of support and understanding. "But now..." Amelia's voice broke, a sob tearing from her throat. "Now, with the Duke's proposal, with the prospect of being chosen as his bride... I fear that all those dreams will be shattered."

Rosalind's heart ached for her sister, for the pain that seemed to consume her. She glanced at Isabella, saw the same sorrow on her younger sister's face.

"Oh, Amelia," Rosalind murmured, her own voice thick with emotion. "I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

Amelia nodded, her grip on the letter tightening. "This... this is his latest letter," she whispered, her fingers tracing the words as if they were a lifeline. "He writes of the battles he has fought, the sacrifices he has made, but always, always, he speaks of his love for me, of the life we will build together."

Rosalind felt a lump form in her throat, a knot of emotion that threatened to choke her. She herself didn't know the power of love, but she had seen the way it could consume and transform, the way it could make even the darkest of days seem bright. A small, secret part of her had always longed for a love like that, but it seemed such a triviality in the face of her larger concerns.

Isabella scooted the chair closer, her small hand resting on Amelia's knee. "We are here for you, sister," she said softly, her voice filled with a gravitas beyond her years that made both sisters stare at her. "No matter what happens, no matter what the future may hold, we will stand by your side."

Amelia's lips trembled, a watery smile breaking through the tears. "Thank you," she whispered, her gaze moving from one sister to the other. "I don't know what I would do without you both."

As Rosalind listened to Amelia's heartfelt confession, a wave of emotion washed over her. There was no doubting the depth of her sister's love for Thomas; it was palpable in every word, every tear that fell from her eyes. It had to be serious by virtue of the fact that Amelia had kept it a secret for so long. Rosalind's heart ached for Amelia, for the injustice of a world that would seek to tear apart two hearts so deeply

entwined.

A fierce protectiveness surged through Rosalind, a determination to shield her sister from the cruel machinations of society.

She knew all too well the weight of expectation, the suffocating pressure to conform to the roles and duties prescribed by their station, but in that moment, as she sat there with Amelia and Isabella, their hearts laid bare, Rosalind felt a resolve growing within her.

She would not let Amelia's dreams be shattered, would not let her sister's chance at true happiness be sacrificed on the altar of duty and obligation.

Even if it meant making a difficult choice, even if it meant putting her own desires aside, Rosalind knew that she would do whatever it took to protect Amelia's love.

They both had far, far more to lose than she, and she would not see them throw away their chances at happiness. She'd always been too strong, too indomitable—this is what she'd been given such robustness, such spirit for, to weather what they could not.

"Amelia," Rosalind said softly, her voice filled with a quiet strength, "I cannot begin to imagine the pain you must be feeling, the fear of losing something so precious. But know this: we will find a way. We will fight for your happiness, for the future you and Thomas have dreamed of together."

Amelia's eyes met Rosalind's, a flicker of hope amidst the despair. "But how?" she whispered, her voice hoarse with emotion. "How can we possibly stand against the Duke, against the expectations of our father and society?"

Rosalind's lips curved into a small, determined smile. "We will find a way," she repeated, her words a promise, a vow. "Together, we are stronger than any force that

would seek to tear us apart. I will not rest until you and Thomas can be together, until your love can flourish freely, without fear or constraint."

Isabella nodded, her own eyes shining with a fierce loyalty. "We are with you, Amelia," she said, her hand squeezing her sister's knee. "Always and forever. We will weather this storm together, as we always have."

After a tense dinner, in which the three sisters sullenly pushed food about their plates and their father mostly sighed, they decided to forgo the usual after-dinner socialising in the parlour. Everyone retreated to their respective rooms and the house fell silent, save for the occasional sound of a servant still moving about.

Unbeknownst to them, Rosalind remained awake, her mind racing with the next steps she would need to take. She knew that time was of the essence, that she would need to act quickly and decisively if she were to secure her sisters' happiness.

With a determined set to her jaw, Rosalind rose from her bed, her heart pounding with a mixture of fear and anticipation.

Relying only on the silvery moonlight that filtered in through the window, Rosalind made her way to her dressing room. Quickly, she slipped back into her stays and donned a redingote with some difficulty, as she didn't want to ring for her maid to help her.

With sharp, careless movements, she coiled her braid up at the back of her head and jammed pins into it.

Cautiously, she cracked open the door to her bedchamber and peered out, ensuring the hallway was abandoned, and slipped out.

She moved silently through the darkened halls of the manor, her footsteps muffled by

the plush carpets beneath her feet. Carrying her boots in one hand so that her steps would be lighter, Rosalind glided down the stairs and through the ground floor of the house. She paused at the entrance to the servants' area downstairs, ears straining as she listened. From below, the sounds of kitchen maids and hallboys still at work filtered up.

Careful now , she thought to herself. With the greatest care possible, she put her foot on the first stair, which felt obliged to let out a great squeak that sounded as loud as a gunshot in the silent house. Rosalind grimaced, willing everyone to stay abed—she could not afford to get caught now.

The moment passed, and Rosalind quickly rushed down the stairs, lifting one of the maid's cloaks from a hook by the back door as she went. She paused long enough outside to slip her boots on and drew the hood up over her distinctive hair.

Her heart pounded with a mixture of fear and determination. The cool night air caressed her face, sending a shiver down her spine as she made her way to the stables. Her footsteps clicked quietly on the paving stones of the mews as she scurried along. The moon cast a soft glow over the grounds, illuminating her path as she moved with purpose and resolve.

Upon reaching the stables, Rosalind quickly located her favourite horse, a beautiful mare with a sleek, dark coat. With swift, practised movements, she saddled the horse, her hands trembling slightly as she tightened the girth and adjusted the stirrups.

The familiar scent of hay and horse filled her nostrils, a comforting reminder of the countless hours she had spent riding, the one place she might find solace and freedom.

Uncharacteristically for a young lady, she was a dab hand at saddling her own horse, refusing to have this practical skill denied to her.

Once the horse was tacked, Rosalind tried to heave at the stable door, but it was stuck firm. She grunted and tried again, but to no avail.

"Move, blast you," she said through gritted teeth, pulling at it again.

"I thought ladies didn't know how to curse," a voice said from behind her. Rosalind nearly jumped clean out of her boots, whipping around to find Joe, one of the grooms watching her.

"You gave me such a start!" she said, holding a hand to her pounding heart. "Here, help me with this," she said, jerking her head toward the door.

Joe hesitated, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "I don't know, milady, it...it seems wrong," he said.

Rosalind sighed. I do not have time for this, she thought. "You've never objected to helping me sneak out before," she pointed out.

"No, milady, but that weren't in the middle o' the night," he argued, which was too sensible for Rosalind to argue with.

"Fine," Rosalind said, "I'll give you two shillings this time."

"Right away, milady!" Joe hurried forward and leaned against the door, which immediately slid open. Rosalind gave him a baleful look as she passed by, which he smiled at cheerfully.

As she prepared to mount her horse, Rosalind paused for a moment, casting a final glance back at the house. The imposing structure loomed behind her, its windows dark and silent, a testament to the slumbering inhabitants within.

Her heart ached at the thought of leaving her sisters behind, of the worry and concern they would undoubtedly feel upon discovering her absence. But she knew that this was a journey she had to undertake alone, a sacrifice she was willing to make for their happiness and well-being.

With a deep breath, Rosalind swung herself into the saddle, settling her leg carefully into place on the sidesaddle. She gathered the reins in her hands, feeling the supple leather between her fingers, a tangible connection to the powerful animal that would carry her forward. With a gentle squeeze of her legs and a soft click of her tongue, Rosalind urged her horse into motion, the sound of hoofbeats echoing through the night air as they set off into the unknown.

As the house receded behind her, Rosalind's mind raced with thoughts of the challenges that lay ahead. She knew that her journey would be fraught with obstacles, that she would face opposition and resistance at every turn, but she was armed with her wit, her courage, and the unwavering love and support of her sisters; a force that would sustain her through even the darkest of times. She refused to be afraid.

The cool night breeze whipped past her as she rode, threatening to dislodge the hood from her head. It was imperative that she not be spotted out at night, unchaperoned, so she urged the horse into a spirited canter. Still, the steady rhythm of her horse's gait was a comforting constant amidst the swirling emotions within her heart. Rosalind's eyes remained fixed firmly ahead, her gaze unwavering as she pressed onward, determined to see her mission through to the end.



### Chapter 5

The Duke of Somerton could feel a tremendous, irrepressible sigh building within him. Thankfully, he was in the privacy of his own carriage, and thus not able to be overheard. He'd kept his composure as he had spent another evening in the company of the Harrington sisters, but only just.

He didn't object to them per se, but the situation he found himself in chafed at him. The ton were a petty, gossipy lot as far as he was concerned, but a necessary evil to move through society. Unfortunately, the gossip had turned towards himself once again, a resurrection of the trouble he had thought to put behind him.

The carriage, well-padded and richly upholstered in velvet and brocade, was comfortingly insulated against the sounds and smells of London. Here, in private, was one of the few locations in which Alex felt secure being completely and totally himself; it was exhausting, having to constantly watch one's facial expressions and minutest gestures, lest they be misinterpreted in some way.

Even so, the thick traffic that always sprang up around Vauxhall Gardens did nothing to improve his mood. The carriages, traps, barouches, and landaus all crept along at a snail's pace, horses and vehicles all jammed together. Handkerchiefs were waved from windows in order to catch the attention of others, fans fluttered flirtatiously before faces when eyes met.

It was all a bit much.

The Duke was gazing out of the carriage window without really seeing the scenery as

it passed by. A flash of colour caught his eye, a familiar taupe, at the same moment an unmistakable voice hit his ears. It was loud, singing boisterously. The Duke bolted upright, at last able to see part of what was causing such a logjam. There, on a bench just outside the entrance to Vauxhall, sat the Duke's brother, Viscount Richard Harrington.

Richard was sprawled in a most undignified manner, long legs splayed out, a silver flask in his hand. He was singing loudly, slurring badly. Whenever someone attempted to pass him and enter Vauxhall, he leaned over, half-yelling whatever doggerel he was belting out directly at them.

Alex, gritting his teeth, rapped on the roof of the carriage, signalling to his driver. The horses were pulled up suddenly, the carriage barely coming to a stop before Alex leapt out onto the pavement, his polished boots hitting the ground with a sense of purpose. As he approached the bench where Richard sat, the Viscount's boisterous singing grew louder, accompanied by the sloshing of liquor in his flask. Alex's jaw clenched, his frustration mounting with each step.

"Richard!" His voice cut through the night air like a sharp blade. "What in heaven's name are you doing here?"

Richard looked up, his eyes glazed with intoxication. A lopsided grin spread across his face as he recognised his brother. "Alex! Come to join the revelry, have you? Come, sit—you can toast with me!"

Alex's gaze hardened. "Hardly. I've come to put an end to this foolishness." He gestured to the flask in Richard's hand. "You're making a spectacle of yourself, and by extension, our family name."

Richard scoffed, taking another swig from the flask. "Always so concerned with appearances, aren't you, dear brother? Life's too short to be shackled by society's

expectations," he drawled, tipping his hat sardonically to a group of ladies as they hurried past him.

Alex's patience wore thin. "This isn't about appearances, Richard. It's about responsibility and upholding the honour of our family." He reached out, snatching the flask from his brother's grasp. "It's time for you to come home and sober up."

Richard stumbled to his feet, swaying slightly. "And what if I refuse? Will you drag me back like a naughty child? You're not my governess," he argued petulantly.

Alex's eyes narrowed. "If that's what it takes to keep you from further disgracing yourself and our family, then yes." He bent down and hauled upward on his brother's elbow. "I wish your governess was here," he grunted as he attempted to pull Richard upright. Like a child in the throes of a tantrum, Richard went limp and slipped from Alex's grip, thumping back down onto the bench.

Richard's laughter echoed through the park, a bitter and mocking sound. "Ever the dutiful duke, aren't you? Always putting the family's reputation above all else."

"One of us has to," Alex shot back, his voice low and controlled. "I'm currently paying the price for my earlier transgressions: Before inheriting the title, I too indulged in a careless life, mingling with commoners, frequenting taverns, and cavorting with women, well...with her..."

Richard's eyes widened slightly, surprised by his brother's admission. Alex rarely spoke of his past, always maintaining an air of propriety and decorum.

Alex's gaze grew distant for a moment, as if lost in a memory. He shook his head, pushing aside a bittersweet recollection. "But that was a lifetime ago." A wall seemed to come down over him, cutting off whatever reverie he had been lost in. Back in its place was the stalwart Duke of Somerton.

Richard opened his mouth to retort, but Alexander cut him off with a raised hand. "Enough, Richard. I will not tolerate your mockery any longer. It's time for you to grow up and accept the responsibilities that come with being a member of the Somerton family."

Alex's grey eyes bored into his brother, his resolve unwavering. "I understand the allure of a carefree life, but we have a duty to our family and to society. It's time for you to put aside your selfish pursuits and start behaving like a proper viscount."

Richard's shoulders slumped slightly, the weight of his brother's words sinking in. Alex placed a firm hand on Richard's shoulder. "Come, let us return to the manor."

Richard, however, had other plans. With a sudden twist of his body, he pulled away from Alex's grasp. "Wait, wait!" he exclaimed, his words slightly slurred. "Sit with me for a moment, dear brother. Surely you can spare a few minutes for a brotherly conversation. Even a duke must have time for a little frivolity," he wheedled.

Alex's eyes narrowed, his patience wearing thin. The last thing he wanted was to indulge Richard's drunken whims, especially in a public setting, yet, as he looked into his brother's pleading eyes, he found himself wavering. There had been a time, forever ago now, when the brothers hadn't needed pretexts to have fun together. As Richard looked up at Alex, the Duke could feel his resolve failing, drawn in by their years of boyhood mischief. With a heavy sigh, Alex lowered himself onto the bench beside Richard, his posture stiff and unyielding. The wooden slats creaked beneath his weight.

"What is it, Richard?" Alex asked, his tone clipped and impatient. "What could possibly be so important that you feel the need to make a fool of yourself in the middle of London?"

Richard leaned back against the bench, his head lolling to the side as he regarded

Alex with a lopsided grin. "Can't a man enjoy a bit of revelry without his brother's constant disapproval?" He raised the flask to his lips, taking another swig and smacking his lips.

Alex's hand shot out, snatching the flask from Richard's grasp. "Enough, Richard. This behaviour is beneath you." He tucked the flask into his jacket pocket, his eyes never leaving his brother's face. "What's really going on? Why are you here, drinking yourself into a stupor?"

Richard's grin faded, replaced by a flicker of something darker, more profound. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he stared at the ground. "Do you ever feel trapped, Alex? Trapped by the expectations, the responsibilities, the weight of our family name?"

Alex's brow furrowed, a flicker of understanding dawning in his eyes. He knew all too well the burdens that came with their station, the constant pressure to uphold the family's honour and reputation; yet, he had learned to shoulder those burdens with grace and dignity, never allowing them to consume him. Still, they had both been thrust into the thick of the ton at a young age, their father passing before either of them were in their majority.

"Of course I do," Alex replied, his voice softening slightly. "But drowning yourself in liquor is not the answer, Richard. It never is. We are privileged, and with that comes hard choices, compromises, that we must live with." Though he was ostensibly speaking to his brother, Alex may as well have been speaking to himself.

Alex sat beside his brother in tense silence, his mind drifting to the recent encounter with the Harrington sisters. He found himself inexplicably drawn to the memory of Lady Rosalind, the fiery and unconventional middle daughter. Her sharp wit and independent spirit had initially marked her as unsuitable for the role of a duchess—society demanded grace, poise, and a certain level of decorum from a

woman of her station, yet, as Alex recalled their heated debates and the passion with which Rosalind defended her beliefs, he couldn't help but feel a spark of admiration.

It had been a long time since anyone had dared to stand up to him in the way that she did, and Alex was intrigued in spite of himself. In a world where women were expected to be demure and compliant, Rosalind stood out like a beacon of refreshing honesty. She spoke her mind without fear of consequences, challenging the very foundations upon which their aristocratic society was built.

As the Duke of Somerton, Alex had always placed great importance on social graces and the ability to navigate the complex web of high society. A future duchess would need to possess the intelligence and sophistication to stand by his side, to be a partner in both life and the responsibilities that came with their title, but as he sat there, lost in thought, Alex found himself questioning the true nature of compatibility.

Was it solely about adhering to societal norms and expectations? Or was there something to be said for the spark of connection, the meeting of minds that transcended the superficial?

Lady Rosalind, with her flaming red hair and emerald eyes, had managed to capture his attention in a way that few others had. Her passion for knowledge and her unwavering commitment to her beliefs were qualities that Alex found himself drawn to, despite his initial reservations. She seemed the very embodiment of his more carefree youth, the wild idealism he had once entertained. He couldn't help but wonder if perhaps, just perhaps, there was more to her than met the eye. Could she be the one to challenge him, to push him beyond the confines of his own expectations?

Alexander's thoughts were interrupted by Richard's voice, tinged with playful curiosity. "What's on your mind, dear brother?" Richard asked, his eyes glinting with a hint of mischief. "You seem rather pensive this evening, even for you."

Alex hesitated for a moment, unsure whether to share his impressions of the Harrington sisters with his brother. But as Richard's gaze remained fixed upon him, he found himself relenting. "I was just thinking about my recent encounter with Lord Harrington's daughters," Alex began, his voice measured and thoughtful.

Richard leaned forward, his interest piqued. "Ah, yes, the lovely Harrington sisters. Do tell, which one has captured the Duke of Somerton's attention?"

Alex's brow furrowed slightly as he considered his words. "Lady Rosalind, the middle daughter, is quite...unconventional," he admitted, his tone guarded but thoughtful. "She possesses a sharp wit and an independent spirit that sets her apart from the other ladies of society."

Richard's lips curled into a knowing smirk. "Lady Rosalind, you say? She's the one with the topping figure, isn't she?" he asked, making a vague motion with his hands that indicated a soft, curvaceous body, which made Alex scowl. "And all of that red hair, too. It seems she's made quite an impression on you, dear brother."

Alex shifted uncomfortably on the bench, his hackles rising at Richard's implication. "It's not like that, Richard. I merely find her...intriguing, in a purely intellectual sense."

Richard's laughter echoed through the park, a playful sound that contrasted with Alex's serious demeanour. "Intriguing, you say? Could it be that the stoic Duke of Somerton has finally fallen under the spell of a woman's charms? And a firebrand at that! Go on then, go and claim your Boudicca."

Alex's jaw clenched, his eyes narrowing at Richard's suggestion. "Don't be ridiculous, Richard. You know very well that I have no intention of falling in love, not after..." He trailed off, the painful memory of his past heartbreak resurfacing.

Richard's expression softened, a flicker of understanding passing between the brothers. "I know, Alex, but perhaps it's time to open yourself up to the possibility again. Lady Rosalind seems to have a way of challenging your preconceptions. Besides, what's the point of life without a bit of fun and passion?" he asked, attempting to snake his hand into Alex's pocket for his flask.

Alex shook his head, batting away Richard's hand at the same time, his resolve unwavering. "No, Richard. I cannot allow myself to be swayed by fleeting emotions. My duty is to find a suitable duchess, one who can uphold the family name and fulfil the responsibilities that come with the title."

"Oh, come off it," Richard retorted. "What, is this Lady Rosalind Harrington prone to howling at the moon? Does she clean her teeth with a knife at breakfast? She's a lady, her reticule is undoubtedly full to bursting with a dowry—what else is there?" Alex remained stoically silent, his mouth tight.

Richard sighed, leaning back against the bench. "As you wish, dear brother. But don't dismiss the power of a genuine connection so easily. Sometimes, the most unexpected people can change our lives in ways we never imagined."

Alexander's expression hardened as Richard's words struck a chord within him. The implication of his liaison with Mary, his former love, sent a jolt of pain through his heart, a wound that had never fully healed. He clenched his jaw, trying to suppress the memories that threatened to resurface.

"Mary's departure will always be a part of my past, Richard," Alex admitted, his voice strained. "But it was for the best. We were not meant to be."

Richard leaned forward, his eyes searching Alex's face. "And yet, you still carry the hurt with you, even after all these years."



Alex's gaze remained fixed on a distant point, the weight of his responsibilities and the unexpected stirrings of his heart battling within him. He had long ago resigned himself to a life of duty, putting the needs of his family and his title above his own desires. Now, with the arrival of Lady Rosalind, Alex found himself questioning the path he had chosen. Her spirited nature had ignited something within him, a spark of curiosity and longing that he had thought long extinguished.

Richard's voice cut through Alex's thoughts, a rare moment of seriousness in his tone. "Perhaps Lady Rosalind is the one who can help you move past your heartbreak, Alex. Maybe she's the key to finding happiness once more. Let her be your phoenix, burning all of that away," he said thoughtfully, punctuating his words with a swoop of his hand and a whooshing sound of conflagration.

Alex remained silent, his mind swirling with conflicting emotions. Could he allow himself to open his heart again, to risk the pain of another loss? Or was he destined to remain trapped in the shadows of his past, forever bound by the chains of his own making?

Sat beside his brother, the sounds of merriment wafting from Vauxhall were a symbolic temptation: The prospect of amusement, of delighted senses, was just around the corner – all he had to do was go find it. Alex's mind felt heavy with the weight of recent events. The false rumours circulating about his alleged secret affairs had taken a toll on his reputation, and the frustration simmered beneath his composed exterior.

"It's preposterous," Alex declared, his voice rising with indignation. "These baseless accusations are nothing more than a malicious attempt to tarnish our family name." His hands clenched into fists on his knees.

Richard shifted uncomfortably on the bench, his eyes averting Alex's intense gaze. Alex could feel him take a steadying breath next to him, having easily followed the

trail of thoughts that had led to Alex's sudden outburst. "I understand your frustration, Alex," Richard said, his tone uncharacteristically sombre. "But engaging with these rumours will only fuel the fire. The best course of action is to rise above it all and focus on your duties. Isn't that what you're always telling me?"

Richard cast his eyes down, his own past indiscretions weighing heavily on his conscience. "I know the price of scandal all too well, Alex. It's a burden I wouldn't wish upon anyone, least of all you."

Alex studied his brother's face, noticing the uncharacteristic unease etched upon his features. Richard's usual carefree demeanour had vanished, replaced by a haunted expression that sent a prickle of foreboding down Alex's spine.

"Richard," Alex began, his voice low and measured, "what is it that troubles you so?"

Richard shifted on the bench, his fingers fidgeting with the hem of his jacket. He drew in a deep breath, as if steeling himself for the words that were to come. "Alex, I must confess something to you, and I fear it will not be easy for you to hear."

Alex leaned forward, his brow furrowing with suspicion. "Speak plainly, brother. What have you done?"

Richard's gaze dropped to the ground, unable to meet Alex's piercing stare. "I have been involved in a scandalous affair," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "With Lady Evelyn."

"The judge's wife?" Alex blurted, his face a study in incredulity.

Richard nodded, refusing to meet his eyes, keeping his gaze locked firmly on his feet. The words hung heavy in the air between them, and for a moment, Alex found himself unable to breathe. His mind reeled with the implications of Richard's

revelation, the shock and disbelief coursing through his veins like ice. A burst of distant laughter rang out from behind the hedge of Vauxhall, as if mocking the absurdity of the situation.

"How could you be so foolish, Richard?" Alex demanded, his voice rising with each word. "Do you have any idea the damage this could cause to our family's reputation?"

Richard flinched at the harshness of Alex's tone, his shoulders slumping under the force of his brother's anger. "I never meant for it to go this far, Alex. It was a moment of weakness, a lapse in judgement."

Alex shook his head, his jaw clenched tight. He could feel his pulse beating rapidly in his temple. "And now, your actions have drawn me into this scandal as well. As your elder brother, I'm meant to be responsible for you – this reflects poorly on us both." Alex stood, restless and agitated, and began pacing before the bench.

Richard sat sullenly, slouched and defeated. "At least this will pull the ton's attention away from you," he muttered. "No one will care about whatever they say you've done once this hits the scandal sheets."

Alex stopped his pacing, halting mid-stride. Realisation was beginning to dawn on him, a suspicion that turned his stomach to stone. "Richard," he asked slowly, his voice low and dangerous. "Why has the ton begun gossiping about me again? Why now, when I've been nothing but the very model of duty for the past five years?"

Silence stretched between the two brothers, taut and almost tangible with crackling anger. Richard averted his gaze in any manner he might, folding his arms, then unfolding them. "Well," he hedged, "I...I may know something about that. It's possible that I used your carriage to go to one of our...rendezvous."

"My carriage," Alex repeated. He drew himself upright, staring down at Richard.

"Surely you don't mean the crested one?" Richard winced, answering the question without speaking. "Oh for—Richard, how could you? You know that everyone will recognise the coat of arms on it! The rumours are circulating, Richard, and they mistakenly implicate me as the culprit."

Richard's eyes widened, the gravity of his actions finally sinking in. "Alex, I never intended for you to be dragged into this mess. I swear it."

"What were you even thinking? You had to have known that it would be recognised. If you were meant to be carrying on a secret affair, how could you do something so obvious?" Alex demanded.

With a little shrug, Richard answered weakly, "Lady Evelyn liked being seen in it. It was nicer than my coach, and...she liked the prestige. Really, brother, believe me: I didn't do this to cause trouble for you."

Alex stood abruptly, his hands balled into fists at his sides. "Your intentions matter little now, Richard. The damage has been done, and it falls upon me to bear the consequences of your irresponsible conduct."

Richard bowed his head in shame, unable to meet his brother's piercing gaze. "I am truly sorry, Alex," Richard said, his voice thick with emotion. "I will do whatever it takes to make this right, to clear your name and restore our family's honour."

Alex resumed his pacing, his mind racing with potential solutions to contain the scandal that threatened to engulf his family. The weight of his responsibilities as the head of the Fitzwilliam family bore down upon him. The burden of maintaining their reputation and securing an advantageous match resting heavily on his shoulders. Now, more than ever, it was imperative that he marry well and quickly—he had to secure a match before this powder keg of gossip was well and truly ignited.

Richard, desperate to make amends, reached up and grasped his brother's arm. "Alex, I will do whatever it takes to make this right," he said again. His words tinged with remorse and a newfound determination. A determination that was only somewhat undercut by the fact that his words were still a little slurred, his voice thick with emotion and intoxication in equal measure. "I cannot let you bear the consequences of my actions alone."

Alex paused, recognising the sincerity in Richard's offer. His anger gradually subsided, replaced by a sense of resolve. Somewhere, beneath the mask of drunkenness and dissolution, the brother that had been his constant childhood companion, his most loyal friend, lingered. He knew that they would have to work together to navigate the treacherous waters of scandal and gossip.

"We must act swiftly," Alex said, his voice firm with determination. "The longer we allow these rumours to circulate, the more damage they will cause."

Richard nodded, his eyes shining with a newfound sense of purpose. "What do you propose we do, Alex?"

Alex's mind churned with possibilities, weighing the potential risks and rewards of each course of action. He knew that they would have to tread carefully, for one misstep could bring their entire world crashing down around them.

"We must find a way to divert attention from these rumours," Alex mused, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Perhaps a grand gesture, something that will capture the ton's interest and shift their focus away from idle gossip."

Richard leaned forward, his expression eager. "What did you have in mind, Alex?"

The sun was well and truly set now, and the lamplighters were moving down the streets, tottering about on their stilts. Alex watched them, feeling a kind of kinship for

their balancing act, as he was now being forced to perform his own. His thoughts turned to the Harrington sisters and the potential alliance that lay before him. Perhaps, in the midst of this chaos, there was an opportunity to secure his family's future and ensure his respectable position.

Richard, sensing Alex's inner turmoil, placed a reassuring hand on his brother's shoulder, a gesture of support and understanding. Alex drew strength from Richard's presence, taking a deep breath and steeling himself for the challenges ahead.

"Come, Richard. Let's go home."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

### Chapter 6

The sounds of barely contained chaos echoed within the Duke of Somerton's townhouse, shattering the weary silence that had settled over the halls. Muffled footsteps and half-shouted, half-whispered words carried down the hall. Alex, his mind still preoccupied with the challenges that lay ahead, had just rung for his valet.

He was weary and hoped for an early night, having barely tasted dinner and no desire for brandy and cigars. He'd only managed to slip from his jacket. The valet's fingers still grasping the buttons of his waistcoat, when a sharp knock at the door echoed through his dressing room.

With a mighty sigh from deep in his bones, Alex nodded at the valet, who opened the door. A servant stepped into the room, his face etched with confusion and concern. The man bowed respectfully, his eyes darting nervously as he delivered the unexpected news.

"Your Grace," the servant began, his voice low and urgent, "there is a visitor who has arrived at the manor, demanding to speak with you in utmost secrecy, despite the late hour."

Alex's brow furrowed, his mind already racing with possibilities. Who could possibly be calling at such an hour, and with such insistence on secrecy?

He fixed his gaze upon the servant, his voice steady as he inquired, "And who might this visitor be?"

The servant hesitated for a moment, as if weighing the impact of his next words. "It is Lady Rosalind, Your Grace. She is alone and unchaperoned."

Alex's eyes widened in shock, his breath catching in his throat. Lady Rosalind was here at his manor, without a chaperone, in the dead of night. The implications of her presence sent a shiver down his spine, his mind grappling with the potential scandal that could unfold.

"Lady Rosalind insists on the urgency and importance of the matter at hand," the servant added, his voice laced with a hint of trepidation.

Alex drew in a deep breath, his thoughts swirling with a myriad of emotions. What could have driven Rosalind to take such a bold and reckless step? Was she in trouble, or was there something more sinister at play? He knew that he had to handle this situation with the utmost care and discretion, lest it fuel the already raging fires of scandal that threatened to engulf his family.

"Has anyone else seen her?" Alex demanded.

The footman hesitated, shooting a glance to the valet. "One of the scullery maids, and the hallboy...others possibly as well. She arrived at the servants' entrance, Your Grace," he added hurriedly.

With a curt nod, Alex dismissed the servant. "Very well. Show Lady Rosalind to the drawing room and ensure that no one else is aware of her presence. Inform everyone downstairs that if I hear even a whiff of talk about this, then they shall be dismissed without notice and without a character reference. I shall be there shortly."

Quickly, Alex let the valet slide his jacket back up onto his shoulders, brushing it down in hurried sweeps. Steeling himself for the encounter, Alex straightened his shoulders and strode out of his dressing room. Despite his sleeping quarters, his



footsteps echoing through the silent halls of the manor.

Alex's mind raced with a whirlwind of thoughts as he made his way towards the drawing room where Lady Rosalind awaited his presence. His steps were as heavy as his mind as he passed through the dimly lit corridors, a testament to the weight of the impending conversation. His heart thrummed with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension, wondering what could have possibly driven the fiery and unconventional young woman to seek him out at such an unseemly hour. Despite his apprehension, there was an undeniable hint of thrill about the whole escapade that made his skin tingle.

As Alex entered the drawing room, his gaze fell upon Rosalind. He found himself immediately captivated by her presence. She stood tall and defiant, her scarlet hair threatening to escape its moorings, her emerald eyes glittering with a fierce determination that seemed to fill the entire room with an electrifying energy. She stood near the fireplace, her back initially turned to him, but she turned when he entered the room.

The flickering flames cast a warm glow upon her fiery red hair, setting it alight. Rosalind met his gaze unflinchingly, uncowed by the strange circumstances of their meeting. There was no hint of fear or hesitation in her demeanour, only a resolute determination that radiated from every fibre of her being.

Alex found himself momentarily taken aback by the intensity of her presence, but he quickly composed himself, his voice steady despite the conflict that swirled within him. "Lady Rosalind," he greeted, his tone a mixture of formality and curiosity. "I must admit, your presence here at such an hour is most unexpected."

He raised an eyebrow in silent question, his mind racing with possibilities as to what could have brought her to his doorstep in the dead of night. The impropriety of the situation was not lost on him, but the urgency and determination in Rosalind's eyes

suggested that there was more to her visit than mere social niceties. As he regarded her, Alex found himself drawn to the fire in her eyes, the strength of her spirit that seemed to fill the room with a palpable energy. Despite the unconventional nature of their meeting, he couldn't help but feel a sense of admiration for the young woman who stood before him, her courage and resolve evident in the way she proudly tossed her head.

"What brings you here, Lady Rosalind?" he asked, his voice gentle yet probing, his curiosity getting the better of him. "What matter could be so pressing that it warrants such a clandestine meeting?"

He waited for her response, his heart beating a little faster in anticipation of the words that would fall from her lips. Whatever the reason for her visit, Alex knew that it would be a moment that would forever change the course of their lives; a turning point in the intricate dance of fate that had brought them together on this fateful night.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

### Chapter 7

Rosalind stood before Alex, her heart pounding beneath her cloak. The drawing room of the Duke's manor seemed to close in around her, the weight of her purpose pressing against her chest. She met Alex's gaze, his eyes wide with a mixture of shock and something else she couldn't quite discern.

"How did you manage to escape your home unnoticed?" Alex demanded, his voice cutting through the tense silence. "And with only a cloak to conceal your identity?"

Rosalind took a deep breath, willing her voice to remain steady despite the tremors that threatened to betray her inner turmoil. "Your Grace, the purpose of my visit is worth every risk I have taken."

She stepped forward, the hem of her cloak brushing against the plush carpet. The firelight cast dancing shadows across Alex's face, highlighting the sharp angles of his jawline and the intensity of his stare. "I have come to make a proposition," Rosalind declared, her words hanging in the air between them. "One that concerns the future of both our families."

Alex raised one dark eyebrow, his posture stiffening. "And what proposition might that be, Lady Rosalind?"

Rosalind's fingers curled into the fabric of her cloak, anchoring herself as she prepared to unveil her plan. "I am here to offer myself as your bride, Your Grace." The words seemed to echo in the drawing room, the silence that followed thick with tension.

Alex's eyes widened further, his lips parting in surprise. "You—you came here to propose?" he asked, his voice laced with disbelief. "You are proposing to me?"

Rosalind nodded, her resolve unwavering. "Yes, Your Grace. I believe it is in the best interest of both our families." She took a step closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. "My sisters, Amelia and Isabella, they...they could not bear a marriage of this sort. It isn't in their natures, and I would not see their hearts shackled in such a way."

Alex studied her, his eyes searching hers as if truly seeing her for the first time. "And what of your own heart, Lady Rosalind? Are you truly willing to sacrifice your own chance at love for the sake of your sisters?"

Rosalind's lips curved into a wry smile. "We may be frank with one another: My chances of finding a husband that would love me, independence and all, were always vanishingly small. Besides, there is nothing I wouldn't do to ensure the continued happiness of my sisters. If my sacrifice can ensure their happiness, then it is a price I am willing to pay."

She paused, letting her words sink in. "Your Grace," she continued, her voice trembling with emotion, "I know that my proposal may seem sudden and unconventional, but I assure you, it comes from a place of love and devotion to my sisters. If Amelia were to be forced into a loveless marriage, it would shatter her very soul," Rosalind said, her voice cracking with the weight of her words. "I cannot bear to see her dreams crushed, not when I have the power to prevent it."

She turned away from the Duke, staring into the fire but not really seeing it. "Isabella's spirit would wither and die if she were confined to a life of duty and obligation," Rosalind said, her words filled with raw honesty and vulnerability. "You've seen how she paints, how she puts her whole heart into it."

The Duke nodded. "Can you imagine her if she were shut up in some grand house,

cut off from doing what she loves? She deserves the chance to find her own happiness, free from the constraints of societal expectations."

As Rosalind laid bare her fears and hopes, she could see the shift in Alex's demeanour. His initial shock gave way to a growing admiration, his eyes softening as he listened intently to her words. She could feel the weight of his gaze upon her, the way he seemed to see straight into her very soul.

"I know that our union would be one of duty and responsibility," Rosalind said, her voice steady despite the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. "But I believe that together, we could forge a partnership built on mutual respect and a shared sense of purpose. We would enter into our marriage free from any clouds of sentimentality."

She took a step closer to Alex, her eyes pleading with him to consider her offer. "Your Grace, I ask that you see the potential in this arrangement, the opportunity to protect not only your own reputation but the happiness of my beloved sisters as well."

Rosalind's heart raced as she awaited Alex's response, the silence stretching between them like an endless chasm. She knew that her fate, and the fate of her sisters, rested in his hands, and yet, despite the uncertainty that loomed before her, she found solace in the knowledge that she had done everything in her power to protect those she loved most.

### Chapter 8

Alex stood before Rosalind, his mind reeling from the unexpected proposal she had just laid at his feet. The candlelight cast shadows across her face, accentuating the surprising determination etched in her delicate features. He found himself captivated by the fire in her emerald eyes, a blaze that seemed to pierce through the very fabric of his being.

"Lady Rosalind," he began, his voice low and measured, "you must understand the gravity of what you are suggesting. A marriage, even one born of necessity, is not a matter to be taken lightly."

Rosalind lifted her chin in defiance. "I am well aware of the implications, Your Grace, but I am also aware of the love and devotion I hold for my sisters. If sacrificing my own happiness can secure theirs, then it is a price I am willing to pay."

Alex felt a flicker of admiration for her selflessness. There was little doubt that she was as devoted to her family as he was to his own. The prospect of having that same loyalty fixed upon himself and his legacy was an appealing one. Still, he hesitated. "Have you never entertained dreams of a union based on love?"

A wistful smile played upon her lips. "Dreams are a luxury afforded to those who have the freedom to pursue them. As a daughter of the nobility, my path has always been predetermined. But in this moment, I choose to forge my own destiny, to protect those I hold dear. If I must marry for the security of my sisters, then I should like to at least do it on my terms."

The sincerity in her words struck a chord within Alex, resonating with his own sense of responsibility and honour. He found himself drawn to the strength that emanated from her, a strength born of love and sacrifice.

"You speak of duty and obligation," Rosalind continued, her voice softening, "but have you ever considered the possibility of finding something more? Of discovering a partnership built on mutual respect and understanding?"

Alex's heart quickened at her words, a flicker of hope igniting within him, but he quickly tamped it down. There was no room for sentimentality in the duties of a duke. Carefully, he arranged his features into an unreadable mask.

He was not quick enough, however, for Rosalind's eyes caught whatever he had been attempting to hide. Her brows twitched slightly in a silent question, and then she blinked as some sort of understanding dawned on her face. "I understand that you likely have your own expectations that you bring to marriage. I also will not pretend that it's impossible you have had your own past, your own trials of the heart. I do not claim that I can assuage whatever those might be, but we might at least find honest companionship within each other. After all, we would have the benefit of complete and total honesty."

As she spoke, Alex found himself drawn to the warmth and empathy that radiated from her. The walls he had so carefully constructed around his heart began to crack, a sliver of light seeping through the darkness. "You are a remarkable woman, Lady Rosalind," he murmured, his voice laced with a newfound admiration. "Your courage and loyalty are truly commendable." He paused, regarding her in a new light. "You're far more perceptive than I had originally credited you with being."

As their conversation deepened, the drawing room seemed to transform into a sanctuary, a space where they could explore the possibilities of a future together. Rosalind's words were laced with a cautious hope, a vulnerability that Alex found

himself mirroring as he shared his own desires and fears.

"I have long believed that duty was the only thing I might be able to build a marriage on," Alex confessed, his voice low and tinged with a hint of sadness. "But in your presence, Lady Rosalind, I find myself questioning the very foundations upon which I have built my life."

Rosalind's gaze softened, her hand reaching out to gently touch his own. The contact sent a jolt of electricity through Alex's body, igniting a spark that he had thought long extinguished. The boldness of the gesture, of a young woman initiating contact in such a manner, made the Duke's heart skip a beat. "Perhaps it is time to rewrite the rules, Your Grace," she whispered, her voice filled with a quiet determination.

The weight of her words settled upon him, forcing him to confront the reality of their situation. Reluctantly, he tore himself away from her wide eyes and paced the drawing room. His footsteps echoing against the polished wooden floors, as he grappled with the magnitude of the decision that lay before him.

On a practical level, Alex recognised the strategic advantages that a match with the Harrington family could bring. The Harringtons were well-respected and influential in society, and a union with one of their daughters would undoubtedly strengthen his own position and political standing. A dowry from any one of them would be enough to secure his legacy for generations. It was a calculated move, one that could offer alliances and open doors to new opportunities.

However, as Alex continued to contemplate Rosalind's proposal, he found himself increasingly drawn to the woman herself. Her intelligence and quick wit had captured his attention from the moment they first met, and her unwavering dedication to her family was a testament to her strength of character.

Rosalind possessed a fire within her, a passion for life that burned brightly and



refused to be extinguished by societal expectations. She was almost startlingly forthright, a refreshing change from the usual shy and retiring young ladies that were flung at him from every direction.

Alex's gaze lingered on Rosalind's face, studying the determined set of her soft jaw. Her eyes, a vibrant green that reminded him of the lush gardens of his estate, held a depth of emotion that stirred something within him. In that moment, he saw beyond the facade of a society lady and glimpsed the true essence of Rosalind Harrington. Yet, even as Alex found himself captivated by Rosalind's presence, the scars of his past heartbreak began to throb with a dull ache. The memory of Mary, the woman who had shattered his belief in love, resurfaced like a phantom, whispering doubts and fears into his ear. He had long since resigned himself to a life without the warmth and comfort of a true partnership, convinced that love was nothing more than a fleeting illusion.

As he stood there, face to face with Rosalind, her words ringing in his ears and her eyes searching his own, Alex felt a flicker of something he had thought long extinguished. A spark of hope, a whisper of possibility that perhaps, just perhaps, there could be more to a marriage than mere duty and obligation.

The internal battle raged within him, his head and his heart at odds with each other. The practical, logical side of him urged caution, reminding him of the risks and the potential for further heartache. Yet, the part of him that had been touched by Rosalind's sincerity and courage longed to take a leap of faith, to embrace the chance for something more.

As the silence stretched between them, heavy with anticipation and unspoken emotions, Alex knew that he stood at a crossroads. The decision he made in this moment would shape not only his own future but the lives of those around him. The yoke of responsibility pressed upon his shoulders, urging him to consider the far-reaching consequences of his actions.

Alex regarded Rosalind with a mixture of curiosity and admiration as he sought to unravel the intricacies of her bold proposition. He leaned forward, his eyes locked on hers, and posed a question that had been burning in his mind since she first stepped into his drawing room.

"Lady Rosalind, your commitment to your sisters is truly remarkable, and your willingness to sacrifice your own happiness for their sake is a testament to your character. But I must ask, what do you envision for our potential partnership? What expectations do you hold for a marriage between us?"

"Your Grace, I believe that a successful marriage is built upon a foundation of mutual respect, trust, and understanding. I seek a partnership where both individuals have the freedom to grow, to pursue their passions, and to support one another in their endeavours," she answered plainly and without preamble. Her words carried a quiet strength, a conviction that resonated deep within Alex's soul.

Rosalind continued, her voice steady despite the slight tremble in her hands that Alex caught from the corner of his eye. "I am not content to be a mere ornament in society, to spend my days in idle gossip and frivolous pursuits. I crave intellectual stimulation, the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions and to make a difference in the world around me."

Alex inclined his head, considering. "And what of the traditional duties of a duchess?" he asked, his tone more curious than challenging. "Are you prepared to fulfil the obligations that come with such a title?"

Rosalind met his gaze unflinchingly, her resolve unwavering. "I am not seeking to shirk my responsibilities, Your Grace. I understand the importance of maintaining the social standing and reputation of our families, and I have been helping my sister to run our household since our mother passed. I believe that a true partnership allows for both individuals to thrive, to find fulfilment beyond the confines of societal

expectations."

As she spoke, Rosalind's words painted a vivid picture of a future where they could stand side by side, equals in every sense of the word. A future where they could challenge each other, inspire each other, and grow together in ways that defied the rigid strictures of their world. It was easy to fall into this vision of the future; Alex had no doubt that Rosalind had the fortitude to take on the ton and bend it to her will.

Alex found himself captivated by the passion in her voice, the sincerity that shone in her eyes. He had never encountered a woman who possessed such a fierce determination to forge her own path, to carve out a destiny that was entirely her own.

"And what of love, Lady Rosalind?" he asked softly, struggling against the thorny brambles that had grown around his own heart. "Do you believe that love has a place in a marriage such as ours?"

Rosalind's gaze softened, a flicker of understanding passing between them. "I believe that love can grow, Your Grace, even in the most unexpected of circumstances, but I am not naive enough to expect it from the outset. What I seek is a partnership built on honesty—love is not a requirement for a happy marriage."

Alexander Fitzwilliam, Duke of Somerton, found himself captivated by the woman standing before him. He was in very great danger of forming an attachment to her, of allowing himself to even begin to love her. In Rosalind, he recognised a kindred spirit, a woman who dared to dream beyond the limitations imposed upon them by their world. Her unconventional approach to marriage, her desire for a partnership built on mutual respect and shared purpose, ignited a spark of hope within him. It was a vision that both thrilled and terrified him, a leap into the unknown that held the potential for unimaginable rewards.

He reached out, his fingertips grazing the delicate skin of Rosalind's hand,

emboldened by her words. When they touched, a spark leapt between them, a tangible reminder of the connection that had sparked between them. In that moment, Alex knew that he could no longer deny the pull he felt towards her, the undeniable attraction that went beyond mere physical desire.

Alex stood transfixed as a log in the fire cracked and split open, sending flames licking higher in the fireplace. The soft, golden glow cast a warm hue upon Rosalind's face, illuminating the hope and an unexpected vulnerability that shimmered in her eyes.

In that moment, Alex could feel the precipice he was balanced on, caught between possibility and duty, of a future of his own making or one that had already been written for him.

Even as his heart yearned to embrace the possibilities that Rosalind presented, Alex knew that he could not make such a life-altering decision on a whim. The weight of his responsibilities, the expectations placed upon him as the Duke of Somerton, demanded careful consideration and thoughtful deliberation.

With a deep breath, Alex stepped backward, breaking the invisible connection between them. "Lady Rosalind, your proposal has given me much to contemplate. The vision you have painted of our potential future together is one that I find myself drawn to. However, I must approach this decision with the gravity it deserves," he said coolly, composed in spite of the wild beating of his heart.

Rosalind nodded, her eyes shining with a mixture of understanding and tentative hope. She did not protest, clearly recognising the magnitude of the choice that lay before Alex, the implications it held not only for their own lives but for the lives of those around them.

"I understand, Your Grace," she replied, her voice gentle, yet filled with conviction.

"I know that this is not a decision to be made lightly, but I want you to know, that, whatever path you choose, I will always be grateful that you heard me out, letting me speak my mind freely."

Alex felt a surge of admiration for Rosalind's grace and composure, even in the face of such uncertainty. He reached out again, unable to stop himself as his fingertips touched her arm in a gesture of reassurance. "I promise you, Lady Rosalind, that I will give your proposal the careful consideration it deserves. You have challenged my perceptions and stirred something within me that I cannot ignore."

With a final nod of understanding, Rosalind turned to leave, the skirt of her grey wool redingote swishing softly against the polished wooden floors. Alex watched as she disappeared through the doorway, his heart heavy with the weight of the decision that lay before him.

As the door clicked shut behind her, Alex found himself alone in the drawing room, the silence broken only by the distant chirping of birds outside the window in the pre-dawn greyness. He stood there, his gaze fixed upon the empty space where Rosalind had once stood, the ghost of her presence lingering in the air. He remained rooted to the spot, reluctant to leave, half-afraid that to do so would wake him, and he would find that all of this had been a dream.

As the first light of dawn continued to creep through the windows, casting a soft glow upon his face, Alex knew that the coming days would be filled with soul-searching and introspection. He would need to weigh the potential risks and rewards of Rosalind's proposal. To consider, also, the impact it would have not only on his own life but on the lives of those around him. Still, even as the uncertainty of the future loomed before him, Alex couldn't help but feel a flicker of excitement, a sense of anticipation for the journey that lay ahead. Rosalind had awakened a part of him that he had long thought dormant, a desire for something more than the confines of societal expectations.

And so, with a deep breath and a resolute nod, Alex turned away from the empty drawing room. His mind consumed by thoughts of the unexpected path that fate had placed before him and the woman who had so boldly challenged his perceptions of love and marriage.

### Chapter 9

As Alex stepped into the grand foyer of Harrington House, his eyes were immediately drawn to the intricate plasterwork that adorned the walls and the gleaming marble floor beneath his feet. The house buzzed with activity, servants scurrying about to attend to their daily duties, while the faint sound of a piano melody drifted from one of the distant rooms. He held his hat in his hands, turning it around and around by the brim mindlessly before a footman glided forward to take it and his gloves.

Lord Harrington emerged from his study, his expression a mixture of surprise and curiosity as he approached Alex, his hand outstretched in greeting. "Your Grace, what an unexpected pleasure to have you visit our humble abode. To what do we owe the honour of your presence? Were we expecting you? Did Lady Amelia forget to inform me of a visit?" he asked, his brow furrowing slightly.

Alex, his voice steady and confident, met Lord Harrington's gaze with unwavering determination. "Lord Harrington, I have come to formally express my intention to court your daughter, Lady Rosalind. I believe that our union could bring great benefits to both our families, and I wish to further our acquaintance to explore the potential of a future together."

Lord Harrington's eyebrows raised slightly, clearly taken aback by the Duke's declaration. "Rosalind?" he blurted, his eyes flicking down the hall and back to the Duke. "I mean...that is, Your Grace, I must admit that your interest in Rosalind comes as a surprise," Lord Harrington replied, recovering quickly. "She is not the most traditional of young ladies, and I fear that her independent nature may not be well-

suited to the expectations of a Duchess. Amelia, on the other hand—"

Alex, undeterred by Lord Harrington's reservations, pressed on, raising a hand. "It is precisely her independent spirit and quick mind that have drawn me to her, Lord Harrington. I believe that a partnership built on mutual respect and understanding could flourish between us, and I am eager to explore that possibility further."

Lord Harrington paused, considering Alex's words. Alex could almost see the arithmetic that Lord Harrington was doing in his head at the announcement: The alliance could bring great prestige and influence to the Harrington family, and he knew that Rosalind's future would be secure with a man of Alex's standing. However, should the Duke find Rosalind's propensity for independent thought not to his taste after all and publicly cut her, her reputation, and likely that of her sisters, would suffer. It was a risk.

"Very well, Your Grace," Lord Harrington conceded, his tone still laced with a hint of scepticism. "I grant you permission to court Rosalind. I trust that you will treat her with the utmost respect and propriety." He paused. "The weather seems to be rather fine today—perhaps you might promenade with her in the park? She needs a reason to be taken from the library," he added.

Alex bowed his head in gratitude, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Of course, Lord Harrington. I would be glad to."

As Lord Harrington nodded his assent, Alex felt a surge of anticipation course through his veins. A footman was dispatched to summon Rosalind and to find her maid so that she might be readied for her outing. The opportunity to spend time with Rosalind, to delve deeper into the fascinating depths of her mind and heart, filled him with a sense of excitement and purpose. He found himself balancing eagerly on the balls of his feet, full of delighted anticipation.



When Rosalind presented herself, Alex found himself fighting to keep a broad smile from his face. She was resplendent in a lavender pelisse and a green cotton day dress that made her red hair seem even redder. Like him, she kept her expression tightly controlled, but there was a glint of eagerness and curiosity in her eyes that followed Alex carefully. Alex bowed to her, unwilling or unable to take his eyes from her for even a moment.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," she said. "I understand you were concerned about my need for fresh air."

"Lady Rosalind," the Duke replied, not rising to her bait just yet. Rosalind inclined her head, a playful tilt to her mouth.

"My sister has agreed to act as chaperone," she said, nodding to Lady Amelia, who was waiting some steps away. The Duke nodded, and without further ceremony, they were discharged out into the brisk spring air and made their way to St. James' Park.

As they walked in companionable silence, with Amelia trailing a polite distance behind, the beauty of St. James' Park was on full display. The lush green lawns stretched out before them, dotted with vibrant flowers and towering trees that provided a canopy of shade. The gentle breeze carried the sweet scent of blooming roses, and the distant sound of chirping birds filled the air. The ton, too, was out in all their feathers and ruffles, as eager to see as to be seen.

For all the natural beauty, it was Rosalind's presence that truly captivated Alex's attention. There was a sort of natural magnetism to her, even when she wasn't speaking. Still, Alex was determined to know her better, to see what he might tease out of her. She was not inclined to mindless chatter, however, and seemed thoroughly disinclined to speak unless she had something worthy to say.

"I understand from your father that you have been much in the library today," he

offered.

Rosalind gave him a sidelong glance, clearly unimpressed with such a banal statement. "I have been," she confirmed politely enough, though. "Much to my father's distress," she added.

Alex felt a corner of his mouth tug upward a little. "What have you been studying for so many hours?"

Her steps slowed and stopped, and Alex, surprised, turned back to face her. Her green eyes boldly swept over him, assessing, and he couldn't help but draw himself up a bit in response. "Do you really wish to know, or are you merely attempting to make polite conversation?"

From behind Rosalind, Alex could see Amelia put her hand on her forehead and sigh. For his part, he appreciated the directness. "It may surprise you to know that I am genuinely interested."

"I've been reading the works of Aphra Behn," Rosalind said, staring directly into Alex's eyes, unflinching. "She was possibly the first British woman to make her living by her pen alone, without the support of a man."

"I know her work," the Duke replied. "I understand your father's distress a little more clearly now."

"Do you?" Rosalind returned, one of her brows arching. "Do you also find her work unsuitable? Morally depraved? Without merit?"

Alex shrugged. "It does seem... a little unseemly for a young lady, I will admit."

"Unseemly," Rosalind huffed. She began walking again, her stride quick and

determined, and Alex had to stretch his legs to catch up. "And yet, none of the same condemnation for Wilmot and his bawdy verses."

"That's different," Alex protested.

"Why?" Rosalind demanded. "Is he permitted because he is a man, or because he is a peer?"

"Well, I—"

"Because if a subject is unsuitable for writing about, then it is simply unsuitable, no matter who is writing," Rosalind continued. "The words don't know if they are being written by a man or a woman, so the meaning is the same. If it's because of social status, then I ask, why were nobles created in the first place?"

Alex tilted his head, his brow creasing a little as he thought. He'd never considered such a question in his life. "I imagine because they performed a service for a king, and were duly rewarded."

"Ah! That is it precisely," Rosalind cried, turning toward Alex again. "Ms Behn likewise served the king, acting as a spy in Antwerp for Charles II, at his personal behest. There, she has done a service to the king, and is therefore exactly as worthy as any other peer."

Now it was Alex's turn to stop walking, his boots planted on the gravel path. Rosalind did not seem to notice for a moment and continued on. She stopped several steps ahead of him, and when she turned around, the Duke felt his breath catch in his chest. Her cheeks were flushed from the cool breeze and exercise, but her eyes were shining with the passion of her argument. She stood straight and didn't attempt to diminish her bearing in any way so that she would appear lighter, more delicate. She was, in a word, magnificent.

Alex was aware that he was just staring at her, but he didn't care. Rosalind, too, did not seem to care, the tone of her gaze playful and daring. "Have I shocked and appalled you, Your Grace?" she asked, her tone fairly challenging.

"No," he answered with a slow shake of his head, coming to stand with her again. "I was just imagining the fireworks that would ensue if I took you to court."

Rosalind laughed, fully and without hesitation, her head tilted back, white teeth flashing. "I'm sure that would be my first and only audience with the royals."

"Probably," Alex agreed. "Though the queen is rather a force to be reckoned with herself."

"Well, if you should like to avoid further nasty shocks, I suggest you stick to the approved scripts for these sorts of outings," Rosalind said.

"Which is?"

"We might discuss the weather, how many people are out today, the latest hunt you attended..." She ticked them off on her fingers, her dark purple kid gloves emphasising her points.

"I think I'd far rather ask your opinion on the Prime Minister," Alex said.

"Oh?"

"It will at the least be far more entertaining, and I suspect, a great deal more stimulating," he said with a nod.

Rosalind laughed again, which made Alex grin. Alex found himself increasingly drawn to her, his gaze lingering on the delicate curve of her cheek and the way the

sunlight danced in her fiery red hair. There was a depth to Rosalind that he had never encountered before. It was a sense of authenticity and raw honesty that stripped away the pretences of society and left him feeling both exhilarated and exposed. Feeling emboldened, Alex allowed himself to walk a little closer to Rosalind, the back of his hand brushing hers. To his delight, she coloured prettily and bit her lip.

A pointed cough from behind them had Alex folding his hands behind his back. Rosalind tossed a glance over her shoulder to Amelia, which made Alex chuckle to himself. "How are your sisters, if I might risk a foray into more mundane conversation?"

"Well enough, thank you," Rosalind replied automatically, with none of the feeling he expected from her.

Suspicious, Alex lowered his voice. "I'm not looking for gossip, Lady Rosalind," he said quietly. "I think that you know well enough by now my feelings on that point."

"True enough," Rosalind allowed. They walked in silence for a moment, round a corner in the path. Her expression was troubled, her eyes distant as she clearly wrestled with something internally. "In the spirit of the honesty which I promised you, I suppose I might tell you that I am troubled on their behalf...Isabella in particular."

The duke nodded. He had seen the solicitous care that the other Harrington sisters had tended to the youngest, and his heart was all sympathy for them. There was a sad, melancholy air that clung to Isabella, a heaviness in her movements that gave the girl gravity beyond her years. Isabella had been shy and reserved from the first, but over the weeks, she had become so wan and quiet that she seemed in danger of simply disappearing.

"What troubles her so?" Alex inquired.

Rosalind hesitated again, her steps slowing. She glanced over to Alex, searching his face, and he suspected that she was attempting to decide how much to trust him. He evidently passed whatever test she had been mentally putting him through, for she answered with unvarnished plainness.

"I think the reality of her life is bearing down on her. This whole business—" She gestured vaguely between herself and the Duke. "—has brought to light that her future is already written for her, and it's not a story that she wishes to be the main character in."

"Ah," Alex said, nodding. "I can empathise with that well enough." A pause. "Is this why she hasn't been presented at court?"

"Partly," Rosalind admitted. "But I think also she simply doesn't wish to be labelled as on the marriage market."

"Does she not wish to marry?" Alex asked, surprised.

"No, I think she very much does—she has a lot of love to give to the right person. The problem is, who could she marry that would allow her to continue to paint as she does? It's a conundrum," Rosalind said unhappily.

As an older brother himself, Alex couldn't help but feel a measure of sympathy for Rosalind's position. More than that, he did not care one jot for the way her mouth turned down at the corners, her concern and feeling for her sister suffusing her entire expression. He found himself wanting desperately to put things right for her, to restore the bright smile to her face.

"Perhaps I can help," he heard his mouth saying before he knew what was happening.

"You? How?" Rosalind blurted.

"Well," he said slowly, the plan forming as he said it, "why not take her to an exhibition of some sort? Let her see how the other half lives."

Rosalind bit her lip again, her brow furrowed in thought. "It would be good to get her out of the attic for a bit," she allowed. "But I am worried that it will simply discourage her more."

A grin flitted over Alex's face. "I think I know exactly the artist's works she should see," he said, "and afterwards, we can take her to get iced cream—there's a patisserie that sells some over near Bond Street."

"We should surprise her," Rosalind said, her face becoming animated again. "I won't tell her what we're doing, that way there's no expectation; everything will just be a delightful surprise for her. What do you think, Amelia?" Rosalind asked, turning around and walking backwards for a moment to gauge her sister's reaction.

To Alex's relief and pleasure, Amelia's eyes were glistening with emotion, and she nodded enthusiastically. "She'll love it," she agreed softly. "It will take her out of herself."

Delightedly, Rosalind squealed a little and clapped her hands together. In her happy enthusiasm, she pirouetted back around and grasped the Duke's elbow with both hands. Amelia, evidently too pleased to protest, said nothing in objection, which in turn greatly pleased Alex.

As Alex, Rosalind, and Amelia returned to the Harrington manor, they were unified in their plan to help the youngest Harrington. As Alex deposited Lady Rosalind and her sister safely back in their house, he promised that he would send a card over the very moment he had the details settled. Strangely enough, it didn't feel like a chore as other social engagements frequently had.

### Chapter 10

As the date for Isabella's impending outing approached, Rosalind found herself wanting to spend more and more time in the company of the Duke of Somerton. The initial animosity between them had gradually given way to a growing sense of mutual respect and admiration, their conversations flowing with an ease and familiarity that surprised them both.

When the appointed date arrived, Rosalind hurried Isabella through her morning toilette, giddy with anticipation. So eager was she that she found herself nearly snatching the brush out of the maid's hands so that she might pin up Isabella's hair all the faster. For her part, Isabella endured all of this with a languid, disinterested air, which only served to heighten Rosalind's impatience to depart.

Isabella managed to rouse herself a little when she spotted the Duke's grand carriage waiting for them outside the house. The Duke himself stood next to it, and offered the sisters a deep bow in greeting. She cast a dubious glance to Rosalind, who only smiled and took her hand. "Don't you worry, my little rosebud," she said, "there are only good surprises today."

Hesitatingly, Isabella allowed herself to be handed up into the carriage. Within, Rosalind could still sense her unease, the way that she attempted to squeeze herself deep into the corner. "Thank you for the ride, Your Grace," Rosalind said, attempting to keep the excitement from her voice.

"Not at all, Lady Rosalind," he returned formally. His own face was alight with bemusement, clearly enjoying the subterfuge.



The journey was largely spent in silence, the richly upholstered carriage surprisingly comfortable as it rolled over the uneven London streets. Rosalind and the Duke engaged in polite conversation, which felt oddly impersonal given their usual honesty, but they didn't wish to give anything away. Isabella stared silently out the window as London passed by.

They stopped in front of a plain townhouse, the facade plain but lovely in its symmetry. There were a number of other carriages there, with people regularly disembarking.

"We're here!" Rosalind announced, seizing Isabella's hand. "Come on, Bitty-Bella, you don't want to miss this!" she said, using the baby-name they'd called Isabella, encouraging her up. Isabella, once out of the carriage, put her hand to the back of her bonnet to steady it as she looked up dubiously at the house.

"Where—where are we?" she asked.

"This is Lord Percival Tyrell's London residence," the Duke said, coming up behind them.

"The famous collector?" Isabella asked, her eyes sparking a little.

"The same," the Duke confirmed. "Shall we?" he said, gesturing towards the door with his walking stick. That was all the encouragement it took to get them inside.

From the moment they entered, Isabella's pale blue eyes were wide with wonder, her rosebud mouth open in silent appreciation. Rosalind watched her with satisfaction, glad that her plan was already working, and they were only in the vestibule. There were two small marble statues in little alcoves, Cupid and Psyche, and Isabella was immediately drawn to them, murmuring about their shape and form.

"I think it's working," Alex whispered to Rosalind. She hadn't realised how close he was standing, and the play of his words on her ear made her shiver a little.

"I think so too," Rosalind replied.

They stood for a moment side by side, their shoulders nearly touching as they watched Isabella flit about. "If you saw me, perhaps you would fear me, perhaps adore me, but all I ask of you is to love me. I would rather you would love me as an equal than adore me as a god," the Duke quoted quietly, staring at the statue of Cupid.

Surprised, Rosalind turned to him. "I must confess, I never took you for a lover of poetry, Your Grace," Rosalind remarked, a playful smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Alex chuckled, his gaze warm as it met hers. "There is much about me that might surprise you, Lady Rosalind. Just as there is much about you that continues to intrigue me."

Rosalind felt a flush creep up her neck at his words, her heart fluttering in her chest. In that moment, caught in the intensity of his gaze, she found herself lowering her guard, revealing a part of herself she rarely shared with others.

"I have always dreamed of using my position to effect positive change in the world," she confessed, her voice soft but filled with conviction. "To make a difference in the lives of those less fortunate than myself."

Alex's eyes widened, a flicker of admiration dancing within their depths. "It seems we share a similar passion, then. I, too, have long held the desire to create a more just and equitable society." As they spoke, their hands brushed against each other accidentally, sending a jolt of electricity through their bodies. They stared into each

other's eyes, and Rosalind found herself swallowing hard, her mouth suddenly dry.

"Come on, Rosalind!" Isabella said, breaking the spell. "We must see the rest of the collection!"

With a rueful smile, Rosalind turned her attention back to her sister. Linking arms together, Rosalind gently guided her through a series of rooms, all hung with an astonishing amount of paintings. Isabella protested, digging in her heels and demanding to see the pieces they were simply passing by.

"Patience, Isabella," Rosalind said. "We're going to see something very special indeed."

At last, they came to a spacious hall, which was populated with a number of easels. On these, a collection of oil paintings stood, with a number of people clustered around, admiring them. Rosalind, not wishing to give anything away, made a great show of casualness, but watched Isabella surreptitiously from the corner of her eye.

"These are quite good," Isabella murmured, leaning forward to look closer at a painting of a woman seated at an easel, while an older woman peered around to gaze at the painting-within-a-painting. "These are—wait," Isabella said, glancing about at all of the canvases. "These are by Sharples! Oh, they're exquisite," she said.

"I'm delighted you think so," a gentle voice said from behind them. Rosalind and Isabella turned, and there, in a fashionable white dress, stood a rather unassuming woman with dark hair and playful eyes on the arm of the Duke, who was grinning like a child who'd stolen the last biscuit.

"Lady Rosalind, Lady Isabella, may I present Miss Rolinda Sharples? Miss Sharples, Ladies Rosalind and Isabella Harrington," the Duke said, still smiling.

"Miss Sharples," Rosalind said as they exchanged polite bows, "I am so delighted to meet you. My sister, here, is quite an admirer of your work."

"So I gathered," Miss Sharples replied with a glint in her eye. "Tell me, Lady Isabella, are you an admirer of the arts?"

Isabella opened her mouth to answer, but no sound came out. She shrank back a little, partially hidden behind Rosalind. Rosalind recognised this posture well, it being a constant in their childhood. Refusing to allow this opportunity to pass her sister by, Rosalind stiffened her grip on Isabella's arm.

"She's more than an admirer," Rosalind said proudly. "She's an artist herself."

Miss Sharples' eyes lit up with interest. "Are you indeed? Come then, my dear, you must tell me all about your work." And with that, she inserted herself between Isabella and Rosalind, taking the former by the arm. Speaking in low, gentle tones, as if she innately understood Isabella's shyness, the artist began squiring the girl around the room, pausing occasionally to discuss a painting.

Rosalind watched with a mix of pride and fondness. She could feel the Duke's presence beside her, a kind of charge in the air about him.

"I can't thank you enough for arranging this," Rosalind said, nodding toward Isabella. "It means so much to her, and...and to me."

"It was very much my pleasure. You are an extraordinary woman, Rosalind," he murmured, his voice low and sincere. "Never doubt that. The qualities that make you unique, that set you apart from others, are what make you so incredibly special."

Rosalind's breath caught in her throat, her heart swelling with an emotion she dared not name. In that moment, lost in the depths of his eyes, she felt a connection to Alex

that transcended the boundaries of their social positions and the expectations placed upon them.

As they stood there, surrounded by beautiful things, Rosalind and Alex began to see each other in a new light. The initial prejudices and misconceptions fell away, replaced by a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complex individuals they truly were. Rosalind was delighted to find that beneath the Duke's exterior of duty and propriety, there was a real heart beating, a truly generous soul.

"Of course, Lord Tyrrell was all too happy to help me with the arrangements," the Duke said. "In fact, he was rather keen to meet Lady Isabella as well."

"Was he? Why?" Rosalind asked, her protective instinct surging to the fore.

"He's always on the lookout for new extraordinary talent, and I believe it's safe to say that means your sister," Alex said with a nod toward her. "He has quite an eye for it. In fact, there he is now," he said, dipping his head at a tall, tow-headed man across the hall. Lord Tyrrell, spotting the Duke, smiled widely and made his way over.

"Your Grace!" he said affably, clapping the Duke on the shoulder jovially. "I am delighted you were able to attend today. Delighted! Now, tell me, is this charming young lady the one who wished to meet our Miss Sharples?"

"No, Percival," the Duke said with a shake of his head. "This is Lady Rosalind Harrington, Baron Harrington's middle daughter."

"Ah! Well, I am pleased to make your acquaintance then," Lord Tyrrell said, accepting Rosalind's hand as if she were a man and shaking it vigorously. "Pleased, very pleased! I understand it was for your sister's benefit that this meeting was arranged?"

"It was, milord," Rosalind replied, blinking and gently extricating her hand from Lord Tyrrell's enthusiastic grip. "Ah, there she is now," she said, happy to see that she had linked arms with Miss Sharples. Their heads were close together in private conference, with Isabella nodding emphatically.

"Ah, Miss Sharples!" Lord Tyrrell said, the smile on his face widening. "So you have met His Grace's young friend, then. Wonderful! Just wonderful."

Isabella and Rosalind exchanged a knowing sort of glance between themselves, the sort often shared by sisters that have mastered the art of silent communication. Rosalind suspected that Lord Tyrrell was the sort of happy person that could find happiness in the most mundane of circumstances. There was a sort of overeager, puppy-like aspect to him that was endearing and somewhat undercut his classical, chiselled good looks.

After the requisite introductions with bows and curtsies were completed, Rosalind spoke up. "Lord Tyrrell, I understand that you are quite the patron of the arts."

"Oh yes," he said, nodding so that his straw-coloured curls bobbed against his forehead. "Ever since I was a young lad, I've had a passion for supporting any and all artistic endeavours."

"Your collection is breathtaking," Isabella remarked, her eyes shining with admiration. Rosalind was surprised but delighted by the steady, confident tenor of her voice.

"He has a real eye for recognising talent," Miss Sharples agreed with a self-satisfied smile.

"And recognising a lack of talent, too," the Duke muttered darkly. Rosalind turned a querying look on him, and he shrugged. "I had thought once that I might be a great

gentleman artist. It ah...it did not work out as I had hoped."

"Oh come now, Alex," Lord Tyrrell said, "it was a delightful country scene. I can't remember seeing a more attractive cow."

"It was a portrait of my governess," Alex replied, deadpan. "And you advised that I burn it. Immediately."

Rosalind, unable to contain herself, burst into laughter. The Duke turned to look at her with surprise, but seeing her delight, found himself chuckling as well. "It wasn't that amusing," he protested, attempting a serious expression but failing miserably.

"Oh, I can just see you now, you poor thing," Rosalind said, still laughing. "I imagine you were such a serious little artist."

"I was. It was devastating. Do I not look devastated?" Alex asked, which made Rosalind laugh harder. With great affectation, he heaved a dramatic sigh. "You had better be grateful you're so lovely when you're amused," he muttered, full of mock indignation.

"Oh please," Rosalind said, tapping him playfully on the arm. Rosalind caught Isabella's eye then, and there was a strange expression on the younger sister's face, like she was trying to understand something. It was almost as if she recognised something she had glimpsed once before and was trying to recall it. Immediately, Rosalind sobered and remembered why it was that she was really there.

"Actually, Lord Tyrrell, if it's new talent that you are seeking, you might have a look at some of my sister's work," Rosalind said, nodding toward Isabella. "She has a rare gift."

"I—oh, no, I don't think—" Isabella began.

"It's true," the Duke confirmed. "I might not be able to wield a brush, but I recognise masterpieces when I see them."

"That's kind of you, but I really am not—" Isabella protested again.

This time, it was Miss Sharples who put a hand on her arm, interrupting her. "Listen to me, my dear," she said, looking Isabella directly in the eye. "This is a hard world for lady artists; you will never claw out a handhold for yourself if you do not seize the opportunity. Now: Is this what you wish? Do you want to keep your light hidden under a basket, for the world to never see your work?"



### Chapter 11

Rosalind watched Isabella closely. She could almost see the thoughts as they grappled around in Isabella's head. To her immense pleasure and pride, Isabella spoke up, her voice clear and her eyes raised directly to Lord Tyrrell.

"I should be very glad if you might consent to viewing some of my work," she said. "I believe it has merit, but would value your opinion."

"As you come with the highest recommendations, I should be pleased to do so. Very pleased!" Lord Tyrrell said with a happy nod. "Might I call upon you this afternoon?"

"Today?" Isabella asked, her eyes going wide with alarm. "I—that's so soon, I haven't prepared anything."

"Good," Lord Tyrrell said. "I would like to see your work as it is, as naturally as possible."

"Until this afternoon, then," Rosalind said, which settled the matter.

As they were leaving Lord Tyrrell's house, Isabella seized both Rosalind and the Duke by the hands. "Please tell me that you will both be there with me," she said, her eyes pleading. "I don't know if I can face this alone."

"Of course," Rosalind said, putting her arm about Isabella's shoulders.

As it happened, all of Isabella's fretting was for naught. Lord Tyrrell was immediately

taken with Isabella's paintings, asking intently about her process. It wasn't long before they were lost in a world of their own, with Amelia trailing along behind to act as a chaperone. Seeking a moment of quiet amidst the bustling activity of the house, Rosalind slipped into the library.

She took a deep breath, glad of the familiar smells of the books and the relative quiet. The door cracked open again, and the Duke slipped in with the manner of someone attempting to sneak away. His eyes lighted on Rosalind, and a guilty smile flickered across his handsome face.

"I see that we were of a similar mind," he said. "I know that we were meant to be supportive, but those two are so alike that I couldn't get a word in if I tried."

"I'm pleased," Rosalind said. "What were they discussing when you left?"

"He was asking Isabella about her paint recipes—something about linseed oil, I didn't follow a word of it," Alex admitted. He cast an appreciative glance about the library, turning around to look at all of the shelves. "This is a magnificent library," he said with frank admiration. "I think it might be bigger than the one on my estate."

"Feel free to browse, Your Grace," Rosalind said.

As they browsed the shelves, their hands reached for the same book, brushing against each other in a fleeting touch that sent a shiver down Rosalind's spine. She glanced up at Alex, her breath catching in her throat as she met his gaze, a silent acknowledgement of the growing connection between them.

Lost in conversation, they settled into the comfortable chairs of the library. The world beyond the walls fading away as they discussed their hopes, dreams, and the challenges they faced in navigating the expectations of their world. Rosalind found herself opening up to Alex in a way she had never done before, sharing her deepest

desires and fears. Her voice filled with a vulnerability that surprised even herself. They leaned closer toward each other as they spoke, gesturing emphatically as they spoke with feeling and enthusiasm.

The moment was shattered when the library door burst open, making both of them leap apart. "Rosalind!" Isabella cried, Amelia trailing in her wake. "You will never, ever believe it!" she said, flying straight for her sister.

Rosalind stood, catching her by the arms. "What? What is it? Has something happened?"

"It most certainly has!" Isabella said, her voice trembling. "Lord Tyrrell—he wants to exhibit some of my work! He thinks it would perfectly complement the paintings on display. He's gone now to arrange it, but he'll be back later to speak to Father. I can't believe it, can you?" Isabella said in a breathless rush.

"Of course I can," Rosalind said, breaking into a smile. "I never had a doubt that he would love your work."

"Oh Rosalind!" she said, throwing her arms about her neck. "I cannot thank you enough! And you, too, Your Grace!" she said, beaming at him as well. "Oh my heavens, which pieces will I select? I can't possibly choose, oh gracious me."

"Peace, Isabella," Amelia said, taking Isabella gently by the arm. "Let's go see what we can sort out. I will help you," she said. She paused by the library door, casting a strange look at Rosalind and the Duke, who, though standing a respectable distance apart, seemed connected by a kind of palpable energy.

"I sincerely hope that you know how much this means to me, and to Isabella, too," Rosalind said tenderly. She gazed up at the Duke with perfect sincerity. "I must confess that I had never suspected you would do something like this for my sister...or

for me."

Alex turned to Rosalind, his eyes filled with a warmth that took her breath away. "You have done an incredible thing here, Rosalind," he murmured, his voice low and sincere. "Your dedication to your sister's happiness is truly inspiring."

Rosalind felt a blush rise to her cheeks at his words, a sense of pride and accomplishment swelling within her chest. As they stood side by side, their hands brushing against each other in a moment of shared triumph. Rosalind realised that her feelings for Alex had grown far beyond the practical arrangement they had initially agreed upon.

Rosalind stood beside Alex, her heart swelling with pride as she surveyed the exhibition room, alive with the buzz of admiration for Isabella's stunning artwork. The cream of London's high society mingled amidst the glittering chandeliers, their voices a symphony of praise and appreciation. Rosalind's gaze drifted to her sister, who blushed under the attentions of Lord Tyrrell.

"Your work is truly exceptional, Lady Isabella," Lord Tyrrell declared, his eyes alight with genuine admiration. "The emotion, the depth, the raw talent—it's breathtaking. You've taken the mundane and treated it with such dignity and grace that it's become elevated."

Isabella ducked her head, a shy smile playing at the corners of her lips. "You're too kind, Lord Tyrrell. I'm merely expressing the beauty I see in the world around me."

"What a precious thing, to see the world with such eyes," Lord Tyrrell replied, his voice and expression soft.

Rosalind watched the exchange with a mixture of joy and protectiveness, her heart aching for her sister's happiness. She leaned closer to Alex, her voice low and

conspiratorial. "I think Lord Tyrrell is quite taken with our dear Isabella."

Alex chuckled softly, dipping his head to speak closely into her ear in a way that made Rosalind shiver. "It seems her talent has the power to captivate even the most discerning of critics."

As they moved through the crowd, Rosalind couldn't help but notice the curious glances and murmured speculations that followed in their wake. The sight of the Duke of Somerton and the unconventional Lady Rosalind together as a couple had set tongues wagging. The air was thick with the weight of gossip and conjecture.

Rosalind lifted her chin, determined to ignore the whispers and focus on the triumph of the moment. She and Alex paused before one of Isabella's most striking pieces, a hauntingly beautiful portrait that seemed to capture the very essence of the subject's soul.

"She has a rare gift," Alex murmured, his eyes fixed on the painting. "The ability to see beneath the surface, to reveal the truth of a person's character."

Rosalind nodded, her heart swelling with love and admiration for her sister. "Isabella has always had a way of understanding people, of seeing the beauty and pain that others often overlook."

But even as they lost themselves in the magic of the artwork, the tranquillity of the moment was shattered by the insidious whispers that began to circulate through the room. Members of the ton, their faces alight with a malicious glee, huddled together in small groups, their voices low and conspiratorial as they shared the latest gossip.

Rosalind strained to catch the threads of conversation, her heart sinking as she heard Alex's name repeated in hushed tones, accompanied by words like "indiscretions" and "scandal." She glanced at Alex, saw the tightening of his jaw and the flash of anger in

his eyes, and knew that the rumours had reached his ears as well.

Strangely, a stab of anger, a sort of protectiveness that she had hitherto only felt for her sisters lanced through Rosalind. She could feel her temper rising, and she turned scathing eyes on those who gossiped. Alex, catching the way that she whipped her head around to glare at someone who said his name, touched her arm gently.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"They have no right," she hissed, not bothering to hide her irritation. "Who do they think they are?"

Though clearly still annoyed, Alex exhaled a laugh. Rosalind glanced up at him, and was somewhat mollified to find that he was not as upset as he had been. "Your loyalty is...surprisingly touching." His expression faded, a frown replacing it. "Would you excuse me? I must attend to something."

And with that, he departed without waiting for a reply, his eyes fixed on something across the room. Rosalind, feeling strangely alone, was left like a stone in the middle of a river as the gossip continued to swirl about her.

### Chapter 12

Rosalind stood amidst the crowded exhibition hall, her senses assaulted by the hushed whispers and furtive glances of the gossiping ton. The once joyous atmosphere, filled with admiration for Isabella's stunning artwork, had taken on a sinister edge, the air heavy with the weight of scandal and rumour. She strained to catch snippets of their poisonous words, her heart sinking with each passing moment. Whispers of Alex's alleged indiscretions and secret rendezvous swirled through the room like a noxious fog, threatening to suffocate the very joy and accomplishment of the evening.

"I heard he's been carrying on with a married woman," one lady murmured behind her fan, her eyes glinting with a malicious delight. "The poor Duke, caught in such a sordid affair."

"And to think, he's here with that Harrington girl," another responded, her voice dripping with disdain. "I wonder if she knows the truth about the man she's been trying to net."

Rosalind's cheeks burned with indignation, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. How dare they spread such vicious lies about Alex, a man of honour and integrity? She whipped her head around to glare at the gossiping duo, her eyes burning. They were a matched pair, both of them powdered and rouged in the manner of the last century. One lifted a lorgnette to inspect Rosalind, and upon realising that Rosalind was staring right back at her, sniffed and turned her face away, her nose in the air.

It's petty gossip, the same as every season, fuelled by the jealousy and resentment of

those who seek to tear others down to puff themselves up, Rosalind consoled herself. She had never been one to be cowed by society matrons, and she refused to give them the satisfaction now of thinking that they had succeeded in getting under her skin. Undaunted, she tossed her head proudly and sauntered to the table with punch and lemonade arranged in cut crystal cups as if there was nothing else on her mind but simple refreshment.

Yet, even as she silently fumed, Rosalind could feel the weight of their stares upon her, the smug expressions and knowing looks that followed her every move. She felt like all were staring at her, her every action and reaction scrutinised and judged by the merciless eyes of the ton.

She felt a rising tide of panic within her, a desperate need to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the exhibition hall. Her gaze sought out Alex, longing for the comfort and reassurance of his presence, but he was nowhere to be found, lost amidst the throng of gossiping aristocrats. She knew that she could not stand idly by and allow the poison of the ton to destroy their budding relationship, to tarnish the reputation of a man who had shown her nothing but kindness and respect.

With a deep breath, Rosalind squared her shoulders, her chin lifting in a show of defiance. Glancing across the room, she saw Isabella basking in the praise of her artwork, a radiant smile lighting up her features. Lord Tyrrell stood by her side, his eyes alight with admiration as he spoke animatedly about her paintings.

Isabella's cheeks flushed with a mixture of pride and bashfulness, her eyes sparkling as she listened intently to his words. Lord Harrington, who had viewed the whole enterprise with suspicion at best, stood just behind her, basking in the praise as if he himself had been the one to paint the pictures.

Nearby, Amelia was engaged in a hushed conversation with a young woman, who discreetly passed her a folded note, undoubtedly from Thomas. Rosalind watched as



Amelia's hand trembled slightly as she accepted the letter, her eyes darting around the room to ensure that no one had noticed the exchange. A flicker of hope and longing danced across Amelia's face as she tucked the note into her beaded reticule, a secret treasure to be savoured in a moment of solitude.

The sight of her sisters' happiness momentarily eased Rosalind's troubled mind, reminding her of the sacrifices she was willing to make to protect them. She knew that her decision to accept Alex's courtship had not been made lightly and that she had weighed the consequences and the potential impact on her own heart and future. But as she watched Isabella and Amelia, their faces alight with joy and the prospect of love, Rosalind knew that she would endure a thousand scandals and face a million whispers to ensure their happiness. They were her sisters, her blood, the very beat of her heart, and she would move heaven and earth to shield them from the cruelties of the world.

Rosalind's resolve strengthened as she stood amidst the gossiping throng, her head held high and her spirit unbroken. She would not let the vicious rumours and malicious whispers of the ton tear apart the fragile threads of happiness that she and her sisters had fought so hard to weave.

Rosalind had ever been a woman of action, not one to simply stand by and let things happen to her. To be so trapped by the wagging tongues about her now was abhorrent to her, but she had no idea how to proceed. For all of her knowledge, she was ill-practised at manipulating the ton to her whims.

"I heard he's been seen in the company of a notorious courtesan," one woman murmured, her eyes glinting with a wicked delight. "Apparently, she's been his mistress for months, right under the nose of polite society."

"Well, it's hardly surprising, is it? We all know what the brother's like, after all," another replied, her voice dripping with disdain. "Poor thing, she has no idea what

she's getting herself into."

"That's not even the worst of it," the first said, her face flushed with malicious glee. "I've heard that she's French," she said with relish.

"Oh, how unseemly," the second tutted. She put a handkerchief to her nose as if the very idea had produced a noxious odour. "It's one thing to be a rake, but an unpatriotic rake, that takes the biscuit."

Unable to help herself, Rosalind sidled up closer to them. "That's not even the worst of it," she said, staring directly into their faces. "I've heard that he's hiding a pair of horns beneath that rather fabulous head of hair," she said. "The doctor said they were brought on by indulging in too much gossip." She punctuated this with a sickeningly sugary smile, staring at each of the ladies in turn until they excused themselves, faces red.

"Harpies," Rosalind muttered. She knew realistically that she could not address each and every gossip, but it was a tempting prospect. In the hopes of avoiding further upset, she retreated further into the house, near the sitting room that had been designated as the gentlemen's smoking retreat. Not even here was safe, however, for Rosalind overheard a group of gentlemen, their voices low and conspiratorial.

"They say he's been gambling away his fortune at the gaming hells," one man whispered, his brow furrowed with disapproval. "Apparently, he's in debt up to his ears and is only courting the Harrington girl for her dowry."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he's planning to abandon her at the altar," another chimed in, his tone laced with a cruel amusement. "After all, what use does a man like him have for a wife when he has his pick of London's most beautiful mistresses? Mark my words, she'll be packed off to the countryside and never seen or heard from again."

Rosalind's heart clenched at the words, a sickening feeling settling in the pit of her stomach. She didn't want to believe the lies they were spreading, the vicious rumours that painted Alex as a man without honour or integrity. Yet, Rosalind couldn't help but wonder if there was any truth to these rumours.

It wasn't as if the notion of a husband stealing his wife's fortune and leaving her in some reclusive house was unheard of, after all. Countless stories abounded of men shipping their wives off to convents or asylums once their usefulness had come to an end.

Though the rooms were large and spacious, Rosalind felt the walls closing in, the air growing stifling as the rumours swirled around her, threatening to consume her. The once grand and elegant exhibition hall now felt like a cage, trapping her within its confines and subjecting her to the merciless scrutiny of the ton.

Rosalind's feet carried her swiftly through the exhibition hall, her silk gown rustling as she wove her way through the crowd. She kept her gaze fixed ahead, refusing to meet the eyes of those who sought to draw her into their web of scandal and deceit.

With each step, the need for escape grew stronger, the desire to break free from the confines of the hall and the suffocating weight of the rumours. The room was too warm, too loud, and Rosalind's heart beat wildly in her chest.

By the time she reached the front doors, thrown open wide to welcome in the guests, she was nearly running. She could feel the eyes of the ton upon her, their gazes heavy with anticipation and cruel delight, eager to witness her downfall. Some part of her knew that she was giving them exactly what they wanted, creating a scene that would be taken as confirmation of the rumours.

Rosalind refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing her crumble. With a deep breath and a silent prayer for strength, she slipped out into the cooler London night

air. Carriages continued to pull up and disgorge guests, fur and diamonds on parade. Her stomach flipped at the idea of further socialising, so silent as a shadow, Rosalind clung to the shadows and made her way to the back of the house.

Thankfully, the gate to the garden was unlocked and untended, and Rosalind stepped through with only a slight groan of the iron hinges to give her away. The cool night air washed over her like a soothing balm. She took a deep, steadying breath, her hands trembling as she grappled with the conflicting emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. The weight of the whispers and stares from the ton still clung to her like a heavy shroud, the echoes of their malicious gossip ringing in her ears.

She walked deeper into the gardens, seeking solace in the darkness and solitude. The further she ventured, the more the lights and sounds of the exhibition faded away, replaced by the gentle rustling of leaves and the soft chirping of crickets. Rosalind welcomed the embrace of the shadows, finding comfort in the anonymity they provided. Unusually, Lord Tyrrell's grand house boasted quite a sizable garden, a rare luxury in London.

It was like an oasis of peace and quiet. Unsurprisingly, however, it was packed with statues and fountains, all of them lovely to behold. The marble gleamed brightly in the moonlight, and even in her unsettled state, Rosalind had to admire them.

As she wandered along the winding paths, her mind raced with thoughts of Alex and the rumours that seemed to follow in his wake. She wanted to believe that all of them were lies. The seeds of doubt had been planted, though. Now, she couldn't shake the nagging feeling of uncertainty that gnawed at her heart.

Rosalind found herself in a secluded corner of the gardens, far from the prying eyes and wagging tongues of the ton. She leaned against a stone bench, her fingers gripping the cool surface through her thin silk gloves as she tried to steady her breathing and calm her racing thoughts.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps approaching from behind shattered the tranquillity of the moment. Rosalind's heart leapt into her throat, her body tensing as she whirled around to face the intruder. In the darkness, she could barely make out the silhouette of a figure drawing nearer, their features obscured by the shadows.

### Chapter 13

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Alex's heart clenched as he watched Rosalind flee the exhibition, her face a mask of distress and confusion. It wasn't difficult to imagine what had upset her. Alex couldn't help but mentally flog himself for not trusting her enough to warn her in advance. She had done nothing to make him believe that she would not continue to exercise the same fierce loyalty she had demonstrated, and now they were both paying the price.

Excusing himself from a conversation with a group of noblemen, Alex followed Rosalind's path out of the room, his steps quick and determined. He watched with some alarm as she stepped out into the night alone, with neither escort nor shawl.

He lost her for a moment in the gardens, his apprehension growing, worried that he had lost her. He rounded a bend, and there she was, beneath the gentle sway of a willow tree, gripping the back of a stone bench as if it were the only thing anchoring her to shore. The moonlight cast a soft glow upon her features, illuminating the tears that glistened on her cheeks, but her jaw was determinedly set. She looked up sharply at the sound of his boots on the paving stones, her eyes probing the darkness.

"Rosalind," he called out softly, his voice tinged with concern. "It's only me."

She visibly relaxed, her shoulders sagging as she recognised his familiar form. Alex closed the distance between them, his gaze locked on her tear-stained face. She returned his gaze for a moment, a surprisingly vulnerable softness on her face. Her expression changed suddenly, and she reached up and swiped angrily at her eyes with

her palm.

"I detest crying," she muttered, "especially in front of people."

"I beg your pardon, but surely I am not 'people'," he said, attempting levity. She responded with a watery, strangled laugh that tugged at his heart. "Rosalind," he said, softening. "Please, talk to me. Let me help you."

"I'm sorry," Rosalind whispered, her voice trembling. "I know that this is Isabella's night, but I couldn't bear to stay in there any longer, with all of...them." She gestured contemptuously back in the direction of the house. "The way they talk, it was just—it was too much."

Alex remained silent, unsure of how to comfort her. This was an unforeseen consequence of his plan: He'd only wanted to clear his own name, to turn the ton's attention to something else. It had never occurred to him that he might drag Rosalind down with him.

Rosalind turned to face him, her eyes searching his for the truth she so clearly needed. "Alex, I... I don't know what to believe anymore. The rumours, the whispers... It's a lot to bear. This isn't what I had imagined when I..." She trailed off, looking down and then away, her hands holding tightly to the bench again as if she wanted a shield between them.

"When you made your bold proposal?" he finished for her. With her face still turned away, she nodded.

Slowly, giving her every opportunity to move away, Alex carefully stepped closer. He took one of her gloved hands in his, lifting it from the bench. Alex's heart constricted as he watched Rosalind's face as she clearly waged some sort of internal debate. Her eyes, once filled with warmth and affection, were now muddled with

doubt and suspicion. Rosalind stared straight into his eyes, silently demanding answers he couldn't fully provide.

"Rosalind, please," Alex implored, his voice strained with desperation. "You must believe me when I say that these rumours are baseless. I would never betray your trust or our understanding."

Rosalind's lips trembled, her words laced with a bitter edge. "How can I believe you, Alex, when the evidence seems to mount against you? The whispers, the knowing glances... They all point to a truth I cannot ignore." Wordlessly, her hand slipped from his, the silk whispering between his fingers. He could feel her emotionally pulling away as well, and for the first time, he had a real sense of what that meant.

There was little doubt in his mind that once her affections were decided, Rosalind was the sort of woman who would love fully and without reservation. He had already glimpsed her fierce loyalty, and it was clear that if her trust were to ever be betrayed, it would be nigh impossible to regain.

Alex stepped forward, his hand reaching out to bridge the growing chasm between them, his fingers curling around her wrist. "I am a man of honour, Rosalind. My word is my bond. If I could explain the nature of these meetings, I would, but I am bound by a duty that goes beyond myself."

Rosalind flinched away from his touch, wrapping her arms tightly around herself as if to shield her heart from further pain. "Duty?" she scoffed, her voice raw with emotion. "Is that what you call sneaking around while all of London watches, attending clandestine meetings with unknown women?"

The accusation stung, piercing Alex's heart like a dagger. He closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his thoughts and tempering his own rising frustration. "Rosalind, I have never been anything but truthful with you. These meetings, while secretive, are



not what you think. They are matters of family honour, of protecting those I hold dear."

Rosalind's eyes glistened with unshed tears, her voice trembling as she spoke. "Family honour? What of the honour of the woman you've pledged yourself to? What of the trust we've built, the understanding we've forged? What of my reputation—have you any idea of the damage you are doing to me, to my own prospects?"

Alex's heart ached at the pain in her words, the realisation that his actions, though well-intentioned, had inadvertently wounded the woman he had grown to care for so deeply. "Rosalind, I..." he began, his voice faltering as he searched for the right words to attempt to smooth over the cracks that were appearing between them.

But Rosalind held up a hand, silencing him. "No, Alex. I cannot bear any more excuses or half-truths. If we are to proceed with this—this attachment, then you must be honest with me. Fully and completely. Surely I deserve nothing less."

Alex hesitated, caught between his own desires and his duty, balanced on a knife-point. He knew that he could not reveal the full extent of his investigations, the delicate balance of power and politics that hung in the balance. He also knew that he could not bear to lose Rosalind, to see the light in her eyes extinguished by doubt and mistrust.

"Rosalind," he said softly, his voice filled with a quiet intensity. "I am bound by oaths and obligations that I cannot break, but I swear to you, on my honour as a gentleman, that I have never betrayed your trust. These meetings, though shrouded in secrecy, are not what the rumours suggest."

Rosalind's gaze searched his, her eyes filled with a desperate need for reassurance, for a glimmer of the trust that had once flowed so easily between them. "Then tell me, Alex. Give me something to hold onto, a reason to believe in you despite the

whispers and the doubts."

The weight of his responsibilities warred with the yearning in his heart. He knew that he could not reveal the full truth, but he also knew that he could not let Rosalind slip away, lost to the shadows of misunderstanding and mistrust.

"The meetings," he began, his voice low and earnest, "are related to a matter of great importance to my family. A matter that, if brought to light, could have grave consequences for those I hold dear. I cannot divulge more, but I ask you to trust in the man you've come to know. As one who takes the well-being and happiness of your sister so seriously, I am sure that you can understand the importance of loyalty to family."

Rosalind's expression softened, a flicker of understanding dawning in her eyes. "Alex, I..." she whispered, her voice trailing off as she grappled with the conflicting emotions that swirled within her.

Alex closed the distance between them, his hands gently cradling her face as he looked deep into her eyes, greatly daring. Rosalind leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering closed as a single tear escaped down her cheek. "I want to trust you, Alex, I truly do, but the doubts, the fears... This is uncharted territory for me, and I don't know where to turn for safe harbour."

The depth of her vulnerability touched Alex in a way that he had never experienced before. Though still clouded by suspicion, he had glimpsed Rosalind's heart, and it was a beautiful, golden thing. She had not pulled away from him, and the feeling of her porcelain face in his hands was worth all of the hardship they had endured through the evening.

Suddenly, the sound of the garden gate clanging open echoed across the garden. He heard approaching voices, the distant chatter growing louder with each passing

second. He knew that they couldn't be found like this, alone and unchaperoned in a dark garden at night. The scandal that would ensue, the damage to Rosalind's reputation, was a risk he couldn't bear to take.

With a heavy heart, Alex pulled away from Rosalind, his hands dropping from her face as he took a step back. Rosalind glanced behind him, a flicker of understanding mingled with frustration in her eyes. She smoothed her gown and patted her hair, composing herself as best she could, even as the turmoil of their unfinished conversation lingered in the air between them.

"There's a door on the west side of the house," Alex whispered urgently. "You can slip inside that way, and no one will see you. I'll stay here and ensure you aren't discovered."

"We will continue this discussion later," she said tenderly, a slight crack in her voice the only sign of the turmoil within her. "I need answers, Alex. I need to know that I can trust you, fully and completely."

"I promise you, Rosalind," he said, his voice low and fervent. "We will find a way to talk, to lay bare the truth between us, but for now, we must play our parts, maintain the illusion of propriety."

With a final, lingering glance, Alex turned and strode away, his footsteps echoing on the smooth stones as he emerged from the shadows. He forced a smile onto his face, greeting the passing guests with a nod and a charming word, even as his heart ached with the weight of the unresolved conflict with Rosalind. He hated that she was venturing alone back into the proverbial lions' den, hated that she had been dragged into the muck that was being thrown at him. Whatever his motivations had been before, his sense of duty and his concern for his brother, the weight of his duty to Rosalind began to weigh just as heavily on his conscience.

Carefully, deliberately, they avoided each other for the rest of the evening. Rosalind remained in the company of her sisters, who had formed a sort of protective barrier around her. Though he had initially dismissed the other Harrington sisters as weaker than Rosalind, with the way that they effortlessly shielded Rosalind from the rest of the ton, Alex would not want to be the one to attempt to penetrate such formidable defences. Only once did their eyes meet across the room, and Rosalind's gaze was full of unresolved turmoil.

### Chapter 14

Rosalind restlessly paced about her room, her heart still heavy with the weight of her confrontation with Alex. From her window, to the mantle of her little fireplace, to the door of her dressing room, back to her bed, over and over again she walked. With each lap, she replayed the scene in the garden in her mind, wondering what would have happened if she had only said this, or done that. Her mind's eye focused on Alex, his words echoed in her thoughts, the pain and frustration in his voice still raw and palpable.

She paused at her window, pushing the gauzy drapery aside to look outside. Her sisters had wanted their rooms to have better views—Amelia's windows faced the street outside their home, Isabella's looked over the garden and skyline beyond. However, Rosalind didn't care about aesthetics or being able to watch the comings and goings of the neighbourhood. Her window looked out over the stables, which admittedly was hardly a view worthy of much consideration. Still, they represented the possibility of freedom.

Gently, Rosalind let her head rest against the window pane and sighed, fogging the window a little. Part of her was sorely tempted to sneak down to the stables again, to mount up her horse and set off across London. She was unsure if she meant to demand another midnight audience with Alex again, though that did seem a reliable hour to get the truth from him, or if she would simply gallop off into the night in a flurry of hooves, never to be seen again. It was an appealing thought, to just leave everything behind.

Perhaps I should just go to Italy, she thought wistfully, reaching up to draw a lop-

sided circle in the fog on the window. I could become an artist's model, or maybe a governess . She sighed again, obscuring the view to the stables further.

She knew there was no way she could leave her sisters, no matter her misery. Whatever her hardships were, she was still determined to do right by them. If she were being honest with herself, as honest as she wished Alex was being, then she also stayed because her traitorous heart stayed anchored to Alex. Despite the strain between them, Rosalind couldn't deny the depth of her feelings for Alex. The connection they had forged, the moments of vulnerability and understanding they had shared, had left an indelible mark on her soul.

Like a caged tiger, Rosalind turned away from the window, her light pacing making the boards of her floor squeak. Irritated and full of unresolved sentiments, she alternated between clenching her fists and folding her arms. Her body felt too small to contain her troubled mind and heart. Her light cotton nightgown felt like a gossamer shroud about her as she walked and fretted.

A light scratching at her door interrupted her. She pressed closer to her door, listening. "Open up, Rosalind," Amelia said from the other side, her voice low and muffled.

"We can hear you pacing," Isabella added.

Rosalind sighed but smiled all the same as she opened the door, admitting her sisters. Without preamble, they entered the room and took Rosalind by the hands, pulling her over to her bed, where she followed reluctantly. She allowed herself to be seated onto her bed, with her sisters climbing in and sitting opposite her, their legs folded up beneath the bedpane. This was their habit from when they were very young, to sit like this and have private conference.

It was also their habit to nick some biscuits or some other sweetmeats from the

kitchen. Rosalind was pleased to find that Amelia bore a tray of whipped lemon custard tarts. Cook would surely be in a state over the loss in the morning, but it seemed a price worth paying; Rosalind's restless body and mind had made her quite hungry, particularly as she hadn't been able to choke down any of the morsels at the exhibition.

"Now," Amelia said once they had all availed themselves of the treats, "would you kindly tell us what has chased you from your bed?"

Rosalind hesitated. She hadn't yet told her sisters of her audacious proposal to the Duke, hoping to spare them any further worry. She stared down at her hands, the pastry crust crumbs pooled between them on her quilt. The silence in her room stretched, and she could feel their expectant eyes on her.

"Shall we tell you what we have seen over the past few weeks?" Amelia continued. "Father says one of us must marry the Duke, and we are all troubled by this for one reason or another. I will own that it seemed I was the most likely candidate, but for some strange reason, the Duke suddenly had shifted all of his attentions to you. Don't mistake me, I am grateful to be overlooked, but it seemed strange all the same, given that you made your contempt for the situation well-known. Still, all seemed well enough, and you were happy to be in each other's company."

"Quite happy," Isabella added.

"Until tonight, that is. Why don't you, in your own good time, tell us what exactly has been afoot?" Amelia finished.

Rosalind bit her lip, not trusting herself to look her sisters in the eye. "Please, pay me no mind," she said, forcing herself to be light. "I am fine—well enough—and I'm only sorry if I distracted from your great night, Isabella."

Isabella made a dismissive sound through her nose. "I'm not worried on that score," she said with far more confidence than Rosalind had ever heard her speak with. "Lord Tyrrell assures me that I shall have many more in the future, should I so wish."

Pleased in spite of her own misery, Rosalind reached forward and pressed Isabella's hand, glad for her. This turned out to be a mistake, for Isabella cleverly caught Rosalind's hand, holding it tightly in her own. She dipped her head down, trying to catch Rosalind's eye.

This was all that it took to break the dam of Rosalind's resolve. Her voice was low and urgent as she confided in her sisters, the words tumbling from her lips in a rush of emotion. "Amelia, Isabella, I...I have done something I fear you will disapprove of," she began. Slowly, she unwound the tale, from her daring midnight proposal to her first outing into society with the Duke. As she spoke, her sisters' faces reflected their emotions, with Amelia reaching out to clasp Rosalind's hand too.

"You said that you proposed a marriage of convenience, an honest one," Isabella said, her pretty forehead wrinkling a little as she thought. "But you seemed so..."

"Well-suited," Amelia finished.

Rosalind sighed, withdrawing her hands to wrap her arms about herself again. "No one told me that love can make one into such a fool," she grouched.

Amelia and Isabella exchanged a glance. "Well, we could have told you that," Amelia said, smiling a little ruefully.

"Love?" Isabella repeated, her eyes widening.

"Did I say love?" Rosalind said, her brow furrowing. "Oh, blast it all, I did," she said, flopping back onto her pillows, pressing her hands against her eyes.



"The Duke seemed so charming and genteel when we walked in the park," Amelia said with some vinegar in her voice. "And now at the first test of feeling, he withdraws."

"This is my fear," Rosalind agreed, her voice a little muffled as she scrubbed at her face. "Did he simply wind me in with his smooth words? Did he pretend to be so interested in me as a person for...I don't know, some game? His pride? Oh, I really have been a fool."

"No," Amelia said, grabbing Rosalind's wrists and pulling her hands away from her face. Rosalind was surprised to see such ferocity in Amelia's eyes, her normally placid sister moved on her behalf. "He has been a cad. You laid out the terms of your proposal, and asked only for the same honesty that you gave to him, and which he refused. That is most definitely not on."

"It really isn't," Isabella murmured in agreement. "To let you walk out into the ton like that, so unprepared..."

"It's not as if I can refuse to see him now," Rosalind said. "We're already all on precarious footing after Isabella's exhibition; the only reason he agreed to it is because he thought I would be marrying the Duke, thus saving us all from ruin and reputation."

Amelia's eyes filled with compassion and understanding as she listened intently to Rosalind's words. She drew her sister into a warm embrace, her touch a silent reassurance of her unwavering support. "Oh, Rosalind," she murmured, her voice tender and soothing. "I can only imagine the weight you carry on your shoulders, but know that we are here for you, always."

Isabella, too, reached out to embrace Rosalind, nestling into them. "Rosalind, you are the strongest and most resilient person I know," she said, her voice filled with

conviction. "You have sacrificed so much for us, and we will stand by you, no matter what comes."

Rosalind drew strength from her sisters' unwavering love and support, their presence a beacon of light amidst the darkness that threatened to engulf her. She took a deep, steadying breath, the warmth of their hands in hers anchoring her to the present moment.

"I just fear that I might have imagined it all, that it was all just girlish hopes," Rosalind confessed.

Isabella pulled back, sitting on her legs and tilting her head thoughtfully. "I'm not so sure," she said, tapping her chin with her finger. "I saw you two together when you took me to see Miss Sharples—the way the Duke looked at you, there was something in his eyes," she said softly, her gaze filled with understanding. "He hardly looked at the art, as if he couldn't bear to take his gaze from you for a single moment."

Rosalind listened intently to her sister's words, her heart stirring with a flicker of hope. Isabella's observations, born from a place of love and insight, struck a chord within her, resonating with the very essence of her own feelings for Alex.

"I know it's not easy to trust, especially in the face of such adversity," Isabella continued, her voice filled with compassion. "But he might still prove himself. Surely you can still give him the chance to do so."

Rosalind considered her sister's words. She knew that the path forward would not be easy, that there would be challenges and obstacles to overcome. Even so, the thought of losing Alex, of letting the connection they had forged slip away, was a prospect far more daunting than facing the rumours and scandals head-on. She doubted she would ever find someone with whom she could forge such a relationship, who would ask her about more than her embroidery and her frock.

"The next few days will settle the matter one way or the other," Amelia said. She fixed Rosalind in her gaze again, her face grave. "Whatever happens, promise us that you won't try to carry such a thing all on your own again. I mean it, Rosalind—we're your sisters, and we're with you, no matter what comes."

"We're stronger than you think," Isabella added. "We can help you shoulder this burden."

Rosalind smiled and took their hands again in silent promise. Whatever the next few days would bring, Rosalind felt all the better because she knew that she wouldn't have to face it alone.

### Chapter 15

Rosalind couldn't be sure what time she finally fell asleep, but she knew that it was not early enough for a restful night. She awoke the next morning, bleary-eyed and achy of head. As her maid arrived to help her dress for breakfast (Lord Harrington insisted that everyone dress for breakfast, no tea gowns or wrappers permitted), Rosalind winced every time a cabinet door or drawer was roughly closed. As the maid wound Rosalind's hair up into a simple bun at the back of her head, Rosalind stared longingly at her bed. She winced when about a hundred (or so it seemed) pins were jammed into her sensitive scalp.

Like an automaton, she made her way to the dining room, taking her place at the table. Without enthusiasm, she helped herself to some slices of cold ham and buns with currants. Her father, at his customary place at the head of the table, was using the opportunity to deliver a homily to the girls about the importance of marriage and their place in it. Listlessly, Rosalind only half-listened, pushing her food about her plate.

"...And of course, no one wants to marry a young lady that is induced to mindless chatter," he intoned. "Which, I am glad to see that you all have taken to heart."

Blankly, Rosalind looked across the table to Amelia, whose nostrils flared in amusement. Next to her, Rosalind could see Isabella clasp her hands under the table and look down at her lap. They all knew that Lord Harrington actually meant Rosalind, as Amelia had always been congenially serene, and Isabella generally kept to herself. Little did Lord Harrington know that Rosalind's unusual reticence was more to do with fatigue than duty, but no one seemed inclined to enlighten him to this

fact.

"I trust you are paying attention, Rosalind," Lord Harrington responded.

"Yes, Father," Rosalind replied automatically, turning a smile vaguely in his direction.

A footman slipped into the dining room bearing a small silver tray. Rosalind could feel her father still watching her warily, clearly not trusting this newfound meekness. He lifted a card from the tray, turning it over in his hands. Even from her place down the table, Rosalind caught the glint of gold embossing on it. Her father stared at it for a moment, and then a triumphant smile spread across his face.

"Well," he said, "it seems that Rosalind has been paid a most generous compliment: The Duke of Somerton has requested the company of 'the charming Lady Rosalind Harrington and the rest of her family' at the Duke's salon tomorrow. Well, I confess that I had been worried that you would drive away the Duke with your overly modern ideas. I'm pleased to see, though, that is not the case."

Rosalind simply stared at her father for a moment, not fully understanding what she had heard. "The Duke has invited me to attend a salon?" she repeated slowly. Automatically, she glanced across the table to Amelia, who inclined her head contemplatively. Underneath the table, Isabella reached over and took Rosalind's hand. "May I see the card?" she asked, and Lord Harrington passed it down.

Rosalind stared down at the handwriting, the quick, confident shapes of the letters. She couldn't explain why, but she knew for a fact that Alex had written it himself—the letters weren't even or neat enough to be done by his secretary. She fancied that there was a significant kind of weight to his pen-marks where he wrote her name. Unable to help herself, she swiped her thumb across the writing, trying not to inexplicably smile.

"It's kind of him to include all of you in the invitation too," Rosalind said, still staring down at the card. "It will be all the more enjoyable for having you there with me." I can't do this without you, is what she really meant. Isabella squeezed her hand again as if she had understood Rosalind completely.

In spite of this reassurance, and knowing that she would be fortified by her sisters' presence, Rosalind had a kind of gnawing anxiety in her stomach. She didn't know what tomorrow would bring, and the possibilities made her equal parts nervous and excited.

The Duke of Somerton was known for his quality salons, a tradition begun by his grandmother and carried on by him. They always had the best musicians, the most brilliant philosophers and writers. Rosalind had longed to attend one ever since her debut at sixteen simply because of the breadth of talent always on offer there.

If nothing else, I shall spend an afternoon in the company of some of Europe's best minds, she thought. Should the worst happen, then that will be my consolation prize.

It was not much of a comfort to her raw and aching heart.

The day was exceptionally fine, and it seemed as if the whole city were in bloom. The Duke's townhouse was framed by two cherry trees, which rained down delicate pink petals on the guests as they arrived. Rosalind had allowed her maid and her sisters to dress her and generally fuss over her. Although she was not ordinarily a vain woman, Rosalind was certain that she formed an exceptional picture as she walked slowly beneath the pink canopy to the open doors of the Duke's house.

Her red hair had been twisted up carefully but made to appear as if it might tumble down at a moment's notice. Green ribbon had been threaded through with delicate curls framing her face. Her dress was a white muslin with green vines embroidered on it, with a green and gold ribbon about the waist. The scent of almonds and vanilla

followed her wherever she went, a gift from the scented pomatum that helped hold her hair in place. It had taken hours to get her ready to her sisters' satisfaction, which Rosalind hadn't been fully convinced was strictly necessary.

It proved entirely worth it, however, when the Duke, catching sight of them and coming out to greet them, laid eyes on Rosalind. He stopped in his tracks, handsome as ever in his dark green jacket and buff breeches. His dark eyes lit on Rosalind and seemed to go molten as he stared at her.

Rosalind had never had a man look at her in this way. It made her feel warm and a little weak at the knees from the frank admiration, but also powerful. She blushed and ducked her head like a good young lady, but at such an angle to show her neck to advantage. He watched the movement with interest before seeming to remember himself and smiling warmly.

"Lord Harrington, ladies," he said, as bows and curtseys were exchanged, "I am glad that you are all here." He said these last words with his eyes fixed on Rosalind. He ushered them inward, pointing out a few of Lord Harrington's friends.

The guests were the toniest of the ton, with enough titles and peerages between them all to make up the lion's share of a copy of Burke's. Guests were free to come and go as they pleased, with a fragrant punch, coffee, tea, and wine on offer, as well as tables piled high with any number of delicacies to tempt the appetite. There was even a sugar sculpture of the Parthenon, with bits of gold leaf brushed onto it. The doors and windows were thrown open to the spring air, which wafted through the rooms pleasantly, carrying music and conversation from room to room.

Rosalind had assumed, perhaps naively, that since they were guests in the Duke's home that they might all be inclined to...well, perhaps if not kindness, then perhaps less unkindness. No one was overtly rude, and the gossips tended to ply their trade more discreetly.

Rosalind didn't overhear anything this time, but there was a strange kind of humming that seemed to follow her everywhere she went. Curious eyes watched her from every corner of the room. She refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing her distressed again, so she tossed her head as grandly as an empress and glided about as if she had not a care in the world.

It helped tremendously that her sisters remained steadfastly by her side, an elegant bulwark against the wagging tongues. Rosalind had hoped to be able to converse with the Duke, as she still felt entitled to answers. At one point, she saw him from across a parlour in which an earnest young man was reading from his treatise on economics. All eyes were turned to the front of the room, except for his.

Rosalind met his gaze and felt as if the air in her lungs was suddenly not enough. She exhaled sharply through her nose, and then breathed in. All through this, Alex's face remained unreadable while he studied her, as if he were seeing her for the first time.

When the speaker had finished, polite applause swept across the room. In the noise, Rosalind saw Alex slip away, stepping backward through a doorway deftly. Excusing herself from her sisters' company with a murmured apology, Rosalind slipped away from the bustling room. Her steps quickening as she ventured into the house's corridors in search of Alex. The hallways stretched before her, their walls adorned with elegant wallcoverings and paintings that whispered of the Duke's rich family history.

As Rosalind navigated the winding passages, her footsteps echoed against the polished marble floors, the sound mingling with the distant hum of conversation and music from the salon. Though furnished in the height of modern elegance and taste, the house had been built in the century before, with the rooms all connected by doors. It was disorienting, and Rosalind had the sensation of stepping further into a maze.

Rosalind's eyes scanned every doorway and alcove, hoping to catch a glimpse of



Alex's familiar figure. She paused at intersections, straining her ears for any sound that might indicate his presence. The corridors, though, remained eerily silent, save for the soft rustling of her dress and the pounding of her own heart.

As she turned a corner, Rosalind found herself standing before a pair of heavy wooden doors. The dark wood was polished to a high shine, but still showed the scars of decades of use. The handles were heavy iron, a relic of a time long gone. There was little doubt that these led to a decidedly masculine space, probably Alex's study or withdrawing room.

This is probably where he sits and works, where he writes, Rosalind thought with a start. It was undoubtedly not a space where the guests were welcome, so far within the house; it was private, something that was his alone. This sent a thrill up Rosalind's spine. She knew she shouldn't, it went against everything about good manners and good taste, but the notion of being able to find answers, to know him just a little better pulled at her. She hesitated, one hand reaching out to touch the iron door handle.

Rosalind, no , she chided herself. When has anything good ever come from snooping in such a manner?

She dropped her hand and was prepared to turn around and go back the way she came when there was a sound from within the room. Rosalind instantly whirled back around, pressing her ear against the door. She strained with her ear, willing herself to hear. The unmistakable sound of a man's voice floated through the thick wood, impossible to understand but familiar in its pitch and timbre—it sounded like Alex's! Another voice answered, a light and breathy laugh, undoubtedly feminine.

That settled it. With a deep breath, Rosalind grasped the handle and turned it, the door swinging open with a soft creak. She peered inside, her eyes adjusting to the dimly lit room, the heavy curtains drawn firmly against the sunshine. Her heart was

pounding, angrily certain that she was about to find the answer to all the riddles, certain that she would find some trollop in Alex's arms. However, the sight that greeted her stopped her in her tracks, her eyes widening in shock and disbelief as she struggled to comprehend the scene before her.

There, in the softly lit room, Rosalind beheld a man who looked very much like Alex, slimmer and lighter but familiar all the same, locked in an amorous embrace with an unknown woman. Their bodies were entwined, hands grasping at each other with a fervour that spoke of a passionate moment stolen away from the watchful gaze of society. The air crackled with the intensity of their forbidden desire, a stark contrast to the propriety and decorum expected of their stations.

Rosalind stood frozen, her breath caught in her throat as she tried to process the implications of what she had stumbled upon. Her mind reeled, a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions battling for dominance within her.

### Chapter 16

Well, dash my wig, Rosalind thought as realisation dawned. That can only be Alex's brother!

The woman looked familiar to Rosalind, but as her face was largely obscured, it was impossible to tell. As Rosalind stood there, her presence still unnoticed by the entwined lovers, a wave of conflicting emotions washed over her. Shock gave way to a sense of betrayal, a bitter taste in her mouth as she realised the depths of deception that had been hidden from her. The trust she had placed in Alex, the growing connection between them, now felt tainted by the shadow of his brother's actions.

Yet, amidst the turmoil of her thoughts, a flicker of understanding began to take root in Rosalind's heart. She recalled the whispers and rumours that had plagued Alex, the accusations of impropriety that had driven him to seek a suitable bride. It was easy to give a family plagued by scandal a fresh veneer with a respectable marriage. Rosalind could feel her lip curling in distaste, feeling well and truly used.

It was unclear what gave her presence away, but suddenly the pair were staring at Rosalind, who could only stare back. The lovers leapt apart, with the man attempting to shield the woman from view.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, aristocratically running his fingers through his hair and adjusting the lay of his jacket. His cravat was pulled helplessly askew, his collar rumpled beyond repair by their eager embracing.

Rosalind could only stare—it was simply too strange for words, the way that this man

looked so much like Alex. There was a certain leanness to his face that Alex did not have, and Alex's hair tended more towards waves, but the likeness was still striking. Her mind raced at the possibilities, the implications.

"Well?" the man demanded, taking a step closer.

Before Rosalind could react, the sound of footsteps echoed behind her. The door was flung open as if it weighed nothing, and there was Alex, filling the doorway. "Rosalind?" he asked, his eyebrows shooting up. "What's going on?" His eyes flicked between her and the other occupants of the room. His expression fell. "Richard," he said flatly.

Rosalind's gaze darted between Alex and the entwined lovers, her emotions boiling over. There was no doubt now that Alex knew the man, as if the clearly familial resemblance wasn't confirmation enough. She fixed Alex with a piercing stare, her voice ringing with a mix of anger and hurt.

"It seems that your family has a habit of harbouring secret affairs and scandalous behaviour," Rosalind accused, her words dripping with bitterness.

"Rosalind—" Alex began, but Rosalind tossed her head, her eyes flashing. Rosalind's trust had been shaken to its core. The weight of the rumours and whispers that had plagued Alex now took on a new meaning, casting a shadow of doubt over everything she had come to believe about him.

"Rosalind?" Richard repeated, blinking at both of them. His face softened a little.

"How can I trust you, Alex?" Rosalind demanded, her voice rising with each word. "How can I be sure that you're not involved in similar scandals yourself? That this isn't just another layer of deception in a family that seems to thrive on secrets and lies?"

Alex took a step towards her, his hand outstretched in a gesture of pleading. "Rosalind, please, let me explain. This isn't what it looks like. I had no part in this."

Rosalind shook her head, her eyes brimming with unshed tears, hot with anger. The betrayal cut deep. She couldn't bear to look at him, couldn't stomach the thought of being caught in the middle of a scandal that threatened to unravel everything she held dear.

"I can't do this, Alex," Rosalind whispered, her voice barely audible above the pounding of her own heart. "I can't be a part of this. I won't let myself be dragged into the mire of your family's secrets and indiscretions." She swallowed hard, squaring her shoulders. "I have my sisters to think of, after all," she said more firmly.

Rosalind shifted backward as Richard disentangled himself from the woman's embrace. His paramour turned away, keeping her face obscured. Richard's face was a mask of guilt and desperation. He took a step towards her, his hands outstretched in a pleading gesture, his words tumbling out in a rush.

"Lady Rosalind, please, you must understand," Richard implored, his voice hoarse with emotion. "The rumours that have plagued my brother, the scandal that has cast a shadow over our family's reputation—it was all because of me, not Alex."

Rosalind's eyes widened, her breath catching in her throat as she struggled to process Richard's confession. She glanced at Alex, who stood frozen, his body tense.

Richard continued, his words spilling forth like a dam that had finally burst. "I have been the one involved in this illicit affair with Lady—"

A sharp clearing of the throat from the lady in question silenced Richard. He half-turned back to her, taking her gloved hand in his. "My own reckless actions, my own selfish desires, have brought shame upon our family and threatened to destroy

everything we hold dear." He paused, then addressed the lady who kept her back to them. "It will be alright," he said with surprising gentleness. "We owe them our trust, surely."

The lady's shoulders fell a little, and she nodded. Slowly, she turned to face them, her face pale and eyes filled with fear. She stayed half-hidden behind Richard, using him as a shield.

"Lady Evelyn Banfield?" Rosalind blurted, looking from Alex to Richard in disbelief. Of course Rosalind knew her—Lady Evelyn had been a great beauty at her debut, her chestnut hair and large doe-like eyes winning her many admirers. She was still beautiful, but the low light in the library deepened the lines of her face, lines brushed onto her by worry and sadness. A kind of melancholy seemed to be swathed around her like a mantle.

"Please, Lady Rosalind, I beg of you, have mercy on us. If this secret were to be exposed, the consequences would be ruinous. My husband, the judge, would be merciless in his retribution." She clung to Richard's arm, her voice barely above a whisper as she spoke.

Rosalind's mind reeled, the weight of their confession pressing down upon her. She grappled with the realisation that the man she had come to care for, the man whose integrity she had questioned, was innocent of the very scandal that had brought them together. Blindly, she reached behind her for a chair, which Alex quickly scooted forward for her. She sank into it heavily, her mind whirling like a top.

Richard's voice grew more urgent, his eyes pleading as he met Rosalind's gaze. "I know I have no right to ask for your silence. I implore you, though, for the sake of my brother, for the sake of our family's honour, please keep this secret. Allow us to find a way to make amends, to right the wrongs we have committed."

Rosalind's heart twisted, torn between her own sense of morality and the weight of the consequences that would befall them all if the truth were to be revealed. She glanced at Alex once more, and found that he was watching her warily. He did not push or insist, which Rosalind appreciated in this moment.

Rosalind sat in the quiet room, her heart heavy with the weight of the secrets that had been revealed. Lady Evelyn, her eyes filled with a haunting sadness and a flicker of hope, stepped forward out of Richard's shadow. "Might I have a private audience, Lady Rosalind? I...I should like the chance to speak with you, one woman to another," she said, her voice soft.

After a moment's hesitation, Rosalind nodded. Alex, his jaw tight with barely controlled anger, took Richard by the arm and led him from the room. As the door closed behind the two men, Rosalind turned to face Lady Evelyn, her curiosity piqued by the woman's request. She gestured for Lady Evelyn to take a seat, her own nerves on edge as she waited for the woman to speak.

Lady Evelyn clasped and unclasped her hands by turns, her voice wavering with emotion as she began to speak, a haunting sadness laying heavily on her face. "I was very young when I married my husband, Judge Banfield. I had been the belle of that season—I suppose I am allowed to say it now, that I was a great beauty and all of the men wanted me." She exhaled a sad laugh. "Or so it seemed at the time. Judge Banfield was wealthy and charming, and I thought that I had made a good match." Lady Evelyn's face darkened. "All of that charm evaporated the moment we were married. I had come with a rather sizable dowry, you see, and it was very clear that was all that he wanted."

She paused, turning her face away again. Compulsively, Rosalind reached out and touched her hand. She could not help but feel for the woman; after all, it very easily could have been her, or one of her sisters—it still might. Lady Evelyn gave her a wan smile, took a deep breath, and continued.

"For all of his posturing, Judge Banfield is a profligate. He quickly gambled and drank away my dowry, and I refused to beg my father for more. I knew that it would be lost at the gaming tables, or poured right down his throat. I may as well have taken whatever money was given to us and tossed it into the sea for all the good it would do," she said bitterly. "When it became clear that I would be of no more help to him, that I refused to... Well, do things that no man should ask of a wife in order to get him more money, his cruelty knew no bounds from that time onward."

As she spoke, she unbuttoned her glove, fumbling a little with the small pearl buttons at her wrist. She peeled it down, not meeting Rosalind's eyes. Even in the relative gloom of the darkened library, Rosalind could see livid marks on Lady Evelyn's delicate forearm.

"There is no truth to the claim that it was once legal for a man to beat his wife with a stick so long as it was no thicker than his thumb, but that does not stop cruel men from doing so and claiming that they are within the letter of the law. And it wasn't just myself that suffered," she added. "My husband," she practically spat, "is not above using his position and influence to blackmail and extort whoever he can in order to get what he wants."

Rosalind stared intently, her mouth going dry. Her heart ached for the pain and suffering that Lady Evelyn had endured. She could see the toll that years of abuse and neglect had taken on the woman and the way her once vibrant spirit had been dimmed by the constant torment of her husband's actions. Yet, there was still a spark of something undiminished within her.

"I had decided that I had quite enough of being his plaything, something to torment and inflict upon. I may have been trapped into a marriage of the worst kind, but I refused to remain that way—you know that women do not have many options. I was at the bottom of a dark well, and there was only one way out. I couldn't endure another day, a single hour, with the pain."



Lady Evelyn closed her eyes, her voice stronger when they fluttered open again. "That was the day I met Richard. There I was, on the bridge over the Thames at midnight, my pockets full of stones, and there he was, full of light and laughter and gentleness..."

She looked down at her hands, a wistful smile playing about her lips. "I could not believe that someone could touch me with such tenderness, a stranger even. He made me laugh, even at that terrible moment: 'For the love of God, don't jump—the Thames smells foul this time of year! You won't be allowed a church burial simply for the smell!' Can you imagine?" Lady Evelyn chuckled, shaking her head.

"And...you've been lovers since then?" Rosalind asked softly.

Lady Evelyn looked up sharply at Rosalind, taking her aback. "Not just lovers," she said, her voice strong and clear, enunciating each word crisply. "He has been my lifeline, the only thing keeping me tethered to this mortal coil. Without him, I..." She shook her head again, and pulled her glove back up. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons again, trembling slightly.

Carefully, Rosalind reached over and helped her; a perfect parallel to the trust that Lady Evelyn had placed in her, the vulnerability that she had shown in sharing her deepest secrets and fears.

"I understand," Rosalind said softly, her voice filled with empathy and compassion. "I cannot begin to imagine the pain and suffering you have endured, the courage it must have taken to hold on for so long in the face of such cruelty."

Lady Evelyn stared at Rosalind as she buttoned her glove. Her lower lip quivered a little, her eyes brimming with tears. "I know that what Richard and I have done is wrong," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "But he has been my only source of comfort, the only person who has shown me kindness and respect in a world that has

treated me as nothing more than a burden to be born."

Rosalind's heart ached for the woman before her, for the impossible situation in which she found herself. She knew that the path forward would not be easy, that the consequences of their actions could be devastating if the truth were to be revealed. Even so, in that moment, as she looked into Lady Evelyn's eyes, Rosalind knew that she could not turn her back on the woman's suffering, on the desperate plea for help that shone in her gaze.

"We will find a way," Rosalind said, her voice filled with determination. "I cannot condone what has happened, but I also cannot ignore the pain and desperation that has driven you to this point. We will work together to find a solution, to help you escape the nightmare in which you have been trapped for so long."

Lady Evelyn's eyes widened, a flicker of hope sparking to life in their depths. "You would do that for me?" she asked, her voice trembling with emotion. "Even after all that has happened, all the trouble that Richard and I have caused?"

Rosalind nodded, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "I believe in the power of redemption," she said. "I believe that everyone deserves a chance to start anew, to build a life free from the chains of the past. And I believe that, together, we can find a way to make that happen."

"How?" Lady Evelyn demanded, catching Rosalind's wrists in her hands. "I cannot leave him—he would find me, I'd be dragged back."

With a determined set of her mouth, Rosalind scooted her chair closer, gently placing an arm about her shoulders, folding into her protective embrace. "You have only been one up till now," she said, "but now you shall be many. We will find a way."

Lady Evelyn's shoulders sagged with relief, a sob escaping her lips as she buried her

face in her hands. Rosalind held her shaking shoulders close as she wept, the weight of years of pain and suffering pouring out in a torrent of tears. It was as if a storm had been loosed within Lady Evelyn, everything that she had been holding back running wild all at once. When at last the tempest was spent, Rosalind stood and helped Lady Evelyn to her feet. They spent some moments adjusting their hair and the fall of their dresses. Together, they opened the library doors, stepping out into the light together.

Rosalind's heart raced as she walked beside Lady Evelyn. Rosalind's resolve only grew stronger with each passing moment. As they entered a sitting room, Rosalind's gaze swept across the crowd, searching for Alex amidst the sea of faces. She spotted him standing with Richard, looking at a red-headed woman playing the harp, but not really seeing her. Both of their faces still looked startlingly alike in full daylight, but Alex's was limned with a quiet anger, while Richard's was pale and wan.

Rosalind took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders as she approached the two men. Lady Evelyn kept her hand on Rosalind's elbow, clinging to her like a lifeline in a storm-tossed sea. As they drew near, Alex looked up, his eyes widening as he took in the sight of Rosalind and Lady Evelyn together. When he caught sight of Rosalind's face, of the determination that no doubt shone freely from it, his expression changed.

"Your Grace," Rosalind said, her voice steady and clear despite the pounding of her heart. "There is something you need to know, something that cannot wait a moment longer. If we might have a discreet word?" She flicked her gaze about them significantly, at the eager ears that were pretending to listen to the music, but were really just hungry for more gossip.

Alex's brow furrowed, his gaze darting between Rosalind and Lady Evelyn as he tried to make sense of the scene before him. "Of course," he said, his voice laced with concern. With an outstretched hand, he gestured for them to accompany him to the back garden, out of earshot of everyone but still within sight of the windows.

Rosalind took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving Alex's as she began to speak. She did not flinch or hesitate as she told him, in no uncertain terms, exactly what had befallen Lady Evelyn. As she spoke, Alex's face became paler and paler, his mouth pressing into a hard line, his hands clenching into fists.

When at last Rosalind fell silent, her voice hoarse with emotion, Alex turned to Richard, his eyes blazing with a fierce intensity. "Is this true?" he demanded, his voice low and dangerous. "Is what Rosalind says true, Richard?"

### Chapter 17

"I can't believe you kept all this information from me, Richard," Alex said, his voice tinged with a mix of frustration and disappointment. "How could you let things get so out of hand?"

Richard shrugged sadly. "It wasn't my secret to tell," he said gently, with a melancholy smile at Lady Evelyn. "I never meant for it to go this far, Alex. I was just trying to help Lady Evelyn, to give her a glimmer of hope in a life filled with misery."

Alex sighed, running a hand through his sun-warmed hair. "I understand your intentions, Richard, but your actions have put us all in a precarious position. We need to find a way to extricate Lady Evelyn from this situation without causing further scandal or harm."

He glanced over to the windows, fully aware that they were attracting an audience. His eyes shifted to Rosalind, and he frowned at the thought of causing her to be the centre of more unkind gossip. "Let's retire to my study," he said to Richard. "If you would be so kind as to excuse us, ladies," he added with a quick bow.

The brothers fell silent, each lost in their own thoughts as they retreated from the guests. He knew that he was being quite rude, ignoring them as he was, but at this moment, he had far greater concerns. Alex's mind raced with possibilities, weighing the risks and benefits of each course of action. He knew that they had to tread carefully, for any misstep could have disastrous consequences.

Once within the safe confines of the study, he began to pace. Richard fairly fell into a leather armchair, his head cradled in his hand. Alex couldn't help but feel a pang of pity for his younger brother; no matter how they had come to be in this situation, he still cared for Richard. As he paced, Alex's gaze fell upon a stack of legal documents on his desk. A flicker of an idea began to take shape in his mind, and he turned to Richard with renewed determination.

"We need to gather evidence of the judge's wrongdoings," Alex said, his voice low and intense. "If we can prove that he has been abusing his power and engaging in illegal activities, we may be able to use that information to secure Lady Evelyn's freedom."

"Parliament would never grant her a divorce," Richard said flatly, his forehead still in his hand.

"We don't need them to," Alex argued. "She simply needs to be away from him. If we had some kind of leverage, we might persuade him not to pursue her should she go, or even discredit him enough that no one would aid in his pursuit."

Richard sat up and nodded, his eyes widening with understanding. "And if we can expose his misdeeds, it could also help to clear our family's name and put an end to the rumours that have been circulating."

Alex nodded, a grim smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Precisely. But we must be discreet. We cannot afford to let anyone catch wind of our plans, lest we put Lady Evelyn or ourselves in even greater danger. Still," he said thoughtfully, "I believe we will need help, and I think I know just the brave soul to call upon."

The next day, Alex stood by the window of his study, his heart pounding with anticipation. He could only hope that his invitation would be accepted, and that he would not have to face the coming trials on his own. The events of the previous day

weighed heavily on his mind, and he knew that the time had come to take decisive action.

As the sound of carriage wheels on gravel reached his ears, Alex felt a surge of gratitude and, in spite of the perilous circumstances of their meeting, a distinct flutter of eagerness in his heart. The door to the study opened, and Rosalind entered, followed closely by Amelia and Isabella. All three wore determined expressions, dainty shoulders set firmly. Alex's breath caught in his throat as his gaze met Rosalind's, the depth of their connection palpable in the air between them.

"Thank you for coming," Alex said, his eyes fixed on Rosalind. "I cannot express how much your presence here means to me." He turned his attention to the other two Harrington sisters, a smile pulling at one corner of his mouth. "I had not anticipated that all three of you would be joining us today."

Rosalind stepped forward, her eyes shining with determination. "We are here to help in any way we can, Your Grace. Lady Evelyn granted me permission to inform them of what has transpired, and they are as determined as I to assist in any way possible. You may depend on us."

Alex nodded, a sense of relief washing over him. He gestured for them to take a seat, and as they gathered around the fireplace, he leaned forward, his voice low and urgent.

"I have a plan," he said, his eyes passing between the three sisters. "A daring plan that could help Lady Evelyn escape her abusive marriage and bring the judge to some sort of justice."

The room fell silent, the weight of his words hanging in the air. Rosalind, Amelia, and Isabella exchanged glances, their faces set into identical expressions of determination. "What do you have in mind, Alex?" Rosalind asked, her voice steady

and strong.

"We must gather evidence of the judge's misdeeds," Alex said, his voice low and intense. "If we can prove that he has been abusing his power and engaging in illegal activities, we may be able to use that information to our ends."

Alex leaned forward, his eyes locked with Rosalind's as he laid out the intricate details of his plan. With each word, he could see the gears turning in her mind, her keen intellect already working to refine and strengthen their approach.

"We must be strategic in our efforts," Alex said, his voice low and urgent. "Judge Banfield is a powerful man, and we cannot afford to underestimate him."

Rosalind nodded, her face thoughtful. "I agree, Your Grace. We will need to gather evidence quietly and efficiently, without arousing suspicion. It's important that we are discreet, and that none of us alter our behaviour to anyone involved in this plot."

She paused, and gave Richard an empathetic look. "To that end, we—my sisters and I—must not appear to be any friendlier to Lady Evelyn than we have been. It may help if we publicly cut her, so that the Judge would never imagine that we are her allies. Forgive me for being indelicate, but I imagine that you have some way of communicating with her that the Judge cannot intercept."

Richard nodded slowly. "I will write to inform her at once. We pass messages through her maid," he said with a wry smile.

"I can use my connections in society to gather information discreetly," Amelia offered, her voice steady and resolute. "There may be others who have fallen victim to the judge's schemes, and their stories could prove invaluable."

With her hands held tightly together, Isabella said, "I may not have Amelia's



connections, but I do have the ear of a few people, most of them artists. Thanks to you," she added with a shy smile to the Duke. "They travel in different circles and mingle with all sorts, so we might cast a wider net."

Alex felt a swell of pride and admiration for the sisters, their courage and compassion shining through in every word and gesture. With their help, and the aid of a network of trusted allies, he knew that they stood a fighting chance of success. As the plan began to take shape, Alex turned his attention to the task of confronting the Judge himself. He knew that it would be a dangerous and delicate undertaking, requiring all of his skill and cunning to navigate the treacherous waters of blackmail and corruption.

"Richard and I will handle the Judge directly," Alex said, his voice firm and resolute. "I do not want the rest of you anywhere near him when we do so—we don't know what his reaction might be, and he may lash out."

Richard, who had been listening quietly throughout the discussion, nodded his agreement. "I will do whatever it takes to make things right," he said, his voice heavy with regret and determination. "I owe it to Lady Evelyn, and to you."

It was not even a fortnight later that Alex found himself once again pacing the floor of his study. He had sent Rosalind a note yesterday, requesting the presence of herself and her sisters. They had found subtle ways to stay in communication, with everyone playing their parts accordingly. The trouble was, their search had thus far proved fruitless.

"I refuse to believe it," Richard said, his fists tight on the arms of his chair. "How can someone so corrupt, so morally bankrupt leave no trace of his misdeeds?" he demanded. He, too, was restless, crossing one leg over the other, shifting from side to side.

"It is a bit puzzling," Alex agreed. "Don't worry—we'll get him one way or another, no matter how long it takes."

"We need to bring him to heel now!" Richard snapped. He leapt to his feet, going to stare out of the window.

This sudden outburst, his palpable tension, was unlike Richard, and Alex's brow creased in worry. Richard had always been the more laid-back of the two, the brother most inclined to good humour; to see him so bothered spoke to the tension of the situation at hand. Alex came to put a hand on Richard's shoulder, reassuring. Richard, however, shrugged off his hand.

"Don't you understand that every day she remains in that house, she's in danger?" he demanded. "I can't—it's too big of a risk for her."

"Has something happened?" Alex asked, peering closer at Richard.

"No," he answered with a rigid shake of his head. "That's the problem: I've not heard from her since we met last," he said. "That was ten days ago." Richard raked his fingers through his hair, pushing it out of place. "I can't bear it, what if she's been harmed? What if I put her in danger? Oh God, if he found out—"

Alex grabbed Richard's forearm, cutting him off. He could see that his brother was in great danger of spiralling down a dark well. "Enough," he said. "Lady Evelyn is smart and resourceful, else she wouldn't have lasted as long as she has. Give her some credit." The distant sound of the bell at the front door ringing caused both brothers to perk up. "There, that will be the Harringtons now—perhaps they have something for us."

Richard nodded glumly, and sank heavily back into his chair. Alex, pursing his lips a bit in concern, opened the door to the study, awaiting the ladies. In spite of the

precarious circumstances, Alex couldn't help but feel a bit of selfish pleasure at the thought of seeing Rosalind again.

When she appeared in the hall, having divested herself of bonnet and shawl, it took everything in him not to allow himself to break into a wide smile. She appeared cool and confident as she walked towards him, her deep green walking dress making her eyes flash and her cheeks glow.

"Ladies," Alex said, ushering the three of them into his study. Once the requisite niceties had been dispensed with and refreshments had been offered, they all settled into an assortment of chairs.

"I'm sorry to have to report that we've had no luck at all, for all our feminine wiles," Rosalind said, frowning unhappily as she balanced a cup of coffee and small plate of biscuits. "The Judge appears to be a slippery eel."

Alex nodded, his own frown mirroring Rosalind's. "I had feared as much—we've had no luck either."

"Have any of you heard from Evelyn?" Richard demanded suddenly and without preamble.

"Amelia publicly snubbed her at a lending library over a week ago," Rosalind said with a quick smile to her oldest sister. "So I don't think anyone would suspect us of being on friendly terms with her."

"It was awful," Amelia said. "I felt so terrible about it afterwards."

"You were magnificent," Rosalind comforted her. "It was necessary for our ruse, and I'm sure Lady Evelyn appreciated it...in a manner of speaking," she said, her nose wrinkling as she tried to come to terms with the irony of that statement.

"It's not about us and our discomfort," Isabella reminded them quietly but firmly. "It's about Lady Evelyn."

Everyone turned to stare at Isabella, who looked about, apparently uncomfortable with the attention. Alex couldn't help but be struck by the way that Isabella, though shy and retiring, seemed to speak with a wisdom that belied her years. He cast a sidelong glance at Rosalind, who met his eye and gave a little shrug.

"That's right," Richard said sharply, standing again. "It is about Evelyn, and no one has seen her for over a week." He gave a hard look to the little assembly, flapping his hands a little in disbelief. "Does no one see the problem with this?" he demanded, raising his voice.

"Richard—" Alex began, but no one would ever know how he intended to finish that sentence, for he was interrupted by a cacophony of sound in the hallway. There was the unmistakable sound of slamming doors and scrambling feet, and voices in distress. "Stay here," he ordered everyone, and was at the point of opening the study door when it burst open from the other side.

Standing there, visibly panting and dishevelled, was a woman in a dark riding habit, her face obscured by the veil of her riding hat. "Sorry I'm late," the woman said, and stumbled forward, her legs giving out beneath her.

Alex stood frozen in disbelief, but Richard didn't hesitate. He darted forward, arms outstretched and caught the woman. She leaned into his arms gratefully, sweeping one arm up to brush aside her veil, revealing herself to be Lady Evelyn.

"Fancy seeing you here," she said, smiling but wincing when she did so, her face marred by fresh bruises and her eyes brimming with tears. The Harrington sisters gasped in unison, their hands flying to their mouths in shock at the sight of Evelyn's battered appearance. Richard, supporting Lady Evelyn, helped her to a chair, holding

tightly to her arm.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"There's no time for that now," Rosalind said, standing and offering Lady Evelyn her handkerchief to press against a split lip that still sullenly bled. She jerked her chin in the direction of the doorway, where a gaggle of servants were still crowded. "Send one of our audience members to fetch the doctor," she said to Alex.

He shook his head, feeling as if he had been far from himself for a moment. He stalked to the door, his face like thunder. "Go and bring the doctor at once," he ordered. "And if I hear so much as a single word about any of this..." He let the threat hang in the air, and the footmen and maids all scrambled off.

He turned and went to a side table with an assortment of crystal decanters and bottles, and poured a large brandy. This he gave to Rosalind, who dipped her handkerchief into it and began dabbing at Lady Evelyn's lip, which made her wince.

"Amelia, help me," Rosalind said, and gently began to unbutton Evelyn's leather riding gloves, sliding them with great care from her trembling hands. Amelia complied and took her other hand. Rosalind dipped two fingers into the brandy and swiped them on Evelyn's wrists and blew gently, which seemed to rouse Evelyn a little from her half-swoon.

Alex stood by, feeling a little unnecessary, but also impressed with the matter-of-fact way that Rosalind had taken charge of the situation. She was competent and capable, and Alex had never really appreciated exactly how much until this moment. Richard, too, seemed caught between blind fury and his desire to comfort Evelyn, holding tightly to her shoulders.

"How did this happen?" he asked again.

Lady Evelyn's lower lip trembled as she struggled to compose herself, her hands shaking as she clutched at the folds of her gown. "It was the judge," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "He found me in his study, and he was furious."

Alex's jaw clenched, a wave of anger surging through him at the thought of the Judge inflicting such violence on a lady. He knelt beside Lady Evelyn, his eyes searching her face for any sign of further injury. To his relief, her eyes were clear, though one was already blackening. "Why were you in his study, Lady Evelyn?" he asked gently, his voice soft and reassuring.

Lady Evelyn's gaze darted around the room, as if checking for any signs of eavesdroppers, before she leaned in closer to Alex. "I was looking for evidence," she whispered, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and determination. "Evidence of his illegal activities, his blackmail and corruption." A strangely triumphant look flitted over her face. "I knew that you all had not been able to find anything, and I refuse to let the back-biter get away with this."

Alex's eyes widened, blinking a few times in astonishment. "That was a terrible risk," he said. "He could have killed you."

Lady Evelyn nodded, a flicker of fire in her tired eyes despite the pain etched on her face. "It was worth it. I have letters and documents," she said, her voice growing stronger with each word. "Proof of his misdeeds, his abuse of power."

"He kept records of all this?" Richard asked incredulously. "Right there, in his home?"

Evelyn gave a breathy laugh. "He was always an arrogant wretch," she said.

Alex felt a wave of gratitude wash over him, his admiration for Lady Evelyn's courage and resourcefulness growing with each passing moment. He reached out,

gently taking her hand in his own. "Thank you, my Lady," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "Thank you for your bravery, for risking so much to bring the truth to light."

Lady Evelyn's eyes shimmered with unshed tears, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I couldn't let him continue to hurt others," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I had to do something, no matter the cost." Her eyes fluttered closed, a satisfied look on her battered face. "It was a small price to pay, really."

Alex nodded, his heart swelling with a fierce determination to see justice served. He turned to look at Rosalind over Evelyn's head, who met his gaze with an admiring smile, proud of the determination that had been displayed.

"We have the evidence we need," he said, his voice low and intense. "Now we must act, and quickly, before the judge has a chance to realise what Lady Evelyn took."

Rosalind stood, her eyes blazing with a fire that matched Alex's own. "You make sure that he can't ever hurt anyone again, and we'll see to Evelyn—we'll get her as far from him as humanly possible."

In the days that followed, Alex and Rosalind worked tirelessly to build their case against the judge, poring over the documents and letters that Lady Evelyn had risked so much to obtain. They spent long hours in Alex's study, their heads bent together over the evidence, their minds working in perfect synchronicity to piece together the puzzle of the judge's misdeeds.

As they worked, Alex found himself increasingly drawn to Rosalind's keen intellect and unwavering determination. He marvelled at the way her mind worked, the way she could see connections and patterns that others might miss. More than that, she showed a strength of character and determination that was rare among the gentry. Together, they formed a formidable team, their strengths complementing each other

in ways that left Alex feeling both humbled and inspired.



### Chapter 18

While their plan to bring the Judge down a peg had been proceeding well, there was one more aspect of the process to extricate Lady Evelyn that required a delicate touch: how to safely spirit her away from London, outside of the Judge's influence. Rosalind and her sisters had come up with a convincing ruse, and they all had parts to play. They were all gathered about the breakfast table, waiting for the footman to deliver the morning's post. Rosalind kept her eyes on her plate, focusing her attention on cutting up the glazed ham before her.

When the footman presented Lord Harrington with the small tray bearing an assortment of letters, Rosalind felt her stomach do a little flip. She cast a glance across the table to Amelia, who likewise froze. Careful not to stare openly, Rosalind watched from the corner of her eye as her father frowned at a letter written in a shaky hand.

"This one is for you, Rosalind," he said, passing the letter to her. "Though I'll be dashed if I can make out who it's from."

"Oh?" Rosalind said, trying to sound surprised. Without waiting, Rosalind lifted the seal and passed her eyes over the words without really seeing them—she already knew what the letter contained; she had helped Isabella write it. "Oh dear," she said, putting her fingers to her mouth.

"Bad news?" Lord Harrington asked, turning his attention back to his newspaper.

"It's Aunt Beatrice," Rosalind sighed unhappily. "It seems she is anxious for

company. You know how lonely she gets these days. She's sending her maid to travel with me."

"Poor Aunt Beatrice," Amelia added, affecting a sympathetic face, "all alone in that huge house in Yorkshire."

Lord Harrington's eyes narrowed slightly, a flicker of suspicion passing over his features. "Aunt Beatrice?" he asked.

Rosalind swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. "Father, don't tell me you've forgotten your Aunt Beatrice!" she said with mocking chagrin. "But I don't know if I should go—it's the middle of the season, and there's the Duke's courtship to consider..." She trailed off and sighed again, as if torn between two equal pillars of duty.

"You shouldn't neglect your aunt," he said, looking at her over his newspaper. "She might be inclined to be kind, after all, to one of you when she dies. You or your sisters might need it."

"Very well," Rosalind said with another heavy sigh. "If you really think it's necessary, then of course I will go, Father."

Lord Harrington considered her words for a moment, his gaze searching her face for any hint of deception. Rosalind held her breath, silently praying that he would not see through her carefully crafted facade. At last, he sighed, his shoulders relaxing slightly as he lifted his newspaper again. "Just don't let her keep you too long; there are matters here that require your attention. Besides, an absence might make the Duke all the more eager."

Rosalind curtsied, relief flooding through her veins. "Of course, Father, exactly as you say. I shall be gone only long enough for the Duke to miss me." Beside her, Isabella made a choking sound, as if she had attempted to swallow a laugh and her tea

at the same time. Rosalind patted her on the back, all solicitous concern.

With a final nod of acquiescence, Lord Harrington stood and strode from the room, leaving Rosalind alone with her sisters. When the door had swung shut behind him, Rosalind turned a fox-like grin on her sisters. As one, they all burst into relieved, anxious laughter.

"I can't believe that worked," Amelia breathed.

"I can't believe he thinks we have a great Aunt Beatrice," Rosalind said. She gave Isabella a playful nudge with her elbow. "Lucky for us we have a master forger in our midst."

Isabella gave a nervous little laugh. "I had no idea I could make such a convincing spinster."

They all laughed again, sharing this moment of camaraderie. After breakfast, they retired to Rosalind's quarters and helped her to pack her travelling trunk. It was a testament to the trust that her sisters had in her, in their belief in their plan, that not once did they remonstrate with her about the consequences of her getting caught. They had complete faith in her, and belief that what they were doing was right.

After luncheon, a plain carriage pulled up to the house. With a final embrace, Rosalind gathered her things and slipped from the house, her heart pounding in her chest as she set out on her clandestine mission. Rosalind and her trunk were loaded within, where a sullen maid waited. They did not speak to each other beyond a simple nod of greeting. She didn't know how much the maid had been paid off, but her payment apparently did not include conversation.

Rosalind was glad of this, however, for as the carriage rattled along the cobblestone streets, Rosalind's thoughts were a whirlwind of anticipation and trepidation. The

Duke had hired a trustworthy driver to escort her to his manor, with strict instructions to maintain the illusion that she was visiting her Aunt Beatrice, should anyone from her household inquire. The subterfuge was necessary, but it weighed heavily on Rosalind's conscience.

Upon arriving at the Duke's manor, Rosalind was ushered inside. Though she had been there before, the grandeur of the estate was still breathtaking. Alex greeted her with a warm smile, his eyes alight with determination and a hint of something deeper, something that made Rosalind's heart flutter in her chest.

A footman showed her to her rooms for the night, which were very pointedly on the far, far opposite side of the house from the Duke's. Momentary disappointment flickered through Rosalind, but she quickly tamped that down—she hadn't the time to linger on what that meant just now.

It was very nearly time for supper by the time that Lady Evelyn arrived. She had only a small valise with her and a jewel case, which she clutched tightly to her chest. She had been strictly instructed to bring only that which was necessary so as not to arouse the Judge's suspicions.

"Were you seen leaving?" Rosalind asked as Lady Evelyn slipped from a dark blue wool cloak.

Lady Evelyn shook her head. "No—he is out gadding about town, and likely won't be back before noon tomorrow." Her lip curled a little in disgust, her nostrils going pinched. "We should be able to put some distance between us before he notices that I'm gone."

Rosalind nodded. At that moment, Richard stepped out of the doorway to a darkened parlour. Lady Evelyn's breath caught audibly as she caught sight of him. He said nothing, simply staring at Evelyn with a mix of longing, resignation, and a sad sort of

happiness. It hadn't occurred to Rosalind that this evening wasn't just about procuring Evelyn's freedom; it was also the last time that she and Richard would be able to see one another.

"Hello, Richard," Evelyn said, her eyes shining.

It took him a minute to respond, his throat working visibly behind his beautifully knotted cravat. "Good evening, Evelyn."

The Duke stepped forward, clearing his throat a little into the heavy silence of the entry hall. "Richard, if you would like to show Evelyn into the dining room?" he said.

Richard, still under love's spell, shifted his eyes slowly to Alex, then nodded gravely. He offered Evelyn his elbow, which she took after depositing her jewel case with a maid. She stared up at him openly, adoringly, and it made Rosalind's heart sigh just to see. She started to follow after them, but the Duke caught her gently by the arm.

"It seems only right that we give them the evening to make their farewells," he said with a one-sided smile. "I hope that you do not mind dining in the parlour with me. I could always have them send a tray up to your room..." he said, his voice trailing off a little hopefully, as if he couldn't wait to be contradicted.

Rosalind couldn't help but smile, and she laid a hand on his. "I would be happy to dine with you in any room," she said lightly. "I appreciate your concern for my reputation, but being found out as having dined alone with you in the parlour is not high on my list of worries at the moment."

Alex grinned, and Rosalind caught a glimpse of how he must have looked as a younger man, free of care and worries. "I've asked Richard to join us when they are done, so that we might go over any final preparations."

They made their way into the candlelit parlour, and when the dishes were unveiled, Rosalind realised just how famished she was. She'd had very little appetite for nerves, but now that things were in motion, her appetite had caught up with her. It also wasn't helped by the fact that the Duke kept a fantastic cook, who had clearly pulled out all the stops. There was glazed fowl with orange slices pinned to it, roast beef with aspic, asparagus baked standing in a decorated crust, potatoes in a fragrant cream sauce, and three different puddings to choose from, plus an assortment of fresh hothouse fruit. There was also a small table in the centre of the room, which had been laid with a white tablecloth.

It was a strange experience at first, dining alone with a man, but Rosalind found that she quite liked it. It gave her the chance to study him, to let conversation flow naturally without worrying over who might be listening. They compared eating habits, gently teasing each other: Alex tended to favour the roast beef, to the exclusion of much else; Rosalind had a terrible sweet tooth, which Alex wasted no time in fondly ribbing her about, given her lecture to him on the morality of sugar the first day they met.

When they had finished, a bevy of servants appeared to clear away the remains of their dinner. They sat together in companionable silence, the fire crackling gently in the hearth. Rosalind, reclining a little on the silver and green striped settee, glanced at the clock above the mantle. It was fast approaching midnight, and there had been no sign of Richard or Evelyn yet.

"I wonder what's keeping them?" she mused aloud.

"You can't rush love," Alex said with a shrug, but then seemed to abruptly notice what he had said. He stared at Rosalind, his eyes boldly studying her face and form. She felt her cheeks grow warm, but smiled coyly at him.

The night wore on, and their conversation waned with the hours. Rosalind shivered a

little, rubbing her arms, and scooted closer to the fire.

"I'm sorry, this room has always had a terrible draught at night," he said apologetically. "I should have chosen a different one. Let me ring for a servant to fetch you a shawl," he said, reaching for the bell.

Rosalind waved him off, stifling a yawn behind the back of her hand. "Don't bother them, not this late. I'll just sit closer to the fire."

Alex, clearly having noticed the yawn, gently said, "You can retire—it would be best if you were well-rested tomorrow."

Rosalind shook her head stubbornly. "No, we needed to speak with Evelyn to ensure that everything was prepared for tomorrow."

He stared down at her, shifting from one foot to the other for a moment. "At least let me sit next to you, that I might block some of this awful draught from one side."

With a nod and another muffled yawn, Rosalind waved him over. "You might go over our route with me, so that I might know which way we are going," she said as he settled onto the settee beside her.

The Duke acquiesced, spreading a small map on the low table before them. With one finger, he traced their route, north out of London, then onto the toll road. Rosalind's eyelids grew heavy, the strain of the day taking its toll. She fought against the exhaustion, determined to press on, but her body betrayed her. Slowly, her head dipped, coming to rest on Alex's shoulder, the warmth of his presence lulling her into a peaceful slumber.

As the first light of dawn began to creep through the windows, Alex gently roused Rosalind from her slumber. She stirred, her eyes fluttering open, a soft smile gracing

her lips as she met his gaze. The house was silent, and Rosalind could not remember a time when she had felt more content and secure.

With sleep-kissed eyes, she gazed up at him, not bothering to hide her adoration, her gratitude for his generous nature. He stared right back at her, and he deftly slid an arm about her waist, pulling her flush against him. Her breath stuttered as he reached up with one thumb and touched her cheek, sliding it down to her chin and cradling it between his warm fingers.

Rosalind's heart raced as Alex drew her closer, their foreheads touching, their breaths mingling in the scant space between them. The air crackled with tension, the weight of unspoken feelings hanging in the balance, and then, in a moment of pure, unadulterated bliss, their lips met.

The kiss was gentle at first, a tentative exploration of newfound emotions, and Rosalind appreciated that he understood that she was a novice at this sort of thing. She quickly found herself hungering for more, for him, so as the seconds ticked by, it deepened, becoming a searing, passionate embrace that left them both breathless and trembling.

When they finally parted, Rosalind's cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining with a mixture of wonder and desire. Alex, too, looked slightly dazed, as though he could scarcely believe the turn of events. She wanted nothing more than for time to stop, for the morning to be delayed so that she might stay there in that parlour and linger in the blazing sweetness between them. There was no stopping the relentless progress of the hours, however, and already, the sounds of the first servants stirring were echoing through the house.

Reluctantly, Rosalind pulled away, standing on legs that were shockingly wobbly. Alex saw this and grinned at her. Rosalind took that grin with her as she attempted to sneak her way to her room with whatever dignity she could intact. She knew that she



would be sorely missing a good night's sleep in a few hours, especially with the promise of a long journey. She couldn't bring herself, though, to admit that it had been a bad trade—it hadn't been a bad trade at all, by her estimation.

### Chapter 19

The tension in the air was palpable as Lady Rosalind stood beside Evelyn in the grand hall of the Duke of Somerton's London house. Though she was bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, Rosalind was resolute and determined as she waited for Lady Evelyn to finish her preparations. Alex stood next to her, with Richard on his far side. She steadfastly resisted the urge to look at Alex, as they weren't alone.

Evelyn at last descended the stairs, and she was a woman transformed. Gone were the elegant dresses and jewels, carefully packed away in her valise. Instead, she wore a plain wool travelling dress in muted grey with a partlet of organdy at the neckline. Her thick, iconic chestnut hair had been braided and pinned up, hidden beneath a plain white cotton cap. She held a plain straw bonnet in her hands, which were hidden in fingerless mitts. She looked, in a word, every bit a lady's maid—no one would ever assume that she was really the fashionable and beautiful Lady Evelyn Banfield. She kept her eyes down, her hands holding tightly to the brim of her bonnet.

Rosalind could feel the nervousness practically radiating off of her, so she gently clasped Evelyn's hands in her own, offering a silent gesture of support and understanding.

Evelyn's eyes met Rosalind's and she offered a small smile of thanks. "Are you ready?" Rosalind asked gently.

Clearly still worried, but refusing to give in to her doubts, Evelyn nodded. She put her hand in the Duke's, her face awash with gratitude. "I don't know how to repay you," she said quietly, but sincerely. "I...I had never hoped—" She paused, clearly

overwhelmed by feelings of gratitude. "Thank you for believing that I was worth saving."

"My Lady," Alex said sincerely, covering her hand with his own, "even if I had not known you at all, it would have been enough to know that my brother loved you—that is all I needed to know about you."

Evelyn's lips trembled, a single tear escaping down her cheek. "I cannot begin to express my gratitude, Rosalind. You, and the Duke, all of you— you have given me a chance at a life I never dared to dream of."

Rosalind embraced Evelyn, holding her close as the weight of their shared emotions filled the room. "You deserve this chance, Evelyn. You deserve to be free, to live a life filled with love, respect, and happiness."

Evelyn listened intently, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. She gave him a last brief smile, and then was standing in front of Richard. They simply stared at each other for a moment, with much passing between them silently. It was an end of things, and though it was about as happy of an ending as they might have hoped for, it did not make their parting easy. At last, Richard took her gently by the shoulders, and looked at her gravely.

"Be happy," he ordered.

"Be sensible," she responded, and the two chuckled. They clasped their hands together one last time, and then parted. Rosalind took Evelyn's arm, and with a last, lingering look at Alex, they left the Duke's house. The same plain carriage was waiting for them, along with a pair of outriders that would keep them safe on the journey north.

It wasn't until they were settled in and the carriage door closed firmly behind them

that Rosalind heard Evelyn exhale, as if she had been holding her breath the whole time they had been preparing to leave. Rosalind reached across the space between them and squeezed her fingers. Evelyn smiled at her, and though it was tinged with sadness and there were tears in her eyes, it was the first time that Rosalind had ever seen her look hopeful. She turned to look out the window, watching London roll by, and Rosalind followed suit.

As the miles passed slowly by, the buildings of London disappeared, as did the paved and cobbled streets. Fields and trees took their place, full of green and the delights of early summer. This was when the reality of her situation hit Rosalind, and she was full of a whirling, jumbled mass of emotions. There was the relief, of course, both that she hadn't been discovered and that Evelyn had been spirited away from London safely. There was also a thrill of exhilaration that always came with doing something forbidden.

That wasn't the only thing that was making her heart race, however. The memory of last night's kiss warmed her cheeks, and she hoped that Evelyn would put it down to the excitement of their escapade. Undercutting all of this was an edge of anxiety: She knew that Alex meant to confront the Judge with their findings in the coming days, once Evelyn was well on her way north. She didn't doubt that he was perfectly capable of handling himself, but the Judge's reputation for cruelty—which Rosalind had witnessed the results of firsthand—weighed heavily on her.

There would be no way for Alex to send word as to how their tête-à-tête had gone. It could be weeks before she heard any news, and this realisation unsettled her stomach more than the carriage bumping along the ruts in the road.

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Alex and Richard gazed up at the facade of the gentlemen's club, squinting a bit in the warm rain. They wore twin expressions of determination, jaws and shoulders

squared.

"Are you ready?" Alex asked Richard, who answered with a sharp nod. As one, they pushed through the doors, past the bowing attendants who greeted them.

The opulent surroundings of the club, with its rich mahogany panelling and plush leather armchairs, stood in stark contrast to the grim purpose of their visit. As they navigated the maze of rooms, Alex's mind drifted to Rosalind. He knew that he had to remain focused on the task at hand, but he could not help but fear for her. There was no telling how the Judge might react, and it wouldn't take long for any riders he sent after them to catch up.

Richard, as if sensing his brother's unease, placed a reassuring hand on Alex's shoulder. "Fear not, dear brother," he said, his voice low and steady. "Lady Rosalind is a woman of remarkable strength and courage. She will see this through, just as we will."

Alex nodded, drawing strength from his brother's calm confidence. "I know," he replied, not bothering to try and hide his admiration. "She is unlike any woman I have ever known."

With a sidelong grin, Richard said, "She's a firecracker, that one—I've no doubt that she's more than up to the task of putting up with you for a few decades." Alex gave him a playful shove on the shoulder, a gesture from their boyhood. Richard laughed, but turned serious. "I mean it, Alex," he said, catching the Duke by the wrist. "She could be a true partner, Alex," he said, his eyes shining with admiration. "A woman who will fight for what is right, even in the face of adversity—she's nothing like Mary."

The mention of Mary's name sent a pang of old hurt through Alex's heart, but it was quickly overshadowed by the warmth and affection he felt for Rosalind. She had

proven herself to be a woman of substance, a true equal in every sense of the word.

"Rosalind is a rare gem," Alex agreed, his voice filled with quiet reverence. "I am fortunate to have her by my side, and I will do everything in my power to protect her and ensure the success of our plan." At the mention of their true purpose in being there, both brothers sobered.

As they approached the room where they knew Judge Banfield would be holding court, Alex squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. He knew that the confrontation ahead would be difficult. With Richard's support, though, and the knowledge of Rosalind's love and trust, he felt ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

With a final nod to his brother, Alex pushed open the door, ready to confront the Judge and set in motion the events that would change the course of their lives forever. The room fell silent as Alex and Richard entered, the eyes of the assembled gentlemen turning to regard them with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

The Judge, imperiously holding court in the middle of the room, was indolently lounging in one of the club's overstuffed chairs, swirling a glass of brandy. He, too, turned to look at the new arrivals, his brow quirking a little in surprise and unease. Alex was not a member of this particular club, but a duke's coronet made many things possible.

Alex stepped forward, his bearing regal and his voice steady as he addressed the room. "Gentlemen, do forgive us for the interruption, but we come before you today to expose a grave injustice and to hold accountable a man who has abused his position and betrayed the trust of those he was sworn to serve."

A murmur rippled through the gathered men, their careful expression of gentility slipping a bit. One of them stood, gesturing with a glass of port. "What's this all about

then, Somerton?" he demanded, his drink nearly sloshing out.

Alex turned and levelled an unflinching gaze directly at the Judge, who reacted only with the slightest tightening of his mouth. "Perhaps," Alex said, "Judge Banfield would prefer to answer that question." Everyone's heads swivelled now to stare at the Judge. The Judge's expression faltered for a moment, a flicker of unease crossing his features before he schooled his face into a mask of indignation.

"How dare you come here and make such baseless accusations!" the judge blustered, rising to his feet. "I am a respected member of the judiciary, and I will not stand for such slander!"

Richard stepped forward, his voice calm but firm. "We have evidence, Your Honour," he said, holding up a stack of documents. "Evidence of your blackmail, your corrupt dealings, and your abuse of power. The truth will be heard, and justice will be served."

Alex watched as the judge's face contorted with rage, his eyes narrowing to slits as he glared at Richard. The room had fallen deathly silent, the tension palpable as the gathered gentlemen waited with bated breath for the Judge's response.

"You have no right to come here and make such wild accusations," the Judge seethed, his voice trembling with barely contained fury. His eyes fixed on Richard, and he nearly spat as he said, "I am a man of the law, and my reputation is beyond reproach. You, on the other hand, are nothing more than a feckless libertine, a disgrace to your family name."

Richard met the judge's gaze unflinchingly, his voice steady as he replied, "Your reputation, Your Honour, is built on a foundation of lies and deceit. You have used your position to prey upon the vulnerable, to line your own pockets at the expense of others. But no more. Today, the truth will be revealed, and you will answer for your

crimes."

The Judge scoffed, his lips curling into a sneer. "And what proof do you have of these alleged crimes? The word of a scoundrel and his equally disreputable brother? I think not. Surely we are above the base accusations of this sort." A low muttering went through the gentlemen, some nodding, some looking troubled. Alex could see the room dividing into two camps quickly.

One gentleman with prodigious whiskers stood, his waistcoat straining for its life against an equally prodigious belly. "Reputation or no, he's still a duke, man—show a bit of respect," he said, lifting his red-tipped nose into the air. "Word of a duke means more than the average man."

Alex stepped forward, his voice calm but firm. "We have more than just our word, Your Honour. We have documents, witnesses, and a trail of evidence that leads directly to you. Your days of operating above the law are over." Alex cast a pointed gaze around the room. "I daresay a fair share of these fellows have found themselves at the pointy end of your so-called justice. As it's such an illustrious company," Alex said in the plummiest of tones, "I expect they'll have no difficulty in paying for your prosecution."

The Judge's face paled, his bravado faltering as he realised the gravity of the situation. He looked around the room, seeking support from his fellow gentlemen, but found only stony faces and averted gazes.

"This is preposterous," the Judge blustered, his voice rising in pitch. "I will not stand for such baseless slander. I demand that you leave this club at once, or I shall have you thrown out!"

Richard shook his head, a mirthless smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "You have no power here, Your Honour. Not anymore. They know the truth now—they've



seen your real face."

Wordlessly, Alex tossed a folio onto a nearby table. The edges of letters, promissory notes, and other documents spilled out, and several rose to look at them. The Judge watched them, and for the first time, his face showed real fear. The moment was fleeting, and like a rat backed into a corner, he quickly turned to lashing out.

The Judge's face twisted with rage and fear, his hands clenched into fists at his sides as he rose. "You will regret this," he hissed, his voice low and menacing. "You have no idea of the power I wield, the influence I hold. I will destroy you, and everything you hold dear."

Alex met the judge's gaze steadily, his voice unwavering. "Your threats hold no weight here, Banfield. Not anymore."

The Judge looked around the room once more, his eyes wild and desperate, but found no allies among the gathered gentlemen. With a final, impotent snarl, he turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, the door slamming shut behind him with a resounding thud. Richard leaned over to one of the club attendants, who was busy trying to look as if he wasn't blatantly watching and relishing the unfolding drama. Finally, in a stage whisper loud enough for all to hear said, "I expect you'll be wanting to fetch the watch."

The young man cast a glance at one of the gentlemen, who nodded. With that, the young man turned and scampered off. The other gentlemen were all crowded about the table, their fingers pointing at names and sums of money detailed in the documents.

Their quiet indignation was quickly gathering steam, transforming into a righteous fury. There were calls for prosecution which all agreed was the Most Correct way of dealing with things, but there was also a good deal of support for simply calling the

Judge to the field of honour at the nearest green by sunup the next morning.

Alex and Richard exchanged a look of triumph, their hearts racing with the knowledge that justice was finally within reach. They had done what they set out to do, exposing the Judge's crimes and setting in motion the events that would lead to his downfall. With a final nod to the assembled gentlemen, Alex and Richard took their leave, the sound of their footsteps echoing through the halls of the gentlemen's club. They emerged into the sunlight, the weight of their victory settling on their shoulders more handsomely than any crown.

It was with great joy and relief that Rosalind found a letter waiting for her when she returned from her hurried journey north. Evelyn had been left at the home of an aunt of Alex's, where she would remain while other arrangements were made. Luckily, that particular aunt had always had a desire to travel, and they would soon be bound for the Americas. All agreed that an ocean between them was enough for Evelyn to feel safe from any repercussions from the aggrieved Judge. The aunt was a kind and adventurous soul, and immediately took to Evelyn.

Palpable relief flooded Rosalind as she tiredly sliced past the Duke's familiar seal. Her weeks of travel had worn her out, and she wanted nothing more than to sink into her own bed and sleep for days. Her eyes, tired and feeling gritty, quickly read over the letter. It was only a few short lines, but it made Rosalind smile nonetheless.

R—

The rooster has been plucked. E can breathe easy.

I, however, won't be able to breathe easy at all until I see your lovely face again—absence and fonder hearts, etc.

—A

Rosalind could feel the Duke's relief and genuine affection positively dripping from the page, and it made her chuckle a little breathlessly. It was like a stone had been lifted from all of them, one they had been unknowingly yoked to for weeks. Though it was short, the letter's simple honesty pleased Rosalind more than a three-page sonnet could have. When at last she got her wish and had divested herself of her travelling dress and bonnet and had flopped into her bed with abandon, she kept the note pressed to her heart. She fell asleep with a little smile dancing over her mouth, the anticipation of seeing Alex again making her heart flutter.

### Chapter 20

Rosalind stepped into the grand ballroom of Harrington Manor, her hand resting lightly on Alex's arm. The room was ablaze with the glow of a thousand candles, their warm light casting an inviting ambiance. The air hummed with the excited chatter of the assembled guests, their faces alight with curiosity and anticipation. As they made their way through the crowd, Rosalind could feel the weight of countless gazes upon them, the scrutiny of a society eager for a new story to tell. Whispers followed in their wake, the hushed murmurs of speculation and intrigue.

"Is that the Duke of Somerton with Lady Rosalind?" a lady whispered behind her fan, her eyes wide with interest.

"I heard they've been inseparable lately," another replied, her voice laced with a hint of envy.

Rosalind held her head high, her smile never faltering as she navigated the sea of curious faces. She knew that their presence together was a magnet for attention, a beacon for the gossip-hungry ton, but she refused to let their whispers and speculations dampen her spirits.

As they reached the centre of the ballroom, Alex turned to face her, his eyes sparkling with warmth and admiration. He bowed low and Rosalind curtsied in return, her heart fluttering with anticipation as she placed her hand in his.

The music swelled around them as they took their first steps, their bodies moving in perfect harmony. Rosalind could feel the heat of Alex's touch through the delicate

silk of her glove, the sensation sending a shiver down her spine. The other dancers in their set may as well have not existed. For even when the dance required that they partner with others, their eyes were fixed on one another.

As they twirled and glided across the polished floor, Rosalind caught snippets of the conversations around them, the whispers growing louder with each passing moment.

"They make a striking couple, don't they?" a gentleman remarked, his voice tinged with approval.

"I hear the Duke is quite smitten with her," a lady replied, sniffing haughtily to conceal her jealousy.

Rosalind felt a flush of pleasure at their words, a secret thrill coursing through her veins. She knew that the rumours of their blossoming romance were spreading like wildfire, the embers of gossip fanned by the watchful eyes of London society, but as she gazed into Alex's eyes, lost in the depths of his tender expression, Rosalind found that she didn't care about the whispers or the speculation. In that moment, all that mattered was the connection between them, the unspoken understanding that had grown and flourished in the face of adversity.

As the dance drew to a close, Alex leaned in close, his breath warm against her ear. "You are a vision tonight, Lady Rosalind," he murmured, his voice low and gravelly.

Rosalind felt a blush rise to her cheeks, her heart skipping a beat at the sincerity in his words. "And you, Your Grace, are quite the dashing escort," she replied, her eyes sparkling with mirth. She knew full well that their actions would only add fuel to the fire, but she didn't care. In fact, she found that she didn't care about much of anything when she was staring into Alex's dark eyes.

Around them, the whispers continued to swirl, the speculation and intrigue reaching a

fever pitch, but Rosalind paid them no heed, her attention focused solely on the man before her, the one who had captured her heart and ignited her soul.

As the music faded and the applause of the guests filled the ballroom, Rosalind felt Alex's gentle tug on her hand. With a mischievous glint in his eye, he tipped his head toward the entrance to the ballroom.

Rosalind, doing her level best to keep her expression calm and demure, dipped her head and curtsied. She caught the corner of a smile from Alex as he turned away, walking with purpose.

Rosalind made a great show of ambling to the edges of the ballroom, procuring herself a glass of lemonade. Amelia appeared at her elbow, an ironic twist to her mouth.

"Why, Rosalind, you are positively flushed—I expect it was all that dancing," Amelia said, just loud enough to be overheard.

"Yes," Rosalind replied lightly, playing along. "It is rather warm in here, and the air is so close."

"Oh dear," Amelia said. "Well, perhaps you should take some fresh air then," she tutted, all sisterly concern. Rosalind gave her just a hint of a grin, and Amelia affected a face of such innocence that there could be no doubt that she knew what was really afoot.

Rosalind nodded solemnly, making her way from the ballroom with slow, casual steps so that no one would notice her as she slipped away. Quickly, her silk dancing slippers whispering across the floor as she made her way through darkened halls. Then, she made her way to the back doors that opened into the garden. As she put her hand on the latch, she could see Alex standing just on the other side, his back to the

house, but his handsome profile turned to grin at her. She returned his grin and opened the door only as much as she needed to slip through.

Once outside, she took a deep breath, the scent of blooming flowers and the gentle rustle of leaves enveloping them in a world of their own. The tranquillity of the gardens was a stark contrast to the bustling energy of the ballroom, but the serenity could not totally quell the chaotic beating of her heart.

It was only redoubled when the Duke offered her his hand and she twined her fingers in his. It was only marginally cooler outside than the ballroom, with summer being well and truly underway, but Rosalind was under no doubt that it was infinitely more pleasant. Hand in hand, they strolled along the winding paths, the moonlight casting a silvery glow on their faces.

"We really did something remarkable, didn't we?" she asked. Alex looked down at her, and she hurried on, "With the Judge, I mean. We made an actual, quantifiable difference in the world. I used to feel so helpless all of the time," she continued, her words coming faster, speaking them as she thought them. "I would see all of these poor, miserable people in London, and there was nothing I could do to help them. Father would just pull the curtains on the carriage window so that we wouldn't have to look at them."

Her pert nose wrinkled in distaste at the memory. "I had always thought that the most I could do was give to my charities and hand out bread at Christmas." She turned shining, excited eyes onto Alex, smiling up at him. "But here, we've done something actually good. I've always known that I wanted to do more, to be more, but until now, I've never really had a notion of how to do it."

She paused for a moment, halting her steps and forcing Alex to halt beside her. Her expression, though still alight with an eager goodness, had turned more grave. "We are stronger together," she said solemnly.

Alex listened intently, his gaze never leaving her face. He smiled gently down at her. "You have a beautiful heart, Rosalind," he murmured, his thumb gently caressing the back of her hand. "Your compassion and strength are truly remarkable."

Rosalind felt a warmth bloom in her chest at his words, a sense of validation and understanding that she had never experienced before. In Alex, she had found not only a partner, but a kindred spirit, someone who shared her values and her vision for a better world.

"I must confess that I, too, have been greatly bothered by the suffering I see about me. I do my best by my tenants, but there are other people, the truly poor and destitute that have long existed at the edges of my estate. I see them scraping by in the winter, barely surviving, and it—"

He stopped, his brow knitting together. "I have never really known how to help them; they will not accept anything they perceive as pity." He turned his gaze back down to Rosalind, his eyes alight as if he had just realised the possibilities of their future. "Together, Rosalind," he said, his eyes locked with hers, "we could achieve great things. We could be a force for good, a beacon of hope in a world that so often seems shrouded in darkness."

Rosalind felt her heart swell with emotion, Alex's words resonating deep within her soul. In that moment, she knew that she had found not only a partner in life, but a partner in purpose, someone who would never hinder her, never keep her in the little box that was meant to be a woman's place. He saw her, what she was capable of, and he revelled in it. This warmed her heart and her cheeks more than any lovelorn poetry, any ballad, a thousand gifts of diamonds and flowers ever could.

As they walked hand in hand, the blooming flowers and gentle breezes a balm to their weary spirits, Rosalind felt a sense of peace and contentment wash over her. In the gardens of Harrington Manor, immersed in the splendour of nature and the warmth of



Alex's presence, she knew that she had found her place in the world, her true calling. It was a contentment she had never known, and it gave her a strength and appreciation for life that she had never known.

As if sensing this subtle shift within her, the Duke impulsively pulled her into a little alcove in the wall that surrounded the garden. They were shielded from view of the house, and Rosalind swallowed hard as she looked up at Alex. He pressed her backwards, gently but insistently, until she was caught between the wall and himself. She could feel the rough stone of the wall through her silk evening dress and chemise, the stones radiating the warmth that they had absorbed during the day.

Alex folded her into his arms, and she melted against him without hesitation, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Rosalind felt her heart racing as she stood in Alex's embrace, the warmth of his body enveloping her like a comforting blanket. She gazed up at him, her eyes locking with his, and in that moment, the world around them seemed to fade away. The music and light from the ball were far away, leaving them locked in a world of their own. Everything had ceased to exist that was not in the space between them.

As they stood there, lost in each other's presence, Rosalind found herself longing for the touch of his lips against hers. She knew that polite young ladies, genteel young ladies, weren't meant to feel such things, not until they were married, and possibly not even then. She didn't care; she didn't care about any of that as she looked up at Alex. There was a strange heaviness in her limbs, a sort of surrender that she had never felt before, a wild abandon. Her lips were softly parted, her breath panting out between them.

She could feel the electricity crackling between them, the unspoken desire that hung heavy in the air. Her breath caught in her throat as Alex leaned in closer, his hand gently cupping her cheek. His dark eyes were almost black from the way that his pupils were dilated. With agonising slowness, he leaned down, his lips just a whisper

away. Rosalind's eyes fell closed, and she surrendered to the moment. She was going to be kissed, and by Jove, she was going to enjoy it.

"Rosalind? Your Grace?" Lord Harrington's voice rang out, startling them both.

### Chapter 21

They leapt apart as if they had been galvanised, their cheeks flushed with the heat of their almost-kiss. In the shadowy darkness of the garden, they quickly adjusted rumpled clothing and Rosalind silently prayed that her flushed cheeks weren't visible in the dark. Lord Harrington approached them, his brow furrowed with suspicion.

"What on Earth are you doing out here? Alone?" he demanded, his eyes sweeping about as if expecting to see a chaperone emerge from one of the shrubs.

"Father," Rosalind greeted him, her voice slightly breathless. "We were just discussing the Duke's upcoming masquerade ball. Amelia's just stepped away for a moment," she said, swallowing hard against her dry throat and willing her voice not to crack. "To fetch me a...shawl," she concluded.

Alex quickly composed himself, his posture straightening as he faced Lord Harrington. "Indeed, Lord Harrington," he said, his voice smooth and confident. "I was just mentioning to Lady Rosalind that I would be honoured if she could assist with the preparations for the ball. I am, as you know, sadly without a hostess, and I should be glad of her help."

Lord Harrington's eyebrows raised in surprise, his gaze shifting between his daughter and the Duke. "Is that so?" he asked, a hint of scepticism in his tone.

Alex nodded, his eyes meeting Lord Harrington's with unwavering sincerity. "Lady Rosalind's impeccable taste and keen eye for detail would be invaluable in ensuring the success of the event," he explained. "I would be most grateful for her assistance

and your permission, of course." He leaned forward, lowering his tone conspiratorially. "One hears awful tales of gentlemen being forced to rely on professional hostesses, or worse—" He paused for dramatic effect. "Of having to use public assembly rooms."

Rosalind held her breath, her heart pounding as she awaited her father's response. She knew that his approval was crucial, not only for her involvement in the ball preparations but also for the growing bond between her and Alex.

Lord Harrington studied them both for a moment, his expression unreadable. Rosalind could see the gears turning in his mind as he considered the Duke's request. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, a small smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

"Well, if Rosalind is willing and eager to assist, I see no reason to object," he said, his tone softening. "I trust that you will ensure her safety and well-being throughout the preparations, Your Grace. It will be necessary for one of the maids or her sisters to chaperone her," he added with a pointed look. "A father must think of his daughter's reputation, after all. One hears...rumours these days."

Alex bowed his head in gratitude, a smile of relief spreading across his face. "Of course, Lord Harrington," he assured him. "Lady Rosalind's comfort and security are of the utmost importance to me."

Rosalind felt a surge of joy and excitement coursing through her veins. The prospect of working alongside Alex, of being a part of something as grand and spectacular as the masquerade ball, filled her with a sense of purpose and anticipation. Though she'd received the same training as Amelia, she'd never had the opportunity to act as hostess before. That duty falling to the oldest daughter of the house in absence of a wife.

"Thank you, Father," she said, her voice filled with genuine appreciation. "I promise

to do my best and make you proud."

Lord Harrington nodded, his expression still a little suspicious. "I am sure you will," he said to Rosalind, but his eyes were still on the Duke. "Shall I escort you back to the ballroom? I believe Isabella was looking for you earlier." Rosalind nodded, and Lord Harrington turned to start back to the house.

"It seems we have much to discuss and plan, Your Grace," she said, her voice tender and filled with promise.

Alex's eyes sparkled with a mix of mischief and adoration. "Indeed we do, Lady Rosalind," he replied, his hand gently brushing against hers. "I look forward to working closely with you tirelessly, all day long..."

"Rosalind," Lord Harrington said, having paused and turned to find that Rosalind was not behind him as he had expected. There was a little salt in his voice, and Rosalind, with a final longing glance at the Duke, hurried her steps to catch up with her father.

As the date of the Duke's masquerade ball drew near, Rosalind found herself spending more and more time at the Fitzwilliam estate, immersed in the preparations alongside Alex. The hours seemed to fly by as they huddled together in the drawing room, poring over guest lists and menu options, their minds in perfect sync as they worked towards a common goal.

Amelia, bless her, made it a point to find excuses to leave them alone for long stretches of time, under vague excuses of wanting to see the gardens. Isabella, on the occasions she accompanied them to act as chaperone, needed no excuses—she would simply march off to go peruse the Duke's massive collection of art.

Rosalind couldn't help but marvel at the ease with which they collaborated, their ideas and suggestions flowing seamlessly as if they had been partners in planning for

years. She found herself stealing glances at Alex as they worked, admiring the way his brow furrowed in concentration and the way his eyes lit up when they landed upon a particularly brilliant idea.

As they debated over the finer details of the ball, from the colour scheme of the decorations to the selection of music for the evening, Rosalind felt a warmth blossoming in her chest. It was a feeling she had never experienced before, a sense of belonging and purpose that went beyond the superficial trappings of society. Rosalind knew that hosting a masque was not a world-altering event, but it was still a thrill to know that they worked so well together. It opened up the possibility of what they might be capable of in the future.

In those moments, as they sat side by side, their shoulders brushing and their hands occasionally grazing as they reached for the same piece of paper, the Duke was lighter, freer, than she had ever seen him be. It was as if he were young again, without the cares of the world weighing him down.

She found herself longing for more of these precious moments, where the world outside the drawing room ceased to exist. It was just the two of them, lost in the joy of creation and the thrill of each other's company.

As the days passed and the preparations progressed, Rosalind began to see a different side of Alex. One that went beyond the stoic and guarded exterior he presented to the world. She caught glimpses of his humour and his kindness, the way he treated the servants with respect and the way he listened attentively to her ideas and opinions.

As the preparations for the masquerade ball consumed her waking hours, Rosalind found herself pouring her heart and soul into every aspect of the planning. She had never in her entire life been given control over something, had any sort of real authority delegated to her. She revelled in it, in knowing that she was both capable and able to make decisions. It was a taste of the vague sort of independence that was

afforded to married women, and Rosalind was chuffed to find that it suited her so well.

At times, she could feel Alex's eyes on her, and it always made her shiver a little to find him staring at her. She would be engaged in the most mundane task, such as discussing menus with the housekeeper or table settings. Her eyes would instinctively look up to find Alex watching her with fond admiration.

Together, they stole away to a quiet corner of the estate, the sound of their footsteps echoing through the empty halls. Rosalind's heart raced as Alex drew her closer, his eyes filled with a tenderness that made her knees weak. She leaned into his embrace, savouring the warmth of his touch and the comforting scent of the pomatum in his hair. Amelia, ever the dutiful chaperone, stationed herself just outside the door, her arms folded, fairly daring anyone to enter the room.

For a moment, the world outside ceased to exist, and it was just the two of them, lost in the depths of each other's eyes. Rosalind's lips parted, a whispered confession of her feelings dancing on the tip of her tongue, but she thought better of it.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, content to simply bask in the comfort of each other's company, but as the silence stretched on, Rosalind felt a stirring in her heart, a need to give voice to the feelings that had been building within her for so long. She placed her hand in his, which he willingly accepted.

"Alex," she began, her voice filled with emotion, "I never thought I would find someone like you, someone who sees me for who I truly am and accepts me, flaws and all."

Alex's grip on her hand tightened, his thumb gently caressing her knuckles as he listened intently to her words.

"You have become my rock, my refuge in a world that seeks to define me by the expectations of others," Rosalind continued, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "With you, I feel free to be myself, to dream and to hope for a future that is entirely of our own making."

Alex's eyes softened, a tender smile playing at the corners of his lips as he lifted his free hand to gently cradle her chin in his fingers. "Rosalind," he murmured, his voice raw with emotion, "you have transformed my life in ways I never thought possible. Before I met you, I was a man adrift, haunted by the ghosts of my past and the weight of my own expectations."

He paused, taking a moment to savour the smile on her face. "But you, with your fierce spirit and your unwavering belief in me, have given me the strength to face my demons and to forge a new path, one that is filled with love and purpose."

Rosalind's heart swelled with emotion, her eyes locked on Alex's as he continued to speak.

"I love you, Rosalind," he declared, his voice strong and clear in the stillness of the sitting room. "I love you with every fibre of my being, and I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my days by your side."

Rosalind's breath caught in her throat, her eyes wide with wonder and disbelief. She had dreamed of hearing those words from Alex's lips, but to hear them spoken aloud, with such conviction and sincerity, was almost more than she could bear.

"I love you too, Alex," she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. "I love you more than I ever thought possible, and I want nothing more than to be yours, now and forever."

Rosalind's heart raced as she gazed into Alex's eyes, her entire being longing to be



closer to him, to feel the warmth of his touch and the comfort of his embrace. The love that had blossomed between them was a force that threatened to consume her, a fire that burned brighter with each passing moment. Even as her body ached for his, Rosalind knew that she had to resist the temptation, to hold fast to the principles of propriety and decorum that had been ingrained in her since birth. She was a lady, and a lady did not succumb to her desires, no matter how strong they might be.

Alex, too, seemed to be struggling with the same internal battle; his eyes darkening with a hunger that matched her own, but he was a gentleman, and a gentleman did not endanger a lady's reputation, no matter how much he might want to.

"Rosalind," he murmured, his voice low and rough with emotion, "I want nothing more than to take you in my arms and never let you go, but I know that we must wait. We must do things properly, for the sake of your reputation and our future together."

Rosalind nodded, her heart swelling with love and gratitude for the man who stood before her. He understood her, understood the delicate balance that they had to strike between their own desires and the expectations of society.

"I know, Alex," she whispered, her hand reaching out to gently caress his cheek, feeling greatly daring. "And I am grateful for your restraint, for your respect for me and for the love that we share."

For a moment, they simply sat there, lost in each other's eyes, their hearts beating in perfect sync. With a sigh of resignation, Alex stood, gently pulling her to her feet. "We should return to the task at hand," he said, his voice tinged with regret. "The servants will be wondering where we have gone, and we have much to discuss before the masquerade ball."

Rosalind nodded, her own sense of duty and responsibility warring with her desire to remain in Alex's presence for just a little while longer, but she knew that he was right,

that they had to be careful. They had to maintain the illusion of propriety, even as their hearts yearned for something more.

Even so, she couldn't completely regret teasing him. She let out a dramatic sigh and put the back of her hand to her forehead. "Oh, to be cursed with such a considerate, responsible man," she said in the manner of a stage actress in the midst of a great tragedy, letting her eyes fall closed in a pretend swoon. She cracked one eye open, fighting a smile all the while, and Alex chuckled, too.

And then, as they were about to leave the sitting room, Alex turned to her, his eyes shining with love and determination.

"Rosalind," he said, his voice steady and sure, "I know that we have only just begun to explore the depths of our feelings for each other, but I also know that I cannot imagine my life without you by my side."

Rosalind's breath caught in her throat, her heart pounding with anticipation and joy.

"What are you saying, Alex?" she asked, her voice curious.

"I am saying that I want to marry you, Rosalind," he declared, his hand reaching out to take hers in a gentle, but firm grip. "I want to spend the rest of my days with you, living a life that is filled with love and purpose and joy. I want more than simply convenience—I want you," he said with such finality that no one could ever doubt the depths of his sincerity and love.

Rosalind's eyes filled with tears, her heart overflowing with a love that she had never thought possible. She had dreamed of this moment, had longed for the day when Alex would ask for her hand in marriage, but to hear the words spoken aloud, with such conviction and sincerity, was almost more than she could bear.

"Yes, Alex," she breathed, her voice barely above a whisper. "Yes, I will marry you, now and forever."

And then, in a moment of perfect synchronicity, they both spoke at once, their voices blending together in a harmony that was as beautiful as it was profound.

"We should announce our engagement at the masquerade ball," they said, their eyes locked on each other's, their hearts beating as one, matching grins on their faces.

### Chapter 22

The night of the masquerade ball arrived in a swirl of anticipation and excitement. The grand ballroom of Alex's townhouse transformed into a glittering wonderland of music, laughter, and dance. Alex and Rosalind made their entrance, a vision of elegance and grace in their finery, their masks unable to conceal the joy and love that radiated from every inch of their beings. As they entered the ballroom arm in arm, the assembled guests turned to watch in awe, their eyes widening at the sight of the Duke and his beloved, the very picture of romantic perfection.

Rosalind was resplendent in dark green shot through with gold. She wore a gold mask that highlighted the comely curve of her eyes and silk flowers all over it. Matching silk flowers peppered her hair, and a simple gold circlet atop her hair, which was piled loosely at the top of her head. With her bare shoulders and a necklace with garnets in the shape of a pomegranate, it was clear that she was Persephone.

The Duke, standing tall and proud by her side, wore a piece of dark midnight blue silk draped over one shoulder on top of his jet-black evening jacket. He, too, wore a circlet of gold, but his was in the shape of serpents. His mask was also dark blue, and cut sharply to emphasise his cheekbones. His dark attire only highlighted his dark hair and eyes, giving him a slightly sinister air that secretly thrilled Rosalind to no end. He was the Hades to her Persephone.

As Lady Rosalind entered the grand ballroom on Alex's arm, she felt as though she had stepped into a dream. The room was awash in a sea of glittering candles, their soft light casting a warm glow over the assembled guests. Great swathes of silk hung from the ceiling, undulating softly as the ballroom windows had been opened fully to

allow the summer breeze to circulate within. Sideboards were piled high with jellies in fantastic shapes, candied fruits that glistened in the low light, and small pastries dusted with gold. Much of the food was gilded, and that which wasn't gilded had been thickly glazed so that all of it glistened and shone like a feast for the gods. The air was filled with the gentle strains of a string quartet, which was artfully concealed behind a screen painted with a pastoral scene.

As they stepped into the ballroom, the guests parted like the Red Sea, making way for the Duke and his beloved. Rosalind could feel the weight of their gazes upon her, could hear the whispers and murmurs of speculation that followed in their wake, but she paid them no mind; her attention focused solely on the man at her side and the love that burned brightly between them. She ignored them imperiously, as grand as any queen.

It was Alex's duty to open the ball as the host, and there had never been any doubt in either of their minds as to who he would be opening it with. Truthfully, Rosalind had almost foregone the customary dance card, as she had no desire to partner with anyone else that night. She had been persuaded, however, by her sisters, who insisted that she maintain the look of propriety. The dance cards were beautifully embossed, and the gold string that was meant to be worn over the wrist had a tiny charm in the shape of a seashell that shone like a pearl.

They arranged themselves into the formation with the other couples, but they couldn't take their eyes from one another. They stared at each other with a heat that couldn't be concealed by their masks. The rest of the guests stared at them in turn, at such a blatant display of regard in public between unmarried people. It didn't matter—Rosalind had decided that she didn't give a fig for their opinions, and she wasn't about to start caring now.

As the final notes of the aptly named *The Kiss* faded away, Alex bowed as was required, and continued to gaze right into Rosalind's eyes. He folded his arms tightly

behind his back, the very picture of prosperity. It looked to Rosalind, though, as if he did so to keep from openly embracing her right there on the dance floor. "I love you," he murmured, his voice low and filled with emotion. "I love you more than I ever thought possible."

Rosalind's heart swelled with joy, the broad smile that bloomed under her mask all the answer that was needed.

Alex took his place at the head of the ballroom, receiving guests with congenial smiles and nods to those of rank. It was his duty to see that every guest was officially welcomed, and to ensure that the evening progressed as was expected.

Rosalind, acting as de facto hostess, remained by his side, adding her own smiles of welcome. Most of the guests gave her querying looks, as if they couldn't quite understand how she fit into this picture. She didn't care—she was just pleased to be by Alex's side, especially when he would give her a sideways glance and their eyes would meet for a moment.

They were at the point of the evening when there would be entertainment provided, giving the dancers a moment to catch their breath. At great expense, Alex had arranged for a troupe of Chinese acrobats, their faces delicately painted and flowers in their hair. Some walked on their hands, others balanced teacups or plates on poles, twirling them as they wound through the crowd. It was a mesmerising sight, which all of the guests seemed enraptured by.

Rosalind, however, was beginning to feel the strain of the evening. She had been so busy preparing for the masque that she'd had hardly a moment to herself, and she felt a little wrung out from having to put on a polite face.

Quietly, without anyone noticing her, she slipped from the ballroom. The delighted gasps and murmurs of the crowd faded as she moved through the dimly lit halls,

finding her way upstairs to a room that had been set aside as a dressing room for the ladies. To her relief, there were no maids in attendance.

Probably gone to sneak a glass of punch in the kitchens, Rosalind thought with a wry smile. She couldn't exactly blame them. She closed and latched the green-backed door to the servants' stairs, ensuring that she would have her moment of solitude. She walked to the window which overlooked the expansive garden that backed the Duke's townhouse—a real luxury in London, and proof positive of his status. She leaned forward, braced her hands on the windowsill and touched her forehead to the cool glass. It was soothing, this moment of calm and reflection before the excitement that would surely follow the announcement of their engagement.

Her eyes fell softly closed as she contemplated the man that she was going to be marrying. That thought alone sent a thrill through her. Her cheeks grew warm again as she thought of his smiles, the way that his eyes followed her every move. He loved her, and she loved him, and damn the rest of them.

The door creaked softly as it opened, and Rosalind half-turned, expecting to find another young lady who wished to mend her hair, and mentally braced herself for any conversation that might ensue. To her great relief and equal shock, it was no lady that stood there, filling the doorway—it was Alex.

He stared at Rosalind, a blatant hunger on his face that made Rosalind's mouth go dry and warmth pool in her stomach. He stalked toward her like a lion on the hunt, and Rosalind found herself tripping lightly toward him, and they crashed together in the centre of the room.

They came together in a searing kiss, their lips meeting with a hunger and desperation that stole the breath from Rosalind's lungs. Alex pulled back long enough to nudge the door closed with his foot, the lock clicking into place with a satisfying sound. He quickly scooped Rosalind back into his arms, and she melted into Alex's embrace, her

body moulding to his as though they were two halves of the same whole. His hands roamed over her curves, tracing the delicate lines of her shoulders and the swell of her breasts as they rose from her stays, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

Rosalind's own hands explored the hard planes of his chest, the ripple of muscle beneath his finely tailored evening jacket, the strength and power of him both thrilling and comforting. Their hands were everywhere, as if they couldn't possibly get enough of one another.

They lost themselves in the sensation of each other. The world beyond the walls of their sanctuary fading away until all that remained was the two of them and the love that consumed them, body and soul. Rosalind's heart swelled with the intensity of her emotions, the depth of her feelings for this man who had captured her heart so completely. With trembling fingers, they began to undress each other, each article of clothing falling away to reveal the truth of their love and the commitment they had made to one another.

Rosalind fumbled a little with the unfamiliar men's garments, her fingers trembling as she reached for buttons and unwound his cravat. Alex's touch was reverent, his eyes filled with wonder and adoration as he gazed upon her, his fingers skimming over her skin like a whispered prayer.

As they came together, their bodies joining as one, Rosalind felt a sense of completeness, a rightness that she had never known before. All of the doubts, the sniping from the ton, even the hesitation of her own heart to allow herself to love all melted away. They moved together in perfect harmony, their passion building with each thrust, each caress, each breathless moan. The pleasure coursed through her veins like molten gold, building and building until she thought she might shatter from the intensity of it all. Alex's lips found hers once more, his kiss a promise and a vow, a pledge of his love and devotion. Rosalind clung to him, her nails digging into the firm muscles of his back, anchoring herself to him as they climbed higher and higher



towards the peak of their ecstasy.

When the moment finally came, when the world exploded in a kaleidoscope of colour and sensation, Rosalind knew that she would never be the same. She had found her other half, her soulmate, the one person who completed her in every way possible. As they lay together in the aftermath, their bodies intertwined and their hearts beating as one, she knew that this was only the beginning of their forever.

Rosalind savoured the warmth of Alex's embrace, their bodies still intertwined in the afterglow of their passionate lovemaking. His skin was slick against hers, and she could feel the pounding of his heart, a rhythm that matched her own. In this moment, nothing else mattered but the two of them and the love they shared.

"I love you, Alex," Rosalind whispered, her voice raw with emotion. "I never knew it was possible to feel this way, to be so completely consumed by another person."

Alex's hand came up to gently cup her cheek, his thumb brushing over her kiss-swollen lips. "You are my everything, Rosalind," he murmured, his eyes shining with adoration. "I promise to love you, to cherish you, to stand by your side through whatever life may bring. You are my heart, my soul, my reason for being."

Rosalind's eyes filled with tears at his words, the depth of his devotion overwhelming her. She captured his lips in a searing kiss, pouring all of her love and passion into the embrace. They clung to each other, lost in the moment, until the distant strains of music from the ballroom below reminded them of the world beyond the four walls that had framed their loving embrace.

With a final, lingering kiss and a squeeze of their hands, they reluctantly parted, untangling their legs. Alex chuckled a little as Rosalind wobbled slightly when she stood, and she sent him a mockingly doleful look. They straightened their clothing, Alex obligingly helping Rosalind with her stays and watching with curiosity as she

inserted the wooden busk into the centre. She sat at the dressing table with a puff of a sigh and stared at her hair for a moment. She attempted to right it, pushing the pins back in. She didn't dare to call a maid, so she just made do herself.

"At least it was tousled to begin with," she grumbled, which made Alex laugh again and drop a kiss on the back of her neck that made her shiver.

When she was at last done, Alex raised a brow at her as if to silently ask if she was well. She nodded, pressing her mask to her face again and tying it on, just as the mask of propriety slipped back into place as they prepared to rejoin the masquerade. Even as they composed themselves, the memory of their secret moment of passion lingered, a cherished memory that would stay with her always.

For the first time, Rosalind felt truly at peace, truly complete. Here, on Alex's arm as they nonchalantly re-entered the ballroom, she was not just Lady Rosalind, the unconventional daughter of a nobleman. She was not defined by society's expectations or the constraints of her gender—she was simply a woman in love, a woman who had found her other half, her soulmate.

As the final notes of the song faded away, Alex took a chance and snaked his arm about her waist, pulling her close. "I love you, Lady Rosalind, Duchess of Somerton," he whispered, his voice filled with reverence and awe.

Rosalind's heart soared at his words, at the realisation that this was real, that this was her life now. She would be the Duchess of Somerton, the wife of the man she loved more than life itself. As they stood there, surrounded by the glittering splendour of the ballroom and the ton, she knew that this was only the beginning of their forever.

As Rosalind and Alex swayed to the music, lost in a world of their own, a figure emerged from the shadows at the edge of the ballroom. It was a woman dressed all in black, her face hidden behind an intricate mask that seemed to shimmer and shift in

the candlelight.

For a moment, Rosalind rationally thought that she was a shadow made real. Rosalind's heart skipped a beat as she watched the mysterious figure glide across the floor, moving with a grace and purpose that was both mesmerising and unsettling. Her eyes never left Alex and Rosalind, ignoring the dancers and weaving about them with ease.

The woman approached them, her steps deliberate and measured, her gaze fixed on Rosalind. As she drew closer, Rosalind could see that the mask was adorned with intricate patterns of black lace and glittering crystals, a work of art that seemed to come alive in the low light of the ballroom.

Alex's arm tightened around Rosalind, his body tensing as he sensed the change in her demeanour. He turned to face the approaching figure, his eyes narrowing behind his own mask as he tried to discern the woman's identity and intentions.

The woman stopped just a few feet away from them, her head tilted slightly to the side as she regarded Rosalind with an intensity that made her skin prickle. For a moment, the three of them stood frozen, the music and the chatter of the other guests fading into the background as they faced each other in a silent standoff.

Then, the woman spoke, her voice low and melodic, with a hint of an accent that Rosalind couldn't quite place. "Your Grace," she said, her lips curving into a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long time."

Alex's voice was cold and hard as he addressed the woman, his words sharp and biting. "What are you doing here?"

### Chapter 23

Rosalind stared at the stranger warily. She clutched Alex's arm tighter, her fingers digging into the fabric of his sleeve as a wave of unease washed over her.

The woman's gaze flickered towards Alex, and Rosalind saw something in her eyes that made her blood run cold. It was a look of familiarity, of intimacy – a look that spoke volumes about the nature of their relationship. Rosalind's mind raced, piecing together the puzzle, and she felt a sickening sense of dread settle in the pit of her stomach. This woman, whoever she was, knew Alex in a way that Rosalind could not fathom. And the way she looked at him, with a mixture of longing and possessiveness, sent a chill down Rosalind's spine.

Alex seemed to sense Rosalind's discomfort, for he shifted his stance, putting himself between her and the woman in a protective gesture. "You have no right to be here," he growled, his voice low and dangerous.

The woman's lips curved into a mocking smile, her eyes dancing with amusement. "Oh, but I do," she purred, her gaze flickering back to Rosalind. "You see, your beloved Duke and I have a history that runs far deeper than you could ever imagine."

Rosalind felt her heart sink as the woman's words washed over her, each syllable like a dagger twisting in her gut. She wanted to believe that this was all some sort of misunderstanding, a cruel trick of fate, but the look in the woman's eyes told her otherwise. Instinctively, she glanced around, hoping that none of the eager ears of the ton had overheard the woman's bold words.

As the woman took a step closer, Rosalind felt a surge of anger rise within her, a fierce protectiveness that threatened to consume her. She would not let this woman, whoever she was, come between her and Alex. Not now, not ever.

With a defiant tilt of her chin, Rosalind met the woman's gaze head-on, her emerald eyes burning with a fierce determination. "I don't know who you are," she said, her voice steady and unwavering, "but I will not let you ruin what Alex and I have built."

The woman's laughter was like a knife to Rosalind's heart, mocking and cruel. "Oh, my dear," she said through a laugh, her eyes glittering with malice. "You have no idea what you've got yourself into."

"Outside," the Duke snarled in a voice that Rosalind almost didn't recognise. "Now."

With a last, lingering look at Rosalind, the strange woman sauntered out of the ballroom as if she had the world on a string. Alex, his jaw tight and his shoulders squared as if he were facing a firing squad, followed after her without so much as a word to Rosalind.

Rosalind's heart pounded in her chest as she watched Alex and the mysterious woman disappear through the balcony doors. A thousand thoughts raced through her mind, each one more unsettling than the last. Who was this woman, and what hold did she have over Alex?

The ballroom seemed to spin around her, the laughter and music fading into a distant hum as she stood frozen in place. She felt exposed, vulnerable, as if all eyes were upon her, scrutinising her every move. The weight of the ton's judgement pressed down on her shoulders, suffocating her with their whispers and speculations.

Rosalind's gaze darted around the room, searching for a familiar face, someone she could cling to in this moment of uncertainty. All she saw, though, were the curious

glances and raised eyebrows of the ton. Their expressions were a mixture of pity and barely concealed glee at the prospect of a fresh scandal.

She longed to follow Alex and the woman, to demand answers and lay bare the truth, no matter how painful it might be. Instead, her feet felt rooted to the spot, paralysed by the fear of what she might uncover. What if this woman's claims were true? What if Alex had been deceiving her all along, playing her for a fool?

The thought was almost too much to bear, and Rosalind felt her eyes sting with unshed tears. She blinked them back furiously, refusing to show weakness in front of the vultures that circled her. She was Lady Rosalind Harrington, and she would not be cowed by the whispers of the ton. With a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, projecting an air of confidence she did not truly feel. She would not allow this moment to define her, nor would she let the rumours and speculations of others dictate her path.

Amidst the dancers, Rosalind stood alone, determined to confront Alex and uncover the truth.

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Rosalind's heart pounded in her chest as she crept down the dimly lit corridor, her footsteps muffled by the plush carpet beneath her feet. She could hear the faint strains of music and laughter drifting from the ballroom. However, all of that seemed a world away as she drew closer to the balcony doors, beyond which Alex and the mysterious woman had disappeared.

With trembling hands, she reached for the handle of the balcony door, her fingers curling around the cool metal as she eased it open just enough to slip through. The night air was cool against her flushed cheeks, and she paused for a moment, gathering her courage before moving forward.

Rosalind could hear the low murmur of voices coming from the far end of the balcony, and she moved towards them with cautious steps, her skirts whispering against the flagstones. As she drew closer, she could make out the words, though their meaning remained elusive.

"...cannot believe you had the audacity..." Alex's voice was low and dangerous, laced with a fury that Rosalind had never heard before.

"Oh, come now, Alex," the woman purred, her voice dripping with a saccharine sweetness that sent a shiver down Rosalind's spine. "Surely you didn't think you could escape all responsibility."

Rosalind pressed herself against the wall, her heart thundering in her chest as she strained to catch every word. Who was this woman, and what was her connection to Alex? The questions swirled in her mind, each one more unsettling than the last.

"You have no right," Alex growled, his voice tight with barely contained anger. "You can't just stroll back into my life and—"

"Can't I?" The woman's laugh was like the tinkling of bells, but there was a sharp edge to it that cut through Rosalind like a knife. "I seem to have done just that, my dear Duke."

Rosalind's breath caught in her throat as she realised the implications of the woman's words. Could it be that this woman was... No, she dared not even entertain the thought. But the way Alex spoke to her, the undercurrent of history between them, it all seemed to point to one inescapable truth.

Rosalind emerged from the shadows, her heart racing as she stepped out onto the balcony. Alex stood with his back to her, his shoulders tense and his head bowed. The mysterious woman was nowhere to be seen, having slipped away like a wraith in the

night.

"Alex?" Rosalind's voice was barely above a whisper, but it seemed to echo in the stillness of the night air. "What's going on? Who was that woman?"

Alex turned slowly, his face a mask of anguish and despair. In the moonlight, Rosalind could see the glimmer of unshed tears in his eyes, and her heart clenched at the sight.

"Rosalind, I..." He faltered, his voice breaking on her name. "I don't know how to explain."

"Try." Rosalind stepped closer, her silk gown rustling as she moved. "I heard what she said, Alex. About responsibility and... and the past. What did she mean?"

Alex closed his eyes, his jaw clenching as he struggled to find the words. "Her name is Mary Blackwood," he said at last, his voice low and rough with emotion. "She and I... we were involved, years ago. Before I met you."

Rosalind felt as though the ground had dropped out from beneath her feet. She stared at Alex, her mind reeling as she tried to process his words. "Involved," she repeated, her voice sounding distant and strange to her own ears. "You mean... you were lovers?"

Alex nodded, his eyes still closed as if he couldn't bear to look at her. "It was a mistake," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "A foolish, reckless mistake. I ended things with her, but... but she claims..."

"Claims what?" Rosalind demanded, her voice rising in pitch as a sense of dread settled in the pit of her stomach.



Alex opened his eyes, and the pain she saw there took her breath away. "She claims to have born my child," he said, his voice breaking on the last word. "A son, born out of wedlock. She says she's come to claim what's rightfully hers... and the child's."

Rosalind felt shocked and hurt. She stared at Alex, her mind reeling as she tried to make sense of his words. A child... a son... born to another woman. The betrayal cut deep, making it hard for her to breathe..

"How could you?" she whispered, her voice trembling with a mixture of anger and despair. "How could you keep this from me, Alex? I thought... I thought we had no secrets between us."

Alex's words devastated Rosalind.

"I didn't know, Rosalind," Alex said, his voice laced with desperation as he reached for her, his fingers closing around her wrist in a gentle but firm grip. "I swear to you, I had no idea she was with child when she left me all those years ago."

Rosalind wrenched her arm from his grasp, her eyes flashing with fury as she took a step back. With a sharp tug, she snatched the mask from her face so that he might see her fury all the better. "And you expect me to believe that?" she spat, her voice trembling with the force of her emotions. "You expect me to believe that this... this woman just happened to show up out of the blue, claiming to have born your child, and you had no knowledge of it whatsoever?"

Alex's face was a mask of anguish, his eyes pleading with her to understand. "I know how it sounds, Rosalind, but you have to believe me. Mary and I... we were together, yes, but it was a mistake, a moment of weakness that I've regretted ever since. When she left me, she gave no explanation, no indication that she was carrying my child. I was heartbroken, Rosalind, and I thought I could never love again."

Rosalind's eyes filled with tears as she gazed at the man she thought she knew. The man she had given her heart to so completely. "And now?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Am I just the latest in a long string of mistresses, Alex? Another notch in your bedpost, another conquest to be cast aside when you tire of me?"

"No!" Alex's denial was vehement and immediate, his eyes wide and earnest as he reached for her again, only to have her recoil from his touch. "Rosalind, you have to believe me, you are the only woman I have ever truly loved. What I felt for Mary was nothing compared to the depths of my feelings for you."

Alex's betrayal weighed heavily on Rosalind. She shook her head, her hands trembling as she took another step back, putting more distance between them.

"I can't..." she whispered, her voice thick with tears she refused to let fall. He would get no more of her tears. "I can't do this, Alex. Not now, not after this."

Alex's face shifted, the lines in it hardening and his eyes going cold. It was like a stranger was standing in his place, and it was terrible to see. Rosalind recoiled as if struck. His eyes flashed with a fury she had never seen before, and for a moment, she feared she did not truly know the man she had given her heart to.

Alex's jaw clenched, and Rosalind could see the muscle twitching in his cheek as he struggled to maintain his composure. "It's not that simple, Rosalind," he bit out, his words clipped and sharp. "This child, whether legitimate or not, is still an heir to my title, to my legacy. I cannot simply turn my back on that."

Rosalind felt the air leave her lungs in a rush, as though she had been punched in the gut. She stared at Alex, her eyes wide and disbelieving. "So that's it, then?" she whispered, her voice thick. "You're simply going to give in, to just discard everything we've—I thought we meant more to each other than this."

Alex's expression softened for a moment, and he reached out to her, his fingers grazing her arm in a gentle caress. "Rosalind, please, try to understand..."

Rosalind wrenched her arm away from his touch, her eyes blazing with a fury that matched his own. "No, Alex," she said, her voice low and trembling with barely contained emotion. "I don't think I can understand this at all. You claim to love me, to want a future with me, yet you refuse to trust me with your whole self. I cannot abide a marriage where there isn't trust, without reservation."

Alex's face twisted with anguish, and for a moment, Rosalind thought she saw a flicker of doubt in his eyes. Then his expression hardened once more, and he drew himself up to his full height, his shoulders squared as if bracing for a battle.

"I have a responsibility, Rosalind," he said, his voice low and unyielding. "A duty to my family, to my legacy. I cannot simply ignore that, no matter how much I may wish to."

Rosalind felt the tears she had been holding back spill over, hot and stinging as they streaked down her cheeks. She shook her head slowly, her heart shattering into a million pieces.

"Then I fear you have made your choice, Your Grace," she said, her voice thick with pain and betrayal. "And it is not me." She straightened, tossing her head proudly so that he would not see how badly she was truly hurting. "Of all of this, the one thing that I do understand is that you must do what is right by your child. Whatever I may think of your...past, that child is innocent. Do right by him."

With that, she turned and retreated to the ballroom. She didn't bother replacing her mask, leaving it at Alex's feet. Let the ton see, let them judge—she did not, could not care anymore what they might think. Through it all, her conscience ate at her; she couldn't ask Alex to abandon his child, it was wrong and unfair to even think it. Her

own future, once so secure, so certain, was now like a great, yawning void before her.

### Chapter 24

The carriage swayed softly while traversing the dimly illuminated streets of London, the muffled sounds of the city filtering in through the curtained windows. Rosalind sat in silence, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her eyes downcast as she fought to keep her emotions in check.

Beside her, she could see Isabella and Amelia exchanging worried glances, their brows furrowed in concern. They obviously knew something was amiss, could see the sadness writ large on Rosalind's face, but with their father present, they dared not speak of it openly.

Lord Harrington, oblivious to the tension that hung thick in the air, chattered on merrily about the evening's events. "A rousing success, wouldn't you agree?" he exclaimed, his voice booming in the confined space of the carriage. "The ton was abuzz with excitement. I daresay the Duke will propose any time now. I wouldn't be surprised if he paid a call on us tomorrow for that very reason."

His words stabbed Rosalind's heart, recalling the night's events. She had been so hopeful, so full of joy and anticipation as she had walked into the ballroom on Alex's arm, their love a beacon of light in the midst of the glittering crowd.

But then Mary had appeared, like a spectre from the past, and everything had come crashing down around her. Rosalind's hands clenched into fists as she berated herself silently for allowing herself to trust Alex so completely, for opening her heart to him and believing in the promise of their future together.

How could she have been so naive, so blind to the truth of his past? She believed he was unique and their connection was deeper than others. In the end, though, she joined the long list of women who fell prey to his charms, left with a broken heart.

Rosalind swallowed hard, fighting back the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks. She could feel her sisters' concerned gazes upon her, but she could not bring herself to meet their eyes, could not bear to see the pity and sympathy she knew would be reflected there.

Instead, she turned her face towards the window, watching as the familiar sights of London slipped by, her mind a whirlwind of anguish and regret. She gave everything to Alex, only to have it all destroyed in one moment.

As the carriage drew closer to home, Rosalind could not shake the feeling that her world had been irrevocably shattered, that the future she had so carefully crafted for herself was nothing more than a fragile illusion, destined to crumble at the slightest touch.

Rosalind barely waited for the sleepy footman to open the carriage door before she leapt out. Her legs nearly getting tangled in her gown as she dashed towards the imposing facade of the Harringtons' townhouse. Behind her, she could hear her sisters calling out to her, their voices laced with concern, but she paid them no heed; her mind consumed by a single, all-encompassing thought – to escape, to flee from the anguish and heartbreak that threatened to consume her.

"Rosalind!" Her father's booming voice cut through the night air like a whip crack, sharp and reprimanding. "What is the meaning of this unseemly behaviour? You shame yourself, running about like a wild boy!"

Rosalind could not bring herself to care about propriety or decorum, not when her entire world had been shattered into a million pieces. She continued her headlong

flight, her feet pounding up the stairs as she raced towards the sanctuary of her bedchamber, the only place where she could finally let the tears flow unchecked.

Bursting through the doors, she flung herself onto the bed, burying her face in the soft embrace of her pillows as the sobs she had been holding back finally broke free. Trembling with anguish, she mourned the death of her dreams and her broken heart.

The sound of the door opening barely registered through the haze of her grief, but then she felt the mattress dip as her sisters joined her, their arms encircling her trembling form in a tight embrace. Amelia and Isabella murmured soothing words. Their voices were a soft counterpoint to the storm raging within Rosalind's heart. However, it was not until she felt their tears mingling with her own that she finally found the strength to speak.

"He... he has a child," she choked out, the words bitter on her tongue. "A child with... with that woman, Mary. He never told me, never gave any indication that he had such a... such a secret in his past."

Rosalind's voice broke on the last word, and she dissolved into fresh sobs, her body shuddering with the force of her anguish. Amelia and Isabella held her tighter, their own tears falling freely as they shared in their sister's heartbreak, offering what little comfort they could in the face of such devastating news.

For long moments, the only sound in the room was the ragged cadence of Rosalind's breathing as she struggled to regain her composure. Even as the sobs subsided, leaving her feeling wrung out, she could feel the weight of her father's impending wrath pressing down upon her, a heavy mantle that she knew she could not avoid for much longer.

She would have to tell him, to face the consequences of her actions and the choices she had made. Though the thought filled her with dread, she knew that she had no

choice but to press on. With her remaining strength, she had to prepare herself for the upcoming battle.

The elegant drawing room felt more like a gilded cage than a place of comfort and respite. Rosalind sat rigidly upon the delicate chaise longue, her hands clasped tightly in her lap as she braced herself for her father's inevitable wrath. She could feel his piercing gaze upon her, scrutinizing her every movement, every flicker of emotion that danced across her features.

"Explain yourself, girl," Lord Harrington demanded, his voice a low rumble that reverberated through the very foundations of the room. "What could possibly possess you to refuse the Duke of Somerton's suit? Do you have any idea of the consequences your actions will bring upon this family?"

Rosalind lifted her chin defiantly, her emerald eyes blazing with a fire that refused to be extinguished. "The Duke has... indiscretions in his past that I cannot abide," she replied, her voice trembling ever so slightly despite her best efforts to remain composed. "Secrets that he has kept hidden, even from me."

Lord Harrington's brow furrowed, his lips twisting into a disdainful sneer. "Indiscretions?" he scoffed. "My dear girl, you are being far too idealistic. Every man of the ton has skeletons in his closet, secrets that are best left unspoken. The Duke of Somerton is no different."

Rosalind's hands clenched into tight fists, her nails biting into the soft flesh of her palms as she struggled to maintain her composure. "This is not some mere dalliance or youthful indiscretion, Father," she insisted, her voice trembling with barely contained emotion. "He has a child, a son born out of wedlock, and he never saw fit to tell me of her existence."

The weight of the words bore down on Rosalind, impacting her. She could see the



shock ripple across her father's features, his eyes widening ever so slightly before he regained his customary stoic mask.

"A child?" he repeated, his tone laced with a mixture of disbelief and disdain. "And you would throw away this opportunity, this chance to secure your future and that of your sisters, over such a trifling matter? One illegitimate scrapling will mean nothing when you begin to produce legitimate heirs."

Rosalind's heart clenched, the pain threatening to overpower her again. "It is not a trifling matter, Father," she insisted, her voice barely audible over the roaring in her ears. "He lied to me, kept such a monumental secret from me, and I cannot... I cannot..."

She fought back tears as she pressed a trembling hand to her lips. Lord Harrington regarded her with a mixture of exasperation and disappointment, his features hardening into a mask of stern disapproval.

"You are being far too emotional, Rosalind," he chided, his tone sharp and unyielding. "This is not some fanciful notion from one of your beloved novels. This is reality, and in reality, we must make sacrifices and compromises for the greater good of the family."

Rosalind opened her mouth to protest, but her father raised a silencing hand, his expression brooking no argument. "We must move quickly to mitigate any damage your actions may have caused."

Rosalind felt her father's words weigh heavily on her, drowning her in dread and anguish. She knew, deep in her heart, that he spoke the truth – society would judge her harshly for rejecting the Duke of Somerton's suit, and her sisters' reputations would suffer in turn.

"But Father," she protested, her voice trembling with barely contained emotion, "it was never a formal engagement. Surely the ton will understand that a courtship was merely... an exploration of possibilities."

Lord Harrington's gaze hardened, his eyes flashing with a mixture of disappointment and frustration. "Do not be so naive, child," he chided, his tone laced with a hint of condescension. "The mere whisper of a potential match between you and the Duke has set tongues wagging throughout the entirety of the ton. Your reputation, and by extension that of your sisters, hangs by a thread. When a duke is involved, it is always the young lady who is found wanting if the match does not come to fruition."

Rosalind's heart sank, the weight of her father's words bearing down upon her like a physical burden. She knew, deep down, that he was right—the damage had been done, and her actions had cast a shadow over the entire family.

"What would you have me do, then?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Marry a man I cannot trust, a man who has deceived me in the most egregious of ways?"

Lord Harrington's expression softened ever so slightly, a flicker of something akin to sympathy passing across his features. "I would have you do what is necessary for the good of the family," he replied, his tone firm yet tinged with a hint of regret. "You will begin a new courtship, with a suitor of my choosing, and you will conduct yourself with the utmost propriety and decorum."

Rosalind felt the words catch in her throat, a thousand protests rising to her lips. She wanted to remind her father that it was he who had chosen the Duke of Somerton, he who had pushed her towards a match that had ultimately brought her nothing but heartache and humiliation. However, the words died on her tongue, unspoken, as she saw the resolute determination in her father's eyes.

With a heavy heart, Rosalind nodded in acceptance. With a heavy heart, Rosalind nodded in acceptance, realizing her dreams of a loving partnership were destroyed. Her future lay in the hands of her father, and she could only hope that his choice would be a merciful one.

"I already know just the fellow," Lord Harrington was saying, but it sounded as if his words were coming to Rosalind from very far away, as if she was at the bottom of a deep, dark well. "A man of good standing and position, someone steady and intractable to help manage your wilder inclinations. Yes, that is what is needed."

Rosalind only closed her eyes, dread settling over her shoulders like a mantle that she was too tired to shrug off.

### Chapter 25

Rosalind sat by the window of her bedroom, her gaze fixed upon the stables behind the house. It had been days since her world had come crashing down around her, since the revelation of the Duke's betrayal had shattered her dreams and left her heart in tatters.

Her eyes felt dry and gritty, the aftermath of countless tears shed in the wake of that fateful night at the masquerade ball. She had cried until it seemed as though she had no tears left to give, her body wracked with sobs that tore at her very soul.

Her mind wandered to the hours spent at the stables, finding joy in riding and the sound of hooves. It had been a place of respite, a place where she could escape the constraints of society and the weight of expectations that seemed to press down upon her from all sides.

Horseback riding through St. James's Park feels distant and uninteresting to her now. The stables were a reminder of a freedom she once had, now out of reach.

Rosalind's fingers traced the embroidery of the cushion she clutched, her mind replaying the conversation with her father over and over again. She could still hear the disappointment in his voice, the steely resolve that left no room for argument or compromise.

A new courtship, he had said, with a suitor of his choosing. A man to help manage her "wilder inclinations," as if her spirit and her intellect were something to be tamed and subdued, rather than celebrated. Rosalind felt a heavy sense of dread at the

thought of her future being decided by others. She had sacrificed everything for her sisters and family honour. Even that selfless act had been rendered meaningless, her efforts reduced to naught in the face of the Duke's deception.

Rosalind's gaze drifted back to the stables, her heart aching with a longing for the freedom and solace they had once represented. As she observed the stable hands, she realized the sanctuary she once found there was forever tainted by betrayal and heartbreak.

A soft knock at the door startled Rosalind from her reverie, and she saw Amelia standing in the doorway, her face a study in concern and worry.

"May I come in?" Amelia asked gently.

Rosalind nodded, her throat too tight to speak, and watched as her sister crossed the room to sit beside her on the bed, the mattress dipping slightly under their combined weight. She reached out to Rosalind, who reluctantly stood and allowed herself to be pulled down next to Amelia.

She reached out and took Rosalind's hand in her own, her fingers warm and comforting against Rosalind's clammy skin. "I'm worried about you, Rosie," she said softly, her eyes searching Rosalind's face for some sign of the vibrant, spirited girl she had once been.

Rosalind looked away, unable to meet her sister's gaze. She felt Amelia's arm slip around her shoulders, drawing her close, and for a moment, Rosalind allowed herself to sink into the comfort of her sister's embrace, her eyes fluttering closed as she breathed in the familiar scent of lavender and rose.

Amelia pulled back slightly, biting her lower lip a little in a familiar gesture of unease. She reached into the pocket of her calico day dress and withdrew a stack of

letters. "These are from the Duke," she said quietly, holding them out to Rosalind with a hesitant hand. "He's been writing to me, trying to enlist my help in convincing you to see him. He wants to explain himself."

Rosalind stared at the letters, her heart twisting painfully in her chest as she imagined the Duke's words, the excuses and justifications he must have offered, the pleas for forgiveness and understanding. His seal, used to hold the letters folded closed, stared back at her. She shook her head, her voice barely more than a whisper as she said, "I don't want to ever hear from him again."

With a sudden, violent motion, Rosalind knocked the stack of letters from Amelia's hand, sending them scattering across the floor in a flurry of white and cream. The tangible evidence of the Duke's betrayal was too much for Rosalind, who couldn't help but cry and bury her face in her hands.

It wasn't just the fact that the Duke had a past, that he had loved another before her. It was the fact that he hadn't trusted her enough to share it with her, that he had kept such a vital part of himself hidden away, like a shameful secret to be buried and forgotten.

Amelia sighed, rising from the bed to gather up the scattered letters, her movements slow and deliberate as she collected each one and added it to the stack. Once they were all accounted for, she turned back to Rosalind, her face tinged with a sadness that tugged at Rosalind's heart.

"Even though it hurts now," Amelia said, "you might be glad to have them later."

She placed the stack of letters on the nightstand beside Rosalind's bed, her expression a little forlorn as she smoothed her skirt and settled back down beside her sister.

Rosalind felt guilty for being self-absorbed and unaware of her sister's struggles. She

reached out, taking Amelia's hand in her own and giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Are you well, Amelia?" she asked, her voice thick with concern. "You seem troubled."

Amelia hesitated, her eyes darting away for a moment as if weighing the wisdom of voicing her worries. Finally, she took a deep breath and met Rosalind's gaze once more.

"It's Thomas," she confessed, her voice trembling slightly. "I haven't received a letter from him in quite some time, and I fear that something may have happened to him."

Rosalind felt ashamed and self-absorbed. She wallowed in misery while her sister feared for her loved one's safety. She squeezed Amelia's hand tighter, her eyes still burning from all of her crying as she chided herself for not noticing her sister's distress sooner. How could she have been so blind, so wrapped up in her own pain that she failed to see the anguish etched onto Amelia's face?

With a deep, steadying breath, Rosalind pushed her own heartache aside, burying it deep within herself as she focused all her attention on her sister's plight. She would not allow herself to be consumed by her own sorrow, not when Amelia needed her strength and support more than ever.

Rosalind reached out and took Amelia's hand in her own, giving it a gentle squeeze as she met her sister's worried gaze. "You shan't face this alone, dear sister," she said, her voice low and reassuring. "Whatever the future may hold for Thomas, we shall weather it together, as we always have."

A weak smile tugged at the corners of Amelia's lips, but before she could respond, there came a soft rap at the door. Both sisters turned as the door swung open, admitting one of the household maids, her face flushed and her eyes downcast.

"Begging your pardon, m'ladies," the maid murmured, bobbing a quick curtsy. "But Lord Harrington wishes to see you in the drawing room, Lady Rosalind. You've a visitor waiting."

Rosalind felt her heart skip a beat, a flicker of hope igniting within her breast despite her best efforts to quash it. Could it be...?

"A visitor, you say?" she asked, her voice betraying a hint of the anticipation that coursed through her veins. "Do you know who it is?"

The maid shook her head. "I'm afraid not, m'lady. A lord of some sort, from the look of him, but you might want to make yourself a bit more presentable, if you'll pardon my saying so."

Rosalind glanced down at her rumpled day dress, the fabric creased and wrinkled from hours spent lying abed. Realizing her disheveled appearance, she blushed and felt ashamed at the idea of greeting a guest.

Amelia, ever the practical one, sprang into action, rising from the bed and crossing to the wardrobe. "Here, Rosie," she said, withdrawing a cornflower-blue cotton dress and laying it out on the bed. "This should do nicely."

With Amelia's help, Rosalind slipped out of her crumpled day dress and into the fresh cotton frock, revelling in the way the soft fabric caressed her skin. Amelia then produced a pale pink ribbon, which she tied in a neat bow about Rosalind's waist, accentuating the narrowness of her waist. Amelia caught Rosalind's eye in the mirror, and gave her a disapproving look—the days of skipping meals had caught up with Rosalind, rendering her unfashionably thin.

The maid worked quickly, helping Rosalind with her shoes and retrieving a small vial of rosewater from Rosalind's dressing table and dabbing a few drops behind her ears,



the sweet, floral scent mingling with the faint hint of vanilla that still clung to her skin and twisting her hair up quickly and efficiently.

By the time they were finished, Rosalind felt almost like her old self again. The weight of her sorrow temporarily lifted by the simple pleasure of being fussed over and primped. She caught a glimpse of herself in the looking glass, her cheeks flushed and her hair tamed into soft, glossy waves and pinned at the back of her head, and felt a flutter of nervous anticipation in the pit of her stomach. Though her cheeks were not as full as she might have liked, her eyes were alight for the first time in days.

With a deep breath to steady her nerves, Rosalind turned and made her way towards the door, her steps light and almost buoyant as she descended the stairs towards the drawing room. As she drew nearer, she could make out the low murmur of voices, one of them unmistakably her father's, the other deeper and more resonant.

Pushing open the door, Rosalind stepped into the drawing room, her gaze immediately seeking out the figure of the visitor. As her eyes fell upon the man standing before the fireplace, her heart sank, the flicker of hope that had burned so brightly mere moments ago snuffed out in an instant.

It was not the Duke who stood before her, but a stranger, a man she had never laid eyes upon before. He was tall and well-built, with a shock of silver hair and a weathered, aristocratic countenance that spoke of wealth and privilege.

"Ah, Rosalind," her father said, his voice clipped and formal as he gestured towards the stranger. "May I present Lord Edmund Ashford. Lord Ashford, this is my daughter, Lady Rosalind Harrington."

The man inclined his head, his eyes sweeping over Rosalind in a perfunctory manner that sent a chill down her spine. There was no warmth in his gaze, no spark of interest or admiration, only a cool detachment that made Rosalind feel as though she were

being appraised like a piece of livestock at market.

"A pleasure, I'm sure," Lord Ashford murmured, his tone flat and disinterested.

Rosalind felt her stomach churn as Lord Ashford turned his gaze towards her father, his expression one of cool detachment as he addressed Lord Harrington directly, as though she were little more than a piece of furniture in the room.

"A vivacious young lady, to be sure," her father said, his voice dripping with forced joviality as he clasped his hands behind his back. "And an accomplished hostess, well-trained in the running of a household."

Lord Ashford's eyes flickered towards Rosalind for the briefest of moments, his brow furrowing ever so slightly as he took in her appearance. "And her... wilful nature?" he asked, his tone laced with thinly veiled disdain. "Her reputation for embracing more... modern thinking? Will that prove to be a problem?"

Rosalind felt indignant, resisting the urge to interject against condescension. How dare they speak of her as though she were little more than an errant child in need of discipline?

But before she could open her mouth, her father was speaking once more, his voice low and reassuring as he sought to assuage Lord Ashford's concerns.

"A mere phase, I assure you," he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "A young lady's fancies, nothing more. With the firm hand and guidance of an established gentleman such as yourself, I've no doubt that any... untoward tendencies will be swiftly corrected."

Lord Ashford's gaze settled upon Rosalind once more, his eyes narrowing as he appraised her in the same manner one might examine a horse before making a

purchase. Rosalind stared down at the toes of her brown leather shoes, focusing on them instead of the men discussing her.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Lord Ashford gave a curt nod, his features betraying not a hint of emotion as he turned back to Lord Harrington.

"Very well," he said, his tone clipped and businesslike. "I shall call upon Lady Rosalind again in the coming days. For now, I bid you good day."

And with that, he turned on his heel and strode towards the door, pausing only to offer the briefest of nods in Rosalind's direction before disappearing through the doorway, leaving a tense silence in his wake.

Rosalind felt as though she had been holding her breath, her chest tight with the effort of keeping her emotions in check. It was only when her father turned towards her, a self-satisfied smile playing about his lips, that she felt the first stirrings of outrage begin to well up within her.

"There now, you see?" he said, his voice tinged with a paternal smugness that made Rosalind's skin crawl. "You're already behaving in a far more becoming manner. The Duke, for all his charms, was entirely too passionate and temperamental to ever hope to control your... wilder impulses."

Rosalind wanted to respond, but couldn't find the words, overwhelmed by despair. What was the point in protesting, in railing against the injustice of it all? Her fate, it seemed, had already been decided. Her future plotted out like some grand chess game in which she was little more than a pawn to be manoeuvred and sacrificed at will.

As her father turned and strode from the room, his steps light and buoyant, Rosalind sank despondently into an armchair. She was trapped, her spirit crushed by societal expectations and familial duty.. In that moment, as she stood alone in the drawing

room, the echoes of Lord Ashford's disdainful gaze still burning in her mind. Rosalind felt utterly, completely alone, and hopeless.

### Chapter 26

Alexander Fitzwilliam, Duke of Somerton, sat in the dimly lit study, the flickering candlelight casting eerie shadows across his face. His head rested in his hands, fingers tangled in his dishevelled hair, as he grappled with the weight of the revelations that had been thrust upon him.

The existence of his illegitimate son was a complication he had never anticipated, a stark reminder of the consequences of his reckless youth. He felt his father's disappointment haunting him, a spectre of shame and regret.

Alex knew that acknowledging the boy would mean naming him as his heir, a decision that would shake the very foundations of his family's legacy. Yet, the thought of simply providing for the child and turning his back on him stirred a sense of unease within him, a nagging voice that whispered of the cruelty of such an act.

The boy, innocent and blameless, was still the son of a duke. A product of Alex's own actions, and as such, deserved to be treated with the dignity and respect befitting his lineage. The weight of that responsibility, though, was a heavy burden.

Alex's mind drifted to Rosalind, Alex's mind wandered to Rosalind, the woman he deeply loved and revitalised him. The memory of her tear-stained, betrayed face was a dagger to his heart. He had never meant to hurt her, to cause her such pain and anguish, and yet, here he sat, torn between the desires of his heart and the unyielding demands of duty.

He felt the bitter taste of regret as he recognized the consequences of his past actions.

He cursed his wild youth, the reckless abandon with which he had pursued fleeting pleasures, never considering the ripples that would echo through the years to come.

His newfound responsibility was a heavy burden that refused to release him. The study felt now suffocating to Alex. He longed for the simplicity of days gone by, for a time when his only concern was the pursuit of his own desires, untethered by the burdens of duty and legacy.

A sharp knock on the study door pulled the Duke back to the present. Alex pinched the bridge of his nose as the footman announced the arrival of Miss Blackwood, his body tensing involuntarily at the mere mention of her name. He had hoped, foolishly perhaps, that he might be spared her presence this evening. He longed for respite from the storm of emotions she stirred.

As Mary swept into the study, looking stately and dignified in a grey walking dress, Alex's gaze was drawn to the tattered hem, a silent testament to the hardships she claimed to endure. Yet, despite her dishevelled appearance, there was a certain grace to her movements, a practised elegance that belied her supposed circumstances.

"Mary," Alex greeted her, his voice flat and devoid of emotion, a stark contrast to the tempest that raged within him.

As if she had all the time in the world, she made her way to his desk and sat in one of the leather chairs opposite him without being invited. She fixed Alex with her dark eyes, eyes that he had once lost himself in. Her ivory face and large eyes looked the very picture of innocence.

"I...I need your help," she said, her voice holding a vulnerability that he had never heard from her before. "I know you must be tired of seeing me, and I do not blame you, but if it weren't for the child—" She cut herself off, fishing about in her reticule for a handkerchief which she pressed delicately to her nose. "We're hungry, we need

a better place to stay. You wouldn't believe our lodgings, the landlord said—"

"Why?" The question burst forth, unbidden, as Alex struggled to maintain his composure. "Why now, after all these years, do you come to me with tales of a child?"

Mary's expression softened, her eyes taking on a misty, wistful quality as she spoke. "I didn't want you to feel trapped, ensnared by some clever scheme. I wanted you to be free, to live your life without rumours following you at every step. We may have parted badly, but I loved you. I love you still." Her words were like honey, sweet and alluring, but Alex could not help but feel a bitter taste lingering on his tongue.

Alex studied Mary's face, searching for any hint of deception or artifice, but found only a vulnerability that seemed almost foreign to her. The sight of her worn dress, the fabric fraying at the hem, stirred a sense of disquiet within him. Despite the tumultuous nature of their history, he could not bear the thought of his own child suffering from want or deprivation.

With a heavy sigh, he reached into the drawer of his desk and withdrew a small bag of coins. His jaw tightened as he extended the money towards Mary, his movements stiff and reluctant, as though he were relinquishing a piece of himself as he offered the pouch across the desk.

Mary's eyes widened, her hand darting out to snatch the bag from his grasp, her fingers closing around them with a desperation that betrayed her true nature. In that moment, her true nature was unveiled, reminding him of her heartbreak.

"This is not a handout, Mary," Alex said, his voice low and stern. "I will not provide for you indefinitely without proof of your claims."

Mary's lips parted as if to protest, but Alex held up a hand, silencing her before she

could speak.

"Until I have met this child, until I have seen with my own eyes that he is indeed my son, you will receive nothing more from me," he continued. His tone brooking no argument. "I have been deceived by you once before, and I will not be made a fool of again."

Mary's expression hardened, her eyes narrowing as she clutched the banknotes to her chest. For a moment, it seemed as though she might unleash a torrent of accusations and recriminations, but something in Alex's gaze must have given her pause.

"Very well," she said, her voice clipped and cold. "I shall make arrangements for you to meet the boy, and then you will see the truth of my words." She rose and stood to leave, but turned back to the Duke with a slightly wounded expression. "You don't know what it's been like," she said, her voice low and surprisingly raw. "You don't know what it's like to be a disgraced woman, to raise a child on my own. The stares, the jeers... I've been called every foul name you can think of."

Alex felt a pang of guilt. "I'm sorry," he said simply.

"I don't need your pity," Mary said, leaning back over the desk, planting her hands firmly. "I need to know that should your inquiries be answered satisfactorily, what will you do to provide for us? How will you rectify this? I can't live as a pariah forever. No one will marry me now."

"I will see that you are taken care of," Alex said reservedly, refusing to give anything away.

"Which means?"

"I will see that you are taken care of," he repeated with finality.



Mary stood and nodded slowly as if she understood that was all that she would get from him for now. She withdrew from the study, and then it was as if she hadn't been there at all, except for the feeling of dread deep in the pit of Alex's stomach.

Alex leaned back in his chair, his mind reeling from the implications of Mary's visit. Her subtle hints about marriage were palpable. It was a stark reminder of the lengths she was willing to go to secure her future and that of their supposed child.

Alex knew that Mary's words held a grain of truth. Society could be cruel and unforgiving to unmarried mothers, casting them aside and branding them with a scarlet letter of shame. The thought of his own flesh and blood enduring such hardships stirred a sense of unease within him, a nagging guilt that he could not quite shake.

As he pondered the complexities of the situation, his thoughts drifted to Rosalind, the fiery and passionate woman who had captured his heart. He almost heard her voice, passionately denouncing the injustices faced by women in their world. The mere thought of her brought a faint smile to his lips, a momentary respite from the weight of his troubles.

Yet, the smile was fleeting, quickly replaced by a sharp sting of longing and regret. Alex knew that Mary's manipulative ways couldn't match his true love for Rosalind. The prospect of a loveless marriage, a union born of duty and obligation rather than true devotion, filled him with a sense of dread.

Alex sighed heavily, his mind drifting to the stack of unanswered letters that he had fired off to Rosalind, each one a testament to his desperate attempts to reach out to her. The lack of response from her was a constant source of pain, a gnawing uncertainty that ate away at his soul.

He longed to speak with her, to explain the circumstances that had led him to this

moment, but the words eluded him. All he knew was that he missed her desperately, a deep and aching void that could not be filled by any other.

### Chapter 27

The warm spring breeze carried the fragrant scent of freshly bloomed roses through the immaculately manicured gardens of Lord Ashford's estate. Rosalind found herself surrounded by the very finest members of the ton, their delicate laughter and polite chatter filling the air as they mingled amidst the vibrant floral displays. The string quartet's soothing melodies provided a gentle backdrop to the scene, the powdered wigs of the musicians swaying ever so slightly with each movement of their bows.

Rosalind's gaze swept across the elegantly dressed ladies, their pastel gowns and carefully arranged flowers in their hair creating a picturesque vision of springtime beauty. Despite the idyllic setting and pleasant company, she felt hollow inside. It was a stark contrast to the joy and anticipation she had once experienced when attending such events on the arm of her beloved Alex.

Lord Ashford, Lord Ashford, her suitor, barely spoke to her all day, seeming distracted as he mingled with guests. There was no hint of affection or warmth between them, no illusion of love or even friendship to cling to. Rosalind found herself nodding and smiling politely at the conversations directed her way. However, the words fell upon deaf ears, her mind consumed by the memories of the past and the aching emptiness that now filled her soul.

Amidst the gathering, Rosalind felt like a shadow of her former self. The sharp contrast between celebration and heartbreak was almost unbearable. It was a cruel reminder of all that she had lost and the uncertain future that lay ahead.

The noise around her faded as Rosalind's gaze landed on Lord Ashford. Amidst

trimmed hedges, he stood with silver hair illuminated by the sun.

Though there had been whispers and murmurs trailing in her wake ever since the disastrous end of her courtship with the Duke of Somerton, not a single word of gossip or judgement seemed to penetrate the pristine walls of Lord Ashford's estate. Rosalind enjoyed a peaceful silence, escaping from prying eyes and gossip after the masquerade ball..

A small, fleeting thought crossed her mind—had Lord Ashford demanded that his guests refrain from broaching such a delicate subject? If so, it was a small kindness, one that Rosalind found herself grateful for, even if it did little to alleviate the heaviness that weighed upon her heart.

Sipping slowly from her cup of lemonade, Rosalind allowed her gaze to linger upon the man who now held the fate of her future in his hands. Lord Ashford was undoubtedly a handsome man, his features bearing the distinguished lines of age and experience, hinting at the dashing figure he must have cut in his youth. Yet, there was a coolness to his demeanour, a detachment that Rosalind found oddly comforting.

He had not attempted to woo her with flowery words or romantic gestures, nor had he showered her with false promises of love and devotion. Instead, Lord Ashford had approached their courtship with a pragmatism that, while lacking in passion, offered Rosalind a strange sense of relief. At least with him, she did not have to worry about the possibility of her heart being broken once more, for there was no illusion of love to shatter in the first place.

He felt her gaze and quickly turned, his intense eyes meeting hers, taking her breath away. Still, Rosalind found herself compelled to obey, her feet carrying her across the neatly manicured lawn towards the man who now held such sway over her future.

"Lady Rosalind," Lord Ashford greeted her, his voice betraying no hint of warmth or

affection. "Might I show you around the house?"

The request, though phrased as a question, carried the weight of an expectation, and Rosalind found herself nodding in acquiescence. As they turned and made their way towards the imposing manor, Lord Ashford spoke once more, his tone clipped and businesslike.

"I must admit, I am quite relieved to find that you know how to behave in society," he remarked, his gaze sweeping over her as if appraising her suitability. "The guests at this little gathering have assumed your silence to be the quiet attention of a well-behaved young lady, or an admirable amount of snobbishness."

Rosalind bit back the sharp retort that rose to her lips, swallowing her pride and offering a noncommittal murmur of acknowledgement instead. She could sense the unspoken judgement in Lord Ashford's words; the implication that her silence was a calculated performance, not just her own pain.

As they entered the grand foyer of the manor, Lord Ashford turned to her once more, his expression inscrutable. "Tell me, Lady Rosalind, do you find my house suitable?"

Rosalind's gaze swept over the opulent surroundings, taking in the gleaming marble floors and the ornate paintings that adorned the walls. "It is lovely," she murmured, her voice devoid of any real enthusiasm.

Lord Ashford seemed to take her lacklustre response in stride, nodding slightly as if satisfied. "I am glad to find that you are not a silly girl prone to bouts of sentiment," he remarked, his tone matter-of-fact. "You will be an acceptable wife."

Rosalind felt a flicker of her old spirit stir within her breast, a spark of defiance igniting in the face of Lord Ashford's dismissive words. "Are we to be married, then?" she challenged, her voice laced with a hint of irritation at his high-handed

manner.

Lord Ashford met her gaze unflinchingly, his expression betraying no hint of surprise or emotion. "It suits both of our purposes, does it not?" he replied, as if the matter were already settled.

Rosalind found herself rendered momentarily speechless, her mouth agape as she struggled to process the audacity of his assumption. He had not asked for her hand, nor had he even truly proposed—he had simply informed her of his intentions as if her acquiescence were a foregone conclusion.

As she stood there, confronted by the stark reality of her circumstances, Rosalind found that she could not muster the energy to argue or protest. Perhaps this detached, pragmatic approach was better than the false promises and hollow sentiments she had once believed in. With a resigned sigh, she allowed her silence to speak for itself, and Lord Ashford seemed to take it as acceptance, his features betraying no hint of triumph or satisfaction.

For better or worse, their fates were now bound together, two souls united not by love or passion, but by the cold, harsh realities of their world.

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The moonlight cast long shadows across the walls of Rosalind's bedchamber, the silvery glow providing little comfort as she sat alone in the stillness of the night. Her fingers traced the delicate embroidery of the gown that lay draped across her lap. A masterpiece of silk and lace that had been lovingly crafted for her upcoming nuptials.

Yet, as she ran her hands over the intricate stitches, Rosalind felt utterly detached from the garment and all that it represented. The gown, with its silver thread and delicate beading, was a symbol of her impending marriage to Lord Ashford, a union

that had been arranged with little regard for her own desires or emotions.

As her mind drifted back to the events of the day, Rosalind felt as though she were merely an observer in her own life. She felt like a puppet whose strings were being pulled by forces beyond her control. She had endured yet another fitting, her body poked and prodded by seamstresses as they adjusted the gown to perfection.

Rosalind had moved through the motions with a sense of detachment, her mind a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and emotions. She had responded to the questions and instructions with a polite, distant demeanour, her true feelings locked away behind a mask of indifference.

Now, in the solitude of her bedchamber, Rosalind allowed herself to confront the reality of her situation. She felt trapped, a prisoner of circumstance and societal expectations, her dreams and aspirations sacrificed on the altar of duty and obligation.

As her fingers traced the delicate lace of the gown, Rosalind's mind wandered to the memories of a time when she had dared to hope for something more than this life of dutiful submission. She thought of Alex, the man who had once ignited a fire within her soul, a passion that had burned brightly before being cruelly extinguished by the harsh realities of their world.

A tear rolled down Rosalind's cheek, a testament to her lingering pain. She had sacrificed her desires and dreams for her family. It had left her feeling oddly numb and hollow. All that she could truly say that she felt with any clarity was that she longed to escape, to break free. She would give anything to just run free, away from it all, her hair wild and loose, her feet bare as she ran across open fields.

Rosalind blinked, her surroundings slowly coming into focus. The scents of hay and leather filled her nostrils as she tightened the girth on her mare. A wave of confusion washed over her as she glanced around, unsure of how she had ended up here.

Her gaze fell upon her hands as they worked deftly to secure the saddle. Rosalind's brow furrowed, her mind a haze of uncertainty. She had no recollection of hastily throwing on a cloak over her nightgown or shoving her feet into her riding boots. It was as though her body had acted of its own accord, drawn to the stables by an inexplicable force.

A soft sound caught her attention, and Rosalind turned to see Isabella and Amelia standing in the doorway, their faces illuminated by the moon and showing their concern. Without a word, they moved forward, flanking her on either side as they stood beside the horse.

"You cannot talk me out of it," Rosalind croaked, her voice cracking with emotion. "I simply want to get as far away as possible."

Her hands shook as she reached up to adjust the saddle, her fingers fumbling with the straps. Isabella gently took Rosalind's hands in her own, drawing her into a warm embrace, wrapping her arms around her shoulders in a comforting gesture.

Wordlessly, Amelia untacked the horse, her movements calm and practised as she returned the bewildered mare to her stall. The sisters left the stable together, their footsteps slow and measured across the flagstones. As they stepped into the mews, a flickering lantern illuminated the figure of Lord Harrington, his face creased with suspicion. Clad in a robe and nightcap, he peered into the darkness, his voice stern as he demanded an explanation.

Amelia, ever the voice of reason, calmly replied, "Rosalind thought she saw a light in the stables, so we went to make sure a stable boy hadn't left a lantern burning."

Lord Harrington's gaze narrowed. "And? Was there?"

"No, it was only a trick of the moonlight," Isabella said coolly, her face all innocence.



With a grunt, their father turned and left them, the shadows swallowing his retreating form.

In the sanctuary of Rosalind's bedchamber, her sisters gently removed her boots and brushed her hair with soothing strokes. They tucked her into bed, their presence a constant comfort throughout the night, a silent vigil to ward off the demons that threatened to consume her. Rosalind was grateful for them, for the way they anchored her to reality.

As much as she might wish to simply run away, maybe start a new life in Canada or Jamaica or anywhere else, she couldn't do that to her sisters. Their reputations would be ruined if Rosalind rejected another suitor, especially if she ran away. Besides, the engagement was announced—if she broke it, Lord Ashford would be within his rights to sue for breach of promise, and for all her frustrations with her father, she couldn't do that to him, either.

In the dark, without even opening her eyes, she extended her hand, searching out for the comforting grasp of another. She was answered by one of her sisters, which made her cry, and then she cried all the harder because in her heart of hearts, she still wished it was Alex's hand grasping her own.

### Chapter 28

Alex fidgeted nervously as he awaited Mary's arrival, his mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. He had chosen this secluded spot in Islington Fields for their meeting, far from prying eyes and the risk of gossip, for the matter at hand was of the utmost delicacy and consequence.

The gentle summer breeze carried the scent of wildflowers, and the azure sky stretched overhead, dotted with fluffy white clouds. It was a picture of serenity, yet Alex's heart was anything but calm. He smoothed his hands over the picnic blanket the footman had laid out, taking a deep breath in an effort to steady his nerves.

The sound of approaching hoofbeats drew his attention, and he turned to see Mary's carriage approaching. His breath caught in his throat as she stepped out, a vision in a vibrant red linen dress that complemented her dark eyes and hair, but it was the small figure trailing behind her that captured his gaze – a young boy, no more than five years old, with a shock of light brown curls and a shy demeanour.

Henry Brook, the child Mary claimed was his son.

As they drew nearer, Alex studied the boy intently, his heart pounding in his chest. He searched for any hint of familiarity in the child's features, any trace of himself that might confirm Mary's assertion.

Mary greeted him with a warm smile, her voice carrying a note of confidence that belied the gravity of the situation. "Your Grace, thank you for arranging this meeting. I know how much it must mean to you to finally meet your son."

Alex swallowed hard, his gaze flickering between Mary and the boy. "Mary," he acknowledged, his voice tight. "And this is...Henry?"

Alex watched, transfixed, as Mary gently nudged Henry forward. The boy resisted at first, clinging shyly to his mother's skirt, his large blue eyes regarding Alex with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. Clearing his throat, Alex adopted his most formal tone, the one he typically reserved for affairs of state and high society events.

"Master Henry," he began, inclining his head respectfully. "I am Alexander Fitzwilliam, Duke of Somerton. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." He paused, searching for the right words. "I would very much like for us to be...friends."

Henry's gaze flickered uncertainly between Alex and his mother, but before he could respond, his eyes landed on the picnic feast laid out before them. Alex followed his line of sight, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he observed the array of cold meats, cheeses, small game pies, fruit tarts, and more.

"Please, Henry," he said, gesturing towards the blanket. "Help yourself."

The boy looked back at Mary, who gave him an encouraging nod. With that, Henry's shyness seemed to evaporate, and he eagerly dove into the spread, his earlier trepidation forgotten in the face of such a tempting array of treats. Alex watched, both amused and charmed, as Henry devoured the food with unbridled enthusiasm, his manners leaving much to be desired but his joy evident in every bite.

As Henry reached for one of the plum tarts – Alex's personal favourite – the Duke couldn't help but chuckle. "Those are my favourite as well," he confided, leaning back on his elbows. "In fact, when my brother Richard and I were about your age, we once stole an entire tray of them from the kitchen and ran off to eat them all in a tree."

Henry's eyes widened, and a delighted giggle escaped his lips. "I'm the best tree climber in the whole world!" he declared, his mouth still half-full.

Alex raised an eyebrow, a playful glint in his eye. "Is that so? Well, I'll have to see it to believe it."

Without further prompting, Henry scrambled to his feet and dashed towards the nearest oak, his small frame scaling the trunk with surprising agility. Alex watched, his heart swelling with an unexpected fondness as the boy clambered higher and higher, his laughter ringing out like music in the warm summer air.

Alex watched with a mixture of pride and amusement as Henry scampered up the oak tree with the nimbleness of a squirrel. The boy's small fingers gripped the rough bark. His feet finding purchase in the knots and grooves as he ascended higher and higher, his laughter ringing out like music in the warm summer air.

"Henry!" Mary chided, a note of exasperation in her voice. "You'll ruin your new suit, climbing about like that!"

But Alex merely waved a dismissive hand, a fond smile playing across his lips. "Nonsense, Mary. It's the duty of little boys to get dirty and ruin their clothes. Isn't that right, Henry?"

Henry paused in his ascent, his cherubic face peeking out from behind a cluster of leaves as he flashed a mischievous grin. "Yes, Your Grace!"

Mary rolled her eyes, though Alex detected a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Easy for you to say," she retorted. "You have all the money in the world to pay for new clothing."

A pang of guilt tugged at Alex's heart as he regarded Mary, her dress simple yet

elegant, a far cry from the opulent finery she might have enjoyed as his wife. "How have you managed to survive thus far?" he asked, his voice gentle yet laced with curiosity.

Mary's expression clouded for a moment, and she hesitated, as if weighing her words carefully. "I was... married briefly, for a time," she admitted at last. "But my husband is dead now." A flicker of something indecipherable passed across her features. "Lord Jake."

Alex arched an eyebrow, sensing there was more to the story than Mary was letting on, but he didn't press the matter. Instead, he turned his attention back to Henry, who was perched precariously on a high branch, his small legs swinging back and forth with reckless abandon.

"Bravo, Henry!" Alex called out, applauding the boy's efforts. "You're a natural!"

Henry opened his mouth to respond, but then seemed to think better of it, his gaze flickering uncertainly towards his mother. A strange, nervous expression crossed his face, and when he finally spoke, his words were slow and deliberate, as if carefully chosen.

"Thank you, Your Grace," he said, his voice uncharacteristically subdued. "I... I do love to climb."

As Henry began his descent, Alex couldn't shake the peculiar sense that there was more to the boy than met the eye. He watched, pensive, as Mary's gaze followed her son's movements, her expression a mixture of tenderness and something else, something almost... wistful.

"He's a remarkable boy," Alex murmured, his eyes never leaving Henry's small form. "In truth, he does remind me a bit of my brother Richard at that age – always getting

into some sort of mischief."

Before Mary could respond, a footman came into view, his face flushed with exertion.

"Your Grace," he called out, slightly out of breath. "I'm afraid one of the horses pulling Lady Mary's carriage has cast a shoe. It would be wise to have it seen to before continuing on."

Alex exchanged a glance with Mary, reading the unspoken question in her eyes. With a nod, he rose to his feet, brushing off his breeches.

"Very well," he said. "We'll stop at the next inn with a blacksmith and have it tended to. No sense in risking the safety of the carriage on our journey back to London."

### Chapter 29

The carriages halted at the Green Mill Inn, a modest establishment for weary travelers and tradesmen. Alex stepped down from his own conveyance, his eyes sweeping over the weathered exterior with a hint of trepidation. While he had taken care to ensure their journey remained discreet – eschewing the family crest and opting for an unadorned carriage – he couldn't help but feel a twinge of apprehension at the thought of being recognised.

His gaze flitted towards Mary's carriage, watching as she emerged with a grace that belied her simple attire. Henry followed close behind, his small hand clutched in his mother's as he peered about with wide, inquisitive eyes. Alex felt a pang of protectiveness stir within his chest, an instinct to shield this newfound son from the prying eyes of the world.

The innkeeper's wife, a stout, matronly woman with a kind face, bustled out to greet them. Her eyes widening in surprise at the sight of their fine clothing and polished demeanour. "My lord, my lady," she stammered, bobbing into an awkward curtsy. "We weren't expecting guests of your... calibre."

Alex offered her a reassuring smile, his tone gentle yet authoritative. "My apologies for the lack of notice. One of our horses cast a shoe, and we're in need of a blacksmith's services."

The woman nodded, her expression brightening with understanding. "Of course, of course. We'll see to it straightaway." She gestured towards the inn's entrance, her voice hushed as if imparting a great secret. "If you'll follow me, I've got a private

alcove set aside where you can rest, away from prying eyes."

Mary arched a delicate eyebrow, her expression haughty as she regarded the woman with a cool detachment that gave Alex pause. There was an unmistakable air of nobility about her, a sense of entitlement that seemed at odds with her humble circumstances.

As they followed the innkeeper's wife into the dim interior of the inn, Alex found himself studying Mary with a newfound curiosity. What was her story, truly? How had she come to find herself in such reduced circumstances, with a child in tow and no husband to provide for them? The questions swirled in his mind, unanswered and tantalising.

The alcove the innkeeper's wife led them to was small but reasonably private, shielded from the main taproom by a faded curtain. "I'll have the blacksmith sent for straightaway," she assured them, her gaze lingering on Mary with a hint of deference. "And if m'lady would like to freshen up, I can show her to a private chamber."

Mary inclined her head, the ghost of a smile playing across her lips. "That would be most welcome, thank you."

As she swept past, Alex couldn't help but wonder at the enigma that was Mary Blackwood – a woman who carried herself with the poise and grace of a duchess, yet found herself adrift in the world, her circumstances a mystery. He watched her retreating form, a furrow creasing his brow as that lingering sense of unease stirred once more.

The alcove fell silent as Mary left the room, leaving Alex alone with the young boy who had so unexpectedly been thrust into his life. He studied Henry with a newfound intensity, his gaze roving over the lad's tousled curls and cherubic features, searching for any trace of familiarity.



"Henry," he ventured, the name feeling strange and unfamiliar on his tongue. The boy didn't react, seemingly lost in his own little world as he fidgeted with the hem of his shirt.

Alex frowned. "Henry?" he tried again, a hint of impatience creeping into his voice.

Still, no response.

Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees, his brow furrowed in contemplation. "Lad?" The endearment seemed to capture the boy's attention, and those wide, guileless eyes flicked up to meet Alex's own.

A flicker of triumph stirred in Alex's chest, and he offered the child an encouraging smile. "There you are. Now, I was hoping you might tell me a bit about your life before all this." He gestured vaguely, encompassing the whirlwind of events that had brought them to this very moment.

Henry's gaze dropped once more, his small fingers fidgeting with the fabric of his collar as a frown creased his brow. "Lord Ja—" He caught himself, his eyes widening fractionally. "Lord James was good to Mama and me."

Alex arched an eyebrow at the slip, his interest piqued. Before he could inquire further, however, the curtain parted once more, and Mary swept back into the alcove, her presence commanding the room as surely as if she were a duchess holding court.

The innkeeper's wife trailed in her wake, her hands twisting anxiously in her apron as she bobbed another awkward curtsy. "If there's aught else you be needin', m'lady—"

Mary waved a dismissive hand, her expression one of cool disdain. "That will be all."

Alex frowned at her brusque dismissal, disapproval flickering in his gaze. While he

understood the need for discretion, there was no call for such haughty condescension, particularly towards those who had opened their humble establishment to them.

As the innkeeper's wife retreated, Mary turned her attention to Henry, her expression softening ever so slightly. "What do you think, my darling?" she cooed, sinking gracefully onto the bench beside the boy. "Would you like for the Duke to be your papa?"

Alex stiffened at her presumptuous words, his jaw clenching as he levelled a sharp look in her direction. She had no right to put such notions into the child's head, not when he had yet to make any decisions regarding their future.

To his surprise, however, Henry's face lit up with a radiant smile, his eyes sparkling with unabashed delight. "Truly?" The word was imbued with such naked longing that it gave Alex pause. "I should be the luckiest boy in all the world!"

Though the sentiment sounded rehearsed, there was an unmistakable sincerity in Henry's tone that caught Alex off guard. He found himself returning the boy's smile, his earlier ire momentarily forgotten as a strange sense of warmth blossomed in his chest.

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Alex slammed his fist into the leather punching bag, the impact reverberating through his bones with a satisfying jolt. He followed through with a rapid succession of blows, his breath coming in harsh pants as he worked out the turbulent emotions roiling within him.

The events of the past few days had left him reeling. His carefully ordered world upended by the unexpected arrival of Mary Blackwood and her claims of a child – his child. Alex had prided himself on his unwavering sense of honour and duty. Yet now

he found himself adrift, not knowing what the right thing to do was for the first time in his life.

The punching bag swung wildly with the force of his strikes, and Alex grimaced, his jaw clenched tight as he grappled with the weight of his predicament. There was something about Mary's story that didn't quite ring true, a lingering sense of unease that he couldn't shake. And then there was the boy himself – Henry.

Alex's movements faltered as the memory of their encounter surfaced, the child's wide-eyed innocence and unabashed delight a stark contrast to the wariness he had come to expect from Mary. There had been something disarmingly genuine about Henry, a quality that had caught Alex off guard.

The sound of the gymnasium door opening drew his attention, and he turned to find Richard regarding him with something between amusement and concern.

"Feeling a bit restless, are we?" The viscount arched an eyebrow, his gaze raking over Alex's sweat-dampened shirt and dishevelled appearance.

Alex huffed out a breath, running a hand through his tousled hair. "You could say that."

Richard's expression sobered as he ventured further into the room. "I take it your meeting with the lady and her offspring didn't go entirely as planned?"

A humourless chuckle escaped Alex's lips. "You could say that," he echoed, shaking his head. "There's something about Mary's story that doesn't quite add up. The boy, Henry..." He trailed off, his brow furrowing as he replayed their interaction in his mind.

"What about him?" Richard prompted, his interest piqued.

"He seemed..." Alex searched for the right words. "Genuine. Earnest, in a way that Mary most certainly is not. And there were moments when he slipped, when his speech patterns didn't quite match what one would expect from a child of his supposed upbringing."

Richard's lips curved into a faint smirk. "Well, if there's one thing we've learnt, it's that appearances can be deceiving, particularly where the fairer sex is concerned."

Alex shot his brother a withering look, but the viscount merely shrugged, unrepentant.

"All I'm saying is that it might be wise to exercise a bit of caution," Richard continued. "If this Mary Blackwood is indeed trying to ensnare you, she'll no doubt have her reasons. And if the boy is involved..." He let the implication hang in the air.

A muscle ticked in Alex's jaw as he considered his brother's words. As much as he loathed to admit it, Richard had a point – they knew precious little about Mary Blackwood and her motivations. If he was to make an informed decision, he would need to uncover the truth, no matter how unsavoury it might prove to be.

"You're right," he conceded grudgingly. "I've already set my solicitor to digging into her background, but perhaps it's time we employed a more... personal touch."

The corners of Richard's mouth quirked upwards. "I thought you'd never ask."

Alex stilled, the punching bag swinging idly in the aftermath of his flurry of blows. He turned to face Richard, his brow furrowed as he took in his brother's troubled expression. "What is it?" he demanded, sensing that there was more weighing on the viscount's mind.

Richard hesitated, his gaze dropping briefly before meeting Alex's eyes once more. "I

saw something in the papers this morning," he began, his tone uncharacteristically sombre. "An announcement."

A frisson of unease trickled down Alex's spine at his brother's words. He clenched his jaw, steeling himself for whatever revelation was to come. "Well? Out with it, then."

Richard exhaled slowly, as though bracing himself. "It was an engagement notice," he said at last. "Between Lady Rosalind Harrington and Lord Edmund Ashford."

The words hit Alex like a physical blow, the air rushing from his lungs as though he'd been punched in the gut. He stared at Richard, uncomprehending, willing the words to be untrue.

Rosalind. Engaged to another man.

A maelstrom of emotions swirled within him – disbelief, anguish, a desperate denial. He had thought... He had dared to hope...

His hands clenched into fists at his sides, and he turned away from Richard, his chest heaving as he fought for control. Without a word, he resumed his assault on the punching bag, each strike fuelled by the tumultuous turmoil raging within him.

Richard watched him for a moment, his expression a mix of sympathy and resignation. Finally, he sighed, recognising the futility of offering empty platitudes. "I'll make some discreet inquiries into Mary Blackwood's background," he said, his voice cutting through the rhythmic thud of Alex's blows. "See if I can uncover anything that might shed some light on her motives."

Alex didn't respond, his focus narrowed to the relentless pounding of his fists against the unyielding leather. He couldn't think about Rosalind, not now – the pain was too raw, too visceral. He would compartmentalise it, lock it away until he could process it

properly.

For now, he had a more pressing matter to attend to – uncovering the truth about Mary Blackwood and the child she claimed was his. He would channel his fury, his anguish, into that singular purpose, using it as fuel to drive him forward.

With renewed determination, he redoubled his efforts, the punching bag swinging wildly under the onslaught of his blows.

### Chapter 30

Lady Rosalind fought to keep her composure as the dinner party unfolded around her. The idle chatter and forced laughter grated on her nerves. She sat beside Lord Ashford, her new suitor, a man whose wealth and status had been deemed a suitable match for her by her father, but whose dull demeanour and vapid conversation left her feeling utterly uninspired.

As the discussion turned to the Enclosure Acts, a topic that stirred Rosalind's passions, she found herself leaning forward. She was eager to share her thoughts and engage in the lively debate. Before she could even utter a word, though, Lord Ashford fixed her with a withering glare, his eyes narrowing in disapproval.

"My dear," he drawled, his voice dripping with condescension. "Surely such weighty matters are beyond the scope of a lady's interest. Would you not be better suited to contemplating matters of dress and decorum?"

His gaze swept over her scandalously daring gown, a modern French creation with short, puffed sleeves. Rosalind felt her cheeks burn with indignation, her mouth opening to deliver a scathing retort, but before she could speak, her father cleared his throat pointedly, silencing her with a single, sharp glance.

The evening wore on, and as the guests departed, Lord Ashford turned to Rosalind with a self-satisfied smirk. "I shall call upon you tomorrow, my dear," he announced, his tone brooking no argument. "We shall take a turn about Regent's Park, and I expect you to present yourself as befits the future Lady Ashford."

Rosalind seethed, her hands clenching into fists at her sides as she fought to maintain her composure. Lord Ashford's high-handed manner needled her, his casual dismissal of her intellect and opinions a bitter reminder of the constraints placed upon her by society. Anger surged through Rosalind, yet a spark of defiance emerged.

As she retired to her chambers, her thoughts turned unbidden to Alex, the Duke of Somerton, the man who had once seen her as an equal, a partner in intellect and wit. She remembered the way he had listened to her opinions, engaged with her in lively debates, and never once made her feel lesser for being a woman. Despite the pang of longing, Rosalind steeled herself against heartbreak.

She was not the same naive girl who had fallen so deeply for Alex's charms. The betrayal she had suffered had tempered her spirit, forging her into something stronger, more resilient. And as she gazed out over the darkened grounds of her family's estate, Rosalind felt a renewed sense of determination coursing through her veins. She would not be cowed by the expectations of society, nor would she allow herself to be diminished by the narrow-minded attitudes of men like Lord Ashford.

She was Lady Rosalind Harrington, and she would forge her own path, no matter the obstacles that stood in her way.

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As the maid's nimble fingers deftly styled Rosalind's fiery tresses, piling her curls atop her head in an intricate coiffure befitting a lady of her station, Rosalind felt a surge of rebellion well up within her. With a sharp shake of her head, she brushed the maid's hands away, ignoring the woman's startled gasp.

"No," she declared, her voice ringing with defiance. "Not today."

Ignoring the maid's protests, Rosalind reached up and tugged at the pins, loosening



the elaborate style until her russet locks tumbled freely down her back in a cascade of untamed curls. She bound them loosely with a ribbon, allowing a few tendrils to escape and frame her face, lending her an air of wild, nymph-like beauty.

Next, Rosalind turned her attention to the gown laid out before her, a confection of delicate muslin in the latest French style, its neckline demurely filled with a chemisette to preserve propriety. With a mischievous grin, she plucked the offending garment away, leaving the neckline of her dress tantalizingly low, daring to bare the creamy expanse of her décolletage. If she wasn't careful, the upper edge of her stays would show.

As she slipped into the gown, the sheer fabric clinging to her curves in a way that would surely scandalise the ton, Rosalind felt a thrill of exhilaration course through her veins. For too long, she had allowed herself to be constrained by the rigid expectations of society. Her every move and thought dictated by the narrow-minded dictates of men like Lord Ashford.

But no more.

Today, she would meet her would-be suitor on her own terms, a defiant declaration of her refusal to be cowed or diminished. If Lord Ashford wished to court her, he would have to accept her as she truly was – a woman of intellect and spirit, unafraid to challenge the boundaries that sought to confine her.

With a final, rebellious toss of her head, Rosalind swept from the room, her dress floating along lightly as she nearly skipped down the stairs. She was Lady Rosalind Harrington, and today, she would embrace the untamed essence that burned within her, consequences be damned.

As she reached the foyer, she caught sight of Amelia waiting for her, eyes widening in surprise at her sister's daring appearance.

"Rosalind, what are you doing?" Amelia hissed, taking in the low neckline and unbound tresses with a mix of shock and concern. "Surely you don't intend to meet Lord Ashford looking so... unkempt?"

A wild smile curved Rosalind's lips as she met her sister's gaze, a defiant gleam sparking in her emerald eyes. "And why ever not, dear sister?" she countered, her tone light but laced with an edge of recklessness. "If Lord Ashford wishes to court me, he shall have to accept me as I am – a woman unbound by the stifling constraints of society's expectations."

Before Amelia could respond, the maid hurried forward, parasol in hand, her brow furrowed in disapproval. "Your parasol, my lady," she murmured, holding it out expectantly.

Rosalind's smile widened as she brushed past the maid without a second glance, leaving the poor woman gaping in her wake. "I shan't be needing that today," she called over her shoulder, ignoring Amelia's dismayed protests as she swept through the open door and out into the warm London air.

The warmth of the late spring day enveloped Rosalind as she strolled through the verdant splendour of Regent's Park, her skirts swishing lightly with each defiant step. From the moment Lord Ashford had laid eyes upon her, his gaze sweeping over her dishevelled appearance with undisguised disapproval, she had known this promenade would be a battle of wills.

His lips had tightened into a thin line, but Rosalind merely met his censure with a pointed smile, daring him to comment on her brazen defiance of propriety. To his credit, Lord Ashford remained silent, though the muscle twitching in his jaw betrayed his displeasure as he gestured stiffly for them to begin their walk.

As they ambled along the winding paths, Rosalind tuned out the droning monotone of

Lord Ashford's voice. His words were a tedious litany of hunting exploits and other masculine pursuits that held no interest for her. It was about the time that he was describing shooting yet another buck in the Scottish Highlands that she completely gave up listening. Instead, she allowed her senses to revel in the beauty that surrounded them – the vibrant blooms nodding in the gentle breeze, the rich earthen scents mingling with the crisp tang of new foliage, the warmth of the sun's caress upon her bare shoulders.

"Don't you agree, Lady Rosalind?" he demanded suddenly, jarring her out of her reverie. "Is it not an exciting prospect?"

Rosalind blinked, her lips curving into a saccharine smile as she turned her gaze upon him. "Thrilling, my lord," she purred, her tone laced with barely-concealed sarcasm. "It's difficult to believe you haven't been married yet, with how fascinating your conversations are."

A strangled sound escaped Amelia's lips, and Rosalind could feel her sister's disapproving stare burning into the back of her head. She paid it no mind, her attention focused solely on Lord Ashford, watching as a flicker of surprise – and something darker, more predatory – kindled in his pale eyes.

"Indeed, Lady Rosalind," he retorted, his voice deceptively mild as he regarded her with new interest. "One might say the same about you. Though I must confess, I do so love a challenge." His gaze raked over her once more, lingering on the swell of her bosom visible above the low neckline of her gown. "Beautiful creatures are all the more alluring when they prove... difficult to tame."

A delicate shiver traced its way down Rosalind's spine, but she refused to allow Lord Ashford to see her discomfiture. Lifting her chin, she met his hungry stare with defiant eyes, silently vowing that she would never be merely another pretty bauble in his collection, no matter how he might try to break her spirit.

Rosalind felt the barbed words rising in her throat, a biting retort on her lips. She was mere moments away from unleashing her sharp tongue upon the hapless Lord Ashford when Amelia's gentle touch upon her arm stilled her. A pair was approaching them, walking along the same perfectly manicured path. The lady wore a walking dress in a startling shade of bright green, and the gentleman swung a walking stick by his side as if he owned that whole side of the path.

"Ah, Sir Browning and Lady Browning," Amelia greeted warmly, her voice a soothing balm amidst the rising tension. "How delightful to see you both."

Reluctantly, Rosalind turned to face the distinguished-looking couple, her rebellious ire momentarily dampened by the prospect of new company. As the pleasantries were exchanged, she found her attention drifting, dismissing their polite chatter as yet another tedious stream of gossip and meaningless prattle. Lady Browning favoured her with a disapproving glare in the direction of her exposed décolletage, but Rosalind ignored her, letting her mind and eyes wander.

That is, until a familiar name reached her ears, jolting her from her wandering thoughts like a bolt of lightning.

"...the Duke of Somerton, you see," Lady Browning was saying, her voice thick with self-importance. "There have been the most intriguing rumours about him of late."

Rosalind's heart skipped a beat and she struggled to breathe. "Forgive me, Lady Browning," she interjected, her tone strained despite her efforts to maintain an air of nonchalance. "But what precisely did you say about the Duke?"

Lady Browning's eyes widened slightly at Rosalind's sudden interest, but she was clearly too delighted at the prospect of sharing her salacious gossip to question it. "Why, I was merely commenting on the rumours that the Duke has been seen about London with a most peculiar woman – a widow, they say, of some French nobleman

or other. The whispers are that he intends to make her his wife!"

The world seemed to tilt beneath Rosalind's feet as the implications of Lady Browning's words sank in, a leaden weight settling in the pit of her stomach. So the Duke had well and truly moved on, it seemed – and with remarkable swiftness, if the gossipmongers were to be believed.

Dizziness overcame her, blurring her vision and causing a cold sweat. Distantly, she was aware of Amelia's concerned voice calling her name, but it sounded as if she were speaking from the other end of a long tunnel.

"Rosalind? Rosalind, are you quite well? You've gone terribly pale..."

Before she could muster a response, Lord Ashford was at her side, his arm extended in a silent offer of support. Though every fibre of her being rebelled against the thought of accepting his aid, Rosalind found herself grasping his proffered limb, her slender fingers curling around the crook of his elbow as she fought to remain upright.

"Perhaps we should make our way back," he murmured. His tone laced with a strange sort of gentleness that seemed at odds with the predatory gleam she had witnessed in his eyes mere moments ago.

Too proud – and too shaken – to protest, Rosalind could only nod mutely, allowing Lord Ashford to guide her away from the Brownings and back along the path that would lead them home. The weight of her situation grew with each step, leaving her adrift in despair.

The Duke had moved on. And now, it seemed, so too must she.

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Rosalind felt a heavy weight with Lord Ashford beside her on the way back to Harrington House. She longed to retreat to the solitude of her bedchamber, to find some quiet corner where she might curl up and shut out the world, if only for a few precious moments. Alas, it seemed the day's torments were far from over.

No sooner had they crossed the threshold into the manor's grand foyer than Lord Harrington swept in to greet them, his jovial tones grating against Rosalind's frayed nerves. "Ah, there you are! I trust you enjoyed your walk in the park?"

Before Rosalind could muster a response, Lord Ashford spoke up, his voice carrying an undercurrent of finality. "Indeed, it was most...enlightening," he said, his gaze flicking briefly towards Rosalind. "In fact, I believe it would be prudent for us to settle the matter of our marriage with all due haste."

Rosalind's heart stuttered in her chest, her eyes widening as Lord Ashford's words washed over her like a crashing wave of icy water. Marry him? So soon? Panic gripped her, her throat constricting as she fought to draw breath.

"I have already applied for a special licence," Lord Ashford continued, seemingly oblivious to her distress. "And I would like us to be wed within three weeks' time."

Three weeks? The room seemed to spin around Rosalind, her vision blurring at the edges as Lord Harrington's muffled agreement reached her ears. She opened her mouth to protest, to beg for more time, but the only words that emerged were a feeble, "Surely such a short engagement will only add fuel to the gossip fires?"

Lord Ashford fixed her with a pointed stare, his expression hardening. "On the contrary, my dear," he said, his tone brooking no argument. "A prolonged engagement would do neither of us any favours. It would be best for you to be settled sooner rather than later." He offered her a condescending smile that sent a shiver of revulsion down Rosalind's spine. "Once you have born a few children, I daresay your

mind will be sufficiently occupied."

Rosalind recoiled as if he had struck her, feeling a mixture of humiliation and outrage rising within her. How dare he speak to her in such a manner, as if she were nothing more than a broodmare to be bred and put out to pasture?

Yet even as her pride stung beneath the weight of his callous words, she found herself powerless to resist. She was raised to believe that a woman's value hinged on her fertility – a truth she once resisted, but now couldn't evade.

With a curt nod, she excused herself from their company, retreating to the sanctuary of her bedchamber with as much dignity as she could muster. Once inside, her composure crumbled, and she sank onto her bed, overwhelmed by despair.

She had thought herself prepared for this moment, had steeled her heart against the inevitability of a loveless match. Yet now, faced with the harsh reality of her situation, she found herself adrift in a sea of hopelessness, her dreams of a life filled with passion and purpose slowly slipping away.

Rosalind drew in a shuddering breath, her eyes drifting towards the window and the world beyond. Perhaps, she mused, her new position might afford her opportunities to make a difference, to use her influence for good. It was a hollow comfort, but one she clung to nevertheless, a feeble light in the darkness that now seemed to stretch endlessly before her.

### Chapter 31

Alex leaned back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose as he let out a weary sigh. The day had been frustrating, and he felt no closer to solving the mysteries of Mary's past. Across from him, Richard sat with a tumbler of brandy in hand, his brow furrowed in contemplation, his cravat discarded and shirt collar falling open.

"It's as if she vanished into thin air," Alex muttered, his voice laced with exasperation. "Every lead we've followed, every acquaintance we've spoken to, has yielded nothing but dead ends."

Richard took a sip of his drink, his gaze fixed on a distant, invisible point. "It's almost too convenient, isn't it? A woman of her background, a commoner with no connections or means, simply disappearing without a trace?"

Alex nodded, his jaw tightening. "Precisely. And this supposed marriage to a Lord Jacque Blanchet – I've never heard of such a man, and my connections in France have turned up nothing."

"Perhaps the name was a ruse," Richard mused. "A fabrication to add a veneer of respectability to her tale."

Leaning forward, Alex rested his elbows on the desk, his fingers steepled before him. "And yet, Henry seemed genuinely confused when I broached the subject of his supposed stepfather's name. If Mary had been deceiving him as well, one would expect the child to be better versed in the lie."



Richard swirled the amber liquid in his glass, his expression pensive. "True, but children are easily misled, especially at such a tender age. Who's to say Mary hasn't been feeding him a carefully constructed narrative all these years? Besides which," he said, using the toes of first one foot and then the other to pull his tall boots off, "it's not as if it's easy to get information out of France right now."

Alex fell silent, his mind churning with possibilities and doubts. He couldn't deny the connection he felt with Henry, the inexplicable bond that had formed between them during their brief encounter. However, the nagging questions surrounding Mary's past continued to plague him, casting a shadow of uncertainty over the entire situation.

"We need to keep digging," he finally said, his voice resolute. "There are still avenues to explore, contacts to be made. I won't rest until I have the truth, no matter how unpleasant it may be."

Richard nodded, downing the last of his brandy. "Then we press on, brother. The truth is out there, waiting to be uncovered... even if it means we might have to delve into London's underbelly."

Richard's words hung in the air, their weight pressing down on Alex as he considered the implications. He knew his brother was right – if they truly wished to uncover the truth about Mary's past, they would need to delve into the murkier corners of society, the seedy underbelly that Alex had long ago turned his back on.

"You make a fair point," he admitted, his voice tinged with reluctance. "Though I confess, the thought of revisiting those haunts fills me with a certain... distaste."

A wry smile tugged at the corner of Richard's mouth. "Come now, brother. Surely you haven't become so staid and respectable that the mere thought of stepping foot in a tavern fills you with dread?"

Alex shot his brother a withering look, but there was no real heat behind it. "It's not the tavern itself that gives me pause," he said. "It's the memories, the spectre of the man I once was – reckless, self-indulgent, with little regard for the consequences of my actions."

Richard's expression softened, and he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Alex, you've come a long way since those days. The man you are now, the man you've become – that's the person who matters, not the ghost of your past."

Alex held his brother's gaze for a long moment, feeling a swell of gratitude for Richard's unwavering support. With a slight nod, he said, "Very well. If you truly believe it's necessary, then make your inquiries. But tread carefully, brother – we know not what dangers may lurk in the shadows we seek to illuminate."

A familiar glint of mischief sparked in Richard's eyes. "Have no fear, Your Grace," he said with a roguish grin. "I shall be the very soul of discretion."

Despite himself, Alex couldn't help but chuckle at his brother's bravado. "See that you are," he replied, his tone laced with fond exasperation. "I should hate to have to come and rescue you from whatever trouble you inevitably find yourself in."

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The pungent aroma of stale ale and pipe smoke assailed Alex's senses the moment they stepped through the weathered doorway of the Horseshoe Tavern. He wrinkled his nose in distaste, his gaze sweeping over the dimly lit interior with a mixture of revulsion and reluctant familiarity.

"Ah, just like I remember it," Richard quipped, clapping a hand on Alex's shoulder as he strode forward, seemingly oblivious to the dingy surroundings. "Doesn't it just fill you with a sense of nostalgia, brother?"

Alex shot his sibling a withering look, shrugging off Richard's hand. "Hardly," he muttered, his voice tinged with disdain. "This place is as disreputable as ever."

Richard merely smiled, unfazed by Alex's disapproval. "Perhaps, but that's precisely why we're here, is it not? If anyone knows the truth about our elusive Mary, it'll be the denizens of this establishment."

Grudgingly, Alex had to concede the point. As much as he loathed revisiting the seedy underbelly of London's tavern scene, he knew Richard was right. If they hoped to uncover the truth about Mary's past, they would need to delve into the shadowy corners frequented by those on the fringes of society.

"Very well," he said, steeling himself with a deep breath. "But let's make this quick. The sooner we find what we're looking for, the sooner we can leave this wretched place behind."

Richard's grin widened, his eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief. "Your wish is my command, Your Grace," he said with an exaggerated bow.

Before Alex could respond, Richard had already turned and begun weaving his way through the crowded taproom, greeting familiar faces and exchanging boisterous banter with the regulars. Alex followed in his brother's wake, his jaw set in a tight line as he studiously avoided making eye contact with anyone.

Having found a table in a back corner against a wall so that he might see without being easily seen, Alex settled in to watch the shifty crowd. He had purposefully dressed down for the occasion, opting for a plain brown jacket that was a little worn at the elbows, and trading in his perfect, starched white cravats for a patterned kerchief tied about his collar. It was his usual disguise from when he would come "slumming" in the days of his misspent youth.

Richard returned with two glasses of dark liquid and automatically offered one to Alex. Alex accepted the glass of sloe gin from Richard's outstretched hand, his fingers curling around the familiar vessel with an easy familiarity that made him frown. As he raised the glass to his lips, the rich, fruity aroma assailed his senses, transporting him back through the years to a time when such simple pleasures had been the extent of his ambitions.

The first sip was like a punch to the gut, the tart sweetness of the liquor flooding his mouth and awakening a rush of long-buried memories. He could almost see her again, that sly smile playing about her lips as she leaned across the battered table, her eyes sparkling with mischief in the flickering candlelight. Mary.

A rush of nostalgia brought back buried emotions. As quickly as the sentiment had arisen, it was smothered by a wave of revulsion – not necessarily for the woman herself, but for the squalid surroundings that had once been his world.

Alex's gaze swept over the dimly lit taproom. He could never imagine Rosalind in a place like this, her radiant beauty and gentle grace a stark contrast to the coarse vulgarity that permeated every inch of the establishment. Her innate goodness would have made her stand out, even in a burlap sack. A muscle twitched in his brow as he forced himself to swallow another mouthful of the sloe gin, the sweet liquid now tasting bitter on his tongue.

Alex felt a twinge of annoyance as Richard's elbow dug sharply into his ribs, jarring him from his morose reverie. His brother's gaze was fixed intently on a nearby table, where a grizzled old man nursed a pint of ale, the liquid slopping precariously over the rim with each tremulous motion of his gnarled hands.

"Isn't that old Bert?" Richard murmured, his voice a conspiratorial hush. "The ferryman who used to row Mary across the Thames to your place?"

Alex's eyes narrowed as he studied the man's weathered features, the tobacco-stained shirtfront, the patched and threadbare coat. Despite the ravages of time and hard living, there was an unmistakable familiarity about the slumped figure that stirred distant memories.

"You're right," he said at last, the words leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. "That's Bert, all right."

Without waiting for a response, Alex drained the last of his sloe gin and pushed to his feet, striding across the taproom with purposeful strides. Richard fell into step beside him, his expression a mask of eager curiosity.

As they approached, Bert raised a bleary eye in their direction, his rheumy gaze struggling to focus on the newcomers. "Wha' d'ye wan'?" he slurred, swaying unsteadily in his chair.

Alex pulled out a neighbouring seat and lowered himself into it, his movements slow and deliberate. "We're looking for information, Bert," he said, his voice a low rumble that carried an undercurrent of quiet authority. "About Mary Blackwood."

At the sound of that name, Bert's eyes seemed to clear momentarily, a flicker of recognition sparking amidst the drunken haze. "Tha' wench?" he spat, his tone suddenly venomous. "I ain't got nothin' t'say 'bout 'er, 'cept she's the reason I spent the las' year rottin' in Newgate!"

The words hung in the air like a slap, sending a ripple of shock through Alex. He exchanged a startled glance with Richard, then turned his attention back to the ferryman. "What do you mean?" he demanded, leaning forward intently. "What happened, Bert? Why were you in prison?"

But the old man had already slumped forward, his forehead colliding with the sticky

surface of the table as a guttural snore rattled from his throat. Alex swore under his breath, frustration and bewilderment warring within him as he studied Bert's insensible form.

Alex felt suspicion as he observed Bert's unconscious state. The ferryman's words, laced with bitterness and recrimination, had struck a discordant chord within him, hinting at a darker truth lurking beneath the surface of Mary's carefully constructed facade.

With a grunt of disgust, he shoved himself to his feet, the chair scraping harshly against the rough-hewn floorboards. Richard, sensing his brother's sudden shift in demeanour, rose as well, his expression one of curious concern.

"You suspect something, don't you?" he murmured, falling into step beside Alex as they wove their way through the crowded taproom toward the exit.

Alex said nothing, his jaw clenched tightly as they pushed through the battered doorway and emerged, blinking, into the bright afternoon sunlight. It was only once they had put a few paces between themselves and the disreputable tavern that he finally spoke, his voice low and tinged with a hint of grim foreboding.

"I don't know what to suspect," he admitted, raking a hand through his hair in a rare display of agitation. "But Bert's words... they suggest there's more to Mary's story than she's letting on."

Richard nodded, his brow furrowed in contemplation. "She did seem to vanish into thin air for a time," he mused. "And if she was the reason for Bert's incarceration..."

His voice trailed off, but the implication hung heavily in the air between them. If Mary had been involved in some unsavoury dealings, perhaps even criminal activities, it could shed new light on her motivations for resurfacing after all these

years.

A muscle twitched in Alex's jaw as he digested this unpalatable possibility. Could the woman he had once loved, the mother of his child, truly be capable of such deceit and wrongdoing? The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth, a gnawing sense of disquiet coiling in the pit of his stomach.

Before he could dwell further on these troubling notions, Richard spoke again, his tone infused with a renewed sense of purpose.

"There's one place we might be able to find some answers," he said, his gaze flicking meaningfully toward the mouth of a nearby alleyway. "Follow me."

Without waiting for a response, Richard turned and started off, his strides confident and unhurried. Alex hesitated for a heartbeat, torn between a desire to unravel the truth and a lingering reluctance to delve too deeply into the unsavoury underbelly of London's criminal element.

Ultimately, his need for answers won out. With a heavy sigh, he squared his shoulders and set off after his brother, his footsteps echoing against the cobblestones as he followed Richard into the shadowed depths of the alleyway.

The dank, fetid air of the rookery assailed Alex's senses as he followed Richard deeper into the maze of narrow alleys and cramped courtyards. The air was thick with the stench of unwashed bodies, stale urine, and opium smoke.

All around them, huddled figures lined the filthy streets, their haunted eyes peering out from beneath tattered shawls and threadbare coats. Gaunt, hollow-cheeked children darted between the shadows, their tiny hands outstretched in a perpetual plea for charity. Alex's jaw tightened as he steered a wide berth around a ramshackle opium den, the sickly-sweet fumes wafting from its open doorway like a noxious

cloud.

"Charming locale, isn't it?" Richard quipped, his tone laced with dark humour as he navigated the treacherous terrain with an ease born of long familiarity. "Brings back memories, doesn't it, brother?"

Alex shot him a withering glare, his lip curling in a sneer of disdain. "Hardly the sort of memories one wishes to dwell upon," he bit out, his voice edged with distaste.

In truth, the squalid surroundings stirred echoes of a past he'd long since turned his back on – a time when the rookeries had been his haunt, their seedy underbelly a refuge from the suffocating expectations of his noble birth. He reveled in their anonymity, immersed in the rush of vice and debauchery.

That life, those choices, had ultimately led him to Mary.

The thought sent a pang of unease lancing through him, a flicker of doubt igniting in his mind. What if Bert's cryptic words hinted at a deeper truth, one that cast Mary's motivations and actions in a far more sinister light? The very notion left him with a bitter taste and a sense of dread.

Before Alex could dwell further on these troubling notions, Richard came to an abrupt halt, his hand shooting out to grip Alex's arm in a vice-like hold. "There," he murmured, his gaze fixed intently on a nearby doorway partially obscured by a tattered canvas awning. "That's the place I was telling you about."

Alex followed his brother's line of sight, his brow furrowing in confusion as he studied the nondescript entrance. "You'll need to refresh my memory," he said at length, turning a quizzical look on Richard. "What is this place, exactly?"

A grim smile tugged at the corner of Richard's mouth as he launched into an



explanation, the words tumbling forth in a hushed rush.

"A few years back, there was a rather audacious theft that made the rounds in certain circles," he began, his voice pitched low to avoid attracting unwanted attention. "A young woman, posing as a new lady's maid, managed to infiltrate the household of a wealthy gentleman here in London. Within a week, she and her accomplices had made off with the bulk of the poor wife's jewellery collection." Richard paused for dramatic effect. "They eluded the watchmen by rowing across the Thames."

Alex's eyes widened fractionally as the implications of Richard's words sank in. "And you believe Mary was involved in this scheme?" he demanded, his tone edged with a mixture of incredulity and dawning suspicion.

Richard's smile deepened, taking on a feral edge. "It would certainly explain her sudden disappearance all those years ago," he murmured. "And if she employed similar tactics to gain access to other households..."

His voice trailed off, but the unspoken accusation hung heavily in the air between them. If Mary had indeed been part of an elaborate criminal enterprise, it cast her recent reappearance – and her claim of having Alex's child – in an entirely new light.

"She could have been using me as a means to gain access to information about other households," Alex realised with a start. A muscle twitched in Alex's jaw as he digested this unpalatable possibility. Could the woman he had once loved, the mother of his child, truly be capable of such deceit and wrongdoing? The thought left a bitter taste and a sense of unease.

Richard put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, and then beckoned him through the doorway.

### Chapter 32

Lady Rosalind stood before the ornate mirror, her reflection staring back at her with a mixture of resignation and despair. The pale gold satin of her wedding gown shone dully in the afternoon sun, the intricate beadwork and silver thread glittering like a thousand tiny stars.

It was a dress fit for a princess, a vision of elegance and beauty that should have filled her heart with joy and anticipation. Yet, Rosalind felt empty as the modiste adjusted the fabric.

"You look absolutely radiant, darling Rosalind," Isabella murmured, her voice tender and tinged with awe as she stepped closer, her eyes drinking in the sight of her sister in all her bridal finery. "A true vision of loveliness. I—I should paint a wedding portrait for you," she suggested, clearly trying her best to muster some enthusiasm.

Rosalind's lips twisted into a bitter smile, her eyes clouding over with a sadness that cut through her like a knife. "I would rather not," she replied flatly.

Amelia, ever the voice of reason and practicality, stepped forward and laid a gentle hand upon Rosalind's arm, her eyes shining with a mixture of sympathy and determination. "I know this is not the path you would have chosen for yourself, dearest sister," she murmured. "But even in the darkest of times, there is always a glimmer of hope, a chance to find purpose and meaning in the most unlikely of places."

Rosalind turned to face her sister, her brow furrowed in confusion and doubt. "And

what hope is there in a loveless marriage to a man who treats me as a trophy? she asked, her voice tinged with bitterness.

Amelia's gaze was sympathetic. "The hope," she said, "lies in the knowledge that even as Lord Ashford's wife, you will have the power and the influence to make a difference in the lives of those less fortunate than ourselves. You can use your position to advocate for the poor and the downtrodden, to lend your voice to those who have none. You can find purpose and fulfilment in the work of charity and compassion, in bringing light and hope to those who dwell in the shadows."

Lady Rosalind considered Amelia's words, her sister's earnest attempts to find a silver lining in the dark cloud that loomed over her future. She understood, of course, the wisdom in Amelia's counsel, the notion that even in the most trying of circumstances, there was always an opportunity to make a difference, to find purpose and meaning in the work of compassion and charity.

Still, Rosalind felt a profound sense of loss as she stood in her wedding gown. She had tasted the sweetness of love with Alexander, but had it cruelly ripped away, leaving her hollow.

"You look simply breathtaking, my Lady," the modiste murmured, her nimble fingers making the final adjustments to the intricate folds of satin and lace. "Though I must say, it is always a difficult transition for a new bride, leaving behind the comforts of her family home and striking out on a new path."

Rosalind's lips twisted into a bitter smile, her eyes clouding over with a sadness that cut through her like a knife. "I fear this path holds little in the way of comfort for me," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

In her mind's eye, she could see the future that had so nearly been hers. She could see a life filled with purpose and passion, a chance to use her position and influence to

make a difference in the lives of those less fortunate. All these while basking in the warmth and love of a husband who cherished her for who she was, who saw her as an equal and a partner, rather than a mere ornament to be displayed and admired.

It was a future that had been stolen, leaving her lost and broken, her dreams destroyed by Alexander's betrayal. And as she gazed the reflection on the mirror, the wedding gown felt like a shroud to Rosalind, filling her with despair.

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The bustling throngs of the Bond Street Bazaar swirled around Rosalind like a kaleidoscope of colour and noise, the air thick with the mingled scents of perfume, leather, and fresh linen. Ordinarily, she might have found a certain thrill in the vibrant chaos, the thrum of energy that pulsed through the crowded stalls and shops. Today, however, her heart was burdened by her impending nuptials and Alexander's betrayal.

She trailed behind her sisters, Amelia and Isabella, as they flitted from one stall to the next, their eyes alight with excitement as they perused the wares on offer. Amelia paused to admire a delicate pair of embroidered gloves, her fingers tracing the intricate patterns with a reverent touch, while Isabella cooed over a display of lace-trimmed handkerchiefs, each one more exquisite than the last.

Rosalind, however, could muster little enthusiasm for their pursuits, her mind a whirlwind of tumultuous thoughts and emotions. She moved through the crowd in a daze, her gaze unfocused and distant, until a familiar figure in the distance caught her eye, a figure that sent a jolt of electricity through her veins and caused her heart to skip a beat.

Alexander.

There he stood, resplendent in his tailored finery, his dark eyes scanning the crowd

with a pensive expression. Rosalind felt her breath catch in her throat, her body tensing as a wave of conflicting emotions washed over her – longing, anger, jealousy, and an aching sorrow that threatened to overwhelm her.

Unable to meet his gaze, she turned away immediately, her cheeks blushing. His presence reignited painful memories, imagining him with another woman, loving Mary as he had once vowed to love her.

Bitter jealousy overwhelmed Rosalind, and she fought tears. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her so undone, so utterly devastated by his betrayal.

"Rosalind!" Amelia's voice cut through the din, sharp and insistent, snapping Rosalind from her reverie.

She turned, her heart pounding in her chest, and found herself locked in Alexander's gaze, his dark eyes burning into hers with an intensity that threatened to steal her breath away. For a moment, the world seemed to fall away, the cacophony of the Bazaar fading into a distant hum as they stood frozen, caught in the gravitational pull of one another's orbit.

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As Alex and Richard made their way through the bustling Bond Street Bazaar, the Duke found himself distracted by the sights and sounds of the crowded marketplace. Richard, however, remained focused on their mission, his eyes scanning the throngs of people for the person they sought. He had obtained directions from a disreputable-looking fellow in the rookery, and now they were close to their destination.

Suddenly, amidst the din of the bazaar, Alex heard someone say Rosalind's name. His heart skipped a beat as he caught a glimpse of her signature red hair peeking out from beneath her bonnet. Their eyes met by chance, and Alex felt frozen in place, unable to

look away. Before he could stop himself, he called out to her, desperate to explain the truth about Mary and the situation he found himself in.

Pushing through the crowd, Alex tried to reach Rosalind, his heart pounding in his chest as he navigated the sea of people, but she ducked away from him, disappearing into the throng as quickly as she had appeared, like a mirage evaporating. Amelia followed close behind, hurrying after her sister.

Isabella lingered for a moment, her gaze meeting Alex's. With a shy smile, she approached him and said softly, "Your Grace, I'm very sorry that things turned out the way they did." Her words were sincere, tinged with a hint of sadness. Before Alex could respond, Isabella hurried after her sisters, leaving him standing alone in the middle of the bazaar.

Bereft and longing to chase after Rosalind, Alex started to set off in the direction she had gone, but Richard's hand on his arm stopped him. "We have to stay focused, brother," Richard reminded him, his voice low and urgent. "If we don't, all will be lost."

Alex's heart ached as he watched Rosalind disappear into the crowd, the brief encounter leaving him longing for her presence and the opportunity to explain the truth about his situation with Mary. The weight of his responsibilities and the secrets he carried threatened to crush him, but Richard's insistent tug on his arm pulled him back to the task at hand.

Reluctantly, Alex followed his brother through the bustling bazaar, his mind still reeling from the unexpected encounter with Rosalind. As they approached a jeweller's stall, Alex found himself only half-listening to Richard's conversation with the merchant. His thoughts consumed by the pain and confusion he had seen in Rosalind's eyes.

Richard's voice cut through Alex's reverie as he heard his brother mention "fine pieces" and a name he didn't recognise. "One-Eyed Jack," Richard said, his tone laced with a hint of danger. "Where can we find him?"

The jeweller hesitated, his eyes darting nervously between the two brothers. "I don't want any trouble," he said, his voice trembling slightly. "You can find the man you're looking for in Blackfriar's Den."

Richard smiled grimly, a look of determination settling over his features. He turned to Alex, his eyes glinting with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension. "Brace yourself, brother," he said, his voice low and urgent. "We're heading into dangerous territory."

Alex nodded, steeling himself for whatever lay ahead. As they made their way through the winding streets of London, he couldn't shake the feeling that they were on the cusp of uncovering a truth that could change everything. He knew that he had to see this through, for the sake of an innocent child and for the chance to make things right with Rosalind.

The streets grew narrower and more shadowed as they approached Blackfriar's Den, the air thick with the stench of poverty and desperation. Alex's heart raced as they entered the dilapidated building, the sound of raucous laughter and shouts spilling out into the street. The unmistakable sounds of fists hitting flesh, a dull, sickening thud, filled the spaces between the shouts. The smells of sweat and blood mingled in the air, settling revoltingly in Alex's nose.

Richard navigated the crowded space with ease, his eyes scanning the room for any sign of their quarry. Alex followed close behind, his senses on high alert as they made their way through the throng of unsavoury characters.

Suddenly, Richard stopped, his gaze fixed on a figure hunched over a table in the far

corner of the room. "There," he said, leaning close so that Alex could hear him. "That's One-Eyed Jack."

Alex watched with a mixture of fascination and revulsion as the large, one-eyed man effortlessly dispatched his opponent in the makeshift boxing ring. The sickening crunch of bone and the splattering of blood sent a chill down his spine, a stark reminder of the brutality that lurked beneath the veneer of civilised society.

As the crowd erupted in raucous cheers, Alex's gaze remained fixed on the victorious fighter. This was the man they had come to find – One-Eyed Jack, a figure shrouded in mystery and rumour, a denizen of the underworld who might hold the key to unlocking the truth about Mary's past.

Beside him, Richard tensed, his body coiled like a spring, ready for action. Alex knew that his brother was no stranger to the rougher elements of society, but even he seemed unsettled by the scene unfolding before them.

As a mug of ale was passed to One-Eyed Jack, the man's gaze swept over the crowd, his piercing stare momentarily locking with Alex's. For a brief instant, the Duke felt a flicker of trepidation, a primal instinct warning him of the danger that lay ahead.



### Chapter 33

Gathering his resolve, Alex approached One-Eyed Jack and congratulated him on his victory. Jack looked at Alex with barely disguised disgust. "Toffs come slummin'," Jack said and moved off. Richard stepped in his way, stopping him.

"We know that you were involved in that jewellery robbery a few years ago," Richard stated bluntly.

Jack's body tensed, his single eye narrowing as he regarded them with a mixture of wariness and defiance. Alex stepped forward, his hands raised in a placating gesture.

"We're not here to cause trouble," he assured Jack. "We simply want information, and we're willing to pay for it."

Jack let out a bitter laugh, his lips curling into a sneer. "And what use have I for some soft-handed man's coins?" he spat, his tone dripping with contempt.

Alex held Jack's gaze, his expression calm and resolute. "More use than you might think," he replied evenly. "We're not looking to turn anyone in or settle scores. We just want to know the truth about a woman named Mary, and her involvement in that robbery."

Jack's eye flickered with a brief flicker of recognition at the mention of Mary's name, but his expression remained guarded. "And why should I tell you toffs anything?" he challenged, his voice low and dangerous.

"Because we can make it worth your while," Richard interjected smoothly. "And because, if you don't, we'll have to find someone else who will."

"Be my guest," Jack said with a barking laugh as he gestured broadly at the others in the dingy room. Everyone had turned to watch what was happening, and Alex could feel their cold eyes on him. "That is, iffin' you can find anyone who cares to speak."

Alex held Jack's gaze, his jaw set with determination. The disdainful laughter that rippled through the Den only served to strengthen his resolve. He knew that in this world, respect had to be earned through strength and grit, not bestowed by titles or wealth.

Glancing towards the rough chalk outlines of the boxing ring, Alex made his move. "What if we settle this like men?" he challenged, his voice carrying a note of quiet authority. "You and I, in that ring. If I best you, you tell me everything you know about Mary."

A hush fell over the Den as Jack's single eye narrowed, sizing up the well-dressed nobleman before him. A slow, predatory grin spread across his scarred face as he nodded. "Aye, I'll take that wager," he growled. "But if I win, you pay double what your brother's offered."

Without waiting for a response, Jack turned to the gathered crowd. "Lay out your coins, lads!" he bellowed. "We've got ourselves a toff who fancies himself a boxer!"

As the crowd erupted into raucous cheers and jeers, Richard gripped Alex's arm, his brow furrowed with concern. "Are you mad?" he hissed. "You can't be serious about this."

Alex met his brother's gaze, his expression resolute. "I'm deadly serious," he replied, his voice low. "Don't worry, Richard. I know what I'm doing."

Shrugging off his coat, Alex rolled up his sleeves, his muscles rippling beneath the fine fabric of his shirt. He had been trained in the art of boxing from a young age, a pursuit encouraged by his father as a means of instilling discipline and strength. It was a favourite pastime at many gentlemen's clubs in London, though Alex doubted it could compare to the raw brutality of street fighting. Though it had been years since he had stepped into a ring, the familiar thrill of anticipation coursed through his veins.

As he stepped between the chalked lines, Alex cast one final glance at his brother, a ghost of a smile playing upon his lips. "Trust me," he murmured, before turning to face his opponent.

Alex circled Jack warily, his footwork light and his hands raised in a defensive posture. Despite the rawness of his surroundings, the familiar rhythm of the ring settled over him like a comforting cloak. He feinted left, testing Jack's reflexes, and was rewarded with a glimpse of the man's blind spot as he instinctively turned to cover his right side.

Seizing the opportunity, Alex struck with lightning speed, his fist cracking against Jack's ribs with a dull thud. Jack grunted, his single eye widening in surprise, but he recovered quickly, retaliating with a wild haymaker that Alex deftly slipped beneath.

The exchange continued, Alex's aristocratic upbringing melting away as the primal dance of the fight consumed him. He took his share of blows, his lip splitting and his knuckles stinging, but he gave as good as he got, using his agility and precision to exploit the gaps in Jack's defence.

Jack, for his part, fought with the ferocity of a cornered animal, his fists like sledgehammers and his snarls punctuating each swing. As the bout wore on, a glimmer of respect began to shine through the initial disdain in his eye.

Finally, Alex saw his chance. As Jack overextended himself with a powerful cross,

Alex slipped inside his guard, delivering a rapid-fire combination that left the bigger man reeling. A final, perfectly timed uppercut caught Jack squarely on the chin, and he crashed to the floor, his eye patch askew and his body trembling from the force of the blows.

The Den fell silent, the spectators too stunned to react. A few of Jack's compatriots took a menacing step forward, but Jack waved them off, his chest heaving as he slowly regained his feet.

"You didn't fight like no toff," he rasped, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the scuffed floorboards. His single eye met Alex's, and to the Duke's surprise, he saw a glimmer of respect shining through the hardened exterior.

Alex exhaled slowly, his shoulders rising and falling as he struggled to catch his breath. The Den's acrid air stung his lungs, but the thrill of victory coursed through his veins, lending him a sense of clarity and purpose that he had not felt in far too long.

As Jack accepted a filthy cloth from one of his cohorts, using it to dab at the split in his lip, Alex straightened his posture, his gaze steady and unwavering. He had proven himself in the most primal of arenas, and now it was time to collect his due.

"You fought well, Your Grace," Jack grunted, his single eye regarding Alex with a newfound measure of respect. "Didn't think a man of your standing had it in him."

Alex inclined his head, acknowledging the backhanded compliment with a slight smile. "There's more to me than meets the eye, it seems," he replied evenly.

Jack let out a rasping chuckle, beckoning Alex and Richard to join him at a small, rickety table in the corner of the Den. Gingerly, Alex shrugged back into his jacket and waistcoat, loosely draping his cravat about his neck without bothering to tie it. As

they approached, the other denizens of the establishment seemed to melt back into the shadows, their initial hostility tempered by the spectacle they had just witnessed.

"So," Jack began, lowering his voice as he leaned across the table, "you want to know about Mary, eh?"

Alex nodded, his expression grave. "Everything you know," he affirmed. "I need the truth, Jack."

The scarred man's gaze flickered briefly towards Richard before settling back on Alex. "Aye, I know her well enough," he admitted with a grunt. "She's a clever one, that Mary. A right proficient confidence woman, using her charms and her wits to swindle wealthy men out of their fortunes."

A flicker of recognition passed over Alex's features, and he felt a pang of bitterness in his chest. He had been one of those wealthy men, once upon a time, seduced by Mary's beauty and her guile.

Jack seemed to sense Alex's discomfort, for he let out a bark of laughter that sent spittle flying. "Aye, I reckon you know firsthand what she's capable of, eh, Your Grace?" he sneered. "One of her favourite schemes is to appear with a child in tow, claiming it's the product of some affair with a rich man. Gets 'em every time, the soft-hearted fools."

Alex's jaw tightened, his fingers clenching his thighs beneath the table. So that was Mary's game – to ensnare him once more with the lie of a child, to bleed him dry of his wealth and his standing. The thought made his blood boil, but he forced himself to remain outwardly calm, nodding for Jack to continue.

"Last I heard, Mary scarpered off to France after that jewellery heist went sour," Jack went on, leaning back in his chair. "Laid low for a bit, no doubt, but a woman like

that can't stay put for long. Too much of a hunger for the finer things, see?"

He paused, fixing Alex with a calculating look. "I ain't seen her in a good long while, mind you," he admitted. "But I know people who might have knowledge of her movements, where she's like to be stayin' and such."

Alex felt a glimmer of hope spark to life within him, tempered by a lingering sense of caution. If what Jack said was true, if Mary's claims of a child were nothing more than an elaborate ruse, then perhaps there was still a chance for him to salvage what he had lost with Rosalind.

Squaring his shoulders, Alex met Jack's gaze head-on. "Then tell me what you know," he said, his voice low and insistent. "I'll pay whatever price is required, but I want the truth about Mary – all of it."

Alex regarded Jack with a newfound respect, his brow furrowed in contemplation. The man's gruff exterior and unwavering code of honour had proven to be a surprising revelation amidst the gritty underbelly of London's underworld.

Reaching into his waistcoat pocket, Alex retrieved a small leather pouch and slid it across the table towards Jack. The clinking of coins against wood punctuated the gesture, a tangible symbol of the agreement they had forged.

"For your trouble," Alex said, his voice low and measured.

Jack eyed the pouch warily, his single eye narrowing as he considered the Duke's offer. For a tense moment, Alex wondered if the man would reject his payment outright, a gesture that would undoubtedly insult the delicate balance of respect they had established.

Finally, Jack shook his head, his scarred features twisting into a wry grin. "Keep your

coin, Your Grace," he rumbled, pushing the pouch back across the table. "I lost fair and square, and I always pay my debts – good or bad."

Alex blinked, momentarily taken aback by Jack's refusal. In his experience, men of Jack's ilk were seldom known for their scruples, especially when money was involved. Yet, here was a man who adhered to a code of honour that transcended mere financial gain.

Inclining his head in a gesture of respect, Alex slid the pouch back into his pocket. "As you wish," he replied, his voice tinged with a newfound admiration for the scarred boxer. "But I trust you'll uphold your end of our bargain?"

Jack's lip curled into a predatory grin, revealing a mouthful of crooked, yellowed teeth. "You have my word, Your Grace," he growled. "I'll send word the moment I learn anything about Mary's whereabouts."

With a grunt, Jack hauled himself to his feet, his battered frame creaking with the effort. He extended a calloused hand towards Alex, his single eye glinting with a mixture of wariness and grudging respect.

Alex accepted the proffered handshake, his grip firm and unwavering. In that moment, he knew that he had forged an unlikely alliance, one that transcended the boundaries of class and station. Jack may have been a denizen of the underworld, but he was a man of his word – and that, Alex realised, was a rare and valuable commodity in a world where deception and betrayal were all too common.

As they made their way out of the Blackfriar's Den, Alex couldn't help but feel a sense of renewed determination coursing through his veins. The truth about Mary's past, and the true nature of her claims, was within his grasp. With Jack's assistance, he might just have a chance to unravel the web of lies that threatened to tear his life asunder.

The streets of London seemed to stretch out before him, teeming with possibility and peril in equal measure. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Alex felt a glimmer of hope kindling within his heart. A hope that, perhaps, he might yet be able to reclaim the future he had envisioned with Rosalind.

As Alex and Richard stepped out into the slightly fresher air of London's East End, the weight of their encounter with Jack seemed to lift ever so slightly from their shoulders. The streets were a maze of grime and squalor, a stark contrast to the opulent grandeur of Mayfair and St. James's, but there was a raw vitality here that Alex found oddly invigorating.

They had only ventured a few paces when a commotion up ahead caught their attention. A group of ragged children, their faces smeared with dirt and their clothes little more than tattered rags, were embroiled in a fierce struggle over what appeared to be a half-eaten crust of bread.

Alex watched, transfixed, as a boy with a mop of unruly brown curls seized another child by the front of his dingy shirt, raining blows upon him with tiny but determined fists.

The other children formed a raucous circle around the combatants, chanting and jeering in a cacophony of high-pitched voices. "John!" they cried, their cries rising and falling like the crashing of waves upon the shore. "John! John!"

Alex felt a pang of sympathy for the children, his heart aching at the sight of such deprivation and desperation. He knew, better than most, the harsh realities of life on London's streets, having witnessed the depths of human suffering firsthand during his misspent youth. Yet, even now, as the Duke of Somerton, the sight of these forgotten urchins stirred something deep within him – a desire to intervene, to offer aid and succour where he could.



He made a half-step forward, his hand instinctively reaching into the pocket of his waistcoat, but Richard's firm grip on his arm stayed his advance.

"It won't matter," his brother murmured, his voice low and tinged with a world-weary resignation. "They'll be at it again the moment we've gone around the corner."

Alex knew that Richard was right, of course. Such was the nature of life in the East End, where survival was a constant struggle and the slightest scrap of sustenance was worth fighting tooth and nail to obtain. Still, his heart ached at the thought of turning a blind eye to such suffering.

As if sensing the weight of their scrutiny, the boy known as John turned, his fist still clutching the mouldy remnants of the bread crust. His eyes, large and luminous in his dirt-streaked face, went wide as he caught sight of the two well-dressed gentlemen observing the fray.

For a heartbeat, time seemed to hang suspended, the cacophony of the other children's jeers fading into a distant murmur. Alex's gaze locked onto the boy's face, and he felt the world tilt violently beneath his feet as recognition washed over him like a tidal wave.

It was him. The child from his meeting with Mary – the one she had claimed was his own flesh and blood. However, here he was, scrapping in the filthy streets of the East End like any other vagrant urchin, his eyes burning with a feral intensity that spoke of a life lived in squalor and deprivation.

As the realisation took hold, Alex felt his heart constrict, a maelstrom of emotions swirling within him. Anger, confusion, and a profound sense of betrayal all vied for dominance, leaving him reeling and unsteady on his feet.

The boy seemed to sense the shift in the air, his gaze flickering towards the two well-

dressed gentlemen with a mixture of wariness and fear. For a moment, Alex thought he might bolt, his slight frame tensing as if poised to flee.

Moving with a swiftness that belied his stature, Alex closed the distance between them in two long strides, his hand shooting out to seize the boy by the tattered collar of his shirt. The child let out a startled yelp, his eyes going wide as he found himself suddenly ensnared in the Duke's iron grip.

The other children, sensing the shift in the dynamic, took a collective step forward, their faces a mask of uncertainty and trepidation. Alex felt Richard tense beside him, his brother's hand straying towards the reassuring weight of the cane he carried.

But before the situation could escalate further, Richard deftly intervened, producing a handful of coins from his pocket and flicking them towards the ragged band of urchins. "Off with you, then," he barked, his tone brooking no argument.

The children needed no further encouragement, swarming over the scattered coins like a pack of feral dogs descending upon a scrap of meat. Within moments, they had dispersed, scattering into the labyrinthine alleys and side streets of the East End, their shrill voices fading into the distance.

Only the boy remained, his slight frame trembling in Alex's grasp as he fixed the Duke with a look of abject terror. Alex felt a pang of regret at the fear he had instilled in the child, but he could not deny the burning need for answers that consumed him.

"Calm yourself, lad," he murmured, his voice low and soothing as he loosened his grip ever so slightly. "I mean you no harm. I simply wish to know the truth."

The boy's lower lip quivered, his eyes darting between Alex and Richard as if searching for an avenue of escape. Finally, he seemed to deflate, his shoulders slumping in resignation.

"M'name's John," he mumbled, his voice barely above a whisper. "That Mary paid me to pretend to be 'er son. Said if I did well, I could be a rich man's son an' live in a 'ouse as big as a palace, never be ' again."

Alex felt his heart plummet at the boy's words, the truth of Mary's deception laid bare before him. He exchanged a glance with Richard, his brother's expression grim and unreadable.

"And where is this Mary now, John?" Alex pressed, his tone gentle but insistent.

The boy shook his head, his eyes downcast. "Don't rightly know, Yer Grace," he mumbled. "She just...vanished. Ain't seen 'er in weeks, an' she ain't paid me nothin' more."

A heavy silence filled the air as the boy's revelation sank in for the trio. Alex felt the anger and betrayal he had harboured towards Mary transmute into something else – a grim determination to unravel the tangled web of lies and deceit that had ensnared him.

Releasing his grip on the boy's collar, Alex reached into his pocket and produced a handful of coins, pressing them into the child's grubby palm. "Thank you for your honesty, John," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "You've been a great help to me this day."

The boy's eyes went wide at the unexpected windfall, his fingers closing reflexively around the coins as if fearing they might vanish like a mirage. He stared up at Alex, his expression a mixture of awe and trepidation, as though he couldn't quite believe his good fortune.

Alex knelt down in the muck of the street so that he could meet John's gaze at eye level. Reaching out, he placed a gentle hand on the boy's bony shoulder, his heart

aching at the sight of such destitution and neglect.

"John," he said, his voice low and earnest. "I must ask you to be a very brave lad now, and tell me the truth once more. Can you do that for me?"

John's eyes flickered towards Richard, his small frame tensing as if poised to flee. Alex could see the fear and mistrust etched into the child's features, the product of a harsh existence spent fending for himself on the unforgiving streets of London.

After a moment's hesitation, John gave a small nod, his grip tightening around the coins clutched in his fist. "I...I could, Yer Grace," he mumbled, his voice barely audible. "But it's just...it's so hard, bein' 'ungry an' cold all the time. It makes a fella want to do things 'e shouldn't, just to get by."

Alex felt a pang of sympathy for the boy—he'd never known a moment of hunger in his life, and the wide gulf between his own circumstances and those of most of the people filled him with guilt. He had witnessed firsthand the desperation that drives people to desperate actions.

Reaching out, Alex clasped John's hand in his own, his grip firm but gentle. "I give you my word, John," he said, his voice ringing with conviction. "If you tell me the truth, and continue to do so, I shall see to it that you never want for food or shelter again. You have my solemn vow on that."

John's eyes widened, his gaze flickering between Alex and the coins clutched in his hand. For a long moment, the boy seemed to wrestle with an internal struggle, his brow furrowed in contemplation.

Finally, he gave a tentative nod, his grip loosening ever so slightly as he extended his hand towards Alex. "A'right, then, Yer Grace," he murmured, his voice laced with a fragile trust. "I'll tell ye everythin' I know, if ye promise to keep yer word."

Alex felt a surge of relief wash over him as he clasped the boy's hand in his own, sealing their bargain with a firm shake. "You have my word, John," he repeated, his voice resonating with the weight of his vow. "Now, tell me everything you know about Mary, and where she might have gone."

### Chapter 34

Rosalind stared down at the jewel case that Lord Ashford had sent over as a betrothal gift. Inside was a necklace made of several strands of pearls with a small ruby pendant. She ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the pearls, her touch devoid of any warmth or appreciation for the lavish gift.

"Well, that's...certainly something," Amelia said. Rosalind knew good and well that it was a gaudy thing, and Amelia's face clearly said she agreed. "Let's see how it looks on you, shall we?" she offered, attempting to put a good face on the situation.

Before Rosalind could protest, Amelia had already clasped the necklace around her neck, her deft fingers fastening it with practised ease. Rosalind lifted her gaze to a mirror-backed candle scone, her eyes meeting her own reflection, and felt a pang of disappointment. The pearls, once symbol of elegance, now burdened her, the pendant mocking her dreams.

Lord Harrington's booming voice echoed through the room, his tone brimming with pride and satisfaction. "A magnificent gift, my dear! Lord Ashford truly knows how to shower his future bride with affection."

Rosalind remained silent, her lips pressed into a thin line as she fought back the wave of emotions threatening to overwhelm her. She couldn't bring herself to share her father's enthusiasm, not when the necklace felt more like a dog collar than a token of love.

"I must be off to my solicitor's office to finalise the marriage contracts," Lord

Harrington announced, his plummy tone a sharp and terrible contrast to the misery Rosalind felt.

She watched, her gaze listless and detached, as her father swept out of the parlour, his mind already occupied with the details of her impending nuptials. She yearned to speak up, but duty and expectation held her back.

As the door closed behind her father, Rosalind felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her. Her mind was plagued by thoughts and emotions, making it hard for her to find restful sleep. She was exhausted, both physically and emotionally, from the constant demands of her circumstances.

Rosalind's head snapped up at the sound of raised voices echoing through the foyer. Her brow furrowed in confusion as she strained to make out the words, her heart already beginning to race in her chest.

Amelia rose from her seat, shooting Rosalind a concerned glance before heading towards the commotion. Rosalind followed close behind, her steps quickening as a familiar voice cut through the din – a voice that sent a jolt of electricity through her veins.

As they rounded the corner into the entry hall, Rosalind's breath caught in her throat. There, standing defiantly before the stone-faced butler, was Alex, his piercing gaze fixed on the man barring his entry.

"I must insist you leave at once, Your Grace," the butler said through gritted teeth, his posture rigid and uncompromising.

Alex's eyes flashed with a mixture of frustration and determination. "I will not leave until I've had a chance to speak with Lady Rosalind."

Rosalind felt her heart pounding in her ears, her hands trembling at her sides. A part of her wanted to flee, to avoid facing the man who shattered her dreams. Another part, though, a deeper, more primal part, yearned to hear what he had to say, to finally unravel the tangled web of secrets and lies that had torn them apart.

Amelia stepped forward, her expression a mixture of concern and protectiveness. "I'm afraid I cannot allow you to see my sister, Your Grace," she said, her voice steady but tinged with a warning. "You have caused her enough pain already."

Alex's gaze shifted to Rosalind, and in that moment, she felt as though she were the only person in the world. His eyes held a plea, a silent entreaty that tugged at the very core of her being.

Before she could stop herself, Rosalind gave the tiniest of nods, a silent assent that seemed to echo through the cavernous hall.

Amelia glanced back at her sister, her brow furrowed, before stepping aside and allowing Alex to pass. The butler, a loyal servant for decades, sniffed his disapproval, and disappeared through a side door.

Rosalind's heart thundered in her chest as Alex drew nearer, his presence overwhelming her senses. She had dreamed of this moment, longed for the chance to confront him and demand answers, but now that he stood before her, she found herself at a loss for words.

"It was all lies," he blurted. "All of it—Mary, she lied, there was no child. It was a scheme she devised as a means to— That doesn't matter." He stepped closer, his hands reaching for Rosalind's. "The point is, there is nothing to keep us apart."

Rosalind pulled back, bristling, and scoffed, her eyes narrowing as a familiar ache blossomed in her chest. "Have you so quickly forgotten how you abandoned me the



moment it became convenient to do so?" she challenged, her voice laced with a bitterness that surprised even her.

Alex's brow furrowed, and he opened his mouth to protest, but Rosalind held up a hand, silencing him. The weeks of anger, hurt, and betrayal that had festered within her came pouring forth in a torrent of emotion. "You cast me aside without a second thought, Alex," she said, her words cutting through the air like sharpened steel. "At the first real test of our relationship, you chose to discard me like a broken toy."

Rosalind glanced at Amelia, her sister's eyes wide with surprise, and lowered her voice slightly, though the weight of her words was no less potent. "I gave you everything, Alex," she murmured, her gaze locked with his. "My trust, my affection, even my virtue and reputation. And in return, you exposed me to the censure of the ton, made a fool out of me in public."

Amelia's sharp intake of breath was audible, but she remained silent, her eyes darting between Rosalind and Alex as the tension in the room grew palpable.

Rosalind felt a surge of defiance, a fiery determination to lay bare the depths of her pain and make Alex understand the consequences of his actions. She had loved him completely, but he betrayed her. The memory of his betrayal would forever stain a part of her, regardless of what he said, she knew that no matter what he said, no matter what explanations or excuses he offered, a part of her would forever be tainted by the memory of his betrayal.

Rosalind's lips twisted into a bitter smile as she regarded Alex, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "A fool, that's what I was," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "A lovesick fool who believed every pretty lie that fell from your lips." She lifted her chin, defiance etched into every line of her delicate features. "But my eyes have been opened, Alex. I see now that our love was nothing more than a fleeting fancy, a dalliance that should never have been indulged."

Amelia shifted uncomfortably, clearly torn between supporting her sister and maintaining propriety. Rosalind spared her a glance, her expression softening ever so slightly.

"Lord Ashford may not set my heart aflutter," she continued, her gaze returning to Alex, "but at least he has never made me believe he loved me when he did not. It is a suitable arrangement, one that must be made in light of your... actions."

The weight of her words hung heavy in the air, and Rosalind felt a sudden wave of dizziness wash over her. The room seemed to tilt and spin, and she swayed on her feet, her knees threatening to buckle beneath her.

In an instant, Alex was at her side, his strong arms encircling her waist and steadying her against his chest. Rosalind's breath caught in her throat, her senses overwhelmed by his familiar scent and the solid warmth of his embrace. For a fleeting moment, she was transported back to a time when his arms were a sanctuary, a place of safety and solace.

But the moment passed as quickly as it had come, and Rosalind's eyes flew open, her cheeks reddening with a mixture of embarrassment and anger. She pushed against Alex's chest, her movements fuelled by a renewed sense of determination.

"You have no place in my life anymore, Alex," she said, her voice trembling with barely contained fury. "You've done nothing to prove your commitment to me, to show that you truly regret the pain you've caused." She shook her head, her eyes narrowing. "You simply expected me to welcome you back with open arms, to happily take you as you are without a second thought." Rosalind straightened her shoulders, her chin jutting out in a show of defiance. "Well, I will not be so easily swayed this time."

With those words, she turned on her heel and marched out of the foyer, her steps

echoing against the polished marble floors. Rosalind ascended the grand staircase, her hands held tightly together at her waist, and made her way to her bedchamber.

Once inside, she collapsed onto the bed, her body suddenly heavy. Rosalind pressed a hand to her forehead, willing the pounding in her temples to subside, and closed her eyes against the onslaught of memories that threatened to overwhelm her.

Slowly, painfully, she forced herself to lock away her feelings for Alex, to bury them deep within the recesses of her heart. She reached up and touched the pearls at her throat, a reminder of the path she had chosen, the future that lay before her. It was a future without Alex, a life devoid of the love and passion they had once shared. And as much as the thought pained her, Rosalind knew that it was the only way to protect what little remained of her battered heart.

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Alex stood in the grand parlour of his townhouse, the cavernous space echoing with an eerie silence that only served to amplify the weight of his solitude. The shadows seemed to stretch endlessly, casting a sombre pall over the once-vibrant room, a stark reminder of the emptiness that had consumed his life since Rosalind's bitter departure.

His heart leapt in his chest as the footman announced the arrival of a young lady, a mixture of anticipation and trepidation coursing through his veins. Was it Rosalind, come to offer him a chance at redemption, or Mary, seeking to further ensnare him in her web of deceit?

To his surprise, it was Lady Isabella who graced the threshold, her gentle presence a beacon of hope in the darkness that had enveloped him. Shyly, she stepped into the parlour around the footman.

"I...I'm sorry I've come unannounced, Your Grace," she said shyly.

Alex couldn't help but smile sadly at her. "Seems to be a family trait," he muttered, which made Isabella tilt her head in confusion. He shook his head and waved her in, gesturing to a settee.

"I heard what you said earlier, to Rosalind," Isabella blurted. "I believe you," she said gravely, her delicate voice surprisingly serious. "I also believe that Rosalind is still in love with you, no matter what she says."

Alex felt a pang of gratitude mingled with sadness, his heart heavy with the knowledge that such kindness might prove futile in the face of the damage he had wrought. "You are too kind, my lady," he murmured, his voice tinged with a melancholic resignation. "But I fear the path to reconciliation may be forever closed to me."

Lady Isabella's eyes shone with a determined resolve, her delicate features belying the strength of her convictions. "Since you have publicly severed ties with my sister, it is only through a public display of your unwavering loyalty that you can hope to regain her trust," she declared, her words cutting through the haze of despair that had enveloped him.

Alex nodded, his heart filled with newfound hope. Lady Isabella was right – if he truly wished to win back Rosalind's affections, he would have to lay bare his soul before the watchful eyes of society, leaving no room for doubt or uncertainty. It was a daunting prospect, but one he knew he must embrace if he wished to reclaim the love he had so carelessly squandered.

The heavy oak doors swung open, and a small figure emerged. His face reddened and his mouth smeared with crumbs – a testament to the boundless appetite that had become a source of both amusement and exasperation for the household staff. Alex

couldn't help but smile at the sight of young John, his newfound ward, whose insatiable hunger seemed to know no bounds.

"Master John," Alex greeted him warmly, his tone laced with affection. "I see you've been keeping the kitchen staff on their toes."

John grinned impishly, his eyes sparkling with mischief as he wiped the remnants of his latest culinary conquest from his lips. "They make the most delicious tarts, Your Grace," he declared, holding up the half-eaten pastry as evidence.

Isabella's eyes widened in surprise, her gaze flickering between Alex and the young boy. "Who is this, Your Grace?" she asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Alex gestured for John to approach, his arm encircling the lad's shoulders in a protective embrace. "This is John," he explained, his voice tinged with a hint of pride. "He played a pivotal role in unravelling Mary's deception, and I have taken him under my wing as a ward."

John's eyes lit up at the mention of Mary's name, and he turned to Alex, his expression one of eager anticipation. "If we're to snare that vixen, Your Grace, we must bait the trap properly," he declared, his words laced with a wisdom that belied his tender years.

Alex couldn't help but marvel at the boy's astuteness, his heart swelling with a newfound sense of purpose. He nodded solemnly, acknowledging the truth in John's words.

Isabella, ever the voice of reason, cleared her throat delicately. "I may have a solution," she offered, her eyes sparkling with determination. "Lord Percival is hosting another exhibition soon, and I shall ensure that Rosalind attends before she embarks on her wedding tour."

A flicker of hope ignited within Alex's chest, a flame that burned brighter with each passing moment. Lady Isabella's plan was daring, but it offered him a chance – Lady Isabella's daring plan offered him a chance to win back Rosalind's love.

With a renewed sense of determination, Alex squared his shoulders and met Isabella's gaze. "Then we must act swiftly," he declared, his voice resonating with conviction. "For I shall not rest until I have regained Rosalind's trust and proven myself worthy of her love."

### Chapter 35

Lady Rosalind's heart sank as she entered Lord Wycliffe's grand London residence, the opulent surroundings a stark contrast to the turmoil raging within her. On Lord Ashford's arm, she barely registered his droning voice as he introduced her to yet another group of acquaintances from the ton. Her mind was elsewhere, lost in a whirlwind of memories and regrets.

"Lady Rosalind, may I present Lord and Lady Pemberton," Ashford's voice cut through her reverie, jolting her back to the present.

Rosalind managed a polite nod, her eyes glazing over as the tedious pleasantries unfolded. A small murmur rippled through the crowd, capturing her attention. She strained to catch the whispers, her heart pounding in her chest as she discerned the subject of their hushed gossip.

A murmur passed through the crowd, and Rosalind's gaze was immediately drawn to the striking figure of Mary, resplendent in a crimson silk gown that seemed to shift and shimmer in the candlelight. Her raven tresses artfully arranged to accentuate her captivating beauty. The sight of Mary on Alex's arm was a knife to Rosalind's heart. The picture of triumph etched upon the other woman's features a cruel reminder of all that she had lost.

Rosalind felt the familiar tendrils of nausea coil in her stomach, the urge to flee overwhelming her senses. She murmured a hasty excuse to Lord Ashford, her suitor's concerned gaze doing little to soothe the anguish that threatened to consume her. Before she could make her escape, however, a gentle hand upon her arm stilled her

movements, and she found herself gazing into the warm, reassuring eyes of her sister, Isabella.

"Be strong, Rosalind," Isabella implored, her voice a soothing balm amidst the cacophony of emotions that battered Rosalind's soul. "Stay, for my sake. I need you here tonight."

Rosalind's gaze drifted back to the exhibition hall. Her eyes drawn inexorably to the sight of Mary leaning in to whisper something in Alex's ear, the intimate gesture a searing brand upon her heart. She felt the icy tendrils of jealousy and heartache coil around her, threatening to drag her under the weight of her own despair.

Yet, as she turned to meet Isabella's imploring gaze, Rosalind found herself torn between the desire to escape the torment of witnessing Alex's newfound happiness and the love she bore for her sister. With a trembling breath, she forced a nod, her resolve wavering but her devotion to Isabella unwavering.

"For you, dear sister," she murmured, her voice a mere whisper amidst the clamour of the crowd. "I shall stay."

Each passing moment felt like an interminable torment for Lady Rosalind. Despite Isabella's reassuring presence at her side, the sight of Alex, resplendent in his evening attire and exuding an air of cheerful conviviality, was almost too much for her to bear.

Rosalind's gaze was drawn inexorably to the couple, her eyes following their every movement with a masochistic fascination. As Mary reached up to tenderly caress Alex's face, a gesture so intimate and familiar, Rosalind felt the last vestiges of her composure begin to crumble.

A strangled gasp escaped her lips, and she turned to flee, the need for escape



overwhelming her senses. Yet Isabella's firm grip upon her hand stilled her movements, her sister's voice a soothing balm amidst the storm of emotions that threatened to drown her.

"You cannot leave, not yet," Isabella implored, her eyes shining with a determination that gave Rosalind pause. "You must stay, for you cannot miss what is about to unfold."

Confusion furrowed Rosalind's brow, and she opened her mouth to question her sister's cryptic words. Yet before she could give voice to her queries, Alex's voice rang out across the crowded hall, commanding the attention of all present.

"Mrs Smithfield," he called out, beckoning an elderly lady to approach. "Allow me to introduce my companion, Mary."

A hush fell over the gathered throng as Mary turned to face the newcomer, her expression one of frozen trepidation. Rosalind watched, enraptured, as Mrs Smithfield's eyes narrowed, her gaze raking over Mary's form with a scrutiny that bordered on disdain.

"You!" The elderly woman's voice was a thunderous accusation, her face contorting with rage. "I would know you anywhere, you shameless harlot! You robbed me blind!"

The words hung in the air like a palpable weight, and Rosalind felt her breath catch in her throat as the implications began to sink in. Mary's mouth opened and closed, her lips forming words of denial and protest, but Mrs Smithfield would not be deterred.

"That necklace!" she cried, pointing an accusatory finger at the glittering jewels adorning Mary's neck. "That was mine, stolen from me by your wicked hands!"

As Mrs Smithfield's irate husband joined the fray, Rosalind could only watch, transfixed, as the scene unfolded before her. A glimmer of hope, fragile yet persistent, flickered to life within her breast, and she found herself clinging to Isabella's hand with a newfound determination.

Lady Rosalind's heart raced as the scene unfolded before her eyes. Mary, her face contorted with panic, turned to Alex, seeking his aid and support. The Duke merely folded his arms across his chest, his expression impassive, as if he had anticipated this very moment.

"Is there anything else you'd like to confess while we're at it?" Alex's voice cut through the charged silence, his words laced with an undercurrent of challenge.

Mary's eyes widened, her mouth opening and closing in a wordless display of indignation. "Whatever could you mean by that?" she stammered, her gaze darting about the room, seeking allies in the sea of bewildered faces.

A ripple of confusion spread through the gathered crowd, whispers and murmurs rising like a tide as they questioned the authenticity of the unfolding scene. "Is this part of the evening's entertainment?" one guest ventured, casting a questioning glance towards Lord Wycliffe. "Did you hire a troupe of actors?"

Rosalind, however, remained transfixed, her eyes riveted upon the confrontation unfolding before her. Her heart pounded in her chest, a mixture of trepidation and cautious hope swirling within her breast.

Alex, undeterred by Mary's feigned innocence, gestured towards a figure standing near the edge of the crowd. "Perhaps you would care to enlighten the assembly, John?"

Rosalind's gaze followed the motion, and she found herself staring at a young boy,

impeccably dressed in a smart blue suit, his hair neatly combed. Despite his genteel appearance, the lad betrayed his humble origins with his first words, his accent a clear indicator of his lowly station.

"Miss Mary, she paid me to pretend to be her son," the boy declared, his voice ringing with conviction. "Said she needed to lay a trap for the Duke, and I was to play the part of her child."

Rosalind's breath caught in her throat as the truth of Mary's deception began to unfurl before her. The weight of the revelation pressed upon her, threatening to overwhelm her senses, yet she found herself clinging to a fragile thread of hope, a glimmer of possibility that perhaps, against all odds, she had not lost Alex forever.

Lady Rosalind's heart raced as Mary flew into a rage, her beautiful features contorted into a mask of fury and indignation. With a trembling finger, she pointed towards the young boy, her voice rising in a shrill crescendo of denunciation.

"That wretched child lies!" she spat, her words dripping with venom. "He is clearly attempting to run some nefarious scam of his own, preying upon your gullibility and good nature!"

Rosalind watched, transfixed, as Mary made as if to lunge towards the boy, her intentions clear. Before she could act upon her rage, Alex stepped forward, his broad frame shielding the lad from Mary's wrath. In that moment, Rosalind's breath caught in her throat, her heart swelling with a profound sense of admiration for the man she had once loved.

With a deft motion, Alex produced a sheaf of letters, the papers rustling in his grasp as he levelled an accusatory gaze upon Mary. "These letters tell a rather different tale, my dear," he declared, his voice ringing with conviction. "It seems you have been boasting to your acquaintances of the windfall you were soon to receive, bragging of

how easily you would ensnare me in your web of deceit."

A hush fell over the gathered throng, the weight of Alex's words hanging heavy in the air. Rosalind's gaze flickered towards Lord Wycliffe, the man's expression one of abject panic and uncertainty, his eyes darting about as if seeking an escape from the chaos that had engulfed his once-elegant soirée.

It was then that Isabella's voice cut through the charged silence, her tone a conspiratorial stage-whisper that carried to every corner of the room. "Perhaps, my Lord, it would be wise to summon the watchmen," she suggested, her words laced with a subtle undercurrent of command.

Lord Wycliffe's head bobbed in frantic agreement, his normally jovial countenance replaced by a sombre gravity that lent him an air of unexpected authority. With a curt nod, he turned on his heel, his steps quickening as he made his way towards the door, his eagerness to aid Isabella palpable.

### Chapter 36

As Mary realised the precariousness of her situation, her eyes widened with panic, and she made a desperate bid for freedom. Rosalind watched, her heart in her throat, as the woman darted towards the exit, only to find her path barred by an imposing figure – a man she recognised from the broadsheets as the infamous One-Eyed Jack. His rough-hewn features rendered even more striking by the crisp white shirt and well-tailored jacket he wore.

"Leaving so soon, Missy?" the man rumbled, his voice a low growl as he caught Mary's arm in an iron grip.

Alex's voice rang out, calm and authoritative, as he instructed Jack to detain Mary until the arrival of the watchmen. With a curt nod, Jack acquiesced, dragging the protesting, kicking woman from the room, her shrill cries echoing in their wake.

In that moment, Rosalind felt a profound sense of relief wash over her, a weight lifting from her shoulders as the truth of Mary's deception was laid bare before the eyes of society. Her gaze found Alex's, and in his steady, unwavering regard, she saw a glimmer of the man she had once loved, a man of integrity and honour who had fought to uncover the truth.

And in that moment, a fragile spark of hope flickered to life within Rosalind's breast, a tentative flame that promised the possibility of a future she had thought lost forever.

Rosalind felt as if she were adrift in a sea of chaos, the clamour of voices and the swell of the crowd threatening to overwhelm her senses. She scanned the throng,

desperate to catch a glimpse of Alex, to hold his gaze and seek reassurance in the steadiness of his regard. He remained elusive, swallowed by the mass of bodies that surged around him, each person clamouring for his attention, demanding answers or offering effusive gratitude.

Mr Smithfield, his face flushed with a combination of indignation and relief, grasped Alex's hand with a vigour that belied his advanced years, shaking it with fervent enthusiasm as he poured forth a litany of thanks. Nearby, his wife held court, her voice rising in dramatic cadences as she regaled a rapt audience with the sordid tale of Mary's duplicity. The other ladies of the ton fanning her flushed countenance and offering restorative sips of lemonade or brandy.

The cacophony of voices, the press of bodies, the overwhelming swell of emotion – it all became too much for Rosalind to bear. Her newfound hope, fragile and tentative, seemed to flutter within her breast, threatening to take flight amidst the chaos that reigned supreme. With a trembling breath, she turned on her heel, her steps faltering as she sought refuge from the tumult.

Her gaze alighted upon a secluded alcove, a sanctuary of solitude amidst the maelstrom, and she hastened towards it, her skirts swishing with each hurried stride. As she sank onto the upholstered bench, her back pressed against the cool marble, Rosalind allowed her eyes to flutter closed, savouring the momentary respite from the pandemonium that had engulfed the evening.

The gentle caress of a cool breeze against her blushing cheeks stirred Rosalind from her momentary reverie, her eyes fluttering open to reveal the secluded alcove in which she had sought refuge. A shadow fell across her, and she turned to find Isabella standing before her, her sister's gentle gaze suffused with a tender understanding.

"Someone wishes to speak with you," Isabella murmured, her voice a soothing balm amidst the tempest of emotions that swirled within Rosalind's breast.

Too overwhelmed, too fragile in that moment to protest, Rosalind could only nod mutely as Isabella took her hand, drawing her to her feet with a reassuring squeeze. Her sister led her from the alcove, their steps unhurried as they wove through the labyrinthine paths of Lord Wycliffe's gardens, the lush foliage and the heady scent of blossoms enveloping them in a verdant cocoon.

As they rounded a bend in the path, Rosalind's breath caught in her throat, her heart skipping a beat at the sight that greeted her. There, framed by the gently swaying branches of a weeping willow, stood Alex. His posture erect yet relaxed, his expression one of blatant hope and love so raw, so unguarded, that Rosalind felt the sting of unbidden tears prickling at the corners of her eyes.

"Rosalind," he breathed, his voice a caress upon the evening air, laden with a depth of emotion that resonated within her very soul. "I love you," he declared, his words ringing with conviction, with a sincerity that pierced the very depths of her being. "I have only ever loved you, and I shall not be content until you are mine, as I am yours."

Rosalind's heart swelled within her breast, a tempestuous maelstrom of joy and trepidation, of hope and lingering doubt swirling within her. She felt the weight of his regard upon her, the intensity of his gaze a palpable caress, and she knew, in that moment, that he spoke the truth.

"You were right," Alex continued, his voice low and earnest. "I did humiliate you, publicly and without regard for the pain I caused. I can only hope that my actions tonight, my determination to uncover the truth and restore your honour, prove to you that my loyalty lies only with you."

He took a step towards her, his movements slow, deliberate, as if afraid that any sudden motion might startle her into flight. Rosalind found herself transfixed, rooted to the spot by the sheer force of his presence, the depth of his emotions rendering her

breathless.

"If you will have me," he murmured, his eyes shining with a fervent intensity that kindled an answering flame within her breast, "I still wish to marry you, more than anything in this world."

A whirlwind of emotions consumed Rosalind, blending love, longing, hope, and doubt. She felt the weight of Alex's gaze upon her, the intensity of his regard a physical caress that set her very soul aflame.

His words, spoken with such raw sincerity, such unguarded vulnerability, resonated within the deepest recesses of her heart, kindling a flame that had smouldered for far too long. In that moment, Rosalind knew, with a certainty that defied all logic and reason, that she wanted nothing more than to surrender herself to the love that burned so brightly between them.

Without a second thought, without a whisper of hesitation, she flung herself into his embrace, her body colliding with his in a desperate, passionate tangle of limbs and frantic caresses. Peals of laughter, intermingled with the sweet sting of joyful tears, spilled from her lips as she clung to him, her fingers tangling in the fabric of his jacket as if to anchor him to her forever.

Yet, even as she basked in the warmth of his embrace, even as she revelled in the intoxicating scent of his skin and the reassuring solidity of his form, a tendril of doubt, insidious and unyielding, wormed its way into her consciousness.

With a gasp, she tore herself from his arms, her eyes wide and glistening with unshed tears. "I cannot," she breathed, her voice trembling with the weight of her emotions. "I have already agreed to marry Lord Ashford. The contracts have been signed, the arrangements made. There is nothing I can do."



The words felt like ash upon her tongue, bitter and acrid, as she watched the light in Alex's eyes dim, his expression crumpling into one of utter devastation. Rosalind's heart shattered, causing intense pain and disorientation.

In that moment of anguish, a sound pierced the haze that had descended upon her senses – the crisp, deliberate clearing of a throat. Rosalind whirled around, her gaze alighting upon the imposing figure of Lord Ashford himself, his form emerging from the shadows that cloaked the garden path.

With a startled gasp, she leapt away from Alex, feeling a mix of shame and trepidation wash over her. Lord Ashford regarded them both with a cool, appraising gaze, his expression unreadable as Rosalind opened her mouth, desperate to offer an explanation, an apology, anything to mitigate the mortification that threatened to consume her.

Yet, before she could utter a single word, Lord Ashford raised a hand, effectively silencing her. "My dear," he murmured, his voice rich and resonant, "I have lived far too long and seen far too much to be fooled by the signs of a love affair when they are so blatantly displayed before me."

Lady Rosalind's cheeks burned with a fiery blush as Lord Ashford's words washed over her, his tone laced with a pointed understanding that rendered her utterly speechless. Her gaze flickered towards Alex, her heart constricting at the sight of his stricken expression, his eyes shining with a mixture of hope and trepidation.

"It's not exactly as if you two have been covert about it," Lord Ashford continued, his voice rich with a hint of dry amusement. "Always sneaking off together, exchanging those longing glances when you think no one is watching." He shook his head, a rueful smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

Rosalind felt the weight of his gaze upon her, and she found herself unable to meet

his eyes, her shame and embarrassment rendering her mute. She had wronged this man, had allowed herself to be swept up in the tempestuous currents of her own emotions, heedless of the consequences or the pain she might inflict upon another.

Lord Ashford's next words, however, pierced through the fog of her self-recrimination, striking her with the force of a physical blow. "I see now that there is no point in my marrying you, my dear," he murmured, his tone laced with a resignation that tugged at Rosalind's heart. "For you will never truly be mine, not when your heart belongs so wholly to another."

Rosalind trembled at his blunt words, realizing she had been saved from a lifetime of misery and regret. She opened her mouth, desperate to offer some form of apology, some token of gratitude for the kindness and understanding he had shown her, but Lord Ashford raised a hand, effectively silencing her.

With a grace and dignity that belied his years, he crossed the distance between them, his steps measured and unhurried. Rosalind found herself transfixed, her breath caught in her throat as he took her hand in his, his calloused fingers gentle against her skin.

"My dear Lady Rosalind," he murmured, his voice a warm caress upon the evening air. He raised her hand to his lips, pressing a feather-light kiss against her knuckles in a gesture of utmost respect and affection.

Then, with a subtle shift of his stance, he turned towards Alex, his expression inscrutable. For a moment, Rosalind feared that he might offer some scathing rebuke, some biting condemnation of the man who had stolen her heart so utterly. To her astonishment, Lord Ashford extended his hand, offering hers to Alex in a silent, magnanimous gesture. As Alex's fingers closed around her own, Rosalind felt a spark of electricity course through her, a connection so profound, so undeniable, that it threatened to steal her very breath.

For the briefest of moments, Rosalind caught a glimpse of something she had never witnessed before – a genuine smile gracing Lord Ashford's weathered features, a fleeting expression of joy and contentment that seemed to soften the harsh lines of his countenance. With a curt nod towards them both, he turned on his heel and strode away, his departure as dignified and graceful as his presence had been.

Rosalind found herself adrift in a whirlwind of emotions, her heart swelling with a profound sense of relief and gratitude, tempered by the lingering sting of remorse for the pain she had caused. She turned towards Alex, her eyes shining with unshed tears, and whispered the words that had been burning within her breast.

"What now?"

Alex met Rosalind's gaze with a smile that slowly curved upward with a mischievous glint in his eyes. He flicked a glance towards Isabella, who ducked her head, hiding a smile of her own. Rosalind watched them both with a healthy amount of suspicion.

"I do have one idea," Alex said slowly, his hand tightening on Rosalind's. "Very likely the best idea I've ever had."

### Chapter 37

Alex's heart raced as he spurred his steed through the bustling streets of London, the hooves thundering against the cobblestones. Lady Rosalind clung tightly to his waist, her arms wrapped around him in a firm embrace, her laughter ringing out like a melodious chime amidst the chaos of their wild gallop.

The world seemed to blur around them, the shouting voices of startled pedestrians fading into the distance as they weaved their way through the crowded streets. Alex revelled in the exhilaration of the moment, his soul set ablaze by the thrill of the chase and the warmth of Rosalind's body pressed against his back.

Propriety be damned, for in that moment, nothing mattered more than the intoxicating freedom they shared. Rosalind's beautiful evening gown had split, exposing the tantalising sight of her stocking-clad leg and a glimpse of the creamy thigh that lay beneath. It was a scandalous display, one that would undoubtedly set tongues wagging in the salons of high society, but Alex found himself utterly unconcerned by such trivialities.

All that mattered was the here and now, the wind whipping through their hair and the thunderous beat of his heart, perfectly in sync with the rhythmic pounding of the horse's hooves. Rosalind's laughter was a sweet melody, a balm for his weary soul, and in that moment, Alex knew that he would do anything, brave any storm, to keep that joyous sound echoing in his ears for eternity.

The thundering hooves gradually faded into a gentle clip-clop as they neared the city limits, the horse's flanks heaving with exertion after their wild ride. Alexander's heart

still pounded with the thrill of the ride, the wild turns of the evening, adrenaline coursing through his veins like liquid fire.

As they approached the outskirts of London, a familiar sight greeted them – Alexander's carriage, sleek and elegant, waiting patiently at the rendezvous point. It was the trunk strapped to the back that truly caught his eye, and a swell of affection blossomed in his chest as he recognised Rosalind's belongings.

He reined in the panting steed, the powerful muscles quivering beneath them, and slid from the saddle with a fluid grace. Reaching up, he extended a hand to Rosalind, his fingers tingling with anticipation as they brushed against her soft skin.

"How did my trunk find its way here?" she demanded, her voice laced with a mixture of curiosity and playful accusation, those emerald eyes sparkling with mirth.

Alexander couldn't help but chuckle, a sheepish grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Your sister Isabella may have played a small role in that," he confessed, his heart swelling with gratitude for the unwavering support of Rosalind's family.

As Rosalind descended from the horse, her lithe form brushed against his, igniting a trail of delicious heat that set him ablaze. He drank in the sight of her, this radiant goddess who had captured his heart so completely, and in that moment, he knew that no matter what obstacles lay ahead, he would move heaven and earth to keep her by his side.

With a gentleness that belied his noble bearing, Alexander guided Rosalind towards the waiting carriage, his arm encircling her slender waist in a protective embrace. "A little presumptuous, perhaps," he murmured, his voice low and husky with barely contained desire, "but I find myself utterly incapable of relinquishing your company, my dear."

The carriage door swung open, beckoning them forward, and Alexander felt a surge of exhilaration ripple through him. This was the first step on a new journey, a path that would lead them far from the constraints of society and into a world of boundless possibilities – a world where love, and love alone, would be their guiding light.

"Driver?" he said as he stepped into the carriage, hanging onto the frame of the door as if he were a young buck out on the town as he leaned out. "To Gretna Green, with all haste." He chose to tactfully ignore the driver's grin as he settled into the carriage.

The carriage rocked gently as it trundled along the darkened country roads, the rhythmic clop of the horses' hooves providing a soothing cadence to the journey. Alex's heart thrummed with a heady mixture of exhilaration and contentment as Rosalind nestled against him, her slender form pressed flush against his side.

Without a moment's hesitation, he enveloped her in a tender embrace, savouring the warmth of her body and the intoxicating scent of her perfume. His fingers found their way into the tumbling tresses of her fiery locks, gently untangling the silken strands that had come loose during their wild escape.

Rosalind sighed deeply, a sound of pure, unbridled bliss that sent a shiver of delight coursing through Alex's veins. In that moment, with the world reduced to the confines of their cosy carriage, he felt a sense of peace and rightness that he had never known before.

"Have any regrets, my love?" he murmured, his voice a low, husky rumble that seemed to reverberate through her very being.

Rosalind tilted her head back, her emerald eyes sparkling with a fierce determination that never failed to set Alex's soul ablaze. "None whatsoever," she declared, her full lips curving into a radiant smile. "Well, perhaps one."

Alex arched an inquisitive brow, his curiosity piqued by the playful glint in her eyes. "And what might that be, my dear?"

"It's a shame," Rosalind mused, her gaze drifting wistfully to the trunk that contained her belongings. "My beautiful wedding dress shall go to waste, it seems."

A rich, rumbling chuckle escaped Alex's lips as he tightened his embrace, drawing her even closer against his chest. "Ah, but you underestimate the foresight of your dear sister," he countered, pressing a tender kiss to the crown of her head. "I have it on good authority that Isabella ensured your gown made its way into that very trunk."

Rosalind's eyes widened with surprise, and then she threw back her head and laughed, the melodious sound filling the carriage with its joyous resonance. "Of course she did," she exclaimed, her cheeks glowing with delight. "Bless that darling girl!"

Without another word, Alex captured Rosalind's lips in a searing kiss, pouring every ounce of his love and adoration into the passionate embrace. As the carriage rumbled northward, carrying them towards their new life together, he knew that no matter what challenges lay ahead, they would face them side by side, bound by a love that knew no bounds.

### Epilogue

Lady Evelyn paced the dimly lit hallway of Aunt Agnes's manor, her footsteps muffled by the plush carpet. The house felt oppressive, with shadows and silence interrupted by floorboard creaks.

As she approached the bedroom door, Evelyn's heart sank at the sound of Aunt Agnes's laboured breathing. The once vibrant and lively woman was now a mere shadow of her former self, confined to her bed and battling an illness that seemed determined to claim her.

Evelyn entered the room, her eyes immediately drawn to the frail figure lying motionless beneath the covers. Aunt Agnes's face was pale, her cheeks sunken, and her eyes closed as if in a deep slumber. The only indication of life was the faint rise and fall of her chest.

Beside the bed, the doctor sat in a chair, his brow furrowed in concentration as he monitored Aunt Agnes's condition. Evelyn approached him, her steps tentative, as if afraid to disturb the fragile equilibrium of the room.

"How is she, Doctor?" Evelyn asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

The doctor looked up, his expression grave behind his spectacles, his countenance somewhat undercut by the way they enlarged his eyes. "Her condition remains unchanged, my lady. The fever persists, and her strength wanes with each passing hour."



Evelyn felt a knot form in her throat. They had planned to travel, to escape the suffocating confines of England and seek refuge in the Americas, but those plans had been cruelly shattered by Aunt Agnes's sudden illness.

"Is there nothing more that can be done?" Evelyn pleaded, her eyes searching the doctor's face for a glimmer of hope.

The doctor shook his head solemnly. "I'm afraid all we can do now is make her as comfortable as possible and pray for a miracle."

Evelyn's gaze returned to Aunt Agnes's motionless form, her heart aching with the weight of their circumstances. Aunt Agnes had been her salvation, her refuge from the horrors of her marriage to the cruel Judge Banfield. It was she who had offered Evelyn a place to stay, a sanctuary where she could begin to heal and rebuild her life.

Evelyn quietly withdrew from Aunt Agnes's room, her heart heavy with the weight of their circumstances. As she closed the door behind her, she leaned back against the wall, drawing a deep, steadying breath.

Her hand instinctively reached into the pocket of her dress, her fingers brushing against the crisp folded paper of a letter she had been delaying to read. It was from Rosalind, her dear friend, and Evelyn knew that within its folds lay words of love, hope, and encouragement.

With a resigned sigh, Evelyn broke the seal and unfolded the letter, her eyes scanning the familiar script that danced across the page.

Rosalind's words flowed like a gentle stream, carrying with them a warmth and sincerity that enveloped Evelyn's heart. She spoke of the love she had found with the Duke of Somerton, a love that had blossomed from the most unlikely of circumstances, a love that had given her the strength to weather the storms that had threatened to tear them apart.

Evelyn could almost hear Rosalind's voice as she read, the words echoing in her mind like the soft whisper of a summer breeze.

"My dearest Evelyn," the letter began, "I write to you with a heart overflowing with joy and gratitude, for I have found a love so pure, so true, that it has forever changed the course of my life."

Evelyn's eyes lingered on the words, a wistful smile tugging at the corners of her lips as she imagined the happiness that must have radiated from Rosalind as she penned those lines.

"It is my most fervent wish that you, too, may one day experience the boundless bliss that comes with finding a love so profound, so all-consuming, that it transcends the boundaries of mere affection and becomes a force that guides and sustains you through life's trials and tribulations."

Evelyn felt a lump form in her throat as she read those words, her mind drifting back to the horrors of her marriage to the cruel Judge Banfield. She had endured years of abuse and torment and her spirit slowly being crushed beneath the weight of his cruelty. However, Rosalind's words offered a glimmer of hope, a reminder that even in the darkest of nights, the sun would eventually rise, and with it, the promise of a new dawn.

Evelyn folded the letter carefully, her fingers tracing the creases as she returned it to the safety of her pocket. A heavy sigh escaped her lips, her shoulders slumping slightly as a wave of melancholy washed over her.

While Rosalind's words had been a balm for her weary soul, they also served as a stark reminder of the contrast between their lives. Rosalind had found love, a love so pure and true that it had become the guiding force in her life, while Evelyn's own existence was shrouded in uncertainty and despair.

Her fingers curled into a tight fist, her nails digging into the soft flesh of her palm as she closed her eyes, willing herself to escape the confines of her reality, if only for a fleeting moment. In her mind's eye, she envisioned a life far removed from the horrors of her past, a life where she was free to love and be loved in return, a life where happiness was not a fleeting whisper but a constant companion.

Yet, as her thoughts drifted towards that elusive dream, the watery sound of Aunt Agnes's laboured breathing pierced through the veil of her imagination, shattering the fragile illusion and dragging her back to the harsh reality that surrounded her.

Evelyn's eyes opened, revealing the oppressive hallway and mocking shadows. The sound of Aunt Agnes's struggle for each precious breath echoed through the corridor, a haunting reminder of the precariousness of life and the fleeting nature of happiness.

Evelyn's heart ached, not only for her beloved Aunt Agnes, who had been her salvation in the darkest of times, but also for herself, for the life she had been denied, for the love she had never known.

With a heavy heart, she turned and made her way back towards Aunt Agnes's bedchamber, her footsteps feeling heavier with each stride. As she pushed open the door, the scent of illness and despair hung thick in the air, a palpable reminder of the grim reality they faced.

The doctor looked up as Evelyn entered, his expression one of weary resignation, as if he had long since accepted the inevitability of the outcome. Evelyn approached the bedside, her gaze falling upon Aunt Agnes's frail form, her chest rising and falling in a laboured rhythm that seemed to grow fainter with each passing moment. Evelyn, too, could feel her life slipping away as well, all of her security and hope for the future slipping through her fingers.