



The Duke of Sin (Rakes and Roses #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: "This is the closest I have been to a man."

"I would wager you have never been kissed either"

Miss Alice Winslow needs a husband—fast. With her sister's ill-begotten pregnancy about to erupt into scandal, she has no choice but to set her sights on London's most eligible Marquess. Except, his infuriatingly rakish brother, Edward, has other ideas...

Edward Landon, Duke of Valhaven, has no intention of marrying—ever. For, dying a bachelor and passing the dukedom to his half-brother Benedict is his final spite to his callous father. But one stolen kiss with the enchanting Miss Alice makes him crave the forbidden fruit...

The kiss was a reckless mistake. Alice knows she must avoid Edward, but his seductive games soon threaten her resolve—and her carefully laid plans for survival...

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CHAPTER 1

FEBRUARY 1816, LONDON, SOHO.

The plan was madcap... but Alice Winslow had decided to follow through with it anyway; she had to, no one else was in the position to get justice for her sister.

Plucking the slip of paper from her reticule with a trembling hand, she read, “ The Vipers Pit .”

It was a gambling den owned by Lord Rutledge; a tall, bright blond-haired gentleman with the face of Apollo, blessed with high cheekbones, squared jaw, full lips... and the tongue of the Serpent who had tempted Eve.

He was a known rake, but in the last few months, he had spun a spiel of love and affection for Alice’s sister, Penelope—and after two months and a day of ‘courtship’, he had seduced her into bed, taking the one thing a lady of her stature could bargain with—her innocence, before disappearing.

Alice was determined to get him to do the right thing and marry her, otherwise her sister’s spinsterhood fate was sealed.

When the hackney stopped, she paid the indifferent driver, and while her heart thumped up a storm under her breastbone, she approached the marble steps of the club. As she glanced around through the fog-shrouded night, her body felt incredibly alive, every sense feeling somehow sharper.

It was late, almost midnight, as she headed toward the large door, and knocked before she fixed her mask and the silk cowl over her head.

She had carefully chosen this night, the masquerade night, for two purposes. To blend in with the rest of the patrons, and to hide her identity should anyone familiar with her family see her.

Thank the heavens that I know how to sew.

Her mask was passable, a lace and feathered disguise large enough to cover most of her face, while the white cloak lent the image of a dove.

“Penelope, dear sister, I am doing this for you...” she whispered as the door opened and a footman looked down on her.

“Invitation?”

“I was invited by Lord Rutledge,” she said boldly.

“Everyone inside here was invited by him,” the footman said languidly. “If you cannot tell me the—”

“Scarlett parlor,” she blurted. After weeks—no, almost a month of fervent digging and speaking to people she had risked her life to converse with, she’d uncovered a code into the man’s den of vices. “T—that is what he told me to say.”

Her ploy must have succeeded for the impatient gleam left the man’s eyes and was replaced by one of... interest? “You are for that parlor, hm? Well, come in then.”

First barrier breached.

The door swung open and with relief, she stepped into a lavish front parlor that simmered with sinful decadence; it was a place any proper miss would skirt with a mile much less step inside.

She looked around as if in a daze and felt oddly off-balance, well aware she would have been wise to avoid such a wicked place. She had to find the lord, and quickly. She turned in place to see through the melee of men and women parading past.

The interior was luxurious, rich red and black carpets covered the floor, and swaths of red and golden drapes twined themselves around massive white Corinthian columns.

A scattering of tables was placed in an organized sprawl on this lower floor, and many lords and ladies sat around them, cradling drinks in their hands, some lords with cigars between their lips.

Dice clattered as they rolled on the tables while young men shuffled, flicked, and cut cards with artistic expertise.

“A thousand pounds, my lord?” one of the men asked.

The man in question rolled his drink, then looked to the lady beside him parading a fortune of jewels at her ears and throat. “Make it three.”

Abject disgust at the waste of money made her stomach roil; to her, fifty pounds was a fortune, three thousand would make someone comfortable for a year, even two.

“Where do I find you, lord snake?” she asked herself.

Looking up, she saw a jutting balcony above, and lo’ and behold, the very man she was searching for was leaning on the railing, looking down like a king over his court. Two women came to either side of him, one teasing him with a glacé cherry while the

other stroked down his chest.

Glancing around for a staircase, she crossed the floor and hurried up while hoping the man would be in the same place when she got to the floor above. And she arrived there just in time to see him round a corner with the two ladies on either arm.

She made to go after him when a strong arm grabbed hers and towed her away. Her head snapped to the side, “What? Who are you! W-what are you doing to me?”

“The doorman said you were for the Scarlett Parlor,” the footman remarked, “And that is where I am taking you.”

Panic set into her heart. “No, no, you don’t understand, I must find Lord Rutledge, I-I have to—”

“You have to do as you were contracted,” he murmured. “The guests are waiting for your... expertise.”

“No, stop, please, I need to see Lord Rutledge!” She tried to yank her arm away, but his grip only tightened.

He yanked her down corridor steps and down a narrow passage, and no matter how she struggled, he dragged her down to the bottom where thick incense swirled around the room.

Giggles met her ears, and she saw women clad in gauzy nothings paraded around the room, serving men drinks. In the shadowed nooks, she saw bodies undulating, and fear rammed right into her head.

“Please let me go,” she whispered, fearing the worst. “I—I misspoke, I meant—”

Someone stepped in front of them, a tall someone, his face shrouded in shadow. “She’s coming with me.”

“I have my orders, she is—”

“Coming, with me ,” the man muttered, emerging from the gloom. His sharp gray eyes behind his black demi-mask were as lethal as piercing steel; his jaw looked tougher than basalt. “Or would you deny a Duke what he desires? Is not the reason for this room to allow any man the desires he seeks?”

The tight grip around her forearm lessened. “Your Grace, I—”

“I have given you my order. Let her go,” he growled. “She is mine for the night.”

With little say in the matter, the man dropped his hand and bowed. “My apologies, Duke Valhaven.”

When the footman left, she pressed a hand to her chest, relief washing through her like a flood, but her pulse raced again when Duke Valhaven’s eyes landed on hers.

With an unsteady feeling, she watched the play of light and shadow over his chiseled features as he tilted his head. He stared at her the way an auctioneer appraised a strange ornament. The clean structure of his broad cheekbones and square jaw was offset by the tiny scar slanting through his left eyebrow.

“You are a very far way from home, little mouse ,” he finally murmured. “Why are you here?”

As grateful as she was to be rescued from an unsavory fate, she could not be distracted, even by a man as devilishly handsome as this. “...I must speak to Lord Rutledge. Please, it is urgent.”

“Why?” His calmness irked her.

Every moment she stayed with him, Rutledge was slipping further and further away. She notched her head up. “He is a dastardly scoundrel who ruined a woman near and dear to my heart. I must have him marry her if she has any possible way of avoiding being cast as a fallen woman and shoved into ignominy.”

His lips twitched. “Your plan was doomed from the inception. You might have a better hope of fetching a hunk of cheese from the moon, mouse, than convincing Rutledge he must marry one of his conquests. A seducer is as liable to change his ways as a leopard is to change his spots.

“They find a woman who poses a challenge, they wheedle and cajole, and spin their web of lies to draw an innocent into their path. When he’s gotten what he wants, he moves on with nary a look over his shoulder.”

Alice’s heart fell to her feet. “No, no... surely there must be a way,” she held back an aggrieved cry. “He must pay.”

“I doubt you will sway him,” his mocking drawl exasperated her. “He’ll laugh in your face.”

“I’ll hold a pistol to his head if I must,” Alice swore. “He must do the right thing.”

“He won’t.”

“He must .” She felt flustered and spun around, as if the man in question was behind her and she could tell him her demand... or fall to his feet and beg. “I—I cannot leave here without speaking to him. Where did he go?”

“He is in a place where, if you enter, your innocence will be ripped from you and

your delicate sensibilities,” the Duke replied. “I assure you, you do not want to look behind that door.”

Alice felt the need to sit, and the moment the room began to swim, and her knees buckled, a strong hand grasped her and steadied her. “Easy, mouse. You do not want to collapse here.”

She began to fear all her careful planning was now for naught, how she had followed Rutledge’s steps for weeks, how she had cajoled her aunt and her cousin to go and visit their friend in the countryside this very night—while her uncle was away at Oxford on business—just so she could be free to slip out to London.

All this work... for nothing .

The poor girl is about to faint.

Did she know where she was?

The moment he had seen her being dragged away, Edward had known he had to get to her, or she would not survive the night, certainly not where the footman was taking her. She could not have looked more of an outsider—even while in costume—if she tried.

Edward, as cynical, jaundiced, and disillusioned as he was, felt amused that this little Miss thought she could sway Roderick Hammond to give up his roaming ways to marry a woman—one of many he had ruined—and domesticate himself.

Holding her firm, he had to moderate his grip; she was so petite that she looked like a porcelain doll, and wrapped in all that white, more a cherubic one.

The satin mask molded to her delicate bone structure, her lips were rosy and plump,

and while it was too dim for him to see the color of her eyes—the light came from behind her, not over him—he could tell they were some shade of blue.

They are fringed by the longest lashes I have ever seen.

Over her shoulder, he noticed two footmen and the club manager were on the floor searching—presumably—for this girl. Before he knew what he was doing, he'd backed her into a nook, and with one arm still locked around her waist, his free hand tilted her head so that it appeared as though they were kissing.

“Play along ,” he whispered.

There was a grim warning in his tone, and Edward hoped she would get it—quickly, that she was being hunted and that she needed to be playing this part if she wished to get out of here unscathed.

He concealed her body as much as he could, knowing that after the men passed by, he had a limited time to get her out of the club and back to her home.

Her breath was coming hard and fast in his cheek now. Curious, his eyes narrowed on hers. “Why are you afraid?”

“This...” she swallowed “...is the closest I have been to a man.”

“I would wager you have never been kissed either,” he breathed, eyes gliding over her face, and when her cheeks pinked, something stirred in his chest— interest .

It had been a long time since he had felt such a visceral urge, but damn did it come at the worst moment. He cupped her soft cheek, his thumb coasting over the bridge of her nose. A tremor ran through her at the feel of his thumb so close to her lips.

“Si...Sir!”

“It has been a long time since I’ve had the urge to kiss a woman,” he murmured darkly. “Especially one as untrained as you... but alas, it is not meant to be.”

His senses were turned toward the men passing by and when they did, he pulled her cowl over. “We need to leave here. Now. Keep your head down and do not make eye-contact with anyone.”

With his hand protectively on her head, he walked with her down the stairs and through the mingling masses gambling ancient fortunes away, skirting eagle-eyed footmen and ignoring lords who smirked at him, thinking, clearly, that he was going home with another conquest.

“We are almost there,” he uttered eventually, “Do you have a hackney home?”

“...No.”

Clearly, she had not thought this plan through in its entirety. Na?ve little mouse.

“I’ll find you one,” he said as they passed through the brilliant circular marble foyer. He didn’t look over his shoulder to the two stories arching over them, much less the basement where the apex of depravity—gaming, drink, and whores—was in true effect.

She came here to find Rutledge but found me. What will she think knowing I partly own this club? Surely, she’ll think I am just as wicked as he.

The night sky blazed with stars as he drew her close, unwilling to let her go so soon as he guided her down the lane to the waiting hackneys. Halfway there, she paused to suck in a breath.

With her hand pressed on her breast, he cocked his head and peered at her before

reaching to touch her mask. Instantly, she pulled away, “No, do not touch that; the mask stays on.”

His fingers brushed the lace longingly. “You know who I am... but what is your name?”

She seemed to think for a moment. Perhaps deciding upon whether to conjure up a lie. But then her gaze settled on his again, and she whispered, “Alice... Alice Winslow.”

“Well, my dear Alice Winslow , the Duke of Valhaven at your service. Though I’d prefer if you called me by my name, Edward .”

They headed for the line of hackney’s, and upon finding a driver who did not look a shady character, Edward called out, “You there, are you for hire?”

The driver jerked awake, and blinking fast, sat up and fixed his hat. “Y-yes, Sir. I am. What do you need?”

“I need you to take a friend of mine home.”

“And where is that, good Sir?”

“Grosvenor Square,” Alice replied.

The driver tipped his cap. “Get on in.”

Before he pressed a coin into the driver’s hand, he turned to her. “...If you must know, when I said I wanted to kiss you, I wouldn’t have pounced. I was about to ask for permission.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. "I will not allow my first kiss to be with a man like you."

"A man like me?"

"Men like you who take what you want and move on," she stated bluntly. "Rakes and seducers of innocents, who take what they want without any thoughts or consequences for the ladies they leave behind. I came here to bring a rake to task, not to fall into the bed of one. Your request would have been denied."

"Such a pity." He let his hand fall to the small of her back. "It would have been delightful."

"Perhaps for yourself."

"Before you leave, may I ask you one final question, Miss Alice?"

Her brows rose at his sudden sincerity. "I... I do owe you very much, I suppose, so, yes, you may ask me whatever you would like. I am at your disposal more than I ought to be."

"Is your day tomorrow one where you wrap some schoolgirls' knuckles with a ruler or is it that you lounge away the day, eating bon-bons and sipping mint juleps?"

She lifted her head, puzzled. "Neither. Tomorrow, I will return to my normal life of solitude and seclusion."

"I... see," he stepped back and almost merged with the darkness. "Have a safe journey home then. And who knows, we might see each other again."

Her lips ticked down, wordlessly saying, I highly doubt it.

“Good night, Your Grace,” she smiled thinly.

The carriage rode off and soon vanished into the night but Edward knew her face would never fade from his mind.

While heading back to his carriage instead of returning to the den, he gripped the passenger door a touch more firmly than he ought, then looked over his shoulder. “Don’t fret, little mouse. We shall see each other again, very soon .”

CHAPTER 2

Arriving home, Alice slipped inside the dark, silent foyer of the townhouse, relieved that she was back safe, but aggrieved that she had lost her one chance to find Rutledge.

Pulling her cloak from her shoulders, she draped it over her arm and looked at the grandfather clock in the foyer; it read two in the morning. There was little chance her sister Penelope would be awake.

Maybe he is right. Maybe my plan was doomed from the start.

Disillusioned, she ascended the steps to her rooms, plucked the mask from her flushed face, and tucked both it and the cloak deep into a trunk, knowing her aunt would be far from pleased should she discover them.

Slipping into a nightgown, she unlatched the window, inviting the cool night air to drift in before sinking between the chilled sheets. Dropping her head on the pillow, her thoughts tangled with the weight of how she was going to tell her sister she had failed her in the morning.

She shifted onto her side. Then the other. Eyes falling shut, her fingertips brushed her lips as a whisper of doubt stirred within her. Should I have let him kiss me?

The answer came in the next breath. No, she should not have. As tempting as the idea was, she did not desire to have her name or reputation attached to a rakehell.

I cannot lie, he does interest me. Hypothetically.

Sighing, she closed her eyes again and let the tension of the night fade away, and eventually, slipped into a deep slumber, her dreams haunted by mystic gray eyes.

The weak rays of dawn light came earlier than she wanted them, but Alice forced herself to wake to make sure the house was ready for her aunt and cousin's arrival.

When her aunt had taken her and Penelope in after their parents had passed, Alice had decided a fitting way to repay her aunt for kindness was to help around the house. As the eldest of the girls, she made sure the menu for each week was set and attuned to her cousin, Eliza's picky taste, and her aunt's persnickety demands.

She also made sure the servant girls laundered her cousin's dresses properly, that Eliza had her breakfasts at precisely nine-fifteen in the morning, and that her aunt was not disturbed between the hours of one and three in the afternoon.

After washing and dressing, she slipped inside her sister's room and found Penelope just sitting up.

"Good morning," she whispered to her sister while sitting on the edge. "How are you feeling?"

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Penelope mumbled, "I feel well. How—" her eyes shifted from Alice to the doors as if someone would suddenly barge in on them. "How did last night go? Did you find him? Did you find Rutledge?"

Alice hated admitting failure, but this time she had no choice. "I came close, Elly, I came really close, but I didn't get to him in time. I promise you though, I will find him again and convince him."

Her sister swayed, lifting a hand to her mouth, her eyes pooling with unshed tears. “I—I don’t know why I allowed him to... to seduce me, Alice. I swear, I thought—I thought he loved me.”

“I know, Elly,” Alice whispered sympathetically, her heart hardening with contempt for the man. “He is a vile, dishonorable seducer and if he does not do the right thing, one day he will face his comeuppance.”

Resting her cheek on Alice’s shoulder, Penelope asked morosely, “What if he refuses to marry me, Alice?”

A seducer is as liable to change his ways as a leopard is to change his spots.

“I’ll shoot him,” she said plainly, while forcing the Duke’s words away. “Not somewhere he might die from but somewhere he might really feel it.”

Her dry comment eked a laugh from Penelope as she made to get out of bed. “I need to wash and get ready for today. We have a luncheon at Lady Westley’s home tomorrow, remember.”

“I do,” Alice sighed. “I anticipate it will be a long dreary day with women tittering about this handsome lord or which lady is likely to marry him. That is if they are not debating which French fashion is the best and the older women trading advice on how to combat colic.”

Giggling, Penelope vanished into her bathing chamber. Alice left the room and descended the stairs to the main room and after briefly speaking with the staff, returned to the level above to make sure the breakfast room was in order for her aunt and cousin’s luncheon later that day.

Returning to her rooms, she picked out the dress she was to wear for the luncheon

and laid the gown; a light ivory tight-waist gown with puff sleeves and a modestly revealing décolletage on the bodice. She lined up her half-boots with it and then went to assist Penelope.

“What gown are you thinking?” she asked while rifling through the dresses.

“A muslin,” Penelope took a gown out and pressed it to her front while swirling in place. “It is the newest one I had made from the modiste.”

“It is very flattering,” Alice smiled. “I like the bodice trimmed with white lace.”

“So do I,” Penelope nodded while turning to the floor-length brass-gilded mirror. “I hope it will be a good day for me to see my old friends. The last few days were hardly nice ones.”

Alice’s tempered smile hid the grief in her chest; the last few weeks had been rough for Penelope, especially the night when she allowed Rutledge to tempt her into his bed.

“Do you think he will be there?” Her sister asked while rifling through her jewelry box.

‘He’ being Rutledge.

“I don’t know, Elly. I do not think he will be there,” Alice replied thinking, dully, that the man was probably still in the gambling house in the bed of his nightly companions. “If he is, I will find him and confront him.”

The clatter of boots down the hallway drew their attention and from the voices coming from down below the floor they were on, it was clear that their aunt and cousin had returned.

“We should leave it at that for now. We’ll continue this discussion later on,” Alice said while rising from the bed and leaving the room.

She could not dare let Eliza, a ribald gossip and embellisher, to even get a hint of the position Penelope was in. If she did, her sister’s reputation would be ruined in a matter of days. Closing the door behind her, she spotted a grouchy Eliza, clad in a dove grey coat, entering her rooms with two maids behind her.

Alice knew she would not see her cousin again until noon, so she went to her aunt’s room to greet her before her noontime rest.

“Aunt Agatha,” Alice smiled warmly. “How was your trip?”

Her aunt peeled her coat away and plucked her pins from her greying hair. “It went well. I must say though, Lady Oglerthorne is not the lady I thought her to be. Her daughter looked at poor Eliza as if she were a fisherman’s daughter, not that of a respected solicitor.”

To the ton, anything less than generations of money and titles means you are automatically labeled as from Shop. Gentry is nothing less than dirt in their eyes.

“I am sorry to hear that,” Alice replied, refraining from mentioning that she, as the daughter of a merchant, knew all too well how ladies of the ton shied away from being in the company of those lesser than them.

Her aunt, a little taller than the average woman, patted her silvering hair. At fifty-six, and with a daughter conceived later in life than she would have wanted, her aunt was incessantly trying to ingratiate herself with those of the ton to make sure her daughter had better connections and marriage prospects.

“Well, she will see when my precious Eliza marries one of the most eligible

bachelors this Season,” her aunt scoffed. “Matter of fact, the engagement at Lady Westley’s home will be the catalyst for Eliza to make her match.”

“I will alert the staff to send up tea at midday,” Alice replied as she stepped out of the room and returned to Penelope.

Her sister had finished bathing and was dressed in a periwinkle blue day frock and sat while Alice began to braid her hair.

“You did not tell me where you had to go last night to find him,” Penelope asked with a pitch in her tone.

“Oh, just one of his usual haunts,” Alice answered evasively. “Luckily, it was in a place where I could hide my identity and leave unscathed.”

She deliberately kept her words vague so her sister did not realize the danger she had placed herself in. Alice could not put into words the air of wickedness and debauchery at this club and despite her steeling herself, she had felt the decadent ambiance seep into her skin.

“He slipped away before I could get to him,” Alice added while sliding a pin into her sister’s hair. “But never fear, I will not stop until I corner that scoundrel.”

Twisting to look over her shoulder, Penelope smiled. “Thank you, sister.”

“No need to thank me,” Alice replied, knowing that there was no one else to help her sister, and that, in itself, made her understand, there was no margin to fail.

She had to come out the victor here, her sister depended on it.

The continued knocks on Edward’s door had begun as faint raps on wood, but they

grew, and grew, until Edward could not take the strident noise anymore. He flung the sheets away and strode to the door, clad in only his underclothes—he had an idea who today’s offender was anyway.

“Benedict,” he grumbled to the early morning sight of his half-brother. “What do you want?”

At two-and-twenty years, his younger brother, now a newly minted Marquess, strode decisively into the room, not caring that Edward clearly intended to resume his sleep.

“How was last night?” Benedict chimed, practically tipping on his toes. “Did you meet any ladies?”

Edward refrained from rolling his eyes, “It was a gambling parlor, Benedict, not a soiree.”

“Surely you would have met someone though?” Benedict smoothed his copper hair away from his face.

Cocking a dark brow, Edward flatly muttered, “If I did, do you honestly think I would be here?”

“Touché,” Benedict grinned. “Are you attending tomorrow’s luncheon at Lady Westley’s home?”

“Is that why you’re here?” Edward did roll his eyes this time as he slid between the sheets again. “I would rather have my back teeth kicked out by a horse’s hoof than willingly mingle with marriage-minded ladies and their mamas.”

“I still do not understand why you strike out against marriage so much. I’d imagine a wife certainly can provide balance to a man’s life,” Benedict added.

Propping the pillows up behind him, Edward squinted in the dimness provided by the thick brocade curtains. “Are you off to the marriage mart now? I thought you were set on sowing your royal oats first. After all, you are in your second year at Oxford, that is what your age does.”

His brother’s face grew sly. “I’d imagine you were the best of them all.”

“You ought to quantify what best of them means,” Edward’s chuckle preceded him closing his eyes. “Now, go away, I need to sleep. Oh, and Benedict, if you do find a woman there, be careful. When most women look at us, they see money, luxury, and a way to elevate their family. Not the men we are.

“Try to keep your ardor behind your trouser’s placket, will you, and if you do—” Edward leaned over to his bedside table and plucked a white box out from it, then tossed it to his brother. “—use these. They call them French Letters. Don’t ask me to show you how to use them.”

Examining the box, Benedict nodded sagely. “I think it will be easy to figure out.”

“And there’s that Oxford intellect on display,” Edward muttered wryly, turning away. “Close the door on your way out and tell the staff not to interrupt me.”

“Wait,” Benedict asked at the doorway. “Won’t you need some of these back for yourself?”

“Like any worthy Hell Born Babe, I have more than enough.”

CHAPTER 3

Arm in arm with Penelope, Alice held her parasol at her side, admiring the sprawling expanse of Lady Westley's palatial gardens.

Amid the winding pathways, trimmed hedges, and flowery bushes, she drew in a breath of fresh air. The countryside idyllic home was a valuable escape from the bustling, smoke-choked bosom of London.

Here, surrounded by towering oaks, she appreciated the myriad dragonflies with their mosaic wings and chirping birds, over the clattering carriage wheels and raucous road mongers of the London Street.

"What a lovely place," Penelope sighed, her gloved hand brushing down her middle. "It is unfortunate we do not see such open spaces in the Square."

Though listening, Alice's eyes were on the lords passing by, most of them matching the floral ambiance with colorful jackets and waistcoats, some even adorned in orange and pink cravats. Truthfully, she was looking for any sign of Rutledge, though she knew there was a slim chance he would be present.

The nodcock is probably still in the bed of one of the women he sauntered past me with.

"Girls," Aunt Agatha chirped, her fan fluttering while she inched her way with her green gown. "Keep an eye on dear Eliza, will you? Make sure she does not fall in with the wrong ones, yes."

“Who does she think are the wrong ones?” Penelope whispered. “These are all vetted members of the ton, aren’t they? Are scapegraces and blackguards about to come over the wall and through the shrubbery?”

Alice didn’t reply but she would tell Penelope what she thought her aunt meant when they had a moment of privacy.

Holding back a grimace—or was it a sigh of relief—at realizing Rutledge was not there, she trained her attention to the flocks of ladies around them.

She knew what her aunt meant; make sure Eliza found the girls that came from the crème-de-la-crème of the ton, daughters of Dukes or Marquesses; who her aunt considered good company. What her aunt meant was that she had to make sure such a girl was a wallflower or a spinster, where Eliza would enjoy the company and take the shine.

As unassuming as her aunt was, Agatha was cutthroat when it came to her daughter and making sure Eliza climbed the social ladder.

Alice’s mind flittered to Duke Valhaven, his haunting grey eyes—and she held back a shiver.

Put him out of your mind. You will never cross paths again.

“I’ll take care of what Aunt asked us to do,” Alice assured Penelope. “Do you want something to drink? The buffet gazebo is over there.”

“I would like a glass of lemonade,” Penelope said as she nodded to a seat under an elm. “I’ll be over there.”

While her sister went off to sit, Alice went to the gazebo, its wide lattice barriers light

and cheerful. Some ladies and gentlemen were mingling there first so Alice waited her turn.

In between times, she made sure to keep an eye on Penelope, but it seemed she was doing just fine. Her sister had the same coloring their mother had; her hair golden with a tint of red to it, pale skin, and bright blue eyes she had inherited from their father.

I need to fix this situation for her. It is what mother and father mandated me to do.

Upon reaching the refreshment table, she was promptly asked for her order. “Two glasses of lemonade, please,” she requested with a polite smile.

Turning to leave with cups in hand, she very nearly collided with a gentleman standing close behind her. She gasped in horror, the drinks almost sloshing over the rims. “Heavens! I am so sorry. Did—did I spill some on you?”

Blue-grey eyes gleamed under coiffed russet hair. “Never fear, my lady, you have not doused me with lemonade,” a youthful voice chimed back.

Relieved, she examined his bronze waistcoat and blue cravat to make sure. “I am glad. Will you please excuse me, my lord?”

“No,” he said, and she was at a loss of what he meant, when he added, “Please, let me carry those for you. Any half-decent gentleman would not allow a lady to carry these on her own. Please.”

Her cheeks pinked. “Are... are you sure?”

“Benedict Landon, Marquess of Brampton, at your service,” he replied, while gently prying the glasses from her, “Please, lead the way.”

As she headed to the seat where Penelope had indicated, she found that her aunt and Eliza had joined them and realized her grave mistake of taking only two cups.

Her aunt perked up at seeing the lord behind her, her stern expression suddenly as bright and sweet as a summer's day. "We were wondering where you had gone off to, dear."

Stepping aside, Alice began, "Aunt Agatha, may I introduce his lordship, Marquess Brampton. He graciously offered to bring the drinks for Penelope and Eliza."

"Thank you, my lord," Penelope said curtsying.

Eliza was a touch slower, but she followed as well, and when he handed both their glasses, he added, "I am remiss. It is not fair for two to drink when they can be four. Please, excuse me."

"My lord, you don't—" Alice lifted her hand to stop him, but he caught it and kissed the back of it instead.

"'Tis my pleasure, my lady," he replied.

Alice could feel her aunt's glare singe the side of her neck and knew she had to tell the lord the truth about her station when he returned. She had to make sure he knew she was not a lady, which would possibly turn his eye to Eliza—even though she was not a lady either.

In the few minutes he was gone, questions flew from all sides.

"Where did you meet him?" Penelope asked.

"Why didn't you tell us about him?" Her aunt demanded.

“Were you thinking about keeping him to yourself?” Eliza muttered.

“I just met him.” Alice kept her tone civil, though she almost made to scoff at that last remark. “I very nearly spilled those drinks on him, and he decided to do the gentlemanly thing and carry them for me.”

“Oh.” Eliza blinked, her blue eyes clearing, before she sipped her own drink.

“He’s coming, he’s coming,” Aunt Agatha murmured quietly.

The Marquess returned to a wide-eyed entrance, holding two glasses in hand, before handing one to Alice and one to her aunt.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said, heart hammering. “But you should know, I haven’t a title. I am Miss Alice Winslow. My father was a merchant.”

He cocked his head, a brow arching. “I apologize, Miss Winslow, if I accidentally made you feel the need to declare such a thing.”

“It only felt fair to state it,” Alice smiled thinly. “I would hate to appear to be something that I am not.”

Marquess Brampton’s grin was slanted, very boyish but still handsome. “I assure you; I am unbothered. If your aunt would be inclined to chaperon, would you walk with me for a spell, after you finish your drink of course?”

Aunt Agatha nearly fell over her feet agreeing and when the Marquess bowed away, she wanted to walk away because she knew that her aunt would capitalize on the unexpected meeting and near mishap.

“Do everything in your power to charm him,” her aunt ordered. “Do not, and I mean

do not regale him with whatever nonsense of the last book you have read. Listen to him, be submissive, do not give him any reason to walk away.”

When Benedict did return, Alice, like many other times, squashed her irritation, forced a smile on her face, and took his offered arm.

“Truly, you hadn’t needed to clarify your origins,” Benedict grinned, keeping his face forward.

“I did not want to give you a false impression,” she began, gently twisting her head to look at him. “I do detest generalizations, but it is very plain how the ton sees those who are Gentry.”

“I hate to tell you that the divisions in the Upper Ten are as bad as the prejudice you face,” Benedict shrugged. “They are not as visible, but they are there.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“The lords have to be sure the women they meet are not only there for gain and the ladies have to be absolutely sure the lords nipping at their heels are not fortune hunters in disguise,” he said. “The open secret of the ton is that matches and marriages are made on the consideration of power and fortune.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. “Do you… follow that philosophy?”

He paused in the middle of the path and turned to her, his expression understanding as he clearly had deduced the words she hadn’t said. “No, I do not.”

For once, Alice allowed herself to smile. Sincerely. “Thank you.”

“Now,” he began, spinning and leading the way once more. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Only if you will do the same,” she said. “In plain words, my lord, I am a simple country Miss with a practical mindset. I read very much but not so much as of late.”

“And why is that?”

“I suppose I have been caught up in... other things,” Alice said, knowing her tone was vague. She couldn’t dare tell him that she felt too old, too self-sufficient, and too unsophisticated to attract a husband because while she felt so, she knew it was the only way to save her sister.

“When our parents passed—that is to say, myself and my younger sister, Penelope, the young lady with blond hair—my aunt graciously took us in, and she was more than happy to use her position to give her rustic nieces a way to find decent prospects for marriage, and with that, a better life.”

“Sometimes I realize that I am out of touch with the hardships ladies face in our society,” Benedict admitted. “I am still at Oxford, you see, where we men are cloistered in study halls and in the classrooms.”

“In the daytime, I assume, but what happens away from the halls?” she asked, cringing at her failing attempt to sound coy.

His warm laugh made her feel that she was on the right track with him. “Touché, Miss Alice. At night, we are another sort of cloister. The mischievous ones.”

There was no question mischievous was a euphemism for something else entirely; something risqué. “I cannot recall a time I have been mischievous,” she murmured.

“You should try it sometime,” Benedict’s grin was nothing less than charming and tempting. “It’s fun.”

Giggling, she asked, “What do you consider fun?”

“Croquet,” Benedict replied dryly.

Again, she knew he did not mean that. “I enjoy our repartee.”

As they rounded a corner, she found themselves surrounded by a gaggle of giggling debutantes. Holding back a grimace, she allowed Benedict to lead them over and they entered the fray.

Razor-sharp smiles greeted Alice as she curtsied to the titled ladies. She could feel their derision; how was it that a second-class girl like her was on the arm of a titled lord, second perhaps to a Dukedom.

“Miss Alice, is it?” Miranda Valentine, the daughter of an Earl—a tall, slender woman long considered firmly on the shelf—stood encircled by her usual companions. “I am surprised to see you here; aren’t Saturdays for restocking days at merchandisers? Not that I should know of course.”

“My uncle is a lawyer,” Alice said evenly. “My late father was with the East Indian Traders.”

“Oh,” Miranda fluttered her fan. “Merchandiser, lawyer, much of the same.”

Flustered, Alice had the suffocating feeling that she should tell them that she only wanted to borrow the Marquess for a few minutes and would send him right back.

“Are you attending this Season?” Petunia, a pug-faced debutante who wore more rouge than the fashionable rule allowed, asked.

“My cousin, my sister, and I will be attending, yes,” she replied.

Lady Tabitha, the third of the threesome blinked her wide vapid blue eyes. “But who will mind the shop with you gone?”

She ground her teeth but forced a smile. “There is no shop, my lady.”

“Lord Brampton,” Miranda simpered, gaze falling back on the Marquess smoothly. “I heard your trip to the Far East changed your life. Could you give listening ears a tidbit of the journey?”

Alice was willing to stay in the company of the ladies as long as the Marquess wanted; she would take the snipes and un-subtle jabs because this was temporary; her and Penelope’s future was on the line.

“I would,” Benedict muttered. His stiff tone made Alice’s chest tighten. “But not now, my ladies. If you will excuse us.”

Without any preamble or by your leave, Benedict steered her away and they walked into silence until they came to the edge of a manmade pond. Alice sighed and gazed at the ducks gliding on the surface with not a care in the world.

“They do not like me that much,” she said quietly.

“I can see that...” he replied in thought. “Aside from the clear biases they have against you, I am not sure I understand why.”

“That is all that’s needed, I’m afraid,” she sighed. “It is a stigma I’ve borne half of my life, from the schoolroom to the ballroom. I’ve heard all the slights they could levy against me. Most of the time I have turned a blind eye and ear to the she smells like shop witticism, or the one I hear most; she’s no less common this Season than she was the last .”

He shook his head slowly, left to right. "I am... sorry to hear that."

She jumped when a pair of squirrels burst from the bushes and darted across her boots, their bushy brown tails swishing as their game of chase took them up a tree and high into the leafy boughs.

"Dear lord," she breathed, her hands pressed to her pounding heart.

Fortunately, Benedict did not let her tip over but held on as she was practically plastered against his side. "My, my, Miss Alice, are you that willing to jump into my arms already?"

Blushing profusely, she pulled away from him and brushed her skirts down, not entirely enthused about the dryness of his tone. "I apologize."

"No, no, do not," Benedict snorted. "I appreciate a lovely woman close to me. Well, Miss Alice, I may have to rethink my ideas about you."

Wait, what did that mean?

CHAPTER 4

Waking at a late hour was not unusual for Edward—back in his most egregious roaming days, he would not wake before noon. Now, he still held late days, but not as much.

Turning over on his bed, he rubbed his eyes, trying—and failing to remove the eyes of Madam Mystique from last night.

Why was she bothering him so much? In his life, and most importantly, in his station, women came and went. Few of them stayed in his memory and even less haunted him at night. So why was this lady in the feathered mask resonating in his mind?

He'd met the most beautiful women, the most talented, in the bedchamber and out of it, and even they were footnotes in his memory. Scowling, he sat up and flung the sheets from his person.

The marble was cold under his feet, but that sensation paled in consideration to the upset under his breastbone.

Women did not make him wonder; women did not make him dabble in what-ifs—so why was he wondering what the masked lady's lips would taste like?

“Probably like a sweet, tart, Pinot Gris,” he murmured while washing his face.

After summoning his valet to prepare his bath and appraising the kitchen staff to have a hot meal ready, he donned a silk robe and took a brief walk to his study to arrange

the work he had to do before he headed off to White's that evening.

At thirty years, he had no interest in finding a wife—indeed, he was staunchly against the idea of getting leg shackled. He treasured his independence and the notion of making sure he had to curfew his activities to tailor to a finicky lady made his skin itch.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace,” his butler, Charles Ramsay, bowed. “May I get anything for you? Coffee maybe?”

The man was veritably young for a butler, barely brushing forty, but Charles had been the previous butler's understudy and before that, a dedicated footman in the manor. Moreover, the man was a dead shot who did not miss and cooked a mean venison chop.

“Coffee in half an hour while I attend to these,” he yawned while arranging the folios and letters. He came across another letter from his property manager in Italy and held back an aggrieved groan.

What he would give to go back to the idyllic Tuscany countryside, the rolling hills of vineyards to the picturesque towns and villages, the seat of history, art, and such refined culture.

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” his valet, Peter Simpson, bowed. “The bathing chamber is ready for you.”

“Good,” Edward nodded, then tapped the letter. “I will be back soon, Ramsay.”

Precisely two hours and forty minutes later, clad in his shirtsleeves, Edward sorted through most of his week, delegating funds to a town ravaged by a storm, petitioned the Earl who governed the township adjacent to his to dually fund the creation of a

bridge, and lastly, ordered some workers to fix the town's orphanage, closed off from doing work.

Rubbing the strain in his neck away, he gazed at the half-finished cup of coffee—the last of five he'd drunk— and moved from the table. White's awaited, and he was more than ready for its distractions.

“Ramsay, has Benedict returned yet?” he asked when the butler came to collect his cup.

“His carriage pulled in the moment I took the stairs, Your Grace,” Ramsay nodded.

Before he went off, he decided to go see his brother, hoping dearly that the young man had listened to him.

How much of a debacle can he get into at a garden party? This is not the Pleasure Gardens of Vauxhall.

He found Benedict peeling off his jacket, a pleased smile on his face, one Edward assumed came from having a genuinely enjoyable time instead of the smug glee from making a conquest.

Leaning on the doorstep, he asked, “Had a good time, I see?”

While undoing his waistcoat, Benedict smiled over his shoulder, “It was a lovely time. I do wish you'd have attended, but then, you might have stolen the eyes of the lady I met.”

Pressing a hand to his heart, Edward feigned pain. “I would never do that, dear brother. You do know you are the one to continue the ducal line, yes?”

“I do,” Benedict struggled to undo his cravat, forcing Edward to step in.

After spending years traveling the continent with no valet or butler to serve him, Edward had learned to take care of himself—not a choice most gentlemen would have made. However, necessity was the mother of invention, so he had gotten quite inventive: he could tie his own cravat and dress himself, even in the dark.

Adeptly, he undid the waterfall knot and pulled the silk from his collar, “I would never hurt your chance for marriage. Now, tell me, who is this lady like?”

“She is not a lady in the sense we take it as,” Benedict replied. “But in my eyes, she has the comportment of one.”

“Oh,” he said thoughtfully. “That is not as concerning as you might think.”

Benedict’s brows lifted. “You wouldn’t come down on me for possibly marrying a woman from the Gentry?”

“Not as long as she or her family aren’t up to their eyebrows in debt,” Edward replied. “In that case, we might have a discussion.”

“I don’t think so, but the conversation did not stray to fiscal matters,” Benedict said.

Laughing, Edward added, “I would save that conversation for the second meeting.”

“Or the third,” Benedict joked as he donned a looser shirt. “I see you’re out for the Town?”

“I am,” Edward replied. “How are your lectures?”

“Long and tedious enough to make me want to slam my head against my desk,”

Benedict muttered. “But I had a paper to write, so I shall be drinking oceans of coffee and burning the midnight oil.”

Lips tilting to the side, Edward replied, “I do not miss those days, let me tell you.”

“Any tips on economics?” Benedict asked dryly.

“Be able to explain the law of supply and demand backward,” Edward responded as he headed out the door. “Is Professor Yates still rambling in hall four?”

“He is.”

“Then you will need it,” Edward laughed his way to the carriage.

“Do you have a minute, Alice dear?”

Seated at her writing desk in the drawing room, Alice glanced up from her book. Her aunt, clad in her thick brocade robe, her hair up in a nightcap, stood at the doorway, a cup of tea in hand.

She didn’t really—she had to find Rutledge again—but she knew she could not deny her aunt, even if it was the tiniest thing; making sure Eliza got a five-minute egg instead of a seven-minute one. She would always say, I’ll have it done, Aunt .

“Yes, aunt,” she said, putting the book down. “How may I help you?”

“It is in regards to Marquess Brampton,” her aunt said, her face bright with expectation and pride. “I was so honored when he chose to stay with you all day and even have you as his partner at dinner. My word, Alice. You have turned the ton on its head.”

No, not yet I haven't. Not unless he asks me to marry him. Only then will I have turned the ton on its head.

She ducked her head, "Such high praises, Aunt."

"I mean them dear," her aunt sounded almost giddy. "A Marquess! In my wildest dreams I would not have imagined you'd gain the eye of such a prestigious lord. You could be the catalyst to push our family as we have so long hoped."

"His lordship is indeed a very polite man with a lovely sense of humor."

What she did not say was; he did seem intrigued, but I hope his interest is not passing.

"He stopped you after dinner," her aunt added. "What did he say?"

"He said he'd had a lovely time and was glad he'd met me," Alice recalled from thought. "He also said that he had not met a lady like me before and was delighted to know that there were pleasant ladies outside of the Upper Ten."

Her aunt pressed her hand to her heart. "Such words please my heart."

Alice tempered her own delight knowing her aunt had to have something more coming.

"I am happy for you dear, I know if your dear mama was alive, she would be overjoyed to know this," Agatha said. "But my sweet Eliza is despondent. Do you think, if you meet the lord again, that you could direct one of his friends her way? She would love to meet someone as dashing as your friend."

Of course , Eliza was upset. Why had Alice expected anything else? The girl was

inconsolable whenever anyone got something she'd determined was hers. Still, Alice did not dare utter her criticism—and she had many—of her spoiled cousin.

“I hope I will get the chance to,” she said in a half promise.

“Please,” her aunt replied.

“I promise.” Looking pointedly at the bed, Alice turned back to her aunt, “I’ll be retiring now.”

“Oh,” Agatha blinked, once, twice and a third. “Oh, yes, yes. Good night, dear.”

Closing the door after her aunt, she waited until her aunt had left the passageway, then quietly slipped off to Penelope’s room. She found her sister sitting up in bed, her back against a mountain of pillows, nursing a cup of weak tea.

“I hoped you would come to see me,” Penelope whispered. “Today was wonderful. I know you hadn’t gotten to see some of your old friends, but I think the alternative was better.”

Perched on the edge of the bed, Alice smiled. “I had little friends. Those ladies would rather see me on the back of a wagon selling apples and oranges instead of parading down a garden with a wealthy Marquess on my arm.”

Tucking an errant curl back under her silk nightcap, Penelope continued, “He seemed to really like you.”

“He did,” Alice agreed. “I found his company enjoyable too.”

“Eliza was scowling every time you turned your back,” Penelope smiled gently. “Methinks the lady is jealous.”

“I am not surprised,” Alice smiled in return. “But that is not what I came here to talk of. I want you to understand that I have not given up and I will not ever sideline my task of getting Rutledge to do the right thing by you.”

Reaching out, Penelope rested her palm over Alice’s hand, her expression warm and thankful. “I know you will, Alice, and I thank you for it, even though I hate that I had to put you in this position.”

“Nonsense,” Alice shook her head. “I am happy to do so. I do want you to be happy, Elly, that is my sole mission in life. Mother would have wanted it so.”

Wilting back into the pillows, Penelope’s face fell as she twisted the sheets on her lap. “I wish I hadn’t been so foolish and naïve for that man.”

Though her sister's eyes soon shimmered with tears, not a single drop fell, and Alice knew the pain ran deep. She wished she could truly understand, but having never fallen in love—or even surrendered to the folly of a fleeting infatuation—she could only imagine the depth of betrayal her sister must feel.

It had to hurt to be swooned, used, and discarded like litter. Deep down, Alice knew her sister still felt some feelings toward that roguish man. She prayed she would never feel that way.

“I know, Elly,” she replied, holding back a sigh. “I will fix it, I will think of something. Just wait a while.”

The cloying smell of cheroot smoke forced Edward to find a quiet corner of the billiards room, and while he’d sipped wine, he found his mind straying—for the hundredth time—to the lady in the white mask.

What the devil is it about her?

His fingers itched to find a pencil and start to sketch the lines of her face. Not many knew he had a gift for drawing, and frankly, it was not as usable as business acumen or the skill of negotiation, but now, he had no other way of getting her face out of his mind.

“I knew the ghoul skulking in the dark corner looked familiar,” Felton Harcourt, Viscount of Arlington, drew out a chair, forcing Edward to pull away from his thoughts.

“Well, if it is not the Pink of London,” Edward drawled, reaching for his drink. “How is it that you have not surpassed Brummel by now?”

“I have,” Felton grinned while buffing his nails on his brocade jacket. “Haven’t you read the papers lately?”

“Sadly not,” Edward replied dryly. “I am not interested in politically nuanced drivel, nor eager to read about the newest social scandal.”

“What a shame,” Felton shrugged. “Do I ask why you’re not paying attention? Could it be that the eternal bachelor is now on the marriage mart?”

Snorting derisively, Edward corrected him, “You should know me better than that.”

“So, no wife in the future?” Felton asked, his head cocked to the left. “Paramour? Plaything?”

Brow cocked, Edward said, “Neither. Do you have recommendations?”

“Now, you should know me better than that,” Felton laughed, then gestured for a passing footman to bring him a cup of brandy. “So, have you been around lately? The Season is becoming a hot one.”

“No desire to even try,” he exhaled. “The Season is a farce and I refuse to be a puppet. Meet a lady, take her on chaperoned strolls in the park at the Fashionable Hour so you can feed gossips and cynics.

At balls you must dance no more than twice, or your intention is already made. Suffer through polite conversation with her family over afternoon tea, forcing down tiny triangle sandwiches dryer than sand. All this to marry a woman and have scheduled intimacy on Wednesday nights at nine o’clock, on the hour, so she can bear you heirs.”

Accepting the glass brought to him, Felton added, “You didn’t get to the riveting part, making small talk over coddled eggs and lukewarm tea.”

“Perish the thought,” Edward scoffed. “It is why I prefer my women carnal, experienced, and well-paid.”

Swirling his drink, Felton crossed a leg. “There are whispers, you know. Whispers about your predilection .”

“I like control,” Edward shrugged, while his mind strayed to the lady in the silk mask; and a fantasy played in his head. He could imagine the thick rope crisscrossing Madame Mysterious’ creamy skin.

The positions he could restrain her in keeping her open and wanting... but a part of him knew he would have to fight to get her there—she was a stubborn one, that was evident—and damn if his length didn’t thicken and press on his buff trousers.

If he should cross paths with the lady in the lace mask again, he knew he would have his work cut out for him. Regretfully, he knew he should focus on the task at hand and replace the fantasy of her with the reality of a willing woman.

A hand waving with a glass of brandy drew Edward's attention from his misguided dreams and woe-begotten fantasy.

“Ah, there you are,” Felton’s grin was crooked. “Are you sure that is all you are after?”

“I’ve already made sure my brother is prepared to carry on the bloodline while I try to squeeze every drop of pleasure I can from this dull existence,” Edward finished his drink and set the glass to the side.

“For argument's sake, if you were to marry—”

“I will not.”

“—what would your wife be like?” Felton asked. “What temperament would you prefer? Do you prefer blondes to brunettes? I hear the ones with manes of fire have a temper just like their hair.”

“Stop fishing,” Edward replied.

Felton let out a breath. “I suppose the rumors of you being the Sphinx reincarnated are true. You do not let anyone in, do you?”

“Me?” Edward pressed a hand to his heart, his tone hyperbolic. “Me ? I am an open book, every passage readable, and very plain in my policies. I am only here to manage the Dukedom until my brother can take over and I will be back to traveling the mainland. There are some parts of Spain I have not touched yet.”

“The country of the women?” Felton grinned.

“There is no separation,” Edward replied, feeling the urge to return home and find

that pencil and paper digging into his skin. “Now, if you will excuse me, I think it is time I take my leave.”

Lifting his glass in a mock salute, Felton nodded, “Before I forget, there is a hunting party at Baron Newcastle’s home. You know how it is with him and his scathing satirical take on the Ton’s season and making fun of the men who have chosen to get leg shackled.”

Tucking a finger into the knot of his cravat, Edward nodded, “I’ve been to a few of those, and it slipped my mind this month.”

“So you will be there.”

“I’ll be there.”

CHAPTER 5

The unceasing knocks on Alice's door had her turning in her bed, irked a bit about the disturbance. She had not had much sleep the night before; half the night she had tossed and turned not sure if she had really met the Marquess or if it were a fever dream.

Now, in the cold light of day, she was riddled with insecurity and guilt; canoodling with the Marquess was the very thing she did not need right then. She had to find Rutledge and get him to do the honorable thing by Penelope.

On the other hand, she could not dare let go of this chance to marry well and bring her family with her—her Aunt Agatha would never forgive her.

Trapped betwixt a wall and a hard place.

Unhappy, she slid out of bed, hoping that it wasn't her aunt there, asking her to do some infinitesimal task for Eliza, like measuring a new length of ribbon.

Tugging the door open, she was ready to face her aunt—only to find Penelope on the other side, holding a massive bouquet of pink roses and white Hyacinths.

Stunned, she looked to the bouquet and her sister, not sure what to say or even think. "Elly?"

"May I come in so we can talk about your suitor?" Penelope whispered. "Please, before aunt finds us?"

“There is no chance of that happening,” Alice said even as she stepped away to let her sister in. “You know they do not rise before nine and it is barely six thirty now.”

Closing the door with her heel, Penelope handed her the vase and the card she’d hid in her skirt’s pocket. “They are so pretty.”

Turning the card over, Alice gazed at the filigreed edges and monogrammed seal at a corner. “To Miss Alice. She walks in beauty, like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies. And all that’s best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes.”

“Oh my,” Penelope sighed, “Such sweet words!”

“They match the flowers too,” Alice added.

Fingering a silky petal, Penelope asked, “You used to tell me that there is a language to flowers. If that is true, what do they mean?”

“You know red roses mean love, but pink means admiration and appreciation. The Hyacinths mean beauty,” she noted, tilting her head. “He is surely a gentleman.”

A telling silence had forced Alice to face her sister, but when she did, she instantly felt her stomach coil with nervousness at how astute her sister’s gaze had become.

“What?” she asked.

“You don’t like him that way... do you,” Penelope asked quietly.

Suddenly, Alice felt fearful. How is it that her sister knew this when she had not even admitted it to herself? Benedict Landon was handsome, titled, and did not look down on her for her gentry class: he was perfect in every respect and had come into her life the very moment she needed it. Even her aunt approved of him, and rarely did she

and her aunt agree on something.

But as sweet as the man was—she couldn't find the instant spark she expected to feel, especially since she had felt it already with... him . Duke Valhaven.

Just thinking of the man made her heart quiver. He had not touched her or spoke with her enough for her to get that reaction; but the sensations—the look in his eyes, the touch on his hand, the heat of his body—still lingered.

“I suppose I am still reeling with the shock of him choosing to humor me,” she half-lied. “It is not a typical thing for me to walk down the street and gain the attention of a Marquess.”

What about a Duke?

Penelope smiled sympathetically. “It is all a bit astonishing, is it not?”

“Very,” Alice said, then reached out for her sister. “But even with this, I am very firm on getting Rutledge to own up to his wrongdoings and honor you.”

Her sister's smile was faint, “I know you will, Alice, but what if he doesn't? There is no guarantee he will marry me, and if we come to it, it is his word against mine. If he doesn't do the honorable thing—”

“He will .”

“—then I will have nothing else to do but accept it and use it as a lesson learned,” Penelope smiled emptily. “I made my bed, one day I'll simply have to lie in it.”

“Not if I have anything to do with it,” Alice assured her. “I found him once, I will find him again.”

Penelope blew a strand of her hair from her eye and smiled, “Every day I wake up, I thank the good lord above that I have you.”

Wrapping her arms around her sister, Alice replied, “And you always will.”

In the silence of his study, Edward’s eyes dropped to the sketch he’d labored on for most of the previous night, and while he knew there was little chance of crossing paths again—he couldn’t help but wonder what could have been.

His finger traced her lips, and his fingertip came up coated with graphite; the things he wanted to do to those lips. Edward knew his inclination in the bedchamber would make a virgin Miss faint, but something inside him felt—deeply felt , this Alice would meet him halfway.

“Knock, knock,” Benedict said as he strode into Edward’s study, bearing two cups of coffee.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in a lecture hall now?” he asked his brother, shifting the picture to the other side.

“I should be,” Benedict replied. “But I am absconding in favor of a croquet game at Lady Islington’s home.”

Askance, Edward asked, “ You ?”

“Yes?”

“Croquet?” Edward added dryly. “The very sport you told me was the most nonsensical sport ever invented from the dawn of creation? Why are you even attending, much less playing it?”

Twisting the cup in his hand, Benedict took a mouthful. “I’ll suffer through mind-numbing tedium because the lady I want to court is there.”

“Ah,” Edward nodded. “Now the truth comes out. The things we men do to gain the woman we want. We will wade through the fires of hell to get her.”

Lips twitching, Benedict added, “Coming from a man who has sworn off marriage—much less courting, I find that incredibly amusing and heavily ironic.”

“Touché,” Edward said.

Looking down, Benedict sighted the paper with the drawing and spun it to him. Brows lowering, he gazed at it and Edward could see confusion mark his brother’s face. “What is it?”

“I—” he stopped. “I don’t know. This drawing looks very much like the lady I want to court. How did you know to draw this? This is very detailed, even with half her face covered.”

What?

“Pardon?”

“Miss Alice,” Benedict said, tapping the drawing. “She looked exactly like this.”

Alice—the very same name. What are the odds of both of us meeting the same Alice?

“You don’t say...” Edward slid the drawing back to himself.

If she was the woman that had drawn his brother’s interest, he certainly would not interfere, but a devilish need to see this lady for himself and find out if she was the

one from that night arose in his mind.

“How much do you know about her?”

He didn’t know if he wanted—or preferred—to play a game of I-found-her-first but he did want to know if this lady was the same one. He wanted to be strategic and subtle about it though.

Even if she is the same one, what will you do about it? You have decided on not courting or marrying...

“I know she has a sister, who, admittedly, I have noticed is very pretty and quiet,” Benedict confessed. “She also has a cousin that reminds me of a pretty kitten, spoiled as can be.”

“I see,” Edward nodded, wondering if this sister was the same one Alice had mentioned inside the Club. “Well, I won’t be keeping you long. Do you remember what part of the croquet mallet hits the ball?”

Benedict’s eyes narrowed. “The same end I will use over your head if you keep needling me.”

Laughing, Edward waved him off and then lifted the drawing, her eyes as haunting to him this moment as the second their gazes had met. “Alice, Alice... do I dare find you playing croquet?”

Stepping back, Alice sat her mallet aside as Marquess Brampton—or Benedict as he had a moment ago asked her to call him—lined up his last shot on the green and tapped the ball, sending it right through the last of the wickets and solidly winning the game.

“He is so very handsome,” Eliza sighed lovingly, coiling a lock of her dark hair around a finger and gazing fondly at the Marquess, clothed in flattering shades of brown and bronze.

Penelope looked at their cousin with horror and a twinge of disgust. “Eliza, stop. He is courting Alice.”

Twisting her face into a nasty sneer, Eliza huffed, “He wouldn’t have if he had met me first.”

Of course you would be unhappy with something good happening to me while you have had everything you’ve ever wanted handed to you.

Training her gaze on the man, she smiled as he cocked the mallet over his shoulder and ambled to her side. Self-conscious, she went to brush her hand down the bodice of her stylish white taffeta dress and wondered if she should put on her bonnet.

“I wonder if the lady of the house will let me keep this mallet as a keepsake?” he pondered out loud.

“She might,” Alice said. “If you ask for the pair. I don’t think her ladyship would do with a rogue mallet.”

He cocked a brow, his smile sly. “It is more sensible to replace two than one.” Extending an arm to her, he asked, “Care to join me for a drink?”

“I would love to,” she smiled, taking her mallet with her.

As they moved off, gently picking their way over the green, he said, “Have I told you how ravishing you look today?”

“You have mentioned it once or twice,” she tightened her fingers over his arm. “Possibly thrice, but I will answer the way I did the first time, you are so very kind, my lord. Thank you.”

His peal of laughter drew eyes around them and she did her best to hold her head up high even under the unwelcome scrutiny. “You looked like a savant wielding that mallet. How often do you play croquet?”

Benedict’s lips slanted to the left. “This is my first time in a very long time.”

“Really?” Her eyes widened fractionally. “You must have a fine-tuned intuition and a good memory.”

“My history professor would disagree with you,” Benedict replied. “But then again, Mister Weston is a crotchety old crone who does not agree with anyone.”

They came to the refreshment tables on the back porch of the lady’s palatial country home, and he poured her a refreshing glass of lemonade and took a water for himself.

Looking into her glass briefly, she began, “I’ve always wondered what the inside of a lecture hall would look like. I am sure you know women are not allowed into such hallowed places which might give them the ladder to achieve more than the simplistic life ladies are told they should expect.”

Leaning on a balustrade, Benedict nursed his drink. “It is wholly unfair, isn’t it? My first teacher was my mother who helped me spell my name and count my first numbers, but then we shunt women to the side and go on to achieve degrees.”

She took a sip. “It is lopsided, truly.”

“Tell me,” Benedict said, “If you could study at Oxford or Cambridge, what would

you like to pursue?”

“Medicine,” Alice replied immediately. “I would like to know how to heal someone, how to take away someone’s pain and give them ease. Even if it is to learn herbs, I would take that with open arms.”

Benedict rested his glass on the wide balustrade. “I may be able to give you a tour of Oxford,” he offered. “Not on a day when classes are ongoing, but I would love to show you one of the bastions of male companionship.”

“No rivalries?”

“More than you can care to count,” he grinned.

Taking a bracing breath, Alice asked, “I know this is very presumptuous of me, but my cousin Eliza really admires you, and while she has not said it to me, I do know she would love to meet someone like you. Someone who has the morals and values and I would say, appearance you have.”

His smirk turned naughty. “Did I hear a compliment in there?”

She reddened. “Perhaps,” she replied. “You have been free with your compliments, and I decided it was only fair to return one, even as un-subtle as it was.”

“No, no, it was subtle,” Benedict shook his head. “And I feel honored by it.”

Against the sunny sky, the rays gleamed on his perfectly coiffed curls; he looked more like a storybook prince than ever, making Alice flushed with guilt.

It wasn’t Lord Brampton’s fault that she did not feel the pull she so desperately wanted to feel for him—half the women in Town would give their left arm to wed the

man and the other half would give much more than that—but she felt trapped in the in-between of duty and guilt.

She had two duties at the moment, the first was to get Rutledge to do the right thing, but if he did not, she had to make sure her sister had a way out of the predicament she was in—and that was by marrying up.

Unfortunately, that was where the guilt came in. She didn't like knowing that this courtship was being led on the basis of changing her fortunes and saving her sister's life. Well, for her. She was not sure of the underlying reasons Benedict had for the courtship.

However, it felt as dishonest and deceitful to use him as a tool like an otter would wield a rock to open clams and then discard it.

What about yourself? Didn't you once dream of marrying for love? What about your happiness?

"Someone like me, eh?" Benedict asked. "I can think of a few."

Swallowing over the unwelcome thoughts, Alice knew she would get her happiness when everyone else was settled. Another twist of guilt turned her stomach upside down; it was beyond reprehensible to let the Marquess believe she felt something she did not, but were ton marriages ever based on love and affection?

No. She did feel a camaraderie with him though. Inhaling deeply, she told herself that she owed Benedict the courtesy of honesty—one day.

"I know my cousin would really appreciate your effort," Alice said.

He nodded. "What about your sister?"

Instantly, Alice felt protective. “She is not ready to court yet.”

“Are you sure?” Benedict asked. “Forgive me, but I am sure I have seen her look at some lords the way many lords have looked at you.”

She laughed, while her stomach twisted, “You jest, my lord. How unkind of you.”

Tilting his head, Benedict asked, “Am I?”

CHAPTER 6

At the outskirts of the garden, Edward kept his eyes fixed on Benedict and the blond woman walking with him—if he judged by her cheekbones and her pouty lips alone, he knew she was the same Alice.

I've wanted to kiss her from the moment we met. Will her kiss be that of a shy maiden or the passion I sense inside her?

He watched as the two meandered their way to a group of three women, an older one and two younger—one of them had Alice's coloring and the other two were dark-haired.

The other girl must be her cousin.

Sidestepping, he followed the two as they came near, and the cousin, clad in white silk, stood and made to walk over to them when she suddenly tripped and lurched forward.

He knew Benedict would catch her—and when his brother did, the girl clung to him like a limpet to a ship. Edward was acutely aware that the trip was manufactured, and he hoped—dearly hoped—that Benedict would not fall for her lackluster performance.

Circling the massive rosebush and the swan statue, he stood perpendicular to the three and watched as the girl's face was flooded with tears; crocodile tears, he was assured.

Sir John Mandeville was right: these serpents slay men, and they eat them weeping.

Alice went to her sister's side, while the mother fluttered and fussed over her child. From the contemptuous, exasperated look Alice gave her cousin behind her aunt's back, Edward broke a smile.

"Smart girl," he murmured.

As if his words had traveled between them and summoned her gaze, Alice looked up and her eyes drifted towards him. Her back snapped straight, face paling.

Her aunt said something to Alice, drawing her attention from him, and he waited until Benedict lifted the damsel and began carrying her to the house beyond. The younger sister touched Alice's arm, angling her body to the two heading off, but Alice shook her head and said something.

When the sister hurried off, following her aunt, Edward made sure to stay in place until she found his gaze again, and slowly, he backed away, heading to the hedge maze behind him.

He barely noticed the gravel crunching beneath his boots as he hoped she was following him; it was time they made some clarification between them.

Arriving at the center of the thick maze, he sat on the smooth stone bench and gazed at the flowing fountain, the water pitter-pattering into the flower-shaped bowl. He propped his elbows on his thighs and clasped his hands between his knees.

He felt her presence before he saw her and when he rose to his feet, he said, "I see you have met my brother."

Her brows knit in two. "Pardon?"

“Benedict,” Edward continued. “He is my brother—well, half-brother if you want to be pedantic. Our father married his mother after mine passed.”

She blinked, “I am sorry to hear that. But—but what in heaven’s name are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you.”

Alice blinked. “You are waiting for me. In Lady Islington’s garden? Did you come to play croquet?”

Spreading his arms wide, Edward smirked, “Do I look like I am fond of playing silly little games such as knocking balls around with colored sticks? I am here to look after my brother. That, with both of our parents gone, is my responsibility, and I will not let him be taken advantage of.”

Alice notched her chin up, curiosity lodged firmly in her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Do you love him?” He asked plainly.

Her curious expression turned to defiance. “I do not see how that is any of your business.”

“I just told you it is,” Edward stepped closer. “Now, answer me. Are you in love with him?”

“What are you doing here?” She evaded his question. “I don’t think this is your sort of soirée. Isn’t your ambiance more of the sordid gambling hells, canoodling with unscrupulous sort?”

“You think I am friends with Rutledge?” he asked, brows lowered.

“Why not?” her lips pinched, “Men like you flock together.”

He snorted, “Sweet, there are no men like me.”

He meant it too; there was a select sect of men who loved to see their lover sporting a reddened backside from a spanking or seeing her dressed in red rope, a silk blindfold, and nothing else.

She stomped past him and down the steps into the garden and headed into the dense maze of bushes—but she did not get too far. His hand clenched around her arm and with her momentum, he spun her back to him like a fish on a line.

“Let me go or I’ll scream,” she warned him.

“I highly doubt you’ll do that,” he grinned devilishly.

She was about to reply when voices drifted over from the hedge beyond them and before she could react, Edward was yanking her around another bend, into a tight corner of leaves and twigs.

The thick foliage obscured them from the rest and just in time. The voices—male and female—grew louder, twigs crushing under boots and slippers.

“What—”

“Shh,” his eyes cut into hers with a dire warning. “Or do you want to risk discovery?”

For a moment, her gaze sharpened with annoyance... but she blew out a breath. He wasn’t the one she was angry at. Edward didn’t care, all he minded was praying the giggling party moved on. He could not dare move, for if he did, his life would be unwaveringly altered and as he’d vowed to not marry, he didn’t want that to change

any time soon.

Giggling, a lady said, “My lord, you are so—”

“Handsome, rugged, very well-endowed?” a man laughed drunkenly. “I know, little filly, now come on, I need a stable to mount you.”

Alice’s face went red, and Edward couldn’t help feeling entranced; she pinked so prettily.

For someone who walked into a den of sin with her head held high, she is now blushing like a schoolgirl. She really is untouched, isn’t she?

“There is a bench here,” a second man said. “We can use it.”

Her eyes turned into dinner plates and her whisper was strangled. “ We ?”

Very, very innocent, he deduced.

“It might do for a quick romp...” the first man replied, his words trailing off in contemplation, and Edward ground his teeth to the root.

Not now, he begged. Will the damned three move on or we will be trapped here for longer than we can afford.

“... but this is not what I want for us,” the man said. “Let’s move on.”

When the footsteps faded, only then did Edward pull away and he let out a breath. “They’re gone.”

She still looked rattled. “What were they talking about?”

He cocked his head, “They are lovers, Alice. They were planning a game.”

“Lovers?” Alice craned her head. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t suppose you do,” Edward replied and wondered how to gently clarify for her. “There are times when the relationships between a man and a woman can take... unusual forms. I should hate to spoil your lovely innocence, little mouse, but sometimes two men or even three can dally with one woman.... intimately . And vice-versa. What you just heard was the making of a *ménage à trois* .”

When the penny dropped and realization lit her eyes, she stepped away from him, while he secretly smirked inside. Over the years, dissolution and decadence had prodded him to believe that there were no more innocents in Town—now, he was happy to be proven wrong.

“I must return,” she stressed, “My absence must be noticed by now.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Edward demanded. “Do you love my brother?”

“I still think that is none of your business.” Her eyes narrowed. “Now, please let me by.”

He wanted to shake the stubbornness out of her. “Are you always this intractable?”

Alice pushed by him—or tried to at least. He was as immovable as a boulder. She glared at him, “It is one of my finest traits.”

“So is foolheartedness,” he replied. “If I had let you follow Rutledge that night, you would not be the same now.”

“I would have found a way out of it,” she countered. “I can defend myself.”

“With what?” He grabbed her hand and cocked a brow. “Can you fight?”

“I have very capable lungs,” she replied.

“That would be smothered in moments,” he snorted. “Unless you had a pistol under those clothes, you were not going to come out of that room unscathed. Admit it, I saved you.”

Mouth-dropping, Alice could not describe his mind-boggling arrogance; he had rendered her speechless. She gaped at him. “You are—you are—”

“Correct.”

“Unbelievable,” she retorted. “Arrogant, superior, proud, and utterly mind-boggling.”

“Still doesn’t mean I am wrong,” the Duke grinned.

“I cannot believe you,” Alice pushed past him, unsteady with him being so close. He radiated virile energy, the essence of a man in his prime, and she wanted—needed to leave before she did something foolish. She had to ignore her pounding heart and flush skin. “Leave me alone.”

“Is that really what you want?” His tone changed to rich and smoky.

Her head snapped back to him. “What else could I ever want from you.”

“Your first kiss maybe?” he grinned.

How could he know that?

“You are wrong,” she lied, hoping to put him off. “I have been kissed before.”

“Really, by whom?”

Her mind went blank and while her lips opened and closed three times, he chuckled. “Precisely what I thought. When I kiss you, consider it payment for my help with Rutledge.”

She bit her lip. “How do you plan to help?”

“Leave that to me,” Edward smiled, “Do you accept my deal?”

Debating with herself, Alice wondered if it was the right thing to do—admittedly, she needed help with Rutledge, and the Duke had a social and financial cache she had no hope of holding. But why did she feel as if she were making a deal with the devil?

“It is to be one kiss and one kiss only. No touching or anything else of the sort. And it ends when I say it ends,” Alice said suddenly.

“Agreed.”

He lifted his hands to her jaw, tipping her head slightly back and anticipation pummeled through her like a herd of bison. This was truly going to happen, her first kiss; she could read the intent in his eyes.

Worry pounded through her breastbone—was she going to do this right? How was one supposed to kiss?

With his thumb on her cheekbone, his lips descended, landing on hers so gently he

stole her breath for a second time. His kiss was warm and firm, but her anticipation clogged her throat.

She shivered when his tongue swept against her bottom lip. On a tremulous sigh, her lips parted and senses spinning, he let his tongue plunge boldly inside. The taste of him was foreign, deliciously male.

He kissed the way he did everything else: with absolute authority... and she felt ground-shifting pleasure.

Somewhere in the far recesses of her mind, she registered that her first kiss was unlike anything she could have imagined. Instinctively, she followed his lead, letting him in deeper, meeting his tongue with her own.

The shivers that ran through her scared Alice to her core and she had to pull away, terrified about her reaction to him. Her woman's place was uncomfortably damp.

"Enough," she gasped. "Enough, I need to go. Please let me go."

He stepped away, "There is nothing keeping you here, Alice."

Gathering her skirts, she ran.

Pressing a hand to his mouth, Edward wondered what had just happened—what was this sudden burn under his breastbone?

He'd kissed many women before, de rigueur acts of an unrepentant rake, but hardly had any woman managed to evoke any other emotion than lust; Alice though, Alice had his chest twisted in knots.

If she had not run, I know I was going to take her so hard we might not even

remember our own names, let alone the conflict with Benedict and Rutledge . She would have been screaming so loudly, we'd be married by tomorrow.

Rubbing his face, Edward left the leafy nook and headed back to the garden party, but took a circuitous route, giving Alice enough time to return to her family.

He stepped into the garden at the same time as the hostess's footmen called everyone for dinner. He drifted to the back porch as Benedict ducked out under the threshold and jerked to a stop at seeing him.

"Edward?" His brows shot to his hairline. "What are you doing here?"

"I'd come to see you play croquet, but evidently, I was too late," Edward fibbed. "I suppose I should leave."

"No, no," Benedict shook his head. "Come in. I am sure the lady of the house will be happy to have the most elusive Duke in London as her guest."

Holding back an exasperated eye-roll, Edward inclined his head. "Did you come out here for something?"

"Miss Penelope, Alice's sister, asked me to find her a bangle she believed she'd dropped when she was out here," Benedict said, "You can head inside."

"No, I'll look with you," Edward replied, suddenly wanting a reprieve from seeing Alice again.

Five minutes later—conversations about Alice, her family, and her injured cousin in passing—with the retrieved bangle in hand, they entered the manor home and strode to a drawing room where Alice's cousin was lying on a chaise, her 'injured' ankle up on an ottoman.

The older lady turned a curious eye to him while he forced himself to not look at Alice at all.

“My lord?” She asked while rising to her feet.

“Mrs. Agatha Thorpe, it is my pleasure to introduce you to my brother, Edward Landon, the Duke of Valhaven.”

Audible gasps emanated from three women while Alice’s lips tightened; they got to their feet and Edward was not surprised to see the injured girl move so smoothly. Of course it was deception and he hoped his brother saw right through it.

“Eliza,” the mother squawked. “You shouldn’t be on your feet. You are hurt.”

The girl blinked and the belated wince of pain came three solid seconds after the pointed comment. “I know, mother,” she grimaced. “But I cannot be discourteous to a Duke. Especially the brother of the lord my dear cousin has brought into our lives.”

“It is all right,” Edward replied. “I appreciate the intention.”

“Let me introduce you,” Benedict was eagerly bouncing on his feet as he made the round of personalized introductions. When he came to Alice, he felt proud that she did look him in the eye this time.

She inclined her head. “Welcome, Your Grace.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Edward shoved away the duplicitous feeling crawling under his skin. “Has my brother mentioned me at all? You all seem a touch overwhelmed at knowing who I am.”

Hopping from one foot to the other, Benedict sheepishly said, “I haven’t yet. I

thought it prudent to not pander with names or titles.”

“Meaning that you mean you didn’t want me to outshine you,” he laughed. “Pardon us, my ladies. My brother and I have a long-standing tradition of trying to outdo each other.”

The aunt was fanning herself, smiling widely at his and Benedict’s presence. “Oh no, no,” she chuckled. “We don’t mind the lovely banter.”

Edward’s attention shifted to the younger sister. “Miss Penelope, is it?” The girl’s head shot up, shocked to hear him call her by name. “Would you like to be my partner for dinner this evening, and make a lovely evening of it?”

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Eliza’s mouth drop and her face darken, while her mother looked as if the heavens had opened and an angel had descended to shower them with rays of light.

The girl looked to her sister, shock painted right over her face, before she stood and curtsied. “I am honored, Your Grace. Yes, I would be delighted to be your partner.”

“Lovely,” Edward trained his gaze on Alice while he extended his arm. “Shall we then?”

CHAPTER 7

Four days later, Edward stepped out of his carriage and plucked his hat off his head to gaze at the building before him.

To call Baron Newcastle's hunting lodge a lodge was a disservice to the word; the manor, set in the middle of Hampshire's woods was teeming with game.

The lodge was massive; while it was luxurious, it was fashioned to be rustic with warm woods, brass furnishings, dark carpentry, and as grand upstairs as it was below. Paintings hung in gold frames, and rich ornaments sat on shelves and in cabinets.

"Newcastle," Edward extended his hand to the tall, ex-soldier; the man's dark, intense eyes and hooked nose showed the nooks where it had been broken once or twice. "Thank you for having me."

"The honor is mine," Newcastle replied. "I dare say, you carry the essence of an exotic animal, rare to find in the wild."

Laughing, Edward pulled away, "I do like that analogy. The mysterious white stag of Arthurian legend."

"An elusive figure, yes," Newcastle drawled. "I can see the connection. Would you join me and the other men for a drink before the festivities begin?"

"Are you sure it is ethical to have men drink before they are armed with guns?" Edward asked while taking the steps up a billiard room; men were mingling with

drinks in hand, and it took him less than a moment to find Rutledge in the mix.

As blond as the paintings of Apollo, the man drew eyes everywhere he went, but this time, the attention he drew from Edward was less admiring. He had told Alice to leave the tactic of approaching Rutledge to him and she had accepted his enigmatic answer without question; it was a good thing too because the tactic he had in mind was not exactly ethical.

What would innocent little Miss Alice think when she knows you plan to blackmail him into doing right by the girl?

While many saw his gold embroidered jackets and attended the lavish parties he threw at his country home, few people knew that the man was unsteady with his money—there were months when he was up to his eyeteeth in debt and the only thing keeping him afloat was the Club.

He would not make a good husband either, but the best thing the man could do was to marry the girl and stay with her for a year, and then annul the marriage; it was easier than forcing the girl to be found out as unchaste and then, unmarriageable.

I have two options here, personally persuade him or get the man he owes his debts to, to blackmail him. Rutledge needs his reputation, so he'll stay quiet.

“Whiskey,” Newcastle said.

“Brandy, please,” Edward replied. “What are we hunting?”

“Grouse and brown hare,” Newcastle began while handing him the drink. “I hope you are familiar with your way around a shotgun.”

“I am,” Edward took a sip of the premium drink. “How many are taking part?”

Looking around, Newcastle deduced, “It is only twenty-six of us here, so two teams of thirteen or six quartets of four.”

Surveying the room, Edward spotted the men he wanted to ride with, and without question, Rutledge was going to be one of them. “Still decided on being a bachelor for the rest of your life?”

“No different from you,” Newcastle chuckled. “I think you know that you shocked the whole of Town when you publicly announced that your brother will take over the Dukedom while you galavant off to the lands-yonder.”

Moving to a window, Edward gazed over a long span of a trimmed lawn until the forest arched up behind the retaining wall. It was a jarring contrast looking at the sudden change.

“It is only right to hand the Dukedom off,” Edward said while swirling his glass. “While I know there are thousands who would kill to have one day in my position, I have little love for it and the traditions of the ton are hypocritical at best, and treasonous at worst.”

Sticking a hand into the pocket of his buff trousers, Newcastle nodded in agreement. “A position of privilege is not what everyone thinks it is. What they do not see is the constant suspicion and paranoia that lingers around us like a shadow. It’s an unending battle to fetter out who is a friend or who is a foe in friendly disguise.”

“Not to mention those who see your wealth instead of seeing you as you are,” Edward replied.

The derisive sound that came from Newcastle’s throat resounded with Edward. “Don’t even get me started on users and fortune hunters. Those are the two words that describe all of my family.”

Spotting a break with the men speaking with Rutledge, Edward excused himself and went over to the Viscount.

“Your Grace,” Rutledge bowed his head. “I had to question myself if it was truly you who came into the room.” He smoothed a blond lock from his hazel eyes. “How was your night at the Club? Were the girls to your liking?”

“I didn’t partake,” Edward said, glad for the fitting opening. Edging closer, he dropped his pitch, “But I did hear you had some dalliance yourself.”

The man’s grin was salacious and wicked, “Of which do you speak? I have had quite a few in the last couple of days.”

Stomach roiling with repulsion, Edward took a sip; it was one thing to be a rake and dally with women who understood the situation and knew not to expect anything from it, it was another thing entirely to lure an innocent woman who thought you loved her to bed and then throw her away.

“I speak of a young blond woman, very shy, large blue eyes, and who enunciates in whispers,” Edward murmured. “That is of whom I speak .”

“Ah, Penelope Winslow,” Rutledge smirked over his glass. “She was a fun one, completely incompetent in the bedroom, you had to tell her what to do and how to do it, but I made her a woman and gave her an experience she will never forget.”

Edward was tempted to forgo the hunt and put a bullet between the man’s eyes instead. His hand clenched around the thick crystal glass, and he forced himself to hold back from blackening the man’s eyes.

“How long did you court the girl for?” He asked, firmly stopping himself from substituting ‘deceive’ for ‘court’.

“Not too long,” Rutledge said with a careless shrug. “Two months or so, and it tells you the standards the girl has if she is willing to fall in bed so quickly.”

Fury swirled in concentric circles through his chest, but Edward forced himself to be calm. “Don’t you think the right thing to do, the honorable thing to do, is to finish your courtship and marry the girl?”

Rutledge stared at Edward blankly, his eyes switching between Edward’s before he threw back his head and let out the most appalling, revolting guffaw Edward had ever heard.

“Coming from a man who has been the most obstinate about staying a bachelor until death, that is very amusing,” Rutledge chortled. “Marriage is out of the question, Your Grace. That girl was an amusing time, but I have no interest in seeing her again, and God forbid , paying the pied piper.”

“The girl is an innocent,” Edward stressed. “You realize that you have potentially ruined her life and her prospects for marriage because you fooled her into thinking you loved her?”

Again, Rutledge shrugged. “It is an ancient tactic to gain the trust of a woman who yearns to feel the true pleasure of life. I am sure you have done it once or twice yourself.” This time, Rutledge’s eyes sharpened with daggers. “You know, your reputation still lingers around Town.”

“Never once have I ever lured a young girl into my bed,” Edward replied stonily. “There lies the difference.”

Setting his drink on the fireplace mantle, Rutledge asked, “Why are you pushing this issue, Your Grace? As far as I am concerned, it has nothing to do with you.”

“My brother is very close to said family, so yes—it is my business,” Edward replied. “I know the situation, Rutledge, and it bothers me a great deal. I am asking you politely to do the honorable thing and resurrect the last shred of honor you have buried inside you.”

Rutledge’s jaw stiffened. “Is there a threat in there somewhere, Your Grace?”

“That depends on your response. Think it over,” Edward replied while nodding and walking off as he saw Felton enter the room.

Felton spotted his expression as he crossed the floor and instantly reached out, held Edward’s shoulder and steered him to the nearest balcony, then closed the door behind him.

“Breathe man. Breathe three times and try not to launch yourself off the ledge,” Felton pried the glass from Edward’s stiff fingers. “And do not cuff me. I have a ball to attend in two days and I am told that black and blue does not look good on me.”

The balcony was small, barely six by six feet but Edward paced it, trying to walk off the aggravation in his stomach.

“Do you care to tell me what happened to make you so irate?” Felton asked calmly. “Or you can continue to stomp a trench into the floor.”

Finally, Edward paused and let his shoulders sink. “Why did I think that talking sense into a diehard rakehell would make any sense? Rakes are like leopards; they cannot change their spots.”

Leaning on the wall near the door, Felton lowered his brows, “What on earth are you talking about man?”

“Rutledge,” Edward took the glass from his friend's hand and threw back the rest of his drink before grimacing at the ungodly burn. “He ruined a young girl, and I tried to talk him into doing the honorable thing and marrying her.”

Grunting, Felton muttered, “I believe you might be at the last place in a very long line of such appeals to Rutledge. The man is notorious for ruining young women, ladies or not.”

Bracing his back on the railing, Edward rubbed his eyes, “The thing is, I do not want to force my hand, but I will if I need to do so.”

“How?” Felton cocked his head.

“Don’t worry about that,” Edward replied. “Aren’t there times when you see the hypocrisy and uneven playing field we give our women and men? The men can go and sew a thousand and one wild oats, and no one bats an eye, but when the woman is found out to be the second party in that sewing, she is nailed to a cross and crucified without mercy.”

Shaking his head, Felton added, “It is disgusting.”

Shooting a look through the frosted glass and to the room beyond, Edward admitted, “I don’t know if I can go hunting and not be tempted to put a bullet in him.”

Laughing, Felton said, “You can easily say you misfired.”

Shaking his head, Edward replied, “I don’t want you to be indicted as a co-conspirator. I’ll simply take my aggression out on the prey instead.”

Clapping him on the shoulder, Felton nodded, “Smart man.”

Sitting in a curricule chair near a window, Alice varied her attention between the view out the window and the sewing she had on her lap. The gown on her lap was one she wanted to wear to an upcoming ball, but the style was outdated, and she had to overhaul it.

It was midday, hours when her aunt was abed napping and so was Eliza, while Penelope had gone out with two friends of hers from school, and so she had time to herself.

Was the Duke sincere in wanting to help me? He should be; I paid him with the kiss.

Looking back at the moment, she bit her lip; it had been careless of her to kiss him there, even while it had not been out in the open, those men—and woman— could have easily found them.

Dropping the needle to her lap, she slumped. The moment he'd cupped her face, the hungry, heated, intense look in his eyes had made her shiver to her slippers.

The moment his lips had touched hers, she had tasted his insatiable intent. While she had never felt a man's lips on hers and she knew she had responded with unrefined motion, nothing about the kiss had been innocent.

It was dark, forbidden, lustful; his darkly masculine flavor permeated her senses—a hot promise of more wicked things to come had rushed through her blood.

Sighing, she redirected her attention to the dress on her lap and went to stitch the length of lace under her bust—when she heard footsteps coming near her.

“I'll have luncheon be sent up soon, Aunt,” she said without looking up. “I just need a moment.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Eliza said, and Alice nearly skewered her opposing thumb with the needle.

Alice found herself tongue-tied for a moment. Eliza never spoke to her unless it was with a complaint. “Elizabeth?” She regained her composure. “Erm... can I help you?”

Her cousin fixed her bonnet before sitting on a chair across from her. “I want to ask you about you and Marquess Brampton. Isn’t it such a dream, Alice? It is all you, I, and dear Penelope have hoped.”

“It is,” she murmured, her eyes dropping to Eliza’s ankle. “How is your foot?”

“Oh, it all healed up,” Eliza said, her blithe tone showing how inconsequential—and false—her injury was. “But back to your Marquess. Has he given you any indication that he will seriously court you?”

“No,” she said. “Not yet, but I do hope so.”

Leaning in, Eliza asked, “What do you think about His Grace asking Penelope to be his dinner partner? Do you not think that was telling?”

“I think it was a polite thing to do,” Alice replied. “He seems to be very invested in his brother and the family of whom his brother is interested in.”

“Hmph,” Eliza pursed her lips. “I would have thought he’d have asked me to be his partner last night, I mean, I was the injured one after all. Surely, he must have some empathy.”

Ah, there it is. The self-centered reason for this conversation.

“I didn’t get to tell you,” she looked down at the sewing on her lap. “But Marquess

Brampton told me that he is arranging for a friend of his to dance with you this coming ball.”

Eliza’s face perked up. “Who? Do you know?”

“No,” Alice said. “But does it matter? He told me that he trusts this man and that he is honorable.”

“I’d rather him be titled and handsome,” Eliza pouted. “But as the French say. ?a ne... feat... oh drat, that is not—that’s not right. ?a ne feen—”

“ ?a ne fait rien ,” Alice corrected her quietly. “And I don’t think that is the phrase that is best fitting for this situation.”

“Whichever,” Eliza shrugged nonchalantly.

Her fingers flexed with the needle and the cloth in hand. She wanted to shake Eliza for being so selfish, spoiled and so very, disgustingly entitled.

“I think you will like this lord,” Alice said, “If Lord Brampton trusts him, I would too.”

Sniffing, Eliza replied, “I hope you are right. I would hate to be disappointed.”

“Who is going to be disappointed?” the rough voice of Eliza’s father, Richard Thorpe, preceded the man.

When he came in, his slate grey suit was just a shade darker than the dulled silver glinting at his temple. The older man was shorter than his wife and rotund in the middle, but at fifty-seven, he was still robust and healthy.

“Papa!” Eliza shot up from her seat and went to hug him as his arms opened wide.
“Welcome home. How was the journey?”

“Not too bad, not too bad at all,” Richard said, then craned his head to Alice. “Alice, dear, how are you?”

“Not too bad, Uncle,” she repeated, relieved that someone had taken Eliza’s attention away from her because she was not so sure how long she could hold her tongue anymore. “I am happy to see that you have returned safely.”

“Me too. Now ,” he turned to Eliza, “would you like to see what I brought for you?”

“Yes, please,” Eliza sang happily.

As the two left the room, Alice slumped into the side of the wall and sighed; looking down at the gown in her hand she found herself wondering what to do about Edward and Benedict.

How had she found herself in this mess or on the verge of being courted by one brother but feeling the most infuriating attraction to the other?

“What am I going to do?”

CHAPTER 8

While milling in the billiards room after the seven-hour hunt that day, Edward went to the wrack of sticks and plucked one and the other off the hooks, testing each for balance and weight.

His final selection was a cue of polished mahogany and he carried it back to the large table covered with green baize while Felton waited. He felt again and steadily ignored a heated gaze boring into the side of his neck, knowing Rutledge was furious with him.

Felton leaned on his cue and looked over his shoulder. "Methinks you might have poked a savage bear."

"He'll get over it," Edward said while lining up his shot.

"I do not think he will easily for a shot whistling past his ear, not anytime soon," Felton laughed. "And I think he knows it was you."

"He cannot prove it," Edward said as he catapulted the white ball into the mix of the balls. "And if he does accuse, it is his word against mine."

"I don't know," Felton said while taking his shot. "I think you are walking a very fine line."

Rising from his place, Edward rounded the table to find another shot. "I hope to push him off the edge soon because his self-interest is appalling to me."

Taking up a glass of sherry on a table nearby, Felton said, “I don’t think a warning shot will persuade him to run to Rundell, Bridge, and Rundell for a ring.”

“With the state of his finances, I expect the only thing he can afford is the ring off his velvet drapery,” Edward muttered after a misplaced shot. “But this is a matter of honor instead of finance.”

Felton’s shot failed to sink a red ball into a pocket and Edward tried to line up his next shot but found the angle awkward. Slowly, he circled the table and tried to find another angle, but where he stopped placed him right in line with Rutledge.

The man was glaring death and brimstone towards him and Edward knew that if the ground opened up and swallowed him, it would be the best night of his life.

Instead, Edward lined up his shot and while keeping his eyes on the lord, hit his mark into the pocket with a resounding clack . He hoped Rutledge got the message.

Two evenings later, Edward watched the entrance to the Moyet’s ballroom like a man starved of water looked for rain.

For the last two nights, he’d thought of little else but Alice Winslow and that scintillating kiss. He would not—could not—even admit to himself the times he had taken himself into hand, with that kiss in mind.

He remembered her soft body pressed against his, the feel of her curves beneath his hand, and the taste of her lips on his; all of it had capitulated him to some of the most intense releases he had ever had.

Now, he needed to see Alice and tell her about the situation with Rutledge, perhaps in a quiet corner or during a waltz on the floor. While flicking a pocket watch open to check the time, he wandered over to the champagne table and took a glass.

How do I tell her I have failed? Do I tell her that part or do I say I am making ground?

The doors above the short stairs opened and the butler announced,

“Presenting, Mrs Agatha Thorpe, Miss Eliza Thorpe, Miss Alice Winslow and Miss Penelope Winslow.”

With the glass to his lips, Edward’s eyes were fixed on Alice and his gaze roamed over her with slow deliberation; God’s bones, she was gorgeous. Her ivory gown clung to her exquisite bosom and slender waist, flaring into full skirts while her golden hair was arranged in cascading ringlets; she looked like a princess.

In contrast, her cousin wore a gown that appeared to be a size too small, and her breasts filled the top of the garment more than they should. It fell about her slender frame, her silver slippered shoes peeking out from beneath the hem.

Clearly she seeks attention. She will not get it from me.

He waited while they descended the stairs and the aunt made a turn around the room with her daughter on her arm, leaving Alice and Penelope to sit at the sidelines.

Doubling back to the refreshment table, he picked up two filled flutes and carried them over to where they were sitting and talking between themselves.

“Ladies,” he greeted.

Alice looked up, her cheeks going faintly pink, “Your Grace.”

She made to stand but he shook his head, deterring her from making the unnecessary curtsy. Frankly, he didn’t need it nor want it. Handing off both glasses, he began,

“How are you two this evening?”

“Very well, Your Grace,” Penelope said. “I hope you are the same.”

“Eh, middling,” he replied. “I do regret to tell you, Benedict might be late tonight as apparently, one does need to write an ethics paper in order to pass a class.”

“How is he in his academics?” Alice asked. “Are they worrying him?”

“No,” Edward said. “He is a smart lad, but he is also very much of a procrastinator and I hate to see my past surging in him now.”

Her lips twitched, “I fail to see you as an unstudious pupil.”

“I would stay up to midnight roughhousing with my fellow men in the halls and stay up for six hours to write a paper needed that day,” Edward snorted. “But I was one-and-twenty, so you may give me the allowance of being a reckless lad who had a taste of too much freedom.”

“And what was that freedom like?” Alice asked.

He extended his hand, “If you would like to make a turn with me around the room, I will tell you.”

Before agreeing, Alice looked at Penelope who shook her head accommodatingly. “Go,” she told Alice, “I will be fine.”

The twenty-piece orchestra played a soft tune to keep the warm ambiance, preserving the air that followed the last few dances. The room was glittering from the golden light fanning from the crystal drop chandeliers, and the scones at the hidden nooks and crannies, and reflected off the strategically placed mirrors all around them.

“How long have you been in Town?” Edward asked.

“Not long enough as I needed to be,” she replied vaguely.

“I take it you haven’t read the scandal papers from the last few years then?” he pressed.

“I prefer not to fill my head with biases of people I do not know in case I do meet them, and I am already soured with hate,” Alice murmured while looking keenly around them.

It was redundant though; she had already felt the disapproving looks peppering the back of her neck and banally wondered how long it would take for Edward to catch on.

“I don’t know if that is the comfort I want it to be, alas,” he shrugged.

“It makes no difference. A few years ago, well, seven to be exact, the papers were all agog with a certain lord. They said he was wicked and unprincipled as the devil, a raging wolf in lord’s clothing. His reputation was so beastly that he could ruin a young lady with but a rakish glance.”

Ignoring the glares directed her way, Alice asked, “Would the fellow we are talking about currently be clad in navy blue trousers, a matching jacket, and a silver waistcoat?”

Looking down pointedly at his clothes, Edward replied, “Hypothetically, yes.”

There were no suppositions about this, but Alice was willing to play his game.

“And what did this devil’s child do?” she asked politely, trying to look as innocent as

an angel.

He scoffed. “It would be easier to ask what he did not do,” Edward said gravely. “To those around him, he gave off a look of joie de verve wherever he went, a man of pleasure enjoying the bounties his bloodline gave him. A roaming rake ruled by the flightiest fantasy and fleeting desires.

“There was no act, licentious, debaucherous or scandalous that escaped him, and soon the moniker the Wolf of Valhaven appeared on the scandal sheets.”

In the past years, society had taken him to be an utter rake and wastrel, and if Edward was honest with himself, some of that was true, but most of the time his mind was not engaged in carnal pleasures. Affairs of the state were of the foremost importance.

Most people assumed that the title of Duke meant untamed luxury and pleasure at one’s beck and call, but it was a station to be a servant of the people and pick up the baton where the Prince Regent dropped it. It was not a license to take the taxes and spend it on silks and satins, exotic animals, and country houses.

Running a country took a great deal of time, so when he could, he allowed himself pleasure, a great deal of it and he didn’t restrict it—but that did not diminish the past he had lived. If he traveled down the dark hallways of memory, he would be lost to it.

“Your Grace?” Alice said quietly.

Snapping to attention, he asked, “Hm?”

“You trailed off,” she gently coaxed. “Was there more you wanted to add about your past?”

“Not without scarring your sensibilities,” Edward replied. He eyed the dance floor,

contemplating asking the lady to dance. Truly, dancing was one of the few things that allowed him to think of something besides his work, and he worked most of the day. “Would you dance with me?”

Her lips parted softly at the unexpected request. “Are you sure? Everyone is looking at us,” she said quietly.

“Let them look,” he said, extending his hand.

She cast a nervous glance to her sister, before nodding, her eyes as wide as saucers. “Thank you, yes.”

Edward led her onto the floor as the strains of the waltz restarted and while the tremble in her hand gave away her nervousness, he made sure to keep her at an appropriate distance from him—she had his brother’s attention, after all—even though he did not want to.

The petite wallflower looking up at him with trepidation discombobulated him, to say the least.

“Do you like to dance, Miss Alice Winslow?”

She nodded. “I do, yes, when I’m asked.”

The dance began, and they glided their way about the room with him leading and her expertly following. The ball was a crush, but even with the mass of guests, Edward could no longer miss the curious stares that were being thrown in their direction.

“How many times have you danced?”

“Three.”

“That—” he spun them, “—is a travesty.”

“It is the way of our world, I suppose,” Alice replied with another turn, eyes dimming. “The first year I attended a ball, and it was known I came from Gentry, I saw a lady look at me, turn away, and pointedly say, people ought to know their place in this world and abide by it. A marriage between any lord of note and a woman of their kind is quite unthinkable by any standard .”

Although he tempered his rage until his words sounded almost amused, Edward still felt it simmer in his chest. “The dear lady must be blind to the truth that there are untrustworthy ladies in the ton.”

Her brows inched up. “Is that the reason you have not married? That the women, er, pardon me, ladies , are not honest or faithful?”

Edward felt shock blast him from dual fronts; the first was that, by his own words, he had painted himself into a corner that he had masterfully evaded for years, and the second, that she was so keen that she had picked up on it.

It took him two turns to admit, “No, Miss Winslow, that is an entirely different matter.”

“Which I am not privy to,” she gave him a tiny smile.

“Correct,” he said and was struck by his reluctance.

Usually, he considered himself easygoing and sociable, but his secrets were going to remain a secret. No one would pry them out of him, not even the sole woman who had managed to do the impossible: charm him .

“I won’t pry,” she said.

Oddly, Edward felt like he wanted her to ask. He wanted to see that same determination he had seen from her that night at the club—or did it take a mask to allow her to be her real self?

Think of it man, she's already had a hard time of it with the seasons before, she must act demure so as to not attract any more negative attention. Still, though, I wonder what I can do to see that headstrong side of her.

“How—” She cleared her throat. “How far are you on making gains with... a certain lord?”

A spark of irritation mixed with frustration birthed in his chest knowing he had run into a stone wall with Rutledge. However, it was yet early days, and he still had some cards up his sleeve ready to be dropped on the playing board.

“I have a few stratagems in mind, but sadly, the first one is not making as much headway as I'd hoped,” Edward said. “But never fear, he will do the honorable gesture by your sister.”

Trapping a corner of her bottom lips between her teeth, Alice went quiet and Edward was afraid that she might be considering doing something as hair-brained as tracking Rutledge down again. This time, she might not be so fortunate in getting out unscathed.

“Leave the job to me, Alice,” he dropped his pitch when uttering her name. By all accounts, it was taboo to speak a woman's name so familiarly, but this time, Edward wanted—needed—her to trust him.

Her eyes flickered up and Edward felt refreshed by how fresh and wholesomely pretty she was without cosmetics; so many women would not dare leave the house without the over-abundance of rouge and powders.

“Trust me.”

With the crescendo approaching, Edward spun them in dizzying turns and at the end, when the music faded, swept her off to the refreshment tables for a drink. Surrounded by notable lords with their charming wives, Edward spotted a few who whispered behind their fans and looked at them suspiciously.

As she watched, Edward dipped a glass into a miniature champagne lake, then held the glass to her. Taking it, Alice said, “Thank you, Your Grace.” She spoke a bit louder, “And thank you for dancing with me. With his lordship not attending, I feared it would be a dreadful evening.”

He gave her a tight smile, “It is something Benedict would have wanted from me.”

She looked over her shoulder at her sister and Aunt before saying, “Please excuse me. I need to return to my family, but please, enjoy the wonderful evening.”

Watching her go, the smooth sway of her hips, and the shimmer of the pins in her hair, Edward wondered if he should have told her the truth about Rutledge and perhaps the two of them could have decided on a plan.

Scowling, he filled a glass for himself and threw back half of his drink.

This is nothing more or nothing less than the first round in a boxing match. It’s the opening salvo and I still have more moves to make. I’ll get Rutledge to fold... one way or another.

CHAPTER 9

Almost an hour after dancing with his lordship and no one else asking for her hand—she suspected rumors of her and Benedict’s courtship were already making their rounds—Alice escaped through the open terrace doors into the dark gardens.

The crowd was a frightful crush, and it amazed her that ladies of the le beau ton attended such lavish balls almost nightly. Moving in the opposite direction of a light and vibrant ballroom to a shadowed section of the lantern-lit gardens, she found a bench, tipped her face to the sky, and sighed.

“My wits begin to turn.” The somberness of the King Lear quote stilled her heart even more. “Benedict may be a staid choice, but he is also a sensible one. I cannot say so for Edward...”

Even though he makes your heart race...

Even though a mere look from him makes you shiver...

Even though his kiss will live in your dreams forever and a day...

Twisting her head over her shoulder, she could hear the strains of music spilling through the doors from the ballroom, beckoning her to return, but she didn’t want to be the target for unsavory matrons and jealous debutantes.

She watched quietly as a couple slipped outside, the lady giggling and the man swooping her into his arms. Turning away, she leaned forward and tried to assess her

heart.

It was early days but Alice still felt guilt for having these feelings for Edward that she felt she should have for Benedict. Should she talk to Benedict or follow through with her plan?

After all, what is one more sacrifice on the top of the heap I've already given up?

"But can I sacrifice love... true love..." she whispered to herself.

The crunch of footsteps—light footsteps on the gravel had her looking up to find Penelope coming near.

"Alice?" She asked. "What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

"I should ask you that same question," she chided gently while standing. "You know it is dangerous coming out here by yourself, and before you say the obvious , yes, I know, I am doing the same thing. But—but I needed some air."

Her sister looked to the house, "You need to come back inside. Eliza is up to her old tricks again."

"With what this time?" Alice asked, not surprised that her cousin was sewing seeds of dissension. Eliza really despised when she was not the center of attention.

As they headed back, Penelope said, "From the little I heard, she was saying how she had a feeling Marquess Brampton isn't all that taken with you and the reason he is not here is because he is looking for someone else."

Grinding her teeth, Alice picked up her pace. More rumors would destabilize the already fragile reputation she had around Town. Entering the room, she tried to find

Eliza but had to stall as the girl was being led off the sidelines to the dancefloor by a handsome young man who admittedly looked at Eliza as if she were a goddess in the flesh.

If only he knew.

Grimly, she glanced around, hoping Duke Valhaven was still around—but no, he was nowhere to be seen.

Her stomach plummeted; he must have left.

Despondent, she drifted to the seating area and sat, unsure of what to do next; but kept her head up and her back firm as she already felt the scathing gazes rippling all over her. She knew Penelope was right; Eliza had done it again and weaponized her cronies against her.

She twisted her head just a fraction and saw Miranda Valentine and two subjugates, their smirks hardly subtle as they whispered behind fans. It was like back in the schoolroom and her debut in polite company all over again. She felt alone—except for the prickling company of her aunt and cousin, which, frankly, was worse than being alone.

“Don’t mind them,” Penelope whispered. “They are simply bitter and jealous.”

Privately, Alice did not think they were either, but she knew they did scorn her as an outsider and were hateful that she had attained the attention of a Marquess and possibly a Duke. She bit her tongue and faced the dance floor again while Penelope went to the refreshments table.

“Miss Winslow?” She turned her head at a footman’s low whisper, her head cocked in question.

“Yes, sir?”

“This was sent for you, Miss.” The footman bowed and handed her a card.

“Oh, thank you,” she replied, her eyes dropping to the white square in his hand.

Delicately, she broke the seal and unfolded the heavy stationery; spinning it around, she saw the gold seal of the Valhaven Dukedom, and it was a formal invitation to a masquerade ball at his home.

A separate slip of paper was behind it and she saw the forceful slashing hand.

I’d like to say my brother was the one who invited you, but I cannot. I am the one and it is purely for selfish reasons. Please wear your dove costume again. I like seeing your face covered in lace.

Edward.

Duke Valhaven

Alice felt her heart thudding a tremulous beat. He wanted her in his home, yes, but she felt, very conflictingly, that he was not inviting her to see Benedict.

It could be the only safe way to relay what intelligence he has found out about Rutledge...

With her panic easing a little, she stowed the invitation and note into her reticule before Penelope returned with glasses of water in hand. Taking one, she teasingly asked, “The champagne is not to your liking this evening?”

Her sister returned a weak smile, “My stomach is not feeling very well tonight, so

nothing strong will be good for me.”

“Ah, I understand,” Alice nodded as she sipped her cool drink. There were a million things that could turn her sister’s stomach; matter of fact, if she were honest with herself, she did not feel settled either.

The stares and gossip were one thing; the jealousy and treachery by Eliza were another—but the worst thing was her indecisiveness about Benedict.

Was she ready to go to Edward’s ball, though?

At that moment, the orchestra reached a crescendo, the invitation in her reticule felt as if it were burning a hole through the cloth, and a volley of emotions rioted through her head.

Calm down, Alice. Don’t be a ninny, it is going to be purely business. There won't be anything beyond the pale. And if it strays away from the matter at hand... I’d best put it right back on track.

Nothing untoward could or would come from this meeting. It was best if she kept it that way.

Seated in the cloaking darkness of his study at Valhaven Estate, Edward shifted the silk lapel of his black silk robe from his cooled skin and swirled his glass of rich Spanish wine.

Perched on the marble mantle above the flicking fire, a gold ormolu clock chimed the hour as eleven, the small sound distinctive in the silence, but it was not so silent that he did not hear the pads of his Irish Wolfhound, Atticus , as he came closer.

The dog sat on his haunches and was still taller than Edward's sternum. Smiling, he

reached out to rub the hound's greying muzzle. "All right, old boy?"

Resting his head on Edward's knees, the dog gave him a small sound rumbling up from his throat. "I know, boy," Edward said, petting his ears. "It's been troubling for me too."

Another sound, a funny one, scarily resembling a human scoff came from Atticus and Edward narrowed his eyes. "Do I get a hint of judgment from you? Tell me then, was some female temptress that had slid under your skin also almost tempting you away from your good senses? Hm?"

"The last time I checked, when I rescued you from that ditch so many years ago, there was no brother dog near you whose trust you were on the verge of shattering."

Snuffling, Atticus moved to the rug near the hearth, did two circles before he laid on his belly before the fire; the red-gold light glimmered over his spotted grey coat.

He wouldn't be moving for a while, Edward knew that.

Sipping a strong mouth, Edward knew it was time to take off to bed, but he knew he would not sleep a wink.

Pressing the cold glass to his temple, he sighed, "What in god's name am I doing inviting her?"

Edward prided himself on strategic thinking, it was how he won chess games and outmaneuvered sly businessmen who thought they'd had him over a barrel. As far as he saw it, everyone and every situation was like a chess match, he had to move the pieces to his advantage.

However, he had no idea why he had shifted Alice closer to him when the logical

thing to do was to keep her away from him.

Alice's contradictions intrigued Edward. She exuded both girlish innocence and womanly allure... not to mention a strong-minded spirit. Recalling the way she'd nearly walked into the den of the devil without a single care made his lips twitch.

"She is a brave one," he sipped his drink. "That is for sure."

Despite his inexplicable attraction to Alice, he couldn't deny she represented the sort of woman he'd once said he would rather be with than one of the milk-fed ladies of the ton.

She was headstrong, brave, and smart—no, if she had tracked Rutledge down to his club when most people had no idea he owned it, she was more than smart—and from that one kiss, he reckoned she had some passion slumbering under her skin. Even so, she carried herself as if she were a proper young lady.

"Certainly not a featherbrained twit like the rest of them..." he agreed. "I guess Benedict would appreciate my thoughtfulness of beating him to the punch in inviting her..."

Stop lying to yourself, Edward. You want her. Not as far as marriage goes, but something tells me she won't be the sort to be a mistress, a plaything until your intrigue and amusement wanes. Where is the in-between?

Pondering their interactions, he had to wonder if he'd imagined the magnetism between them. Was it a figment of his own lustful fantasies or had he truly felt something coming from her too?

He was hardly the epitome of morality, yet he'd never entice an innocent, and there was no question, Alice was an innocent.

His temple throbbed, “What in God’s name am I doing?”

“I’d ask you the same thing,” Benedict said while entering the room, a cup of coffee in hand. Dressed in a pair of loose trousers and a linen shirt, his brother added, “ I have a reason to be burning the candle at both ends, but I cannot say why you are up.”

Resting his glass on a small round table at his side, Edward admitted, “A moral dilemma is my problem this night, Benedict. I assume yours is trying to finish a treatise on Jean-Baptiste’s Political Economy.”

An aggrieved sigh came from the depths of Benedict’s throat, “How on earth do you know that?”

His smile was flickering. “Old man Favreau always gives that paper at this time of year. It is a timeless rite of passage for everyone who takes his class, and it is one everyone knows to prepare for.” He levered an admonishing look to Benedict. “Even you, if you had listened to me months ago.”

Laughing softly, Benedict took a seat and rubbed his forehead, “Would you happen to have your old paper anywhere, by the by?”

“No,” Edward replied. “You shall suffer on your own.”

“So,” crossing his legs, Benedict sipped his drink. “What is keeping you away from your bedchamber? What moral dilemma has stymied you? Are you figuring out how best to earn another windfall from a new investment?”

“The dilemma is emotional instead of economical,” Edward trained his gaze to the window across the room. The sliver of the moon peeked out from the clouds. “I am entertaining thoughts about a young woman that I should not be harboring.”

“What?” Benedict’s mouth fell. “Do my ears deceive me or am I hearing that my brother, the stoic, cynical, is having a change of heart? Is this the divine intervention I have hoped for so long now incoming? Dare I ask if you are falling in love?”

The scoff that left Edward's mouth was profoundly insolent. “Who mentioned love ? That is an emotion that I neither wish for nor will I ever indulge in.”

Besides, it does not truly exist.

“Lust, then?”

After a moment, Edward replied, “I cannot put a word to it. It is a cross between intrigued, admiring, hesitant, and yes, desirous.”

Logically, Edward knew he was toeing the line of despicable discussing this matter with Benedict, as he too had his eye on Alice. But he reasoned that if he kept things hypothetical and vague, his brother would not be any the wiser.

“The matter is she is not the sort who I believe will agree to or even understand casual bed sport without commitment, a thing I know I cannot give her,” Edward replied. “It also does not help matters that she has more pressing issues than to commit to any sort of relationship, be it casual or intimate.”

Shuffling his feet, Benedict shrugged, “Well, move on, then.”

“I cannot.”

“But she cannot give you the thing you want without you in turn giving her the security she needs,” Benedict said. “I’d say you are lodged between a rock and a hard place, old man.

“You have painted yourself into a corner, managed to engineer a double checkmate for yourself, dug a pit for yourself, floated yourself down a river with nary a row—”

“All right, all right, Christ,” Edward snorted. “Must you evoke every possible imagery of the situation?”

“Yes, because rarely do I get the chance to do so,” Benedict grinned. His smile faded a little, “Honestly though, I do not know what to do here because, on every other occasion, I am the one asking you for help, sipping drops from your almost infinite well of wisdom.”

“I am glad you find me that way but sadly to say, I am just as fallible as you are,” Edward replied, his words punctuated with a little sigh.

“What I can say is, follow your heart instead of your head this time,” Benedict replied while rising to his feet.

Canting his head, Edward asked, “When is the heart the most logical of all organs?”

“It is not,” Benedict grinned over his shoulder. “But when is your head the most emotional of all organs?”

Touché.

“Oh, by the by, I took the liberty of inviting your Miss Alice and her sister to our ball,” he said belatedly.

“Thank you,” Benedict replied. “I’d sent her the invitation and a note this morning, but I have yet to see a reply.”

“It is probably there but you haven’t looked closely,” Edward replied humoredly.

“Now, go study.”

When his brother left, his footsteps fading down the corridor, Edward rubbed his eyes and could not help but laugh. When his carefree brother was the voice of reason, he knew things had taken a severe turn.

Even though he felt as if he was inching his way through a field set with traps and he was treading on the edge of a cliff—he would dare not do what Benedict said he should do; rather, he should start with getting Rutledge to own up to his actions.

She did pay me with a kiss after all.

CHAPTER 10

“Y es, he was handsome, but he was a Baron and a merchandiser with a small fleet,” Eliza sniffed scornfully over her tea. “As admirable as that is, I had hoped for the company of another marquess last night. Alice, could you be a dear and please tell your suitor that someone of better rank would be more favorable to me.”

Appalled—and decisively sickened—Alice glared at her cousin. “Beg your pardon?”

“The friend Lord Brampton sent to be my partner last night,” Eliza wrinkled her nose, oblivious to the state Alice was in. “He is a decent fellow, do not misunderstand me, but he is not the sort of lord I imagine to marry me. Surely someone as I am, so extraordinarily accomplished in the realms of art, music, and languages, would find a better suitor.”

Penelope’s derisive snort was covered with a timely cough, “You can barely remember a French phrase, rather, any French at all, and you have a very tenuous grasp on Spanish.”

“Matters not,” Eliza waved her hand. “I deserve better than a Baron.”

Staring at her plate, Penelope said, “I would have liked to have someone glance at me last night the way he did for you. You danced the night away, Elizabeth, with a man who looked at you as if you hung the moon. Why can’t you accept that? I had no one.”

The broken tone her sister spoke in had Alice’s heart twisting with sympathy and

compassion, but such a nuance flew right over Eliza's head. "You might do well with a Baron, I suppose. He is just not the right fit for me."

Alice had enough, "Oh, for God's sake, how selfish and entitled can you be? Lord Brampton went through all the trouble of securing you a possible suitor and you throw his efforts back in his face with nary a thank you," she snapped. "How can you not see outside of yourself for one minute?"

Eliza looked as if she'd been slapped. "Why are you angry at me?"

"Because you are blind to the fortune in front of you."

"What fortune? Can you be specific?"

Alice pinned her cousin with a blunt cool gaze. "How many suitors have you had in the past three or four years, and you have turned them down simply because they were not a rich, titled lord who could give you all the material possessions you require?"

"Some of them were even willing to turn a blind eye to how nauseatingly spoiled you are in hopes you would look at them with an ounce of care or an emotion that surpasses greed or vanity." The words Alice had penned behind her heart suddenly came streaming out.

"You've been blessed to have both your parents with you, you have never found yourself without a roof over your head, or without a shilling to your name. Not like us, not like Penelope and me, so for god's sake, stop your whining ."

Eliza looked struck through with a thunderbolt, her eyes wide and trembling, her face white with shock. Soon enough, her eyes narrowed. "Is that it then? You have found yourself a marquess and you want to keep him to yourself ."

“...Is that all you took from it?” Alice asked, stumped by her cousin’s self-absorbed delusion. When had she mentioned Benedict? “Nothing else?”

“I see how it is,” Eliza fixed her bonnet. She sniffed. “You feel you are better than me.”

As Alice made to answer, Penelope lurched from her seat and rushed away, forcing Alice to run after her. She found her sister in the commode, hurling the contents of her stomach into a chamber pot. Worried, she held her sister’s hair up and rubbed her back while whispering soothing words in her ear.

“What happened?” Alice whispered.

“I—” she paused to wipe her mouth with the back of her hand while perspiration beaded on her brow. “I don’t know. My stomach has not been feeling well lately.”

“How far would you describe as lately?” Alice’s worry began to ramp up. “Days... weeks perhaps?”

“Six days now,” Penelope replied.

The incident with Rutledge is thirty-one days now.

Heart clenching, she whispered, “When was the last time you had your courses?”

Resting her cheek on the cold wall, Penelope breathed, “I should have seen them four days ago.”

Fear tunneled through Alice—a horse bolting away from a carriage. She could never utter the words, but they reverberated through her head anyway. Penelope was not married. She was unwed. And she was possibly pregnant.

Now, it was more imperative than anything that she made Rutledge marry her. Otherwise, Penelope would be shamed and ostracized from society and would fade away into obscurity. The happy, positive girl she had known from birth would never be the same again.

“It's all right,” Alice found a glass on the counter, filled it with water, and handed it to her sister. “You will be all right. I'll make sure of it.”

“How?” Penelope croaked, tears now brimming at the corner of her eyes. “How can you fix my mistake?”

While doing her best to comfort her sister, Alice could only reply, “I will get him to honor you and not run away from his responsibilities. I have help too.”

“From whom?” Penelope asked.

“Don't you worry about that,” Alice redirected her. “I will make it right.”

With one hand holding fast on the rail of his yacht, William brushed a fresh spray of briny seawater from his face as he stared out at the endless sea; if he squinted, he could see the Isle of Wight. It was there where he would find Rutledge in a private boating club owned by Duke Renford.

When he had purchased the yacht, while simply ninety feet, the man from the HMS Navy told him the ship, once a Royal Yacht twenty years ago, had been used in the French Revolution. Pirates had commanded it for three years after the Dardanelles operation, and then the HMS army had recovered it and decommissioned it.

His turquoise waistcoat mirrored the depths of the Solent as the ship cut through the waves with the speed of a schooner. His trimmed hair curled at the ends in the dampness, and he tucked a lock behind his ear.

Will this move, by enforcing his debt, push Rutledge to do the right thing?

He shifted back and forth on his feet, unsure if his tactic this time was going to work. The journey would take a half-hour at least, so he left the deck to his personal chambers below.

“Other than putting a flintlock to his head, the blackmail is the only chance I have to get him to honor that girl,” Edward muttered while flicking a look to the wide four-poster nailed into a corner of the room.

Rich red velvet drapes were tied back with black tassels on either side, while the plain sheets and the mountain of pillows pulled an errant imagination from him.

What I would give to have her here...

He could see Alice’s flaxen hair strewn across the dark cotton, the light from the window across the bed falling gently on her beautiful face and sparkling eyes.

He’d flatten his palm against her throat, run it in a straight path down between her heaving breasts, over her delicate rib cage and her silken belly. He’d cup her quim—just hold her there, relishing her lushness, the way she arched to his touch.

“Mine,” he’d whisper. “All of this. All of you.”

Shaking his head vigorously, as if he could physically shake the inappropriate thoughts out of his mind, Edward moved to the dark desk dominating much of the cabin and slid the papers to the edge.

A note from the man who held all Rutledge’s vowels was not much of a threat, was it? But then again, Hamlet Grimes was the king of the rookeries and stews, with eyes on every corner and fingers in every pocket, not to mention knives at every throat.

It could help—or it could send Rutledge on the run. He did not know which way the cards would fall, but he had to try.

“Your Grace,” Jones, a trusted footman he’d carried with him, knocked on the half-open door. “We are about to make port.”

His brow cocked up, “That was quicker than I had imagined.”

“The wind was on our side, Sir,” Jones replied with a bow.

Reaching for his jacket, great coat, and hat, Edward grasped a lions-head walking stick as well. After tucking the documents inside his jacket, he headed up to the deck. The port was approaching and his eyes lifted to the rocky crags to the east. Up above the cliff, he saw the terra-cotta roof of the house where he was heading.

Finally, the docks came into view, and he felt a certain amount of tension tightening his chest. With the boat moored, he stepped onto the jetty and made his way up the ramp and to the railed gangway, then headed west of the docks where his hired carriage should be waiting.

The sounds of chattering seagulls echoed through the air and the salt-tinged air made him want to sneeze. He made his way along the narrow walkway of the railed dock with boats bobbing on the water, absorbing the wild energy of the sea.

Just beyond the dockmaster’s house, and behind it, was his carriage. Jones went to speak with the driver first, then opened the door as he entered.

Here to the second salvo.

The boating club was an early Georgian mansion, from 1715 he believed, now turned into a clubhouse; its grey-colored brick and ash wood walls stood out against the line

of trees surrounding the two-story building. Tall columns of cream-colored marble rose up to Corinthian capitals where they met the painted ceiling.

Doffing his hat and cloak to the footman at the door, he asked, “Where are the lords this afternoon?”

“In King Henry the Eighth's parlor, Your Grace,” the footman bowed.

Nodding, he strode through the extensive foyer and up to the levels above, bypassing a corridor of seascape paintings, padded down the Aubusson runner, and entered the parlor to the left. The parlor was as gaudy and overdone as what he'd imagined the inside of Windsor Castle would look like.

Everything inside it was shimmering with gold or brass gilt; there were gold thread tapestries and wall hangings, chairs covered with velvet and sarsenet with animal furs, sable and mink thrown over the backs of them.

“Good god, my eyes are already starting to hurt,” he grunted.

His gaze swept over the lords milling around, drinking in groups of three or four, when he spotted Felton casually talking to Rutledge. The man could have easily merged with the wallpaper behind him as his jacket and waistcoat were so richly embroidered, but if one looked closely, it was faded, and the threads were pulling.

“Duke Valhaven,” Rutledge flashed a tight smile. “How nice to see you. I am surprised to see you twice this month. Please tell, what is causing you to be so visible lately?”

“You .” Edward did not have the patience—nor the time—to beat around the bush. “We need to talk, now.”

The smile did not slip off Rutledge's face, but it turned brittle. "A moment ago, you looked amenable, now your tone sounded, well, murderous. Are you going to finish what you started with the pistol at the hunting party, Your Grace?"

"In a manner of speaking," Edward's tone was icy. "Now, follow me."

"And if I do not?" Rutledge's voice grew edgy.

Felton warned, "I do not think it is in your best interest to disobey his order, Rutledge."

Seeing that he was outnumbered, Rutledge fixed his jaw and nodded; Edward turned on his heel and strode out to an empty room down the corridor.

Closing the door with his heel, Edward said, "I have spoken to you about the young woman you ruined, Miss Penelope, and clearly you have decided to just leave her as a notch on your bedpost. I will not have that."

A muscle jumped in Rutledge's jaw. "What matter is it of yours what I do in the bedchamber?"

"Usually? Nothing. But not when it involves an innocent woman who fell for your lies," Edward snapped. "Have you no conscience man? Is there any scrap of morality left in that foul cesspool of depravity?"

Face mottling, Rutledge jammed a finger into Edward's chest, "How rich is it for you to chastise me about my tastes when rumors about your predilection are still immortalized in the ton's memory?"

"That might be true, but tell me one recount of me using an innocent girl?" Edward baited him. When no answer came forward, he lifted his top lip in disgust. "That is

what I thought. Now, you have two options, marry that girl for a year, or every scrap of possessions you have will belong to me, including that club.”

The Viscount paled. “What do you mean?”

Plucking the papers from his jacket, he handed them over. “I know your creditor, Rutledge, the man who keeps bailing your boat while it keeps sinking.

“Grimes was exceptionally welcome to accept my proposal to buy your properties at a mark above value or even better, to gut you like a fish when you default on his payments. If , however, you do marry the girl, you shall have a year's stay before you pay him back; enough time to make some smart investments, I'd say,” Edward said calmly. “You choose.”

“You spoke with Grimes,” Rutledge went ashy.

“I have.”

Taking the letters, the indolent rake read them over, his face going bloodless by every breath and his fingers trembling to the point he almost ripped the paper in half.

“I know you are half a million pounds in debt, Rutledge,” Edward pressed. “Just do the right thing and save your life.”

Intense consideration crossed Rutledge's face, and the very moment Edward thought he had found the upper hand, Rutledge sneered. “I see what this is. A pathetic attempt to curry favor with the chit's sister that your brother is courting. I will not fall for it, nor will I be marrying her just to divorce.”

Forcing himself not to grind his back molars to the root, Edward calmly said, “No morality then.”

Rutledge let the papers flutter to the ground before he ground his heel into one of them and stalked out, leaving Edward to suck in a long, low breath before sagging on the wall behind him.

The checkmate he'd been sure was in his grasp now crumbled before his face. What was there more to do?

A hand rested on his arm and Edward met Felton's sympathetic gaze, "If it is any consolation, I thought you had him there."

"So did I," he said. "But now, I have no idea where to pivot."

"You could get him drunk and take him to an altar," Felton offered humoredly. "I know a priest you can use."

Despite the gravity of the moment, Edward laughed, albeit bitterly. "I'll consider that as the last resort."

CHAPTER 11

While brushing her sister's hair out for the Duke's ball two days later, Alice tried her best to reassure her. "It will work out, I promise."

Dressed in a yellow gown with delicate daffodils stitched on the hem of puff sleeves and cascading down a stripe from Penelope's right shoulder to her left hip, her sister smiled. "I think his lordship will love your costume."

"I am sure Benedict will," Alice agreed, trying not to think of the moment Edward had seen her in the same delicate dove costume.

While she was in business with Edward, Benedict was the one courting her and she would do well to keep both relationships apart.

"Are you sure Aunt will not be upset that we were invited, while she and Eliza weren't?" Penelope asked, biting her lip.

"Officially, I was invited, with you as my chaperone," Alice said while twisting her sister's hair into a chignon and sliding the unadorned pins in. "I wouldn't leave you home while I know you could benefit from a relaxing night away."

Reaching for the sprigs of daffodil flowers, she slid them into the coiffure and stepped back to view her work. "You look like a summer garden."

Twisting her head, Penelope smiled. "I always love when you do my hair. You still have your artist's touch."

“I haven’t touched a brush in months,” Alice lamented. “But hopefully one day I’ll return to my drawings.”

Plucking up the silk yellow mask, she handed it to Penelope while checking her hair in the brass mirror; instead of the updo she had worn the night she had crossed paths with the Duke, her hair was down in ringlets this time.

“If you marry him.” Penelope shook her head. “No, when you marry him, you will have all the time in the world to paint and sew and garden.”

Guilt assailed her from all sides and red assailed her cheekbones as Alice fought down the remorse which had tormented her in the early days.

Benedict is the one courting you. Edward is not.

A knock on the door barely preceded Eliza stepping into the room, clad in her dressing gown and bonnet. “I wanted to see what you two were wearing to the ball,” she said, her nose wrinkling with distaste at Penelope. “Is that what you are wearing?”

Looking down, Penelope asked, “What’s wrong with it?”

“Well, nothing,” Eliza shrugged. “If you do not mind wearing a dress outdated two seasons ago. It’s sufficient, I suppose, but nothing spectacular.”

Alice bristled at Eliza’s clear attempt to undermine Penelope’s confidence but as she opened her mouth to redress her cousin, Penelope seemed to shrug the subtle insult off.

“It is beautiful still. We may not get new in-season dresses as you do, but I am happy to wear it anyhow,” Penelope chimed. “I am simply going to chaperone. I doubt

anyone will be looking at me. Let your mind be at ease, I hardly doubt that I will be engaged to the last eligible bachelor by the end of the night.”

Eliza’s scowl did not ease the worry in Alice’s heart. “Speaking of bachelors, what came of the lord who was dancing with you a few months ago, Lord Ratling, or Rutter. I—erm, oh yes, Rutledge . That is it. What happened to him? Why did he suddenly disappear?”

Color stained Penelope’s cheeks at the dig. “I do not know.”

“He lost interest in you, I suppose,” Eliza's fake sympathy did not match the ungodly glee in her eyes. “I am sorry, Penelope, but I would be lying if I did not admit that I could see that happening. He was much more... worldly-wise , if you understand my meaning. While you’re an innocent.”

This time, Alice had to step in, “I suppose that means you have more experience then? Please, regale us with your worldly tales.”

Lips pursing, Eliza said, “I just remembered something I should be doing. Please, excuse me.”

When she flounced off, Alice huffed, “I do not know how long I can go with her, Penelope. She grates on my nerves every day and just as I thought she could not go any lower, here she comes, trying to shatter your confidence.”

“She didn’t shatter anything,” Penelope replied with a soothing pat. “She tried, but I’m wise to her antics. I have been for a long while.”

“Good,” Alice reached for her mask and reticule. She paused to brush her fingers off the beading and thought back to the moment Edward had tried to remove her mask—and stifled a shiver. “I think it is time we leave.”

The carriage paused at the gate to the ducal estate and while the driver spoke with the guards at the gate, Alice gazed up at the house; built of golden Cotswold stone, the Valhaven house struck a kingly profile against the dark sky.

As the carriage rounded the circular drive, which had a grand fountain with a formidable Poseidon and a pair of sea nymphs at its center, Alice felt her heart lodge in the middle of her throat at seeing the imposing Palladian entrance and wide marble steps of the main building.

However—the carriage rounded the drive and took them around the house, a feat that took them more than ten minutes.

“What—” Penelope whispered, her head snapping left and right. “What is happening?”

“I am not sure,” Alice replied. “But I hope it is nothing horrible.”

The carriage came to another gate where two footmen stood and came to the door to help them down, and they bowed. “His Grace requested every guest to enter through the gardens, Misses.”

Twisting her head, Alice shared a look with her sister but nodded to the unconventional approach. “Will someone show us the way?”

“I will, Miss,” one bowed again. “Please, follow me. As you go through, His Grace has kindly asked that you pick a flower from any of the bushes that has a red ribbon tied to it and clutch it as you enter on inside.”

The garden was beautifully designed with statues, manicured hedges, and graveled walking paths. The scents of Lily-of-the-Valley, Wisteria, and roses wafted against her cooled skin, the stars a scatter of diamonds in the sky overhead.

Penelope paused to pluck a white rose from a bush, but Alice did not feel compelled to do the same. While wondering why the Duke had made such a strange request, she didn't find a flower until near the end, a strange flower with white petals and deep purple sepals.

At the steps to the house, the footman said, "Please put the flower in your hair."

This was getting stranger and stranger, but she complied, as did Penelope, before the footman led them inside. A corridor down and they descended the stairs to the ballroom—and Alice could see why they were asked to keep the flower.

The guests all had various flowers in their hair and the men sported the blooms on their lapels—but why ?

"Miss Alice," the butler who took her invitation smiled. "The first dance you will have will be the one with the lord who has the same flower. His Grace wanted to make sure no one was left out of the festivities."

"I..." She failed to find the right words. "I never expected such a thing."

"His Grace only invited thirty-four guests, Miss," the butler said again. "Eighteen ladies and sixteen lords."

Alice blinked. She had counted only six bushes with the red ribbon, meaning almost everyone was bound to have a matching partner. Edward had crafted an ingenious plan. "With him and his brother making up the other eighteen," Alice realized.

"Yes, Miss," the butler replied with a deep bow. "Now, please, enjoy the festivities."

Touching the mask, Alice laced her arms with Penelope, and they descended the stairs. While glad that there were not many guests around, Alice wondered if there

was another set-up surprise coming their way.

“I’ll get some water,” Penelope unlaced her arm and headed off to the refreshment tables, while Alice spied the seating area. The white couches with jewel-toned cushions called to her but as she went, she paused and gazed up at the balcony above.

The man leaning on the balustrade overlooking his domain like a dark king was none other than Edward, his dark suit broken up by the white and purple flower in his lapel. His gaze met hers through the half demi-mask and a slow, satisfied smile curled his lips.

She felt unable to move, hesitant to breathe, until he inclined his head and mouthed, “Go on.”

The ties that held her firm snapped in half, and she moved off to the seating area, even though her legs felt heavier than lead. How was it that the man had the power to steal her breath with a mere look and even cut her legs out from under her at the same time? Her head whirled as if she were in the middle of a windstorm.

“Alice?” Penelope asked, a glass of water in her hand, her face knit tight with concern. “Are you all right? You look deeply bothered.”

“May I have some of your water?” She asked.

“Of course.”

Sipping the cool drink over her parched throat, Alice forced her mind to repeat the same mantra she had told herself for days. There is a future with Benedict, not with Edward.

To date, the reiteration had still not taken root.

To make matters worse—and she would never admit this to her dying day—she had dreamt about the man; four times. Without meaning it, she'd finished her sisters' glass and embarrassed, told Penelope that she'd return with a new one.

At the table, she filled the glass, but took another as she felt that she would need it—then turned and almost ran into Benedict. The Marquess' lips twitched as he took the glasses from her.

“I do think we need to stop meeting like this, dear Alice.”

Humored, she curtsied. “How have you been these past days, my lord?”

“Tired, overworked, anxious about another paper I may or may not have written intelligibly at midnight,” he said as they approached the seating area, and his eyes landed on Penelope. “Miss Penelope, how do you do?”

Smiling softly, Penelope replied, “Very well, my lord. His Grace surprised us with such a strange way of engaging his guests.”

“Edward has his moments of genius,” Benedict nodded. “But ask him to give me some pointers on my essays and he is suddenly a blank board.”

“I very much take umbrage to that statement,” Edward's cool tone fell over the side of Alice's neck and her hand tightened over her glass. “If I had to suffer through those ungodly long lectures and find a hundred and one books to write papers, you should too. How else are you going to learn?”

One-handed, she managed to curtsy. “Your Grace.”

He inclined his head. “Miss Alice.”

“Does anyone see the irony here?” Benedict asked, drawing her attention to the flower on his lapel—a white rose.

“T’is simple happenstance,” Edward shrugged. “And the rule is only for the first dance, not the whole night.”

“Speaking of dances—” Alice’s head angled to the eight-piece orchestra who were tuning their instruments. “—I think the first one is beginning- oh —”

Edward had swiftly swiped her glass and settled it on a passing waiter’s tray before he held her hand. “Will you join me on the floor, Miss Alice?”

Edward felt unrepentantly selfish holding Alice in his arms and did not hide his smirk when she realized the nature of the waltz they were about to dance when the first notes sounded.

Her expressive eyes widened. “This—this is the Viennese waltz!”

Gently taking her hand, he placed one on his shoulder and reached for her waist. “Are you unfamiliar with the faster-paced version?”

“Yes,” she said worriedly.

“Be calm.” Edward’s tone instinctively dipped to the one he used on nervous submissives. “Watch my eyes and follow as I lead. You will be fine.”

Pulling her bottom lip in, she glanced behind him at the orchestra, whose members were starting to play. The tempo of the authentic Strauss waltz was much faster than the other forms, but Alice did as he’d ordered and kept her eyes on him.

His grip on her hand had the same control, pulling her into the steps as his hand on

her waist pushed her through them. Their steps broadened as the music picked up speed, but his eyes never left hers and his command of her body never wavered.

He liked the excuse the new waltz gave him to put his head close to her ear. “Good girl,” he whispered.

Alice’s lips parted as her cheeks warmed and his lips curled with delight while his fingers on her waist slid an inch lower, resting just above the dip of her hip.

The mad whirl of the waltz carried them away and with him being a physical man, Edward enjoyed dancing but hardly had found a woman who kept up with him. As the dance sped on, Edward drew her closer with each turn and it was not until their hips grazed, that he realized how scandalous the closeness was.

Briefly, he spotted her sister Penelope gazing at Benedict with pure wonder on her face.

Is something going on there?

He added more pressure on her waist, his hold firm and unerring, the heat of it searing through the silk of her gown. The smooth but fast-paced three-quarters melody soared around them, and Edward guided her into many turns with ease.

The music crescendo, reaching its climax with an abrupt flourish of brass, soon faded into nothing. He still held her hand as he stepped back, bowing while she curtsied.

He heard her discreetly pulling air into her lungs and he offered her his arm.

“After that, I think,” she gasped, “I need some water.”

Sweeping her off to the nook with the beverage fountain, he filled a glass with water

and handed it to her. “You followed beautifully.”

Despite the strength and decisiveness she had shown on that first night they met, there was something about her—an inherent submissiveness in her true nature appealed to him on a baser level, while her bright mind and rapier wit engaged him on a personal one.

“That will be the first time,” Alice said kindly. “My aunt would disagree.”

“Alice, have you ever allowed yourself a moment to just... be?” He asked quietly.

She gazed at him, question heavy in her eyes. “What do you mean, Your Grace?”

CHAPTER 12

A natural pink flush of anxiety colored her cheeks. She bit her lips gently, nervously, which only enforced his instincts about her. He freely admitted to himself that his fantasies revolved around teaching her the intricacies of submission, disciplining her when she was naughty, and enjoying her passionate and submissive nature.

But he did not know how she would take it.

“When was the last time you were able to let go of that rigid cloak of control you hold so tightly around yourself,” Edward asked. “Is it not tiring to be the strong one all the time?”

She glanced down at the glass. “I think I need something stronger for this conversation.”

Swapping her water for an arrack punch, she sipped the drink, then murmured, “When my parents passed this life, I knew, without saying, that it was my obligation to make sure Penelope had an easier role in life. Mother and father had done their best, but now it was my turn.”

Edward couldn’t stop himself from grasping her chin with gloved fingers. “But what about you? What about your needs?”

She blinked, utterly innocently. “I suppose I desire a faithful man who loves me.”

Of course she would want such a thing.

“Aside from the fact that love does not exist, what do you imagine would free you from the burdens you carry?” he asked.

She stared at him with jaw slackened. “I beg your pardon, Your Grace? Love does exist,” she sputtered.

“In novels, yes,” he agreed easily, “And the minds of naïve females who read them and think those righteous princes are real.”

This time, her eyes narrowed, and Edward hated how her vitriol stirred his loins. She sharpened her gaze up at him. “What about romance?”

“Romance or seduction?” Edward replied. “One is fanciful, and the other is matter of fact. I think you know which is which.”

Her chin notched up. “Why did I ever entertain the thought that a man like you knows anything about love?”

I am having more fun with this than I ought to.

“A man like me?” he asked. “There are no other men like me.”

“Well, you are a rake, are you not?” she accused.

“I am also a Duke,” he pointed out. “And I understand the human nature and how layered it is. There is not one pure emotion in the human heart—well, aside from hate. That is the only exception.”

“A theologian would argue if one exists, then the other must as well,” Alice countered. “If the Devil exists, so must God. If hate exists, so must love.”

Belatedly, Edward realized that they were alone in the refreshment nook, way beyond the point of propriety; the only safeguard was that they were close to the opening and still in full view.

“I don’t think this is the right place to have this conversation,” he murmured while his eyes latched onto the doorway.

“I don’t think we should be having this conversation at all,” Alice replied with a curtsy, before heading to the door—only to be forced to retract her steps.

The glass in Edward’s hand almost slipped when Hamlet Grimes stepped into the room, and Rutledge followed him. At the outset, no one would ever believe Grimes was not a part of the Upper Ten, the man looked the part with his blades of cheekbones and Roman nose. Above his noble forehead, his carefully combed golden-brown hair had a thick, enticing wave.

The only identifier that would give away the cruel king of the underworld was the silver scar on his temple and the hardness in his stony brown eyes. Rutledge was bloodless but still stood upright.

“What—” Alice’s gaze flickered from one to the other. “What is happening here?”

Tugging at his cufflink, Grimes spoke, every hint of his street-born accent non-existent. He spoke like any lord. “It has come to my attention that this bye-blow has rejected your more than generous proposal. Ordinarily, matters between you lot do not pique my interests, but I know there is an innocent lady in the middle, and that stirred me to act.”

With a hand pressed to her breast, Alice shot a look at him and back to the two. Edward knew he had to take control of this before it got out of hand. “This is not the place to talk business. Please, follow me to my study.”

Grimes' gaze landed on Alice for a long assessing moment and his lips curved knowingly before he nodded, and they stepped away. Turning to her, Edward said, "Get your sister and ask Ramsay to take you to my study."

She tightened her lips, "I'd rather her not see this."

"Then come by yourself," he spoke over his shoulder. "But do not dally too long."

Closing the door behind him, Edward looked at Grimes. "I never imagined you would come to see me. I thought prolonged exposure to the Upper Ten made you break out in rashes."

"At times, 'spose," Grimes grunted. His well-tailored ball suit was as well as any Edward would have had made for himself. "I may control cutthroats and blackguards by the dozens and a criminal underworld that stretches from here to the Indies, and while I have whorehouses, not once have I ever had innocent women be pressed into the service.

"I abhor men who take advantage of women who do not know any better, and when word got back to me that this bastard had done something I have gutted men for less, I knew I had to intervene," Grimes muttered. "I may be the king of blackguards, but there are some crimes I will not abide by."

A discreet knock on the door drew all their attention as Alice stepped into the room, her gaze firm and wary. "My lords."

If he knew Ramsay, there would be a maid waiting for Alice when she did leave.

Grimes pivoted; his head inclined with respect. "Ah, and you must be the fearless Alice Winslow, Miss Penelope's sister."

“I am,” she replied. “And may I know who you are, Sir?”

“You may not,” he said easily. “All you need to know is that I am an acquaintance of these two and even more, I have managed to get Rutledge to do right by your sister. From this point, he will offer your sister marriage and they will stay married for over a year.”

“Or?”

“I’ll have his guts for garters.”

“I see,” she murmured, then rounded to face Rutledge, unfazed by Grimes’ jarring words. He sat still when she drew her hand back and cracked him right across the face. His head snapped to the left and Grimes laughed as the slap echoed in the room. “That is for the heartache you have given my sister. She does not deserve you.”

Rounding his desk, Edward extended his hand to Grimes. “I underestimated you.”

“Most of your lot does,” Grimes huffed, his shake as firm as any businessman. “This particular situation upsets me for it is not too dissimilar from what my sister had to endure. I have no love for predators like these. Now, I must depart, but I hope you have things in hand.”

“I do,” Edward replied. “Thank you.”

“And Valhaven, do not go into Spitalfields with that fancy carriage of yours again,” Grimes remarked. “The mere gold leaf on your door is enough temptation for a pickpocket, much less an armed cutthroat.”

“Noted,” Edward nodded as the man walked out the door. He then turned to Rutledge, “And as for you, you will go downstairs, dance twice with Miss Penelope,

share a drink, and then leave. If you do not show up at her door tomorrow afternoon for tea and your marriage proposal, I know who to send word to.”

With a muscle jumping in his jaw, Rutledge jerked his head and turned to the door.

The moment the door closed behind him, Alice’s shoulders fell. “That man is not... a good man, is he?”

“In many ways, no, but in the ways that count, I would say yes,” Edward replied as he leaned back on the edge of his desk. “But at least that is handled. I’d say our business is concluded.”

Her lips twisted and her brows lowered as if to say, I am not so sure, but instead, she said, “The business I paid you for by a single kiss.”

“The same,” he smirked wolfishly. “I would nary complain if you decided to thank me in the same manner.”

Laughing, Alice wrapped her arms around her middle. “When you asked me what it would take to let go of my control, I had never considered such a thing before. I suppose I don’t have an answer for it to be entirely truthful.”

“Come here.” Edward opened his stance. When she hesitated, he pinned her with a strict look. “I don’t bite, Alice.”

“No, you do worse,” she retorted, stubbornly staying in the same place. “You seduce .”

“Is that a bad thing when both parties want it?” he reasoned with her. “And I know you want my touch, Alice. You cannot hide the signs even as best you try.”

He was a stoic man and a patient one, and he would wait for her to come to him this time—for he knew she would. The air hummed with anticipation, damned near crackling with promise, before she took a step forward—and another, and a third that placed her right in the vee of his legs.

One hand snaked around her nape and the other held her hip immobile as she pressed firm against his chest, causing Edward to wish the layers of cloth between them were gone.

She whimpered softly as he claimed her lips, soft enough to tantalize but then with a faint growl, he deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping amid her mouth.

Unsurprisingly, despite her previous protests, Alice did not try to struggle or escape him. She was too inherently submissive for that—which, of course, was what drew him so fiercely.

I know there is a passionate, spirited woman at her core, a woman who yearns to have a dominant male take control.

Grasping her derrière, it was an easy task to lift her, and in seconds, he had her back up against a wall. Instantly, he caged both of her wrists over her head with steel-like fingers and licked through her mouth.

“Let me show you what I mean about letting another take control,” Edward whispered as he wedged a knee between her legs.

Pinned as she was, Alice knew she should fight him off—but there was no desire to do so. If anything, with her crammed against wood and Edward’s harder body, she wanted to press herself closer .

The hot, wet kisses he planted on her neck made her knees feel strangely weak. Her

breasts ached, her womanhood throbbed, and she could barely think, much less worry.

“Edward,” she gasped, her hands twisting in his hold. “What are you... doing...”

“Let go of your inhibitions, and just feel ,” he ordered her. “Stop overthinking, Alice.”

Each of Edward’s kisses was delicious, gripping, utterly addictive. The more he kissed and teased, sparks danced up and down her spine, igniting an unexpected flare between her legs.

“What—”

“Just feel, Alice,” he repeated. “If you keep overthinking, I will be displeased. Breathe deeply, in and out, three times. Do it now.”

Obeying, Alice did her best to blank her mind and stop the constant thoughts and worries swirling in her head; on her last breath, a calm descended over her she had never felt before.

“ Good girl ,” Edward’s voice was soothing, hypnotic.

His mouth laid over her, his kiss heady and possessive, laying claim with each bold thrust of his tongue. Her body was so firmly tucked against his, she could not fathom where she ended and he began. Even with unapologetic control, he had taken over her, and Alice felt protected, safe, and blistering under her skin.

“Edward, I—I need—” She felt the urge but did not have a word to name the desire spiraling inside her. “I—I...”

“I know what you need,” he whispered.

The hand on her hips moved to splay over her bottom, yanking her closer while he rucked up her dress and wedged his thigh between her legs, the intimate invasion lodging her breath.

He nudged deeper against her sex, hitting an exquisite peak, and her breath popped free, turning into a moan as it left her lips. Her cheeks flamed as she realized how damp she'd become.

Goodness, was that normal?

“Rock on me, Alice,” he commanded. “ Ride me .”

Delirious with need, she rocked against the hard trunk of Edward's thigh, gasping at the heavenly friction that sizzled up her spine. The more she did, the more the delicious but fleeting pleasure rocked through her body.

“God, yes...” he rasped against her throbbing pulse. “Don't stop.”

Alice knew she could not stop if she tried—now that the bite of pleasure had sunk under her skin, she wanted it to devour her.

As she rocked, harder and harder against him, she felt a hard and heavy length pressing into her upper thigh. His male member, she realized dizzily. Her motions were strumming pleasure from the both of them, as the more she chased her capitulation, she was stimulating him as well.

He grasped her hip and muttered a curse that was not fit for a woman's ears—but it stoked the fire inside her even higher. His mouth slammed on hers again and she sucked on his tongue.

“Come for me Alice,” he rasped. “Come now!”

The cry that left her mouth as she hurtled over the edge was one Alice had never heard coming from herself before. Delectable spasms rippled through her, one after another, each one strong and unbearably sweet, and left her shivering with the new discovery.

When she regained her senses, she gazed up at Edward, and for once, his expression was unguarded. In his gleaming gaze, she saw something she had never thought to uncover—tender emotion.

But she could only feel crippling shame. This was not right. She should not be doing this with him.

“Let me go!” She strove to free her wrists from where they were shackled above her head as panic set in. Alice couldn’t believe she had let him draw her into this sinful act and was desperate to get out of it.

His gaze closed off as if a steel wall was slammed between his emotions and his pupils. Edward stepped back, “There is nothing holding you here.”

Frenetically, she put her clothes to right and dashed to the door, only for Edwards parting words to fall over her and haunt her for the rest of the night.

“When you decide to accept your emotions, you know where to find me.”

CHAPTER 13

It took Alice ten full minutes—and a calming turn in the cool gardens— before she returned to the ballroom with the maid the butler had arranged for her in tow. Edward was absent, to her relief.

Penelope was on the dance floor, twirling with Lord Rutledge; and the meeting moments ago replayed in her mind. This was all she had wanted, but she was not so sure that Penelope would appreciate how all this had come to be.

I do not need to tell her. All she needs to know is that I followed through on my promise.

The unbridled happiness on Penelope's face eased her worry, but when she spotted Benedict chatting carefree with two men over the side, with a glass of champagne in hand, guilt wrenched at her belly—if it wasn't already so knotted, she might be sick.

How could I do that to him? With his brother no less !

Dear god, how could she look Benedict in the eye now? Troubled, she went to the seating area and folded her hands on her lap while watching Penelope.

For once, the fear that had painted her sister's face was now gone, and even with the turmoil wreaking havoc in her head, the one calm in the storm was that at least she had done right by Penelope.

What about you, what do you want?

She watched the two dance, and only then did she realize how many were staring and whispering behind their fans.

Beside her, she heard a woman say, “That’s the second time they have danced.”

“You know what they say,” another lady replied. “ Once is interest, twice is declaration... Who is she though? I have never seen her face before.”

“I hope she knows she is marrying the worst rakehell in London,” the first lady tittered. “At least she will be doing the rest of our girls a service by keeping his grubby fingers away from them.”

Alice felt her heart stutter; in making this right, had she somehow worsened the situation? Even so, if Penelope was increasing with his child, it would only save her face going forward. If she were to marry again, at least she would be an honorable divorcée and not a disgraced strumpet.

It will be all right. It must be.

“You were missing for a while,” Benedict’s voice made her jump, and for a moment, she couldn’t look at him out of utter shame.

Taking a moment to breathe, she forced a smile. “I felt a bit stifled, my lord. I went outside for a moment to get some air.”

His brows danced, “If it was any other lady than you, I would have asked if you were entertaining another man.”

Her stomach plummeted to her feet, and for a moment, utter, sheer panic blasted through her at the fear that he might have seen or been told that she had gone to see his brother moments ago. Her mouth dropped as fear temporarily rendered her

speechless.

Benedict thought, then interpreted her expression as something else. His face fell. “I did not mean to make you aghast, Alice. I apologize. That was certainly not my intention. I was simply jesting, but I realize now the joke had taken a wrong turn.”

Able to breathe again, Alice said, “You had me for a minute there.”

“Edward always said that my tact is lacking,” he grimaced apologetically. “That was cruel of me. I am sorry.”

Glancing at her lap, Alice wondered if it was the best time to start a conversation she and Benedict had not had to date—the one where they were heading with the frequent meetups.

“Benedict,” she hesitated. “Are you... are we courting?”

His brows knitted in two. “Ah, I suppose I did not entirely make that clear. But I thought it was evident. Why? Are you not sure?”

“I had my doubts,” she gave him a weak smile. “It is simply the pressures, my lord. I felt the scrutiny and the whispers and the comments about us being together, and I began to second-guess myself. I am sorry.”

His face turned. “Do you doubt my intentions toward you?”

“Not anymore,” she tried to reassure him, but in truth, Alice knew she was doing her best to reassure herself.

Benedict’s face cleared. “Would you do me the honor of the next dance?”

She smiled. “I would love to.”

Penelope was beside herself in joy, sighing in relief, and giggling like a schoolgirl in love—who she should be, babbling how happy she was that Rutledge had come around, how happy he was to be back with her, and how eager he was to continue their courtship.

All through her sister’s happy sighs, Alice smiled and nodded, still unsure that they had taken the correct route to get Rutledge to fold.

Is blackmail ever a good idea?

“Alice?” The nudge in her side jolted Alice and belatedly, she realized that it probably was not the first time her sister had been calling her name.

Abashed, she shook her head. “I am sorry, Penelope. I’m a bit tired. What was that?”

“I do not know how to thank you.” Penelope shook her head. “To be honest, I never thought you would get him to come around, but you did. He told me that he was sorry for how he treated me and that his conscience had been ripping him in two.”

Just like mine is about Benedict and Edward.

“He said, when he met you at Almacks a week ago, and you told him how devastated I was about his absence, he realized that he had truly hurt me and wanted to make it right.”

“That’s good,” Alice smiled thinly. “I hope he follows through on his commitment.”

When they arrived at the townhome, it was a shade behind one in the morning and the house was utterly quiet as her aunt and cousin were asleep. After thanking her aunt’s

carriage driver and wishing him a good night, Alice led them inside and quietly up to their rooms.

Penelope looped her arms around Alice and hugged her tight, whispering, “Thank you so much.”

“Have a good night,” Alice replied.

Entering her room, she paused to rest her back on the door while she sucked in a steadying breath before she plucked the pins from her hair. After dropping them in the jewelry box, she steadily disrobed before donning her night dress and going to wash her face.

She was tempted to fill a bag with ice and press it to her temple, she didn’t have a headache—it was her soul that tormented her. Aggrieved, she rested her head on a pillow and wondered how Edward felt about this. Did he have no shame at all in stabbing his own brother in the back?

Well, it takes two to dance, doesn’t it? He couldn’t have done what he did with me if I had not let him. We are both at fault here.

Upset, she closed her eyes and tried not to cry. She couldn’t let this go on much longer; it was either leaving Edward alone or letting Benedict go as well.

Sharing breakfast with Benedict was a rare feature these days but this Saturday morning was an exception. Edward walked into the breakfast room, nursing what looked like a third cup of coffee, looking decidedly troubled.

“After last night, I didn’t think you would be so somber,” Edward said as he took his seat. “Were you not over the moon, spinning around with your lady?”

Benedict sat his Sèvres cup down, with little care, not realizing—or perhaps minding—the splash of coffee that splattered the table.

Rubbing his knitted brow, Benedict sighed, “About that. I...” he puffed out a breath. “I feel as if I am having second thoughts, Edward, and it’s... there is nothing against Alice, she is a wonderful lady, and I like how different she is from the ton ladies, but I am not exactly sure how we... fit.”

Calmly, Edward poured a cup for himself and sat across to Benedict. “And what made you come to this realization?”

“I am not sure,” Benedict sagged into his chair. “It is nothing... solid. She asked me if we were courting last night, and it was then I realized how unlike courting we were. She must have sensed it too. You know those emotions that you get when you meet a lady, those giddy emotions—”

“Cannot say I ever have,” Edward shrugged.

“Honestly?” Benedict gaped.

The derisive snort Edward let out sounded like a bullet. “When have you ever heard me say that I’d fallen in love or even gotten close to it?”

Even though you might be getting closer to it than you thought.

“Never,” Benedict sighed. “Which, honestly, seems a disservice to you. You should allow yourself to feel something good once in a while, Edward.

“I can understand all about gaining money and steadying the ship to make sure the future generation is secure, but what about yourself? Doesn’t your inner person want to feel—to have an intimate connection with anyone?”

“Define intimate ,” Edward allowed a smirk to play over his face.

Rolling his eyes, Benedict muttered, “Not that sort of intimacy. Stop playing the dolt, Edward, it does not suit you.”

Setting the cup down, Edward said, “You know that you are the one primed to take over the ducal role the day you graduate, and the yacht is already primed to sail me back to Europe where I have mapped out a direction for the rest of my life.”

“Alone?” Benedict shuddered. “God forbid.”

“On father’s deathbed, he tried to make me promise that I would marry so that the title would not be passed down to you,” Edward grunted while hitching a boot onto the other knee. “But father was a bastard beyond all reason, so hence, the Dukedom is going to you. Another salvo to him beyond the grave.”

“That is not what you meant,” Benedict finished his breakfast. “But I get the gist.”

“Are you going to see Miss Alice today?” Edward asked.

“No, but mayhap in the week,” Benedict replied. “The lads and I are going rowing today.”

“Ah, what it was like to be twenty-something with no responsibility,” Edward teased. “How I envy you.”

“No, you do not,” Benedict shot back. “If you did, you would finish my papers for me.”

“Not if you paid me a king's ransom,” Edward laughed. “Now go away so I can think.”

With Benedict gone, he rubbed his face. “Alice, Alice. What do I do about you?”

CHAPTER 14

“O h, dear me,” Aunt Agatha tutted as she fixed her monocle, gazing at the scandal sheets of the London Gazette while having afternoon tea, two days after the Duke’s ball. “That is a hideous picture of you, Alice.”

The knife Alice had been using to spread marmalade on her toast hovered over the crumpet. She blinked, “Pardon?”

Her aunt did not answer yet because her uncle, dressed in his plain waistcoat and shirtsleeves, sat his cup of weak tea on the table and kissed his wife. “Good morning, dear.”

Aunt Agatha looked up with a thin smile. “Are your travels finished for a while, Richard? I hope you would have some time to chauffeur your wife and daughter around to the various ton affairs instead of letting them assume we are poor waifs, hm?”

“My apologies,” Richard sipped his drink. “What were you saying about Alice?”

“This,” her aunt spun the paper.

It showed a caricature of a petite blond lady, tripping with two glasses in hand, and a man who was supposedly Benedict lowered to one knee, holding up a bouquet of rolled-up pound notes, and what appeared to be diamond rings spilling from every conceivable pocket, looking like a besotted fool.

“I do not appreciate them disparaging your relationship, Alice. Richard, will you have a word with the editor today?” Her aunt ordered.

Alice cleared her throat, “I think that might do more harm than good, Aunt. It is simply gossip. By next week, they will be finding another poor soul to make fun of.”

“Hmph,” Aunt Agatha snorted as she shook out the paper. “The ton is all aflutter with news of Marquess Brampton courting, dare we say, an outsider! Hush hush, gently we shall tread. Discreet inquiries into this Miss Alice Winslow have unveiled... nothing much.

The lady, er, forgive us, Miss, is the daughter of a late merchandiser and a governess, decent enough occupations, we suppose, and eyewitnesses have reported that the meeting between the two was complexly happenstance

A few ladies who know the miss in question have commented that she is severely lacking in appearance and gentility to become a duchess, as we all know that Duke Valhaven is handing his ducal role to his brother upon his graduation. Is the ton ready for a gentry duchess? A makeshift one, that is. We shall know soon.”

With her stomach turning, Alice sipped her lukewarm tea and tried to control the roll in her heart.

“What’s that?” Eliza asked bluntly as she entered the room, gazing at the paper in her mother’s hand.

“A poor caricature of dear Alice,” her mother said.

Taking a look, Eliza burst into a peal of mocking laughter. “It looks exactly like you, Alice. Even the exaggerated ears!”

“Thank you, Eliza,” Alice said emptily.

A discreet knock on the door drew their attention to the doorway where Mr. Charles, one of the two footmen her uncle employed, bowed. “I am sorry to interrupt, but Lord Rutledge is here to see Miss Penelope.”

The cup in Eliza’s hand crashed to the floor, splintering expensive crockery everywhere and soaking her shoes. “What ?” Eliza spluttered.

Alice sat quietly as the footman reiterated his opening statement and the unholy rage that creased Eliza’s face made Alice’s heart curl in fear.

It only grew worse when the lord entered; his blond hair was combed rakishly to the side, and he was dressed dapperly in a checkered brown jacket and matching silk cravat.

Her aunt looked moonstruck, but her uncle handled the sudden visit with aplomb, and Rutledge was the perfect gentleman, his smile wide and his words light.

“Oh my goodness,” Aunt Agatha’s hand fluttered as she fanned her face. “Another titled lord for my girls. Dear husband, I think I may faint.”

We are your girls now? Since when?

“No collapsing, my dear,” Richard said. “Stay with us, please. After all, isn’t this what you wanted for your girls?”

Penelope entered the room, clad in a white taffeta dress; with its tight waist and elegant ruffled elbow-length sleeves, she looked like a princess. “My lord,” she curtsied.

“You look like a beautiful dove,” Rutledge said, but Alice noted a strain in his words, as if he were forcing them out of his mouth instead of them coming from his heart.

“She does, doesn’t she,” Aunt Agatha gushed. “Will you be joining us for luncheon, my lord?”

“If you don’t mind,” Rutledge smiled.

Alice dropped her utensils while feeling utterly discomfited and a bit ill. “Aunt, would you mind chaperoning Penelope? I just remembered that I have to go to the Pall Mall for some ribbons.”

Aunt Agatha nodded absently. “Of course, dear.”

Slipping away from the table, Alice met Rutledge’s eyes and internally grimaced at the hardness in the man’s gaze; it vanished in seconds as he took Penelope’s hand and kissed it.

Hurrying, she left to her bedchamber and quickly changed her homey attire into a peach dress, donned her bonnet and coat, then left for the carriage with her reticule in hand. Only when the vehicle set off did Alice feel that she could breathe.

“It is the best thing,” she tried to argue with herself. “If she is in that way, it is best that they marry. Otherwise, it will spell her destruction. She’ll be an outcast. They’ll marry for a year; the babe will be born, and they’ll separate. It is better than the alternative.”

Speaking of alternatives; what shall I do with Benedict and Edward?

The carriage ran through the streets of London, making the surroundings a blur, or maybe it was her state of mind that made it look so—until they came to the

bookstore.

She thanked the driver and told him to return by evening as she felt she needed to be away from the house for a full day.

Entering the store, a haven away from her home, she promised to visit the dining lounge and sample the pastries they had on display. She took the shelves, meandering through them, wondering what title would catch her eye.

She perused her way through sections of history, architecture, and sculpture, before winding her way to the back of the store where the romance novels and poetry were housed.

“The Pauper’s Wife ?” she read out loud while plucking the book from the shelf. “What could this be about?”

“Well, well, if it is not Miss Alice Winslow, skulking through the bookshelves as you once did at Lady Loughrey’s,” a light female voice sang out, a voice Alice knew all too well.

“Diana!” She exclaimed, delighted. “You’re back!”

Four years older than her, Diana Duhart had been Alice’s older classmate at school and the one older girl who had not snubbed her nose at the poor ten-year-old because of her gentry position.

Alice had mourned the day she had left but was grateful for the two years they had shared. Months after her third year, she’d learned that Diana had married and moved away from the country.

Hugging her old friend, Alice held her at arm’s length. “How are you back?”

“My cousin’s wedding is being held in two weeks and Mama wanted all the family back to celebrate,” Diana said, while patting her tight dark curls. “Speaking of weddings, are the papers true? You should have seen my mouth this morning when I read the scandal papers.

“I said to myself, it cannot be true, but then again, if anyone would dare to break the unwritten rules of the ton, it would be you,” Diana beamed. “So, tell me, are you truly being courted by the next Duke of Valhaven?”

Alice made to answer but clamped her mouth tightly before biting her bottom lip; keenly, Diana caught on. “Oh, no, that spells trouble.”

“I—”

Without a word, Diana steered Alice out and away from the books to the dining lounge and to a table in the corner. “I’ll get some hot chocolate, and you can tell me what is bothering you.”

Ashamed, Alice shook her head. “I cannot ask that of you.”

“Oh, don’t you fret.” Diana called a server over and put in the request for the hot drink and slices of apple cake. When she was done, she added, “It’s the fun of having a rich industrialist American husband. You should absolutely come and see New York one day, Alice. It’s an amazing city. Now, what is bothering you?”

Careful about the people around her, Alice phrased her situation in the hypotheticals. “When you were ill, did you ever have to choose between sensible cordials or heady hot elderberry wine?”

It took Diana a hair longer than Alice expected her friend to catch on, but then when she did, light sprung into her eyes, “I gather you mean if it is worth the risk to try

something that might make you over a wheelbarrow or if it is best to keep to what works slowly and steadily?”

“Yes,” Alice emphasized slowly, while the waiter came with their refreshments.

“Well,” Diana sipped her drink. “There comes a time when you would do well with the slow cure, there are some more merits to choosing the logical option that will help, but the wine, the wine, the wine, the wine . It sparks something inside you that that cordial does not.”

Gazing into the rich drink, Alice sighed, “But what happens when you wake up in the cold light of day after you’ve drunk the wine and realize you have made a mistake?”

“Is choosing your heart over your head always a risk? Yes and indeed, it often leads to more than simply going along or against society’s rules,” Diana replied. “I married an American and Mama almost had a conniption when I rejected a viscount with seventy years of history, according to the Debrett’s, in favor of a young railroad industrialist.”

“But it worked for you.”

“It did,” Diana replied. “Choosing the right... drink, the one your heart and soul feels connected to— is not without risk. That is not to say the staid choice of the cordial is without merit, but sometimes it is better to take a leap of faith than settle for mediocracy.”

She leaned in, her tone barely above a whisper. “Is this other man different from Lord Brampton?”

Alice could only nod. “Yes, but he doesn’t believe in love.”

“Then show him how wrong he is,” Diana chimed. “And with how headstrong you are, I know you will find a way.”

Brushing her mopes away, Alice asked, “So, tell me, what is America like?”

With his hair curling from a warm bath, Edward was dressed in a thick woolen shirt, loose trousers, and silk robe, sipping a hot infusion of cloves in his study; he prayed the tickle in the back of his throat would vanish quickly.

“Your Grace,” Ramsay stepped into his study. “I am sorry to disturb you, but you have a rather insistent visitor.”

“Who is—” As Ramsay stepped aside, Alice came in, her expression wary. Flicking his eyes to his butler, Edward then ordered, “I see. Make sure we are not disturbed, Ramsay.”

When the door closed, he asked, “To what do I owe the pleasure, Miss Winslow?”

Her lips firmed. “So, it is Miss Winslow now?”

He leaned into his chair and drummed his fingers on the table, head cocking to the side, “Would you rather I address you by your Christian name? Because I will.”

“What I need is for you to promise me that nothing of what happened the other night will happen again,” Alice notched her chin up. “I cannot risk my future with Benedict because of this—this—”

“Mutual attraction?”

“Devilish distraction,” she said stiffly. “I do thank you for getting Rutledge to do the right thing, but you and I cannot continue sinning behind your brother’s back. I hate

myself for even deceiving him and a part of me is hating myself for....”

He waited, then smirked, “For feeling something other than polite amusement?”

“Whichever way you want to call it, it is wrong, and I am not that sort of person. I am no lightskirt tart going around deceiving men,” Alice said forcefully—her hands fisting by her side were almost trembling with the strength of her words. “And I will not allow you to make me so.”

Gently, Edward rose from his chair and rounded his desk, “Truly, it is adorable how fiercely you are trying to convince yourself about what you do not feel for me.”

“I feel contempt and sorrow at myself knowing that the one I am connected to is your brother, but I allowed you to have your wicked way with me,” she pressed.

“Do you really regret it?” Edward asked as he leaned on the desk.

“How can you face your brother in the face and not feel any guilt!” she lamented. “Do you have no shame?”

Sidestepping the question, Edward asked, “See, I don’t think you hate yourself for it, Alice. You simply have not allowed yourself to accept that you feel more for me than you do for Benedict.”

She stared at him blankly. “... What ?”

“Admit it,” he shrugged. “I cannot do it for you.”

“If you think so, you are either foxed out of your mind or mad and on the way to Bedlam,” she said in outrage.

“Has Benedict made you an offer yet?” He asked calmly.

Her nose wrinkled, “No. Well, not yet .”

“Which means you are a free woman,” Edward told her.

She flung her hands up in frustration. “Do you not see the issue here or do you not care? What we are doing is immoral .”

“Never said I was a saint,” Edward shrugged. “But if you are so decided, I will never touch you again. Not even when you ask me to.”

“I have never asked you to do such a thing!” Alice protested.

This time, Edward, knowing he was breaking the promise he’d stated seconds ago, reached out, and holding her chin, said, “You might not know it but your body... Your pulse is racing, Alice—” his fingers brushed her cheek, “—your skin is flushed and your breath increased twice its pace the very few minutes you have stood before me.”

She yanked her head away and he dropped his arm, a strip of red across her nose and cheeks, while her breasts rose and fell as rapidly as the beating pulse under her ear. His gaze roved over her silently.

“I don’t know what you want with me when it is clear that you do not want anything else,” she said quietly. “You do not want a commitment because you prize your freedom and you scoff at the notion of love because, well, I don’t know why you do, but that, in itself, is not enough for me.”

The lost, wistful look on Alice’s face stirred up a spark in a dark, frozen corner inside his chest—a dangerous spark of doubt and regret. He didn’t want to give her pain, but

was there any other way? He was not in the way to marry—for any reason, money, companionship, even the basic cordiality of mutual respect.

“The one thing I could ever offer you is the one thing I know you would never accept,” Edward said while returning to his chair. “You are not in the market for that sort of arrangement, Miss Winslow.”

She wrapped her arms around her middle, “To be your mistress, isn’t that it?”

“In less vulgar terms,” Edward sipped his cooled drink and grimaced at the raw feeling in the back of his throat. “But essentially, yes.” Resting the cup, he asked, “Is there any other reason you came here than to tell me we will never become anything significant?”

“I suppose not,” she replied softly.

“You are free to leave whenever you’d like,” he muttered and held back the grimace at how uncouth and harsh it sounded. “But Alice, you need to ask yourself, what do you truly want? Who do you truly want?”

She pivoted to him, her eyes big and brimming with a sheen of tears. “That’s unfair.”

“Why?”

“Because what I want is what I will never allow myself to have,” Alice said before walking through the door.

She would have done them both a service if she had slammed the door behind her, but she left with a whisper and not the bang he’d so wanted. Dropping the quill onto a blotter, Edward sunk into his seat and pressed the heel of his left hand into his eye.

“Damn and blast, what is wrong with me?” he asked himself with a croak.

Giving up on the very idea of working, Edward left for his rooms, tugged out a drawer in his washing room, and took a dram of laudanum. Back in his chambers, he pulled the drapes down and fell back against the pillows as fatigue began to spread outward in languorous waves.

His eyes and limbs grew heavy, and he barely felt when Atticus clambered onto the bed and curled up at his feet. Sleep beckoned, and too exhausted and ill to resist, he finally followed.

CHAPTER 15

Gazing up at the front facade of the Ashmolean Museum, at the four tall columns with their massive Corinthian capitals with lateral projecting wings, Alice easily made the correlation between the museum and the Temple of Apollo.

“It is all very intimidating, isn’t it?” Penelope whispered by her side.

“Come on, girls,” Aunt Agatha called while she held onto her husband’s arm as they took to the steps. Eliza was on her father’s other side. “We shan’t dilly-dally.”

Glancing down at the invitation for an up-and-coming artist’s debut that Benedict had sent her, Alice swallowed and looked up again. Linking her arm with her sister, they headed up the stairs as well, careful to not trip over their feet.

While most of the museum was closed for the night, there were three other parlors that were open for viewing: the antiquities, coins, and Eastern art.

It had been two weeks since the disastrous visit to Edward’s home and as much as she tried to put it out of her mind—she couldn’t. Benedict had been over twice, they’d taken strolls in Hyde Park and even gone to Gunther’s for their famous ices, but Alice could not shake the feeling that the enthusiasm he’d once had was waning.

After handing in their invitations, she looked up at the soaring roof and the liveried waiters with trays of champagne wandering through the crowd. This was an event where the true *crème-de-la-crème* of the ton was attending.

“Oh my,” Penelope whispered. “Is that man over there one of the royal family?”

“I think so,” Alice replied after peering in the direction, then nodded to their aunt. “Aunt is overjoyed at attending this night. She’d always wanted an in with the beau monde and this might be it.”

Aunt Agatha fiddled with the grey velvet turban slipping over her faded brown curls, her small hands pushed the headpiece back as she verily vibrated with energy. She wore an indigo-colored velvet that was four seasons behind and was thick and rather shapeless.

“Does she not see the ladies looking at her as if she were a three-eyed fish?” Penelope asked.

“I don’t think she cares,” Alice replied. “What I do care about is you and Lord Rutledge. How is that coming along?”

Shouldn’t he have proposed marriage by now? It was in his agreement, or, well, his order from that mysterious man.

“He’s been... polite,” Penelope sighed. “But I cannot help but think he is being disingenuous in it. I don’t think he wants anything to do with me, Alice, and while I thought I was in love with him, now I am wondering what I ever saw in him.”

Her sister’s words made Alice stop cold. “But Penelope—” she dropped her voice, frantic with worry. “What about the...”

“I will bear it,” Penelope whispered. “But I am not sure he will be a willing father either.”

Alice cast through her head on how to reply—but no words came to her mind. She

didn't have a moment to worry about that as her aunt began making a spectacle of herself.

"Lady Somerset!" her aunt tittered, "and Viscountess Rutherford. So delighted to see you two! How do you do?"

"Isn't that Lady Tulloch and Countess Trent?" Penelope whispered. "Is Aunt addled?"

Alice flushed with humiliation as her aunt continued to greet the occupants of the room; some of them by their right titles but most of them far from it.

Despite the polite murmured replies, Alice saw the raised brows and mocking smirks behind the champagne flutes and fans. She could practically hear what they were thinking; is this woman fit for Bedlam or has she just been released from it?

Eliza was halfway across the room, talking with two other ladies, ignoring her mother completely. Her uncle, as unseasoned as he was with the ton, could only stand by and watch in polite mortification as his wife did her best to ingratiate herself into the upper class.

A bell rang, calling the guest's attention to the host, who told them the exhibition was open and for them to follow him.

"Please, start from the right to the left," the host began. "Monsieur Lefebre has indicated that is how they are to be viewed."

After waiting for most of the guests to go before them, Alice and Penelope began to take in the artwork, which started with a young girl in a field of daisies, her dark hair fluttering in the wind, as did her small white dress. The art was so detailed and precise, Alice half wondered if she were not looking through a window and gazing at

a real meadow.

The portraits continued with the same girl turning into a young woman in a Grecian white dress, sitting atop a tree limb—the third had the girl in the arms of a young man, gazing at him with the expression of a lady in love.

The fourth had the lady with a young boy in her arms, and the last, the young woman as an old woman, her dark hair now grey through the roots, leaning on her husband while waving to her son in the distance. But what was so intriguing and utterly enthralling was the field stretched from the first painting to the last, unbroken.

“It is a solidarity in change,” Alice noted. “The one thing that never changes, even as she ages.”

Penelope leaned in; her eyes widened. “Alice, these strokes are so fine, they look as thin as a strand of hair. It must have taken ages to paint all these.”

Joining her sister to peer at the minutiae of the painting, Alice pulled back. “You are right. The brushwork is so precise. That is marvelous.”

At the end of the line, Penelope nodded over her shoulder. “Duke Valhaven just walked in.”

Instantly, her calm mood vanished and anxiously, she slid her palms down her gown. The washed ivory was the most beautiful color she’d ever seen, and when she had sewn it, she’d felt happy that it would highlight her complexion. Now she worried if it made her look like a pasty mess.

She glanced up and her gaze clashed with Edward’s. Her breath caught; he was always handsome; in his evening attire, he was breathtaking.

Don't do it. Don't look at him.

"Would you like to visit another exhibit?" She asked Penelope pointedly. "There are three more rooms we can visit."

"I think I'll stay here for a while," Penelope said, "But go on if you'd like. Oh, His Grace is approaching."

Her heart stopped for just a moment and then sped up as he crossed the room coming directly toward them; before he bowed, she dipped into a curtsy. "Your Grace."

Alice snapped open her fan to distract herself while Penelope openly ogled the Duke; she blinked, realizing that the man who'd played such a large part in her life and her latest discoveries about herself had never met her sister directly.

Which made her sad. If he'd been her beau... But he isn't, she chastised herself.

"Miss Penelope, Miss Alice," he greeted coolly, his gaze as distant and detached as his voice. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but my brother will be absent tonight. His professor is forcing him to stay all night with a tutor to rewrite a paper. However, he gives me his word that he will visit on the morrow."

Her heart sank. "I am sorry to hear that. I'd hoped—" she sighed, "—never mind."

"I hope you can enjoy this evening anyhow," Edward said calmly. With a bow, he left to a trio of men, artlessly snagging a glass of champagne as he went.

Alice allowed her gaze to trail after him and it lingered for a while, until Penelope gently elbowed her in the side and with some quiet parting words, she left for the other exhibits. This room, two long corridors away, housed antiquities, and she gazed with wonder at a mural from Mesopotamia and vases from Ancient Egypt.

A statue of Poseidon poised to throw his trident, but the deadly weapon was missing. She pinked and averted her eyes from his male member and turned to another vase that showed a man fondling a woman's breast through her gossamer clothes.

She turned away to view another statue; a trio of water nymphs, all three of them naked, their generous curves and sylphlike bodies were masterpieces in themselves.

"Is it not amazing that the ancient people had such reverence and regard for the human body?" Edward murmured from behind her, startling her so much she nearly tripped forward into the statue.

His hands thrust outward catching her, before steadying her and getting her back on her feet. The heat of his hand permeated through the layer of silk and cotton and seared her skin.

She pulled away and shivered. "Why—why are you here?"

He quirked a brow. "Can a man not explore more than the primer attraction?"

"Oh... of course." Her lashes lowered, and her cheeks warmed.

"This was five centuries before Christ," he gazed at the sculpture. "When did society turn us into such prudes?"

Her face flamed. "That is improper talk in front of a young woman, Your Grace."

"It would be," Edward said while rounding the statue and meeting her eyes with a smoldering gaze. "If I didn't know how passionate you are. Admit it, Alice. Are you really going to let all your passion go unplumbed for the rest of your life?"

She bristled, "What matter is that of yours? You are not agreeable to marriage or

anything else than what delights you for a moment and then you will invariably move on. I am not foolish enough to buy into your game.”

His lips ticked down at a corner, “I suppose I am selfish.”

“Yes, you are,” she agreed. “Why are you so against marriage anyhow? Was it a bad example your parents had set for you? Was your heart broken in the past? Why are you so staunchly against an ordinary tenant of existence?”

His jaw worked as he stared at the statue, “This isn’t the sort of thing one talks about with a well-bred miss,” he muttered, “I don’t want to shock you, Alice.”

She straightened. “Try me.”

“When I was six-and-ten, I came home from my last year at Eton, primed and ready to go off to Oxford. I walked in on my father having relations with two women who were certainly not his wife.”

She winced, “Good god.”

“He noticed me and told me I could claim one if I wanted,” Edward said hollowly. “Disgusted, I turned away, walked right back to my carriage, and went back to Eton.

“I couldn’t forgive my father for that blatant abuse of his vows, and I felt soured about the very idea of marriage. It was not right to trick a woman into marriage when you know you have no inclination of holding to that vow. It was better to stay unattached than be a heinous deceiver.”

“I am so sorry.”

He tensed. “I don’t want your pity, Alice.”

She kept her voice calm. “There’s a difference between pity and empathy, Edward. I don’t feel sorry for you—I feel sorry that you had that dreadful experience.”

He did not reply to that, only stared at her long enough that she grew antsy. “What?”

“That is the first time you have said my name.”

“Is it?” she asked. “I apologize, that was overdue.”

Footsteps entered the gallery, and Edward, after darting a look at the door, reacted the same way he had done in the maze garden, tugging her around a corner at the back of an open sarcophagus. The space had clearly been designed for one person, but now there were two bodies in the tight space—and one of them was quite big.

She and Edward stood facing one another; she was squished between his hard frame and the open tomb. Enticing heat exuded from his body and she felt like she was pressed tightly onto a heated wall.

“Be silent.” His quiet words brushed hotly against her ear, while moisture trickled beneath her bodice. She felt flushed all over. His eyes were firm. “And stop wriggling about.”

“Why are we hiding?” she whispered. “We were not doing anything wrong.”

In the dimness, she could make out the harsh jut of his jaw and the tiny nook in his nose; his clean male musk pervaded her nostrils, affecting her... strangely.

“For God’s sake, stop moving.” His voice sounded oddly husky. “Do you want us to be found?”

A woman’s high, quivering voice said, “Didn’t Duke Valhaven come this way? I’d

wanted to talk to him about him possibly courting my daughter.”

Her mouth fell open. “ Oh .”

“I don’t know why you keep with this, Morana,” another woman tutted. “The Duke has made it clear that he is not one to marry. It is common knowledge in the ton and across the continent. What more do you want from him? To write it in the sky?”

Clamping her lips tight, Alice waited for the group to leave before she whispered, “I see why you wanted to hide. Are you so terrified of marriage-minded mamas?”

“ Frustrated more like,” he grunted.

She licked her lips—unintentionally. “Are you going to let me go now?”

His eyes honed onto the motion. “Not when you do things like that.”

Instinct told her what he was about to do. “We can’t.”

“Just this one last time,” he breathed raggedly, and in the next instant, his mouth was on hers; his hard, firm lips ignited a submerged need inside her. She felt something deep inside respond to the dominance, her heart wanted to give him something from deeper. A hunger for something she’d never known came roaring to life inside her, and the feeling was astonishing.

A soft moan escaped her throat, and Edward swallowed it like a man dying of thirst. His low growl shivered through her moments before their tongues twined and tangled.

Then the kiss deepened, and while her knees were tempted to give out, she didn’t fall; instead, firm unmovable hands were holding her fast, and all she could do was cling

to the warm, hard muscles that anchored her.

His tongue slid against hers again, and the slippery twist released a molten rush between her thighs. She moaned and the kiss tangled, getting hotter and hotter. Her head ran with the pleasure of it and just as she felt weak enough to faint, he left her lips to suck her earlobe, to lick his way down her neck.

“Stop, stop,” she pulled away and gasped. “I need—I need to leave.”

Edward stepped away, his expression that of a man deeply conflicted, and Alice slipped between him and the sarcophagus and away, her hand pressed to her swollen lips.

Her heart was in knots and her head swirled with fear. How could never again become once more? And what was worse—she had a creeping feeling that it would not be the last time.

Slowly making a round through the other three galleries, Edward knew the thunderous emotion he sported would deter everyone from approaching him. He needed time to think.

The storm within him was roiling at full gale, and he was equally provoked and bewildered by the intensity of emotion Alice provoked in him. Why did she have such an effect on him? How was it that she was tempting him to step away from his decision to be a bachelor for life and give her what she wanted?

Returning to the main chamber, he spotted Alice with her sister, but while she was blissfully unaware, her waspish cousin was gazing at the two with nothing but blistering envy and hate on her face. Edward was not one to scare easily, but a twist of worry tightened under his breastbone.

What was the little conniving Miss up to?

Sipping a new glass of champagne, he promised himself to protect Alice, even when she didn't know about it—because the girl was up to something. He could wager half his wealth on that.

How could he go about it though?

Keenly, he watched the girl go over to a trio of ladies: Miranda Valentine, a tall, thin woman, a short woman with an upturned nose, rather like a pig, and a third one who looked like she only had air and sliver netting between her vacant blue eyes. She whispered something to them before looking over to her relatives.

He saw how the cousin pandered to the tall one, and knew while she was spiteful as a rearing snake, she was not the ringleader, the tall one was. Turning away, he smiled to himself; all he needed was to know where that one lived and find a servant who needed coin.

On the other hand, he needed more protection for Alice in case the cousin made a move away from their home.

Runners, he told himself. I'll have them protect her in my stead.

Instantly, his head and his heart hurt—because he knew, without a doubt, he wanted her for himself. At any other time, he would have used his prowess to get what he wanted—but he couldn't this time.

Not with Alice, she was too precious, too pure.

Alice was right; he'd stabbed Benedict in the back too much; he was selfish. It was about time he did right by his brother—by staying away.

But what if she does not want Benedict... What if she truly wants me? What then?

CHAPTER 16

“T onight has been ever so wonderful,” Aunt Agatha exclaimed for what felt like the fifteenth time since leaving the museum. “I do think the ladies of the ton are warming up to our presence. Don’t you think, dear Richard?”

“Er, in some ways,” Richard rumbled. “But I do believe you addressed some people wrongly, my dear.”

“What?” Agatha’s tone went up an octave. “If that were the case, why did you not stop me?”

While the two argued, Alice stared out the window; the shrouded shapes in the dark night were as muddled as her thoughts. A part of her felt ashamed; if her parents had any idea of the things she had gotten herself into, she knew they would be sorely disappointed that she had been caught admiring such a lush and decadent lifestyle.

Even with that, another feeling burgeoned—she knew what she’d wanted to give Edward; the rigid cloak of control, Edward had called it. God, she wanted to be free.

From the moment their parents had passed, when she was merely eight-and-ten, she had tended to Penelope, refurbishing old gowns into new ones, managing the farthings and the pennies, minding the garden, minding the house, and cooking supper. When had she allowed a moment to herself?

Clarity struck her like a ray of sunshine piercing through the clouds. She did want what Edward had to give... but she could not accept it, not on those dishonorable

terms.

The sweetest ache stirred in her heart, and her throat stung from the memory of how she'd felt in his arms. How perfectly they had fitted together. Suddenly, she wanted to cry.

"Alice," Penelope asked in a hushed tone. "Are you all right?"

"Just tired," she replied, her voice cracking at the end. "I feel utterly fatigued."

"Have you been sleeping well?"

"No," she answered.

"Is it that time of the—"

"No!" Alice snapped; her tone was unduly harsh. She'd meant to keep it between them but the whole carriage had gone silent. Mellowing her tone, she said, "Not tonight, Penelope. I have a lot of things on my mind. I just need to sort things out."

"I cannot fathom what could ever be worrying you," Eliza replied snidely. "You have the catch of the Season."

"I do not."

"No, she is right, dear Alice," Aunt Agatha tittered happily. "We know Duke Valhaven is handing his title over to his brother, so if you do marry, you will be a Duchess. I cannot think of anything better for this family, can you, dear? Our dear niece, one of the most prominent women in the land. La!"

"Aren't we putting the cart before the horse here?" Alice said pointedly. "His

Lordship has yet to mention marriage.”

“Then you should start dropping hints,” her aunt nodded sagely. “Such as how you would decorate your rooms and the colors you’d love to see on pillows.

“Perhaps even mention the meals you would love to have made for him. Men operate better when they have directions, dear. They are not the masters of the subtle art,” her aunt pressed. “When was the last time you took a gander at The Lady for the Lord by Dame de LaMontague? The practical lessons there are priceless, dear, especially the ones about leading the house.”

As her aunt rattled on about a dusty old manual, Alice pondered what to do when Benedict came by on the morrow. Nothing came to mind, so she put the matter off to the next day when she had a clearer head to think the matter over.

“That is what you should do, dear Alice,” her aunt said as the carriage entered their drive.

Even while she had not heard a word of what her aunt had said, Alice nodded. “Yes, Aunt.”

Inside, Alice ignored Eliza’s scowl and went to her rooms with Penelope behind her. She invited her sister in wordlessly, knowing that she had questions.

The moment the door closed, she hugged her sister, “I am sorry about snapping at you. It was not any fault of yours.”

It’s all right,” Penelope murmured while sitting on the edge of Alice’s bed, “What is the matter?”

“I don’t know what to do with Lord Brampton,” she said bleakly. “I thought we had a

connection, but now that I have spent time with him, I am not as certain.”

“Why?” Penelope asked.

“I don’t think he will love me the way I have envisioned for so long,” Alice admitted. “And he is still very young, you know. University men are not known for their fealty to their wives, especially when they are so young.”

Shaking her head, Penelope said, “I don’t think he will stray, Alice.”

“I think I’d prefer someone older,” Alice admitted while unpinning her hair. “Someone who is past those years and is mature, but not over the hill, if you get my meaning.”

“A couple of years ago, you didn’t have the leeway to choose,” Penelope laughed. “Or was that two months ago.”

“Both,” Alice sighed.

“Well, I hope you’ll find the answer soon,” Penelope stood. “Aunt already has her heart set on the two of you marrying.”

“I hope she hasn’t started publishing the banns yet,” Alice replied.

“She most likely has, and we don’t know.” Her sister laughed her way out the door.

While sipping her weak tea, Alice listened attentively to Benedict’s recount of his week, the trials of his studies, and the outings he and his fellow classmates took.

“I think I need to start carrying an ice pack with me when I finish rowing,” he shuddered. “My arm felt like it was ripped out of its socket the last time.”

She sat the cup down. “You know, my mother would make salves that can ease such pain, and I think I have her notebook around here somewhere. Perhaps I should unearth it.”

His brows lifted, “As much as I appreciate the gesture, it is simpler to buy such remedies from an apothecary.”

Dropping her gaze, Alice worried her lip. “My lord, I—I do not know how to state this, but do you feel the connection we have, or had is—”

A brisk knock on the door drew her attention; her uncle’s footman was at the door, “Pardon me, my lord and misses. Lord Rutledge is here to see Miss Penelope.”

Her gaze flitted to Penelope who was sitting quietly in the corner, her back to the man. “Send him in, then.”

“Yes, Miss.” He left the doorway and soon enough returned with a maid in tow and Rutledge. The man looked rough—even while he looked the part of a gentleman in a dark grey cutaway jacket and blue brocade waistcoat, there was stubble on his cheek and his eyes looked wild.

Penelope stood, “My lord?”

“There you are,” he grinned. “I have been thinking about you.”

“Have you?” Penelope asked. “What about?”

Alice looked over to Benedict, who was looking at Rutledge with concern, his lips flattened with displeasure. “This is not good.”

Rutledge flopped on a sofa, his head lolling back before he straightened and blinked

twice, his words holding a hint of a slur. “Do you know how many women have thrown themselves at me, trying to coerce me or bribe or even guilt me into marrying them?”

“If you aren’t aware, it’s a long list, and you were at the near bottom, but thanks to powers that be—” he fumbled into his inner pocket and produced a ring, “—you have your wish. You will be my bride-to-be. Coming from a long line of traders, your options are rather limited.”

He tossed the ring to Penelope, but it landed short. “Put it on and we can get married. It is your wish after all. You have been casting your wiles at me this entire Season, you little tart.”

Alice felt a cold spike run through her and for a moment, she could not think of one thing to do—but Penelope did. She scooped the ring up and dropped it on his lap. “I am not a tart, your lordship, and if that is how you propose to me, ill-mannered and stinking of blue ruin, I must reject your offer.”

Rutledge’s face turned purple. “You dare to refuse me? When all this time you’d been tripping over your heels to get my attention?”

“That was before I realized how much of a lout you are,” Penelope snapped. “You are a good-for-naught womanizer with no morals or principles. I wish I could go back to the day when I thought you were upstanding and did pine for your attention. Now though, I see who you are. Leave me be.”

Shoving to his feet, Rutledge swayed, but he grabbed Penelope’s arm and tugged her closer. “We are to marry or my guts will be garters and my skin leather for boots. Now come, you little bitch—”

Benedict was on his feet and dragging Rutledge off her, damn nearly shoving the

drunk man into the wall. “The lady said to leave.”

Shaking his head like a wet dog, Rutledge sneered. “Who the devil do you think you are?”

“The next Duke of Valhaven, and if you dare touch that woman again, I will have you jailed,” Benedict ordered.

“Woman ?” Rutledge sneered. “She is no woman. Just a fast little bitch, good for nothing but breeding.”

“That’s enough,” Benedict snapped and yanked Rutledge away. “Get out of this house, now!”

“Make me!” Rutledge swung a fist and Alice screamed in fear, but Benedict adroitly dodged the blow and landed three ones of his own, in Rutledge’s ribs, belly, and the last one to his chin that sent the louse flying into an end table.

The wood cracked and snapped under his weight and went down with him, leaving the man dazed and barely moving on the ground.

Benedict grabbed him by the lapels and snarled. “If you think I will let you disrespect this lady in her home, I am going to throw you out myself.”

Rushing to her sister’s side, Alice hugged her tight, even more when Penelope started to cry. Benedict was maneuvering Rutledge out of the room and down the stairs, while Alice thanked her stars that her aunt, uncle, and Eliza were not home.

She didn’t know what excuse she would have given them if they had been.

“It will be all right,” Alice tried to comfort Penelope, but her words were hollow. “It

will be all right, Penelope. You will be better off without him.”

The cutting sobs that wracked her sister made Alice’s heart twist in two; she had thought—she had been so sure—that getting Rutledge to do right by her sister would make it all right. How wrong she had been.

Now, the bright picture she had seen for Penelope crumbled like cake before her face; if her sister was with child—this would not end well.

Stomping boots had her twisting to see Benedict entering the room, his face thunderous. For a moment, she could see the very same expression on Edward’s face when she told him what happened with Rutledge.

The rose-tinted spectacles she wore fell from her face and now, she saw the truth; the man would have never done right by Penelope. Her sister would have lived unhappily for the rest of her life.

Benedict was quiet, only looking on, while she tried to calm her sister; it took a while for Penelope to stop shedding tears. She was taken aback when he came forward and handed Penelope a glass of water.

“If it is any consolation, Miss Penelope,” Benedict said quietly, “it is better for you to know this now than if you did marry. The man is a morally bankrupt peasant. Apparently, the man is buried in debt. Thank heavens you escaped his clutches—he would have only dragged you down with him.”

Pressing the back of her hand to her eyes, Penelope whispered, “I was in love with him.”

“A lot of women are,” Benedict replied, a tender expression coasting over his face. “I must laud you though, you have come the closest to getting any commitment from

him. You must be a very strong woman.”

A half laugh came from Penelope. “Not strong enough I suppose. A stronger woman would have seen through his pretenses and bravado to find the empty soul behind it.”

“You are better off without him than with,” Benedict said, his eyes flittering to Alice. “Would the two of you like to get ices at Gunther’s?” he asked. “I think a bit of fresh air would do us some good.”

Knowing it was Penelope’s right to agree or not, Alice waited patiently for her to reply. “Thank you, my lord,” Penelope murmured. “But I wouldn’t ask this of you.”

“You didn’t,” Benedict replied. “It is my delight to help.”

“Would you excuse us for a moment?” Alice asked, and with his nod, stood while holding Penelope’s hand.

Gently, she ushered her from the room to their bedchambers and before anything else, wrapped her sister in a tight hug. “I am so sorry, Penelope, I never thought he’d do such a thing to you.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Penelope said quietly. “I asked you to fix a problem I made for myself, and you did the best you could, Alice. You cannot see the future, sister. None of this is your fault.”

“It is not yours either,” Alice said strongly. “Men like him are not worth your tears. Now, let’s change your dress.”

While taking out a blue walking dress, Penelope sighed, “I can see why you like Lord Brampton. He seems to be a very thoughtful and attentive man. He seems to have all the makings of a good husband.”

Alice gave a small smile. “He does, doesn’t he?”

But I feel more for his brother than for him. What am I doing? “Let’s get you ready then.”

CHAPTER 17

Alice trailed a step behind the two as they meandered through the park near Gunther's Sweet Shop. Ices in hand, she kept an eye on the two as they spoke, the conversation meandering around everything but Rutledge.

"I've never been to a fair," Penelope said. "Mother used to say there were unscrupulous people there, preying on the innocent."

"Maybe the ones who fall for the gypsy women's fortune-telling ruse," Benedict replied. "Otherwise, it is really enjoyable. There is one coming next week or so. Would you like to come with me?"

Behind them, Alice frowned, did he mean the two of them... or only Penelope? As they walked, she noted people looking at them askance, as if questioning who Benedict was courting, her or Penelope.

"Alice, should we ask Aunt about that or not," Penelope looked over to her.

"I don't think we need to," Alice replied. "We are adults, after all."

"This tangerine ice is delicious," Penelope mentioned, looking into her cup. "I never thought such a cold thing could be sweet, tart, and refreshing at the same time."

Looking at her cherry-flavored ice, Alice stifled a grimace; she suddenly wanted to be anywhere else than here; she sorely wanted to be with Edward. However, this was a very traumatic day for Penelope, the least she could do was to see it through before

running off.

“Alice?”

Her head snapped up; again, she had the concerning feeling that her sister—and possibly Benedict—had been calling her name multiple times.

Abashed, she gave them a small smile. “I’m sorry. What was that?”

“His lordship offered to refill our ices,” Penelope clarified, looking worried. “Are you all right?”

“You do seem worried,” Benedict said.

“I—I’m concerned about what Aunt will say when they see that broken end table,” Alice partially lied. “I am sorry for ruining our outing with such humdrummery, but you know me, always the practical thinker.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Benedict told her firmly. “And if you need, I will explain about Rutledge too. It might be easier coming from me.”

You really are your brother’s kin.

“Thank you, my lord,” Penelope replied, blushing. “You are too kind.”

He covered her hand with his and the look of tender affection crossing his face while he looked at Penelope only made Alice yearn to see Edward that much more. She knew it was time to speak with Benedict—but perhaps not this day.

When they returned to the townhome, moments before her aunt and cousin came in, Benedict sat his cup of coffee aside and said, “Mister Thorpe, may I have a word?”

Uncle Richard's brows flew to his hairline and her aunt gasped audibly enough that Alice knew she expected more than the man had to tell her.

"O-of course, my lord," Uncle Richard nodded quickly. "In my study, please."

After the two left the room, Alice went to her aunt who was suddenly busy fanning herself as if she would faint at any moment.

"It is not what you think, Aunt," she said. "It is not a marriage proposal."

"It's not ?" Her aunt squawked.

"Of course it's not," Eliza sniffed scornfully.

Ignoring her cousin, Alice explained, "There was an incident earlier with Lord Rutledge, and I am sorry to say, he will not be courting Penelope anymore."

Her aunt's face fell, "What? Why?"

"Because he was drunk and disrespectful," Penelope began, "and moreover, he does not give a whit about me or care about anything except himself."

"The man is a Viscount!" Eliza blurted. "What is there not to like?"

Alice slid a look to her and knew the two words that would deflate Eliza like a popped balloon. "He's poor."

"Oh," Eliza blinked, then shrugged. "Well, that makes sense."

"Then—" her aunt twisted in her chair to look over to the direction her husband had taken Benedict, "what does his lordship want to talk to Richard about?"

Succinctly, Alice told her about the fight between the two men and how it ended with the broken end-table. “That’s what they are talking about.”

Deflated, her aunt sighed, “Needless to say, I’d wished for something else coming from him.”

Exhausted, Alice excused herself. “I need to lie down; I have a headache.”

“I’ll see the lord out then,” her aunt nodded. “Have a rest, dear.”

Shoulders sagging, Alice left for her room and upon arriving, closed the door behind her and changed into a nightgown and a robe, before sinking into her bed. Turning sideways, she pressed her face into the pillow and tried to gather herself.

I’ve failed. I have failed Penelope. She needed me and I failed.

Objectively, she knew no blame should be resting on her shoulders—Rutledge had sunk his own ship—but the feeling lingered anyhow.

Her chest burned with a tangle of emotions she could not unravel, and the more she mulled over them, the tighter they grew. At one time, she slipped off to sleep, but it was not an easy one. She tossed and turned until sometime before midnight, she could not take it anymore.

Throwing on a dress and a cloak, with coins in hand, she slipped out of the house, and because the townhouse was so close to the square, she hailed a hackney to the Duke’s address. As much as she hated deceiving her family and knew she was risking her life and reputation, she had no choice.

Thunder rolled ominously ahead but she had come too far to turn back then. She needed to see Edward. Thunder rumbled once more. It was closer now; the storm was

not far off. As the hackney rolled up the long drive, she observed the privacy afforded by the towering trees and hedges.

They rode through an archway into a wide yard, and the rain began in earnest, sweeping across the forecourt in sheets. Lightning lit up the sky in bright flashes, causing the ponies to squeal and stamp their hooves. She paid the driver quickly as the rain came down and icy needles peppered her skin.

She pulled up her hood in an effort to protect herself from it, but it soaked her to her skin anyhow. Thunder boomed directly overhead; ducking her head against the heavy squall that plastered her clothes to her body, she hastened up the stone steps, slippery with rain, leading up to the manor's entrance.

Banging on the door, she prayed a footman would open quickly so she could get out of the rain, and on the third bang, the door opened and the butler Ramsay stood there in a robe and trousers. "Miss Alice?"

"I—I need to see E-Edward," she shivered.

He pulled her in, "Good gracious, Miss, what possessed you to come in this downpour at—" he craned his head over to the grandfather clock in the corner as he ushered her up the stairs "—half past midnight."

"I—I could not wait," she stammered. "I have to see him."

Instead of the study where she expected him to lead her to, Ramsay led her to a grand door that looked like it led to a full suite of rooms. He wrapped on the door quickly and before it was pulled in, she heard a small canine whine.

"Heel, Atticus," Edward's muffled voice came a second before the door was pulled in. His gaze ran over her instantly, "Alice ? What the devil are you doing here?"

“I need—” She sucked in a breath. “I need to speak with you. I—I cannot...”

He reached for her while looking to Ramsay, “See that we are not disturbed. Unless the manor is on fire, we are to be left alone.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the butler bowed.

With the scrape of the door closing behind her, Edward touched her cheek and her cloak, which he swiftly heaved off her and dropped to the floor with a wet plop. “You are soaked to the bone, sweetheart. What is it? Why are you here?”

Tears blurred her vision then, and she squeezed her eyes shut. She had not wept in front of her captor until now, for she had not wanted him to see her grief, her despair. Yet what did it matter? All hope had gone.

“Alice?” He asked this time more firmly. “Tell me why you are here.”

Hot tears ran down her face, and her body trembled from the effort it took to contain her sobs. She wrapped her arms about herself to keep a leash on her despair, but it was like trying to hold back a bursting tide, impossible.

Wrapping his arms around her, he pressed her face into the crook of his neck. “Why are you crying, Alice?”

“He—he couldn’t deliver,” she sobbed. With stuttering words, she told him about the incident between Rutledge and Benedict, and the fear in her heart. “She’s with child, Edward. Without him marrying her... she’ll be a fallen woman. She’ll never show her face in town without the scandal following her.”

How quickly the tears flowed. Wiping her face with the back of her hand, Alice cursed her frail nerves. The past few hours seemed to see her lurch from one

emotional episode to another.

“Hush, Alice, you are overwrought,” he murmured as she clung to him and her body convulsed.

“I—I can’t,” she whispered. “I can’t keep going on like this. I’m tired, Edward. I am so tired of doing everything. I am so tired of making sure everyone is fine while I keep pushing my needs away. I need—I need help.”

Her hoarse words and the fingers clutching at his back made his heart shatter in two. Alice was a proud woman, all so self-contained, but now, she was tiny and fragile. She was coming to seams in his arms, but not in the way he wanted. Now, he had to put her together again—one shard at a time.

As furious as he felt about Rutledge, he was more scared for Alice’s well-being. “What do you want me to do? What can I give you, Alice? What do you need?”

The emotions she had beneath her breastbone could not translate to words. “I—I don’t know...” she pressed a hand to her chest. “I feel it, but I don’t know how to put it in words.”

“I know what you want,” he said, his hand cupping the back of her neck and massaging the stiff lines there. Her earlier words about being tired resonated deep in his heart. “I know what you need, sweetheart. You need a release. Listen to me.”

Pulling away, he hated the lost, rootless emotion in her eyes. Alice was a strong woman, independent and brave, but the fear she held for her sister had gutted her to the core. It had probably made her challenge her own innate strength too.

Stepping away, he found a towel in a drawer and pulled his robe from his shoulders. “Go into my washing room, remove your clothes, and come back to me dressed in

this.”

He’d dropped his tone to the one that held an unmistakable order. “Dry well, I do not want you to get sick. Now, go.”

She swallowed tightly before heading off to the washing room, while Edward took out a few items from another drawer and rested them on the bed before he ordered Atticus out.

Pacing, he cast through his mind to find the best way to bring Alice from the brink. The soft scrape of the door behind him had him spinning; Alice was there, the lapel of his robe slipping down her shoulder. Her hair was down, a towel-dried tangle down her back.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he whispered.

He bent his head and directed her mouth to open to him with a coaxing kiss. His lips were hard and commanding, his tongue sweeping into her mouth. She sucked eagerly on his offering, and he growled against her lips, thrusting in deeper.

Their kiss caught fire, but he wanted more; angling her head, he kissed the curve of her neck, inhaling the sweet scent of her skin. Who knew that lily and fresh water could be so arousing?

He nuzzled her neck, her shiver causing his hardness to strain against its confines. “In fact, I have a game in mind.”

Her brow pleated. “What sort of game?”

“One inspired by all your talk of striving and self-improvement.” He traced a hand along her side, past the dip of her waist to the swell of her hip. God’s teeth, he liked

her shape.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

A small sound left her lips. “Yes.” She moistened them with her tongue. “I trust you.”

“In which ways do you trust me?” he asked. “Tell me, Alice.”

She shuddered, “To help me when I need it. You gave me your word and you kept it.”

“ And? ”

Alice shook her head. “I don’t know what else.”

She is innocent, after all. Well, partially innocent.

“Do you trust me with your safety?” he asked.

“Yes?”

“Your voice changed cadence at the end,” he noted. “Will you trust me with your safety, yes or no, Alice?”

“Yes.”

“Do you trust me to care for you while you are with me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you trust me with your body?” he pressed.

Her eyes lifted, "...Yes."

His fingers danced across her collarbone before he rested his palm at the base of her throat. He loosely circled his fingers around her neck, and Alice released a breath.

"Bring your shoulder blades together and then drop them down. Take a few deep breaths. You're tense, Alice, let the tension go," he ordered.

Her chest rose and fell, as did her shoulders, and instantly, he saw the stiff lines break. "Again."

After the third time, even the knot in her brows left her. "Good. Get on my bed, face the headboard on your knees."

She gave him a flickering look, but climbed on the bed and sat back on her heels, her palms resting on her thighs—and his blood simmered with heat.

Taking the silk blindfold and the rope, he rounded the bed. "Close your eyes, Alice."

Again, she looked at him, but then did as he asked, and he gently wrapped the blindfold around her eyes. Her sudden inhale was swift, but she didn't yank it off her head.

"Give me your hands, sweetness. Put your arms out, wrists together," he ordered. He could see she was unsure as she held her hands up, not knowing what to expect.

She surely didn't expect her wrists to be tied, the length of the red rope encircling her hands and tugging them together in one quick snap. "I want to make you feel secure."

"W-why?" Her words trembled.

Edward explained, "When you are bound, you do not have to hold yourself together. This is a safe place, Alice. You can cry, you can scream, you can let go."

"Pull at your wrists," he commanded.

She tried to lower her arms, but they didn't leave their perch from the pillow behind her. "Am I tied to something?" she whispered.

"Yes, to the headboard." He slid his fingertips around the edges of the bindings. "Not too tight, is it?"

"No." She tugged again, but her hands barely moved.

"Here, you do not make the decisions; there is no responsibility. You do not have to take care of everyone anymore," he murmured, his gaze coasting over her pert rounded derriere, tilted up because of the angle of the rope tie. "Here, you can surrender. You shall be taken care of and I'll be given what I want."

She was quiet for a moment. "And what you want is my surrender, isn't it?"

"Yes," he replied hoarsely, perching a knee on the bed.

"And how do I give you what you want?" she asked.

"By giving yourself the release you need," Edward hiked up the hem of his robe and exposed her bottom. His hand caressed her smooth skin, and another sweet swift inhale made him smile.

"You need to let your emotions out, Alice. We shall proceed gently," he assured her. "I shall deliver ten blows for the first infraction, and fifteen for the second. If you feel overwhelmed, say my name, if not, you will say Sir . Now, we begin."

CHAPTER 18

Before Alice could ask him what her infractions were—he'd seen that spark in the perking of her head—he landed the first slap to her buttocks.

“Ow!” she cried out, startled by the sudden strike.

He spanked her by hand, causing the warmth to grow inside and out and her breath left her with every hard connection. The slap sounded harsher than its delivery, as her backside grew tender and more sensitive with each land from his hand.

“We have five and ten more. How do you fare, Alice?”

“I’m,” she sucked in a breath and squirmed. “ Adjusting .”

“Your buttocks are beginning to glow a lovely shade of rose,” Edward’s voice grew rough and husky with a curious hitch. “I’ve never seen a prettier shade before in my life.”

He allowed her to catch her breath and brace herself; was she truly submitting herself to such treatment? He slapped her harder. This time it hurt enough to make her wonder if she could survive twenty more such blows.

Edward caressed her stinging skin. “Alice, this is not mere punishment for you, you need to look inside your heart and release the emotions. Expunge your emotions, Alice.”

Clenching her eyes, she thrashed against his hold as he continued the relentless spanking. Each blow stung more. The heat on her bottom increased until her skin was on fire.

Something was cracking inside her—she just didn't know what it was.

The moment she lurched forward, Edward slipped the knot on the rope and spun Alice onto his bare chest, and held her as her tears rolled silently down her cheeks.

Her shoulders were back, hands clenched in her lap as she shuddered. Heat settled in that hollow place under Edward's chest as she wept. Without any logical reason, he wanted to offer her the world, offer her the very thing he said he would never offer any woman.

If she wanted snow from the middle of the eastern desert, he would damned well find it for her.

"There you are, sweetheart," he murmured. "Let it out."

Alice tightened her fingers into his side; he didn't even mind the soft drips down his neck. "You've been carrying this load for so long, it is a part of you now."

"I didn't think a-anyone would help." Her words were a shade louder than a breath.

"But I did," Edward massaged the hairs at the back of her head. "And I will do it again."

"Th-thank you." She took it, pressing her face on his shoulder. "Can you tell me what my infractions are?"

"Leaving your house in the middle of the night with no weapon or protector is count

one,” his head craned to the window where a jagged fork of lightning carved the skin in two.

“You took an unnamed hackney who you do not know of who could have abducted you, count two. And coming to me in this wicked weather is count three. Those are your infractions.

“You’ll not risk your neck like that again, and if you do something as foolish as this again, there will be more consequences,” he said sternly. “You are far too important.”

“I won’t,” she murmured. “I promise.”

“Tell me, what are you feeling?” He smoothed his hand down her spine. “What are your senses telling you? What do you feel physically first?”

“The mattress,” she began, her face still muzzled in his neck. “It is soft as a cloud. I feel the chilled air above me, it is soothing over my skin.”

“Good,” he rubbed his cheek over her hair. “And what are you feeling in your heart and mind?”

“Relief,” Alice whispered. “It feels like it’s a river flooding through my veins. But before, it was pure despair. All I could think about was that so little of my life was in my control. That I couldn’t help my sister. That I couldn’t fulfill the promise I’d made to our parents, and that Penelope was going to live a half-life.”

“And now?” He brushed his nose across her cheek. “How do you feel about that?”

“It’s... the worry is still there, but it is not cutting me up inside,” she sighed. “I don’t know what will happen from here, but I know I’ve done all I could do. I suppose there is... there might be more to do, but I—I’ll have to see how that goes.”

Her breath skittering over his skin left a path of gooseflesh in its wake. He slid his fingers into her thick hair, softly meeting her lips to his. “It is time for your reward. Get on your back, Alice,” his tone dropped to calm control.

She turned without question and slipping to the edge of the bed, he placed his hands beneath her knees and spread her legs wide. Her back arched, “What are you doing, Ed— Sir ?”

“What I’ve wanted to do for the longest time,” he soothed, his breath hot on her belly. “You trust me. Yes ?”

“Yes,” she breathed, “with my life. But—but what are you doing?”

Sliding the silken gown up further, he nonchalantly whispered, “I am going to give you the wickedest kiss men give women, and lick up every drop when you come for me.”

“Are-are you—”

His fingers dug into her skin as he swept his tongue over her from her core up to her nub. “ Edward! ” Her voice was a strangled cry that was the sweetest he had heard in months.

He licked her again, slowly, leisurely, and alternated between nibbling at her lower lips and lapping at her opening. She let her thighs fall wider; slowly, he took her swollen bud between his lips.

“ Oh my— ” Her legs kept jerking, no matter how firmly he held her limbs.

“Hold still, Alice.” His nose bumped against her most sensitive spot, and she cried out again. His lips drew away and he put firm pressure on her nub with his thumb.

“You look beautiful tied to my bed, Alice. I can see that red hemp knotted all around your sweet little body.”

She writhed beneath him, twisting the bedsheets in with trembling fingers. “It all feels beyond wicked!”

“It should.” He blew a cool breath of air over her damp flesh. “You taste amazing. Like honey and spice. Having you is going to be my favorite dessert.”

He pushed her legs back, licking and suckling at the peak of her sensation; his tongue circled her opening... then thrust inside. In response, she rocked her hips into his thrusts, pulling at her bindings frantically, but when Edward scraped his teeth over her inflamed flesh; she was gone.

Her neck arched; her body shattered around him. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her face and seeing her bliss, ignited his; a jagged spark of lust shot to his erection, making it throb against the taut ridges of his trousers. A low groan interrupted his heavy breathing.

“Edward?”

He looked up. “Don’t mind me. You are utterly beautiful when you are brought to crisis. I almost embarrassed myself just looking at you.” His chest brushed her breasts a moment before his lips whispered across her cheek.

He was so aroused when she faced his voice, in all her despoiled primness and awakened sensuality, that he feared spilling in his trousers like an untried lad.

Rejoining her in the bed, he drew her back onto his chest; the rain now flowing steadily against the windowpane. “You did so well, Alice. I am delightfully surprised that you took a spanking so well.”

“I don’t want Benedict,” Alice admitted indolently. “I—I can’t see a life with him.”

He cocked a brow to her. “And why is that?”

“I swear to you that I never got involved with Benedict on false purposes, but... as we grew closer, I began to see him as a way out,” Alice sounded tortured. “I took him as a path to give my sister a better life and for me to leave the hateful house I had lived in for so long.

“That night in the maze, when you asked me if I loved your brother, I truly did not have an answer for you, because I didn’t know what I wanted,” she craned her head up to him.

But instead of the languid, redolent look he expected to come from her, she looked anguished. “I want you, but I know I cannot have you. Not—not the way I would want it to be.”

Her words rammed right up against the iron-clad barrier that had no marriage chiseled hard into its surface. No, marriage was not for him. Not anymore.

But... is a grudge against your father that much of an impetus to tread the road of life alone? Wouldn’t it be much happier with someone?

Edward ground his teeth and forced his thoughts away. If he traveled down the dark hallways of what-ifs, he would be lost to them.

In a hoarse voice, he continued, “I want you to let go of fear and worry, Alice. I want to give you the rest you sorely deserve. I want you to trust me to give you everything you need—”

“ But you cannot .”

“Only temporarily,” he stroked her hair away and kissed her forehead. “Only temporarily, sweetheart.”

“Alice?” Uncle Richard blinked over that morning’s edition of the Times. “Will you be joining us?”

“Yes, Uncle, I shall.” She unwrapped her cloak. “I took an early morning walk as I had a lot on my mind. You know I am an early riser.”

“Oh,” Richard shook out the paper. “Well, have some tea. I had a long night myself. Your aunt, bless her soul, kept waxing poetic on how well off you will be as a wife to a Marquess, soon-to-be Duke.”

She could only give him a weak smile, “I hope Aunt is not putting the cart before the horse, uncle.”

“No, no,” he uttered. “She is simply overjoyed at you elevating your station and taking us with you. Especially dear Eliza. You know that girl is brimming with anxiety to meet a good man of the ton.”

“After the many ones she rejected,” Alice murmured absently, “I would be lying if I told you I am shocked.”

The crinkle of paper drew her attention from the cup of tea she was preparing, and she found her uncle’s eyes wavering over her. “Why would you say such a thing, Alice?”

She found herself unable to sidestep the truth that everyone in the house was gleefully ignoring. “Uncle, Eliza has had many suitors pass through these doors and not one of them has she accepted. Why do you think that is?”

He frowned and dropped another square of sugar in his tea. "From what the missus has told me, it is because nary one of them was a good fit for dear Eliza. You know how frail she is and how she should be attended to."

Of course that was his answer. The man was as hen-picked as a bag of corn kernels in front of a chicken coop.

"No, Uncle, it is because she wants more than anyone can offer her, and wants everyone else's too," Alice said tiredly. "Your daughter is selfish and spoiled rotten with expectations she ought not to have about a lord. At this point, I believe she could be given a prince sitting atop a pile of gold and jewels and she will want the king on the throne. The last two Lords she courted had first taken an interest in Penelope, but then had their attentions snatched by her out of jealousy, only to be tossed aside a few weeks later, then wanting nothing to do with our family for how they overheard her speaking of them to her friends."

He dropped his paper, aghast. "Alice! What a horrible thing to accuse of your poor cousin!"

Emboldened, she shook her head. "Yet we all know it to be true. Why are we never allowed to say anything about it? No one will ever be enough for Eliza and until you open your eyes and see that and address it, she will never change, nor will Penelope ever have a chance at a match. Lord knows it was a miracle for myself to find someone that she wasn't nipping at their heels to steal."

"Alice!" Richard's tone dropped. "You are passing your place. It seems that because you are being courted by a Marquess, you are now somehow critical of your cousin. Eliza is simply unfortunate in nuptial matters as you once were."

"Do you really think so, Uncle, or is that what she has told you?" Alice asked, taking her cup. When no answer came forward, she shook her head, "Please, excuse me."

Entering her room, she rested the cup on a table and sunk into a chair; Alice found herself exceedingly tired of so many things, especially the hypocrisy in her home. It felt absolutely liberating to have let so many cares drop from her shoulders; Edward had redirected something inside her that finally— finally —felt right.

Settling her tea on her end table near her bed, she undid her cloak and laid it over a chair.

The worry she had carried for so long was tying her up in knots no longer, and while she had not come to a decision in regards to what to do with Penelope's condition, she could at least allow herself time to breathe.

“Alice?” Penelope stuck her head in the doorway. “May I come in?”

“Sure,” she sighed, her brows lowering. “Are you all right?”

Her sister closed the door, “I am. But I came to your room last night and never saw you. Where did you go?”

Before she replied, she asked, “Why did you come to see me?”

“I felt ill,” Penelope grimaced while pressing a hand to her belly. “I wanted to ask you if you think...” She blew out a long breath. “...I've heard talk, whispers really, of a mixture of herbs that can end an unwanted situation... if you get my meaning.”

Alice blinked, then blinked again, then her heart swooped in dismay. “Penelope, I—I don't think that is the best course of action.”

Her sister slumped into a lone chair, her expression defeated. With her eyes on the floor, she admitted, “I don't know what to do.”

Reaching over, Alice held Penelope's hands tightly, "I... don't know yet, Penelope, but we will think of something."

Ducking her head, Penelope picked at the sheets, "Lord Brampton, he's nice."

"That he is," Alice sighed.

"I—I wish Rutledge was like that," Penelope murmured. "But he's not. I now realize the qualities of a man I should desire. He's kind and protective."

"He's handsome too," Alice smiled, teasing her sister, knowing it would make her blush.

"He is. I hope—" Penelope scrambled up and clapping a hand over her mouth, darted out of the room with Alice following her in a panic.

She got to the washing room as Penelope emptied her stomach in a pail, the bilious a pale yellow but pungent.

Alarmed, Alice held her sister's hair back while she kept throwing a look over her shoulder, afraid that her uncle would be alerted to the sound and would come to investigate.

Hands shaking, she lurched again, nausea clearly rolling over Penelope in waves, sweat beading on her skin. Finally, she stepped away from the bowl and rested her head on her arm.

A flood of sympathy washed through Alice's heart at seeing her sister's suffering. She filled a glass of water and held it out to Penelope while a flicker of something at the edge of her vision had her turning.

Eliza wrinkled her nose, “Is she contagious?”

“No, Eliza,” Alice said flatly. “You will not contract what she has.”

Her cousin’s narrow gaze flickered from her to Penelope. “What does she have? I heard her losing her accounts last night too.”

“An upset stomach,” Alice lied.

“The lamb pie I had last night for supper did not sit well with me,” Penelope croaked. “And I didn’t have anything this morning yet.”

“Well,” Eliza pattered her bonnet and swanned off. “Just keep her away from me. I cannot afford to get ill.”

Dismissing her cousin with a roll of her eyes, Alice turned to Penelope, only for Eliza to pivot on her feet, “And I heard what you told Father. Don’t think I didn’t.”

Notching her head up, Alice dared her cousin to rebut her words. “Was anything I said out of place or incorrect?”

“It was all rude,” Eliza said stiffly. “So yes, it was all out of place. Years ago, when Mother generously agreed to take you into our home, I thought it would be wonderful to have another girl my age with us so I could finally have some company. Now I know you only came here to stab me in the back.”

Holding her gaze, Alice replied, “I know it is hard for you to hear the truth, Eliza, but nothing I said was a lie and you know it. You have been picking lords and throwing them away as if they were scraps of paper, and none of them are ever good enough for you.”

Blistering anger twisted Eliza's face into a mask of hatred before it vanished in a moment, and she looked as expressionless as a porcelain doll.

She sniffed. "Well, I guess you have no standards then. Good luck with that Marquess of yours. Something tells me he will go the same way Lord Rutledge did. Do not disturb me, I am busy." Pivoting on her heels, she strode away.

Turning to a quiet Penelope, Alice rubbed her forehead. "I think you might need some weak tea. Come on."

"You still haven't told me where you were," Penelope whispered.

"That—" Alice looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was in earshot, "—is for another time."

CHAPTER 19

“Edward?” Benedict strolled into his study, bearing a tray with two cups of coffee. “Do you have a moment?”

Heaving his hands from his pockets, Edward spun away from the large bow window and the lush sight of his mother’s old garden. His eyes flickered to the ormolu clock on the mantle behind him—over three-quarters of an hour.

Typically, the sight of the flowering bushes and trimmed hedges calmed him and reminded him of a time when he had blithely played on that square of green with no matters to bother him... but today, it had not worked. Peace still eluded him.

“Yes, of course.” He nodded to Benedict. “What is on your mind, brother? If it is that damned economics paper again—”

“No, it’s not that,” Benedict cut in while placing the tray at the center of the grand desk. “And that was an ethics paper which I turned in two weeks ago.”

“Right,” Edward nodded while circling his desk to perch on the edge and add a dash of milk to his drink, “What is it then?”

“I am breaking the courtship with Miss Alice,” Benedict admitted, forcing Edward to tighten his grip around the cup or it would surely slip from his hand.

Taking a sip, Edward carefully sat the cup down and calmly asked through the hammering in his ears. “Why?”

Sagging into the seat, Benedict rubbed his face. “I feel that there is no connection between us, not the one a couple heading to marriage should have.”

Clearing his throat, Edward replied, “You want a love match then?”

“I know it’s not all the rage of the ton,” Benedict shrugged. “We of the Upper Ten marry for mutual convenience, money, and connections. Respect and fidelity come second.

But I am not about a life where extramarital affairs are not uncommon but love matches are rarer than hen’s teeth. I want a partnership the very opposite of what mother and father had.”

Shifting a paper on his desk to appear distracted, Edward asked, “And what is it that you find so unpleasant about marrying Alice?”

“It is nothing terrible. It’s simply that I—” Benedict clarified before rubbing his face, “—feel more for her sister than for her. I always have. I feel like a heel saying such a thing, but Miss Penelope is so... vulnerable now, and I can’t stand aside any longer.

“When I saw her the other day and found the jackanape who was courting her, I felt...” Benedict’s lips slanted as he searched for the right word. “For the lack of the best fitting term, I felt jealousy. And then, I felt she needed a champion. Someone to defend her.”

Not Alice. She would have leaped in both feet first.

From the limited interactions he had with Miss Penelope, Edward could understand why Benedict would feel that the girl needed help. She certainly did not have the temerity of her older sister and did need support.

He certainly could not blame the girl for falling for Rutledge's lies—a lot of innocents would have—and he would never reprimand Benedict for defending the girl.

Truthfully—and shamefully—he was relieved that his brother's attention was away from Alice.

“Are you sure about this?” Edward asked calmly. “You know this will cause whispers.”

Benedict shrugged non-caringly, something that was out of character for him. “It will blow away in a couple of months when the next scandal comes along. The only thing I care about is making sure that, that... boulder, does not come within a mile of the girl.”

Fiddling with a pen, Edward asked, “How do you think Miss Alice will take this?”

“Honestly, I think she has been feeling the widening chasm between us but is not sure how to approach it,” Benedict said, squinting in his cup. “Blast, I've finished this already.”

“You do inhale coffee as if it were air,” Edward said. “A habit you have taken from me, I'm afraid.”

“That I have,” Benedict laughed. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have a day ahead of me.”

Frowning, Edward asked, “Are you not going to have breakfast?”

“No,” Benedict glanced over his shoulder. “Another trait I have adapted from you I fear. Oh, and I may not be back for dinner.”

“No worries,” Edward waved him off. “I may not be here either.”

When he left, Edward fell back into his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. What was he to do about this now? He wanted Alice... but the vow to never marry. Was it firm... or was it wobbling?

Was it too much to let go of an old grudge to find happiness? There was comfort and ease when he was with Alice. He admired her strength, her dedication, even when she showed her vulnerability. He would be lying to himself if he did not admit that he wanted—craved—her pleasure.

But what do I do about it?

He knew one thing though—he was going to protect her as long and as far as she needed him to.

It just so happened that Alice was passing by the front door of the townhouse when someone knocked. Answering it, she took a breath to collect herself.

“My... lord,” she stepped aside to allow him entry, “I did not expect you today.”

The Marquess swept his hat off before stepping inside, “I had not planned on it either, but you and I need to speak, Miss Alice.”

Silently, she closed the door and turned. “It has been long overdue, hasn’t it?”

“Especially since yesterday,” Benedict said, “Is there somewhere we can talk? Privately?”

“Yes, we can—”

A flurry of peach bombazine came down the stairs and Alice stepped aside as Eliza managed to slide her coat on whilst tying the ribbon of her bonnet at the same time.

“Oh no, I am late. So late,” Eliza huffed and peeked out the door, waiting on the carriage. She turned to the two and hastily curtsied to Benedict. “My lord.”

“Where are you going?” Alice asked.

“To Miranda’s,” Eliza tapped her foot. “Er, that is Miss Valentine, my lord.”

“I see,” Benedict nodded. “Well, we shall leave you to it. Miss Alice?”

“Yes, yes,” she nodded to the stairs. “Please.”

As they mounted the stairs, Alice could not shake the dawning realization that he was not here to propose marriage. She could not blame him either as even if he did ask her to marry him, she would reject it.

A marriage to a man she did not want or feel a connection with was not one she would endure, even if that man had the wealth of the world at his feet.

“Would you like some tea?” She asked as they entered her aunt’s drawing room.

“It might help,” Benedict said.

As she sent for some tea, and they settled in across from each other, Alice folded her hands on her skirts. “You are not here to ask for marriage, are you?”

“No,” he sounded almost remorseful. “Miss Alice, as much as I regret saying this—”

“You have nothing to be regretful for,” Alice swallowed. “I will admit that in the

beginning, it felt right, it felt fitting, but it has not felt that way lately. You are an honorable man, Benedict, kind and smart and lovely to be around, but we... we do not fit. Not as much as I would have liked.”

His expression fell. “You took the words from my mouth, Alice.”

“I should have done it before,” she said while rubbing her left arm. “I am sorry we—I took this long to say it. You seem to want a wife who is not—” She let out a breath. “—I am too old, too independent, too practical, and too unsophisticated to attract a husband like you. Also, I am not one of the Le Bon Ton . There is not one drop of blue blood that runs in my veins.”

Shaking his head, Benedict stopped her, “I do not give a whit about you not having blue blood, Alice. You are a lovely woman, but as I grew into my majority, I realized that I wanted the very opposite of what my mother and father had, a marriage of silence.”

“And your brother does not want to marry at all,” she mentioned absently. “How intriguing is that.”

“Not at all,” Benedict replied. “Edward is a curious creature and stubborn as a mule.”

She bit her lip. “Are you sure that trait does not follow in the family?”

“Very,” Benedict said, then sobered. “Are you sure you have no regrets about our courtship ending?”

“Not at all,” Alice shook her head. “I am relieved though that you felt the divide too. I shudder to think what would have happened if we had kept up the pretense that all was well and went on with the courtship.”

He nodded, “I am glad that we cleared this up on amicable terms, because I—”

Just then, Penelope came into the room, “Alice, I have to—” she jerked to a stop at seeing Benedict and clamped her lips shut. Vivid red raced up her cheeks as she dropped into a curtsy. “—I do apologize for interrupting; I thought you were alone.”

Benedict stood and bowed; the warm affection for Penelope that stamped itself on Benedict’s visage made Alice smile; her nagging suspicions were correct, he adored her sister, much more than he ever did her.

“It is quite all right,” he said kindly.

“I shall leave the two of you be. We can talk when you are finished here,” Penelope spun on her heels.

Alice made to tell her to stay—but knowing what Benedict had come here to say—wanted to take her rejection privately. “Thank you.”

With a flickering smile, Penelope left the room, and Alice took in a bracing breath. She brought her shoulders back and lifted her chin. “You were saying?”

With the knit ball barely in the air, Atticus bolted over the manicured lawn to hunt the toy, his dark coat shimmering under the midmorning sun as he nosed around to find where it had fallen.

Ever since Benedict had told him about breaking the courtship with Alice, he could not concentrate on anything else. The resolve to never marry had been steadily eroding for days now, the dam crumbling at the bottom, and now, Benedict’s decision could damn well shatter it.

“Alice...” he murmured as Atticus dropped the ball at his feet. He lobbed it in the air

again and the hound took after it. “ Alice Landon, Duchess of Valhaven...”

The new name slipped smoothly off his tongue.

Not only would she have his name and eventually his child; he would bed her as often and as thoroughly as they wished. He would no longer have to deny his sexual attraction to her; scandal be damned.

There would be no hiding, no hesitation when she was with him. He would introduce her to the true art of submission and allow her to free herself in ways she did not know existed.

The thought of holding her trust, as fragile and delicate as it was, made a strong craving twist his belly. His loins stirred at the thought.

A wet nose pressed on his hand, and he quickly snatched the ball at his feet, throwing it at a distance so he had some time to think.

She was the most headstrong, independent, selfless, tenacious woman he’d ever met... yet he had to admit that he loved that about her. She had all the qualities to make a perfect Duchess and a mother—but there were drawbacks too. He might not sleep another restful wink knowing how apt she was at going off on her own.

“Your Grace?” Pushing aside his musings, Edward gave his full attention to Ramsay as the butler held out a note. “A message arrived, Your Grace. From Mr. Samuel.”

The hairs on the back of his head lifted ominously; Henry Samuel was one of the runners he had hired to keep a cursory eye out on Miss Elizabeth Thorpe and all matters concerning the Thorpe’s; the man was an ex-soldier, and he trusted him to take care of Ton matters at his solid discretion.

If Samuel was sending him a message, it had to be bad. Taking the note, he scanned the brief letter. The hairs shot up on his nape and fury raced up his spine.

“Send for my carriage,” he ordered. “Now.”

Arriving at the back alley behind the London Gazette office, Edward waited until the runner, holding the troublesome Miss in custody, opened the door and shoved her into his carriage.

She had a blindfold over her eyes and her face was twisted in fury. “Whoever you are, I demand you release me at once! I will have you arrested and thrown into prison. My father—”

“Your father is a hen-picked shadow of a man who lost his spine to his wife years ago,” Edward’s icy tone slithered over her as he reached over and pulled the cloth from her eyes.

When her eyes focused and she looked at him—all the color drained from her face. “Y-your Grace—”

“If you dare walk into that newspaper or any other news outlet to spread malicious lies about how your cousin was snubbed by a rich lord, you will find yourself in the worst poison you could ever be in,” Edward warned her. “I will not hesitate to make your life an eternal terror. Do you understand me?”

She licked her lips. “And... and what if I tell them that you kidnapped me?”

Edward almost felt amused. “You have no leverage here. All the mediocre finery you currently enjoy can vanish as soon as I—” he snapped his fingers, “—do that.”

Eliza soured, “Why do you have such loyalty to my impoverished cousins anyway?”

She crossed her arms. “They are not worth the roof over their heads and the clothes mother puts on their backs.”

Cold anger turned his insides into ice. “I am loyal to my brother, and if he is marrying into your family, I will make sure no scandal darkens his transition.”

She huffed. Her eyes glimmered with rage, her red lips taking on a malicious curve. “I doubt he will be joining the family. Those two girls are curses; Penelope looks like a pug and ran Rutledge off whilst Alice has no sophistication or grace to be a marchioness.”

Crossing a leg, Edward muttered, “It matters not what qualifications they have or do not; you will not interfere with anything that goes on with either of them or I will not be so generous with you. This is your first and last warning, Elizabeth.”

“How did you know what I intended to do anyway?” she asked, sullenly.

“That is none of your concern,” he muttered. “But I will know if you even think of stepping a toe out of line. Now, on your way.”

He rapped on the door and the footman opened it, pulled the Miss out of his vehicle and she headed off. Edward had no faith that she would listen to him, and soon enough, she would try again, try something again—but what exactly...

“Where to, Your Grace?” his driver asked.

“Whites, please, Jones,” he replied, then reconsidered. “Actually, take me to Purdey & Sons on Princes Street. I have a purchase to make.”

“The gunsmith? Yes, Sir.” Jones snapped the reins. “Right away.”

CHAPTER 20

Benedict had left over an hour ago and Alice was in her room, a lump of cloth on her lap as she stitched another petticoat in place. His rejection had not hit her hard as the same reasons he had told her were the same ones she had considered herself.

Her aunt would not like the broken courtship, but she did not need to worry; she knew another courtship would come about fairly quickly in the wake of her failed one.

“So, Penelope, then?” she’d asked.

The blades of his cheeks had tinged red. “Is it that obvious?”

“To others, maybe not, but to myself, I see how you look at her and I cannot be any happier. She will be honored to have a man like you give her the attention she deserves,” Alice had told him. “If it means anything to you, you have my blessing.”

Benedict had risen immediately. “It means the world! But I must ask one thing—I have no desire to draw unnecessary attention to yourself or Miss Penelope with the... abrupt deviations in my courting habits. If she is willing to accept, I shall be honored to formally ask for her hand a month from now.”

“Ouch!” she jumped as the needlepoint pricked her forefinger. “That is what I get for not using a thimble.”

She stared at the single drop of blood blooming on her finger and fought the sense

that she was so untethered, even though she had expected Benedict's rejection.

Swiping away the droplet, she slipped the thimble on and stared at the delicate daisies she'd embroidered on the skirting.

"Penelope is going to be all right," she assured herself. "If anything, this might be even better than Rutledge."

But what about myself? Do I just swan off into spinsterhood with grace... Edward is the only one I want, but he is not willing to budge on his decision to marry.

At least she would have the memories of their brief shared time together to hold onto for a lifetime.

"Alice?" Penelope came into the room. "Do you have a moment?"

"Always," she glanced up. "Is it what you wanted to talk of from earlier?"

Nodding, Penelope sat and nervously twisted her fingers in her lap. "I wanted to ask you if you could somehow arrange a trip back to our old hometown? I—I feel a trip to mother and father's graves might help me center my thoughts."

Tilting her head to the left, Alice considered it. It would also do to check in with their old cottage, the rents from that house were what minded her and Penelope each month.

"I don't know," she said, scrunching her nose. "It is a long trip and I do not think Aunt or Uncle will relieve their carriage for that long. Are you—how are you feeling?"

"Not much different from the other days, I suppose," Penelope said with a shrug. "I

have been trying to amuse myself, rather, convince myself that everything is not catastrophic, but it still hasn't set in yet."

Alice bit her lip, unsure of when to tell her sister of what—or rather who —was to come. "How about we go book shopping tomorrow instead? I think a bit of fresh air will do us both the world of good."

Frowning, Penelope asked, "What do you mean?"

Tracing the last design she'd sewn, Alice admitted, "Lord Brampton broke the courtship. And before you ask, no, it was not because of anything I did or he did. The connection was... not the one we both thought it would end up being. It was a mutual decision, Elly."

Her sister's face fell, "I am so sorry." She reached out and touched Alice's hand. "You seemed so good together."

"It is all for the best," she looked down at her sewing. "Something tells me something better is coming down the line, however."

"Well," Penelope rested her head on Alice's shoulder, "You always do know what is best."

If only that were true.

"Alice, Penelope," Aunt Agatha stuck her head around the door, "It is time for dinner. Will you please help Anna set the tables? Richard is coming home tonight as well, so make a place for him too."

Sharing an exasperated look with Penelope, Alice set her sewing aside. "Yes, Aunt. We're coming, aunt."

Leaving her room, they entered the dining room, and while Penelope smoothed out the tablecloth, Alice studiously avoided the Sèvres porcelain and took out the bone china tableware. She set the table while trying to think about the trip to the Temple of the Muses tomorrow.

“Penelope, can you get the silverware, please,” she asked over her shoulder while making the settings. “I’ll help you when I am done with these.”

Her aunt entered the room and Uncle Richard followed soon after, his traveling clothes rumpled and his hat dusted from the road. He hurried in, sweeping off his hat to press a quick kiss to his wife's cheek. “Terribly sorry for being late, my dear. I’ll be down shortly.”

Aunt Agatha wrinkled her nose. “Hurry, dear, you smell a fright.”

Richard hurried out of the room with swift hulloos to Alice and Penelope before vanishing from the door. Quietly, Alice finished setting the table as Penelope laid down the last fork.

She took her seat and watched as Penelope poured out a glass of water and sipped it—she prayed that the food would not make her sister ill to the point her aunt would grow suspicious. There were only so many times a person could have an upset stomach in a week.

“Alice, dear,” her aunt looked her over. “How is the lovely Lord Brampton? I would love to have him over for dinner soon, I am sure we can get a lovely goose or turkey. I have been meaning to try asparagus in lemon butter sauce, or mayhap roasted potatoes drizzled with crème flavored with dill.”

“I am sure he will be around again,” Alice smiled thinly, “and as punctual as he is, he will send ample notice so we can prepare.”

“Oh, good, good,” Aunt Agatha nodded. “Where is Eliza?”

“Maybe asleep,” Penelope suggested. “She was out with her friends very late last night. You know she needs twelve hours of rejuvenating sleep per night, or day.”

“My poor dear is so fragile,” Aunt Agatha sighed. “She gets so overwhelmed at times. I fear I may have passed on my delicate nerves to her. My poor girl, I may have condemned her to a life of frailty and constant bed rest.”

“There is nothing delicate about her,” Alice murmured while sipping her water.

“Richard, dear, would you please get Eliza,” her aunt said as the butler and the single maid came in with the platters of food.

The jarring scrape of his chair made Alice wince; as Richard stood, Eliza came into the room, the frills of her nightgown peeking at the neck of her robe. She patted her bonnet and said, “Do not bother, father. I am here.”

“Are you all right, dear?” Agatha asked.

Taking her seat, Eliza nodded. “Just tired. Yesterday—” her eyes bored into Alice’s, “—was a very arduous day, to say the least.”

Mystified about why Eliza was trying to skewer her head from her body, Alice minded her meal and dug into the pheasant pie with little enthusiasm.

All through the meal, as her aunt chattered on about the various soirées Lady or Lord So-and-So were throwing as the Season began to get to its height, she avoided Eliza’s scathing glaring and snide quips as she had no energy—and little care—to mind her temperamental cousin; she only had a mind to plan for her next day with Penelope.

“Aunt, may I borrow the carriage tomorrow?” she asked. “Penelope and I would like to drop by the bookstore, and I have some sewing supplies to purchase, and some remedies from the apothecary—”

Eliza smacked her cutlery down with a resounding thud.

Agatha glanced between her scowling daughter and Alice. “Oh, I am not sure that can be arranged, dear. We may require it for an emergency—”

“And I can ask Lord Brampton about that dinner if I run into him,” Alice smoothly put in.

Bobbing her head at once, Aunt Agatha chimed, “Yes, of course, it makes sense to run all your errands at once! Yes, you may have it for an hour or two.”

“Thank you, Aunt,” she replied, pointedly avoiding the venomous gaze of her cousin. “We’ll be back soon enough.”

While pulling her coat away in the cool afternoon, Alice looked over to Penelope and the two books she clutched under one arm.

“I must confess, I feared Eliza would have tried some stunt to take the carriage and leave us stranded.”

Resting the books on her bed, Penelope giggled, “I had the very same idea! And she climbed into the carriage the moment we returned. Do you have any idea where she has been slipping off to lately?”

“No inkling,” Alice sighed. “But she has found something else to be angry at me about. I do not know what it is, but I am not surprised she is miffed.”

Pulling the pins from her hair, Alice carded through them, then asked her sister, “How are you feeling?”

“At the moment, fairly well,” Penelope huffed, tugging her half boots off. “I still sometimes think about what will happen when Aunt learns of my condition, but I feel as if I am borrowing trouble.”

Reaching over, Alice gave her younger sister a warm hug. “I know you doubt me now, but it will be better one day.”

“Against all odds,” Penelope tried for a smile, “I do.”

Moving from her sister’s room, she entered hers and dropped the pins in her hand on her dressing table, then rolled her neck. Her thoughts fluttered to Edward and her heart twisted a little at thinking of him; his fierce gaze, how his voice would go from warm with those he cared about to icy steel for those who deserved a set-down.

Her hand trailed to her neck where the spot he’d sucked on that night still felt tender and sensitive.

Somehow, despite their disastrous first meeting and subsequent conflicts, she had slowly and steadily lost her heart to him. Edward was a very complicated man; his aloof disposition held a passionate nature and for good reason. She had no inkling at what others would think of his intimate predilections, but she didn’t think many would think highly of them.

Was it normal for a man to want to tie a woman up and spank her?

A knock came on her door and curiously, she answered it, “Pene—oh, Sarah. How may I help you?”

The maid held a flat white oak wood box in her hand, “This came for you today, Miss. It is from Lord Valhaven.”

A frisson of shock ran through her for a moment, but she reached out and took it. “Thank... you.”

Closing the door, she set the box gently on her bed as though it were a sleeping serpent, then took a step back, pulse thrumming in her ears. Slowly, she reached over and lifted the lid, only to have her vision peppered with black spots. Resting on the black velvet inside was a white-gold necklace, its five teardrop-shaped pendants cradling glittering diamonds.

The links between the pendants were made with white gold flowerhead detail, and beside it was a pair of similarly designed ear pendants. It was a necklace fit for a queen.

Her heart found another rhythm under her breastbone.

Tucked under the necklace was a card that she had not noticed before; drawing it out, she read Edward’s slashing hand, “For you, Alice. E.”

“He is out of his mind...” she whispered, daring to reach out and touch the jewels, only snatching her hand away when she felt the cold ice of the diamonds. “He has truly taken leave of all his senses...”

She couldn’t cover the box and shove it in a drawer fast enough to stop her heart from beating through her chest.

There was no question she would be returning those jewels to him by daylight, with a polite demand to know what from the nine realms of hell had possessed him to give her three generations of fortune in a box and what he had expected to happen after.

“It matters not if I love him,” she breathed out. “I cannot accept this from him. It feels... it feels like a bribe.”

Sighing, she fell to her bed. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

CHAPTER 21

Frustrated, Edward struck a bold line through the closing words of his next speech to Parliament and groaned. If he couldn't find the words to convince Parliament to amend the agreement with the royal charter of the East India Trading Company—granting smaller merchants a foothold in commerce—how could he possibly stand and speak with conviction in the halls of Westminster?

Dropping the quill, he groaned, not caring much about the ink splattering over his hand.

He temporarily gave up on the speech and briefly wondered if a trip to Gentleman Jacks for a round of bracing boxing would do him any good.

“It might knock some sense into me for buying that jewel set and sending it to her with no notice,” he grumbled. “When did I turn into such a coward?”

Ramsay came in—and Edward was sure he'd missed the man's knock—with a cup in hand. “Another coffee, Your Grace, and I have taken the liberty of adding a few drams of whiskey.”

“Very astute of you, Ramsay,” Edward gazed at his work with the dour feeling that it might never get done. “I think I need—”

“What in God's name is wrong with you!” Alice swept in, her cloak billowing after her while a hapless footman followed in her wake.

In her hands, she held the box from Rundell's Jewelers, and while Ramsay stepped aside to let her pass, he also silently intoned for Edward if he should step in.

"Leave us, Ramsay," Edward gave his response as she rested the box on his desk. When the door closed, he leaned back in his chair. "Good morning, Miss Alice. As usual, incense looks rather good on you."

"Are you mad?" she demanded, a stray lock of her untamed hair curling near her lips. "What is the meaning of this? Why would you give me jewels fit for a queen?"

"I had presumed they would look rather beautiful against your collarbone," Edward replied matter-of-factly.

"For what reason?" Her brows knit in confusion now. "What am I to you that you would go to such extravagance?"

He did not know how to reply to that. What was she to him? His lover, his mistress... his plaything?

Reaching over to his renewed cup, Edward replied, "I simply thought it to be a nice gift."

She spluttered, "A nice gift is a bouquet of flowers or a set of gloves for the winter, not a set of jewels fitting for an Indian maharajah's wife! Are these your family's jewels that you had the jewelers re-shine or did you buy them?"

His chest twisted, knowing she would hate the next words that came out of his mouth; she practically would not stand for it.

"I purchased them."

“For how much?”

“Ten... thousand pounds?” he almost asked in approval.

Alice gaped at him and as his words hit her, blood slowly began to drain from her face. Eyes narrowing, Edward watched as the pallor spread across her delicate features; he was out of his chair and around the table in a dash the moment her knees buckled under her, and she slumped in a faint.

With her head braced on his upper arm, Edward carried her over to his chaise and laid her there. Plucking his cravat from his neck, he doused the cloth with water from an ewer and rested it on her forehead.

“Wake up, little mouse,” he coaxed her while mopping her forehead and temple. “Come alive for me. Let me see those lovely eyes of yours.”

He kept on with the soft, amusing murmurs until she blinked her eyes open. “There you are!”

When her gaze focused, she whispered, “What happened?”

“You swooned, sweetheart,” he grinned, pulling the cloth from her temple. “No sudden movements yet. Let me pour you some water or tea.”

Her eyes flickered between his, “I... fainted because you told me you purchased those jewels for ten thousand pounds. I— I cannot fathom how much money that is.

“The ten pounds rent from my parent’s old cottage is what is sustaining Penelope and me while we live with our aunt. Ten thousand —” she sucked in a breath, “—is a fortune...”

“It is,” he noted while handing her a glass of water. “But I want you to have it, Alice. It would soothe my pride if you would take them and wear them.”

She bolted upright and shook her head. “I cannot.”

His gaze smoldered into hers. “You don’t like them?”

Her lips thinned. “They are gorgeous, but that is beside the point. I can’t accept them.”

“Whyever not?”

“Aside from the fact that it is too expensive, far too expensive of a gift,” Alice breathed, “I am nothing to you to justify this gift. That is a present you give to your intended, or—or your wife... and I am neither. So, no, I will not accept your gift until you can give me a reason why you would do such a thing. What do you want from me, Edward? What do you want with me?”

The question was one he’d expected to come—but even with that, he still had no firm answer to it. No amount of rewriting sentences and dashing lines could allow him to answer it with any sort of conviction.

“Can’t I simply do something nice for you?” he asked. “I do admire you, you know.”

The exasperated look she shot at him told Edward that she knew he knew he was circling the issue. “Do you want to marry me, Edward?” she said flatly. “Do you... do you love me?”

His hesitation spoke more than any word that could have passed his lips. Squeezing shut her eyes, Alice got to her feet.

Edward's grip closed firmly around her wrist, halting her retreat.

"Stay," he said, voice low, roughened with something dark and commanding. No teasing now. No questions.

His free hand cupped her face, his thumb tracing along her cheek with devastating slowness. His eyes—stormy, burning—held hers as if daring her to look away.

She couldn't.

Not when he dipped his head and brushed his lips against her neck, the barest whisper of heat against her skin. Not when his mouth pressed lower, tracing the flutter of her pulse, his breath fanning over her collarbone as his grip on her waist drew her closer.

Her back met the wall with a soft thud. The candles flickered wildly in the wake of their ragged breaths.

"Edward, please..." she whispered, but it wasn't a protest. Not yet .

His lips returned to hers—slow, searching—until her body softened, surrendering to the heat of his kiss. But then, suddenly, it was no longer slow. His hand slid into her hair, angling her head back with dominance as he kissed her deeper, demanding. His tongue teased the seam of her lips until she opened for him, a helpless yelp escaping as he took what he wanted.

He pressed closer—hot, solid muscle pinning her to the wall—until she felt every inch of him, the hard, unyielding proof of his desire pressing against her, undeniable even through layers of fabric.

"Do you feel that?" he rasped against her lips, his voice a breathless snarl as he rolled his hips, the pressure of his arousal grinding between her thighs.

She did. God help her, she did—and it was wrecking her.

Her hands clutched his waistcoat, unsure whether to push him away or pull him closer. Closer won.

A low, ragged sound escaped him as she shifted against him, letting him guide her into a slow, sinful rhythm. The friction was maddening, exquisite. Heat pooled low in her belly, radiating outward with every deliberate grind of his hips against hers.

His mouth trailed lower, pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses down the column of her throat, his teeth grazing just enough to make her gasp. His hands—one splayed against the wall beside her head, the other guiding the roll of her hips—grew bolder, sliding over the curve of her waist, bunching her skirts slightly. Not enough to be truly improper, but enough to feel... wicked.

"Tell me to stop," he whispered against her skin.

But she didn't.

Instead, her lips parted on a breathless moan as he peeled the gown lower, baring her to him, her breasts spilling free as cool air kissed her skin.

He made a sound then—a low, guttural growl—and bent his head.

The first brush of his lips over her peaked flesh made her cry out softly, the velvet heat of his tongue following as he took her into his mouth. His hand cupped her, kneading gently as he lavished attention on her, swirling his tongue over her nipple before sucking deeper, the wet heat making her arch into him with a needy whimper.

"God, you're perfect," he groaned, voice muffled against her skin. His free hand slid lower, fisting in her skirts and drawing them up, the sensation dizzying as the

roughness of his palm skimmed along the bare skin of her thigh.

She felt him there, teasing, the press of his fingers just shy of where she ached for him most.

His mouth left her breast only to capture hers again, hungrier this time, almost desperate. His fingers pressed higher, slipping between her thighs, parting her. She gasped into his kiss as he found her slick heat, stroking slowly, deliberately.

"You're so wet for me," he rasped, voice rough and unrestrained as he circled that aching spot with maddening precision. "Do you feel how much I want you, Alice?"

She was unraveling. Coming apart beneath him.

"Edward..." Her voice shook, the ache building with every desperate press of his body to hers.

His lips returned to hers, fevered now, hungry, his hips pressing harder, more insistent. He was losing control, and she was letting him.

Until—

No.

Reality pierced through the haze of desire like a blade.

Her hands, trembling, pressed to his chest and pushed. Not hard, but enough.

"Stop," she gasped, though the word felt like tearing herself in two.

Edward froze instantly. His breath was ragged against her lips, his chest rising and

falling in sharp, uneven bursts.

But she saw the battle in his eyes, the frustration tangled with something far more vulnerable.

“I—” he began, voice hoarse, broken.

But this time, she didn’t let him finish.

“I will not be a paramour,” she whispered, the heat in her voice now laced with steel. “You cannot have your cake and eat it too, Edward. And I have far too much self-respect to keep giving you what you want and expect nothing in return.”

The silence stretched, heavy with things unsaid.

She held his gaze a moment longer, fighting the ache in her chest, the heat still burning in her veins.

Then, with trembling dignity, she slipped free of his hold and drew up her gown.

“But I do want you in my life, Alice,” he pressed.

“But not in the only way I would accept. I am sorry, Edward. You need to find what you want—I cannot do it for you.”

“God damn it,” he swore, tugging at his hair. “I don’t know what I want!”

She shook her head. “You can’t keep trying to buy my affection. This... all of this—it is empty without—”

“Without what?” he growled, closing the gap until her back met the wall again, his

voice low, desperate. “Marriage? A ring? Words that are meaningless? ” His eyes bore into hers, smoldering. “You already belong to me in every way that matters !”

She looked squarely into his eyes, her gaze heavy with disappointment, but underneath it rested pity, and that made his pride curdle.

“I think you already know, Edward—the problem is that you will never admit it to yourself. I will never beg a man to love me,” she said, stepping away from him, her voice trembling with pain. “...No matter how much I love him . Please, don’t do anything like this again. Let this be our goodbye.”

And just as swiftly as she’d arrived, she left. Like a wraith to the morning dew.

As Edward gaped at the shutting door, pain coursed through him, but not physical pain. No, it was his heart, his damned heart. It felt as if someone had cracked his breastbone open and set the organ on fire, that was how much it stung; he could barely countenance it.

Why the blazes had she had to say that she loved him? His throat tightened at the very thought of the word.

All his life, he had tried not to hurt people, as his father had done his mother. But Alice? He’d hurt her. The agony had shone in her stricken eyes. He cursed himself.

He’d failed her.

Worst of all—he’d failed himself. For pride. For an old decision he had made years ago. For spite .

Maybe it was time for Gentleman Jacks after all.

CHAPTER 22

“ N umber thirty-four...” Alice whispered to herself as she walked along the homes in St John’s Wood, trying to find Diana’s home.

It was well past the two weeks her friend had told her she would be in town, but Alice severely needed to find a listening ear. She’d found herself between the agonizing place of wanting to scream her heart out or dissolve in a river of tears. Possibly both—at the same time.

She spotted the number on the brass plate and let out a long breath; that was the house. Grasping her skirts, she climbed the steps and knocked with her heart hammering in her chest.

A footman answered and bowed, “Welcome to the Duhart house. May I help you, Miss?”

“Good morning, is Mrs—” Alice flailed at realizing she did not know her friend's married name. “—Mrs. Diana home? I am Alice Winslow, we are old friends.”

It was risky knowing that her friend might have left and she had come out all this way for nothing; if Diana was not there, she’d just taken a rather long walk home.

“She is, Miss,” the man replied. “Please come in and I will let her know she has a guest.”

Relief nearly took Alice’s feet from under her, but she nodded and stepped in, gently

peeling her coat and sunhat away and handing them to another footman.

“Alice!” Diana called to her while flying down the stairs, her arms opened for a warm hug.

Wrapping her arms around her friend, Alice held onto her emotions and smiled, but knew it was wobbly. Diana sighed, “I was planning to offer hyson tea, but now I am thinking some sherry would do you well... whatever is the matter?”

Her throat felt thick and so not to risk speaking and her voice cracking, Alice simply nodded and followed Diana up to a cozy sitting room; the soft blue and grey wallpaper and wide-open windows eased the tight feeling in her chest.

“Please, sit,” Diana waved her hand to a chair and pulled out two glasses, then drew out a bottle from a tray beneath the table. “They say ladies do not drink such spirits, but I disagree. A little bit of drink here and there can aid us very much.”

Clenching the skirts in her hand, Alice began, “I forgot to ask you about your marriage name.”

“Hamilton,” Diana said gently as she placed a glass before her. “Charlie’s surname is Hamilton. Oh, and I neglected to mention—he’s here but currently making use of a courtesy invitation to White’s.”

Staring into the crystal glass, Alice built the courage to finally speak her mind. “I have painted myself into a corner, Dee. I should have known better... but I did not.”

“And you fell in love with your unnamed stranger and do not know what to do, I take it?” Diana said casually as if she were picking up the conversation from the bookstore’s café. “It is written all over your face in agony and despair, darling.”

Alice nodded morosely. “He has vowed to never marry,” she added. “And as drugging as his kisses are, I refuse to be his mistress.”

“Remind me again how you got in his attentions?” Diana inquired.

The tale spilled out, from the night she had ventured to Rutledge’s club, where Edward had intervened to rescue her, to her near collision with his brother, which had sparked her courtship with Benedict. She recounted how Edward had ultimately persuaded Rutledge to relent and court her sister, and even confessed that she and Benedict had broken their courtship.

“And now he is set on winning Penelope’s hand,” Alice continued. “I think it is fair that he knows that she is burdened before he does ask for her.”

“What if there was a way to show the Duke how much he would be missing if he loses you?” Diana mused.

“What?” Alice felt slightly confused. “I need to move on, not seduce him.”

“See,” Diana smoothed the side of her already perfect chignon. “I do not think that is what you want. At all.”

“But—”

“No buts ,” Diana interrupted firmly. “Love is not a feeling that stays stagnant, Alice dear. Saying you love him is one thing, but love requires effort—and you must show it too.”

“But—but he is a Duke...” Alice was utterly at a loss. “What in heavens can I do that every other lady in his vicinity has not already tried?”

“Together, we earned the highest marks in our class,” Diana chirped with a grin. “And men are far simpler than French literature. Now, thinking caps on!”

Entering her home, Alice tossed around the ideas Diana gave and tried to land on one or the other—but she still couldn’t put her mind to it. Hadn’t she just told Edward that she wouldn’t force a man to love her? Wasn’t this doing that very thing?

“Penelope?” She asked, looking into every room she passed. “Are you home?”

“In my room!” her sister called out. “Come in.”

Stepping inside, she noticed Penelope holding a square of cloth and a needle, the most pitiful circle of white stitches adorning the blue cotton. Amused, she gently plucked the fabric from her hands. “And what, pray tell, is this?”

“I was trying to keep myself engaged,” Penelope blushed. “You always make it so easy, so I thought to try it myself. I wanted to surprise you too.”

Alice’s lips twitched at the uneven stitchings and the wobbly embroidery. “You don’t need to do this, Penelope.”

“I think I do,” she smiled thinly. “When I do bring this child into the world, I’ll have to get a job and I figured my older sister would teach me how to mend a tear or stitch a seam.”

Those words tore at Alice’s heart; yes, she’d heard those stories too. What young girl had not heard the whispered horrors of when a young lady had fallen and lost her virtue?

The idea of her sister wearing her fingers out or her eyesight in some dark basement, desperately trying to make a living by sewing the gowns of rich women, made her

shiver with fear.

That life was a life of poverty, misery, and a terrifying old age. One would have to fend for themselves in ways that no young lady should have to know; relegated to the advances of men, promising money and protection without marriage. She'd read about those ways too.

“Penelope, listen—”

“If only I'd chosen someone like Lord Brampton,” she sighed, her gaze drifting to the open window. “He has a kind spirit, a protective heart, and a loving soul. If only...”

It took all of Alice's strength not to spill Benedict's plans, and she stifled her smile with a castigating tut. “If you want to make proper flowers, let me show you. And no, I do not want to hear any more talk about you becoming a lonely seamstress. Now, let me thread that needle.”

CHAPTER 23

TWO WEEKS LATER

The evening light slanted low across the study, gilding the edges of the tall windows and stretching long shadows over the walnut paneling. The scent of burning wood lingered from the hearth, mingling with the sharper tang of ink and old parchment. The house was quiet, the hush pressing heavier tonight.

Edward stepped inside his study, fatigue pressing against his bones after the length of the day. He worked the buttons of his waistcoat free with a sigh, his mind drifting as he shrugged off his jacket. The ache behind his eyes had little to do with Parliament's endless quarrels. The afternoon had seen him pacing the edges of Hyde Park, his boots scuffing the gravel paths with no real direction—except perhaps hoping, foolishly, that she might be there. She wasn't.

And he'd returned home cursing his own absurdity. It had been over two weeks now without even as little as the sight of her. And he was beginning to crave it, unnaturally so. Was there a truth to her words when she said her final goodbye?

The jacket slid from his shoulders, and as he turned, he nearly started.

Benedict was there, behind his table, but instead of the ledgers and folios Edward would have in front of him, Benedict had a pile of books.

“Is there a reason you are in the one place I feel is truly mine?” he asked while placing his jacket on the hatstand.

“I felt it imperative to start familiarizing myself with my future surroundings,” Benedict said with a shrug. “In three months, you'll be off gallivanting across Europe, and someone must be ready to manage the lands. Sooner or later, Valhaven will fall to me, after all. How was Parliament??”

“ Aggravating ,” Edward went to the sideboard and poured himself some brandy. “But that is what you get for sticking a bunch of Whigs passionate for reform and cynical Tories into a room, then praying that neither of them sets the place on fire.”

“Or cross the floor and bludgeon the speaker into a pulp,” Benedict chuckled. “But I mean, how did they take the proposal to disenfranchise the East India Company?”

“They jumped on that proposal like fleas on a mongrel,” Edward replied dryly. “Any scheme promising to fatten their purses is one neither party would dare refuse. But back to your earlier remark—are you planning to step into my ducal role with a wife in tow?”

Benedict rubbed the back of his head, “About that... I plan on courting Miss Penelope.”

Edward ground his molars as he poured out another glass of brandy. As unseemly as it was, he knew he had to tell his brother the truth about the young lady, no matter how much of an invasion of the young woman’s privacy it was.

“Benedict—”

“I know what you are going to say,” Benedict hastened to reply. “That it is rather unseemly to be jumping from one lady to another, no less when they are sisters—how it will look like I have no head on my shoulders and all that. You might go so far as to warn me that the scandal will cling to my name for years. But, Edward... I simply cannot bring myself to care.”

Taking his glass, Edward circled the desk and gestured for Benedict to join him on the chaise.

Once his brother settled, Edward chose his next words with deliberate care. “I hope you will keep everything I am about to say to you in strict confidence...”

What followed was a carefully curated confession—an account of Penelope’s entanglement with Rutledge. He spoke of the poor girl’s insidious seduction and the result of their ill-fated rendezvous. The attempt to have Rutledge own up to his part in it all, culminating in the confrontation Benedict himself had been involved in. Edward shielded the most delicate truths, omitting Alice’s involvement entirely, for some secrets were not his to share.

Silence hung thick in the air when he finished.

Benedict stared at him, the color draining from his face. His voice, when it came, was a whisper laced with disbelief.

“She is carrying his child...” he concluded on his own.

“It is more than likely,” Edward said sympathetically. He waited a while as Benedict internalized the unsettling news. Leaning back, he rubbed his tired eyes, “I need you to know that if you decide to step away, no one will blame you. It is a very difficult burden to come to terms with.”

“...Not as burdening as she must be feeling,” Benedict mused.

Edward took a bracing mouthful of his drink.

“No wonder Rutledge was such a jackanapes when I met him,” Benedict sneered. “I wish I’d given him more facers.”

“I doubt he would have liked that,” Edward replied. “His good looks are how he gets his conquests...” Pausing, he tilted his head. “Actually, dash that. I do think his face needs a substantial rearranging. It would stop these unfortunate situations from arising again.”

Setting his glass down, Edward crossed his legs, “I’d advise you to think about the situation, Benedict. I know you are one to run in headstrong and all, but this is a ton of responsibility, especially considering the responsibilities you will already be taking over from me.”

Sobering, Benedict asked, “How long did it take you to finally settle into the ducal role?”

“Over three years,” Edward replied, “And that was touch and go, try and error. But I settled into it eventually.”

Shaking his head slowly, Benedict asked, “Why are you so fixated on not marrying, Edward? I know you despised the way Father handled business, and I know you abhor our finicky cousins, but why spite yourself when they are living free of all this concern?”

Leaning in, Benedict pressed the point, “Don’t you think that one day, when you are old and grey, lounging near the Seine River, or whichever river is in Italy—”

“The Reno. We have a cottage in Sasso Marconi.”

“—you wouldn’t want someone beside you?” Benedict finished, one brow lifted high. “Don’t you want a companion in your twilight years? Or do you think it is your destiny to die alone?”

“I think destiny or fate or providence, whatever you might want to call it, has not

been very kind to me in the regard of providing a suitable partner. The ladies I draw only see me as a vehicle to a better life, they do not see me or care to know me.

“It is the reason why I never dance with Misses of marriageable age, and only stick with widowed or married women,” Edward remarked. “But the truth of the matter is... I have not thought that far down the line yet.”

“I’d hate to see you squander your life away, brother,” Benedict murmured. “You deserve someone good and fitting in your life too. I know you are not one for society diamonds-of-the-first-water sort. If I were to imagine you with someone, it would be a practical-minded Miss with a sharp tongue and a sharper mind.”

If only you knew.

“Well, until the fates send me such a lady—” they already have, “—I will live my lonesome life, with premium wine and an old hound who enjoys the finer things in life, like ripping apart balls.”

Lifting his glass, Benedict chirped, “My best to you, old man.”

At the doorway, Edward looked over his shoulder, “I expect you to be gone by the time I return.”

“Never change,” Benedict laughed.

In his rooms, Edward called for bathwater and undressed into his robe, while his thoughts strayed to the conversation he’d just had with Benedict.

Truly, was this decision not to marry only hurting himself and no one else? Was he damning himself to a life of seclusion and solitude for an old, immaterial grudge?

Would Alice accept a marriage proposal now, when she was sworn off to not even look at him twice anymore? How would she take it when Benedict courted Penelope?

“All this while, the only thing Alice ever wanted was to protect Penelope, and now she won’t have to worry about her anymore...” he said to himself. “What would she think about my sudden change around?”

That was if he was truly considering this.

Atticus ambled over to him and nudged his knee with his greying muzzle. Reaching out, he rubbed his dog’s ears. “How are you, old boy? Do you have any drops of wisdom for me on how to win a woman who you effectively rejected?”

Tilting his head, Atticus meandered off to his spot before the slumbering hearth and circled the rug. “That would be a no , I take it,” Edward sighed. “I suppose I’ll just have to figure it out on my own.”

He fell back against his soft bed, waiting for the footmen to enter to tell him the bath was ready.

He exhaled deeply and fell back against the bed, the mattress dipping beneath his weight. The fire crackled low, shadows dancing on the carved mahogany panels along the walls. The scent of wax and the lingering aroma of the evening’s brandy clung faintly to the air.

His eyes slipped closed for just a moment. A moment .

But exhaustion—of body, of mind—was relentless. And so he drifted.

The candle burned low, pooling wax along the brass holder as Edward bent over his desk, the scratch of his quill the only sound in the quiet chamber. His

textbooks—Latin grammar, treatises on law—lay open beside him, the scent of ink sharp in the still air. The looming exams at Oxford were weeks away, and he'd been studying late into the night more often than not, determined to prove himself. Determined to be more than his father expected of him.

A quiet knock sounded at the door.

Edward barely looked up. "Yes?"

The door creaked open just enough for a small, tear-streaked face to peek through.

Benedict.

Edward's chest tightened instantly. "What's wrong, Ben?"

The boy shuffled inside, hands curled into fists against the too-large sleeves of his nightshirt. He didn't speak, just sniffled, cheeks blotchy with unshed tears.

Edward pushed back his chair, softening his voice. "Come here."

Benedict approached slowly, his lower lip trembling, but still, he said nothing.

Kneeling, Edward brushed the damp curls back from his face. "Did you have a nightmare?"

A tiny shake of his head.

Edward hesitated, scanning him more closely. No bruises. No sign of illness. Just—sadness. The same sadness that had lingered since their father had begun to pay him less and less attention.

But Benedict never voiced it. He never spoke of it at all.

Edward cupped his brother's shoulder gently. "Would you like to stay here with me for a bit? I was working on translations. I know you like helping me mark the declensions."

That earned the faintest, wobbly nod.

"Good. Here, sit—"

"Edward!"

The Duke's voice cut through the quiet like a blade, echoing sharply from down the corridor.

Edward flinched. Benedict did too.

"Wait here, Ben. I'll be back soon, all right?" He gave his brother's arm a gentle squeeze.

Benedict nodded again, curling into the corner of Edward's chair, small and uncertain but trying to be brave.

The Duke's voice rang out again. "Edward! Now!"

Edward set his jaw. "I'll be back," he repeated quietly and turned toward the door.

The scent of brandy hit him first as he entered his father's study.

It was worse than usual tonight. Heavy. Clinging.

His father sat behind his great carved desk, the curtains drawn despite the early evening light still lingering outside. A half-finished decanter sat next to a second glass, empty but stained where it had been filled and refilled.

And sprawled on the settee—half-clad, her bodice scandalously loose—was a woman Edward did not recognize. As had become customary ever since his mother's passing.

The red silk of her gown pooled over her thighs, the neckline barely decent, her lips painted and slightly parted as she gazed at Edward with a lazy, almost taunting smirk.

Revulsion rose thick in his throat.

The Duke exhaled noisily, setting his glass down with an audible clink . "Close the door."

Edward obeyed, standing stiffly just inside the threshold, hands clasped behind his back. He knew better than to speak first.

The Duke watched him for a long moment, eyes sharp despite the liquor—assessing, as if searching for flaws. Then, he gestured vaguely with his glass.

"You'll be leaving for Oxford soon. And before you know it, you will be married. It's time you understand the gravity of your position."

Edward remained silent.

The Duke sat forward, his glass clinking sharply against the desk as he set it down.

"You are the heir. My heir. The sole future of this family. Everything—everything—rests on you. Do you understand?"

Edward nodded stiffly. "Yes, Your Grace."

The Duke's eyes narrowed. "Do you? Or do you merely parrot what you think I want to hear?"

Edward's lips pressed together.

His father leaned back, taking another long, slow sip. "You know why I called you here? Because you're of age now. It's time you start thinking of your legacy. Time you understand what it means to bear the Valhaven title."

Edward felt his stomach twist.

The Duke continued, voice turning colder. "It means ensuring our bloodline continues. That when you return from Oxford, you'll be seeking a wife of proper station. One who can give you a son. Because make no mistake, Edward—there will be an heir. And it will not be that other one."

The cursory mention of his brother struck like a lash. Edward's back straightened. "He is your son too."

The Duke scoffed, gesturing vaguely to the woman on the settee, who giggled and took another sip of brandy. "A mistake. His mother's shame, not mine. The boy's existence is tolerated. Barely."

Edward's hands clenched behind his back, nails biting into his palm.

"You," his father continued, "are my rightful heir. The one who will carry this name forward with dignity. And you will have a son to secure this legacy, Edward. The Lord chose you. I chose you. Lord knows I will not have my title tainted with... half-blood."

Edward felt his pulse pound at his temples, the words battering him with a sickening clarity. His father wasn't protecting the family. He was protecting his own pride—his own twisted obsession with control.

"I will not see this line end in ruin because of that mistake," the Duke finished, voice slurring slightly as the brandy took its hold. "Everything I did, I did for you, boy. And you will carry it with honor, with grace, with—"

"Is that why you summoned me? To remind me of my duty?" Edward interrupted.

The Duke's lips twisted into something cruel. "Among other things. I've taught you how to be a man. Power. Wealth. Influence. You think it was for naught? Look around you. Everything I have built is yours. Ours. I know a part of you still reviles me for what happened with your mother. But you must understand—"

The glass was raised again, the scent of liquor thick in the air.

"Love," he sneered, as though the word itself was dirty, "is for fools. Control the bloodline. Control your emotions. And desire—" He waved the glass toward the chaise, gesturing toward the sprawled woman. "Is merely a distraction. A game. Women serve a purpose, and once that's done, they become irrelevant. You will learn."

Edward felt the words like bile rising in his throat.

"Will I?" His voice was icy now. "Is that all you want me to see in people? Utility? While I live to be the pride in your eyes?"

The Duke's gaze sharpened suddenly. "Don't you dare judge me, boy. You think you're so different. One day, you'll be just like me. You'll have children of your own. You'll understand how the world works. And you'll thank me for—"

Edward turned on his heel.

"Edward!" his father barked, but he didn't stop.

The study door shut behind him with a deafening click.

Benedict was still curled in his chair when Edward returned, the book he'd left open untouched in his lap. Edward knelt before him, the anger still boiling in his chest—but he forced it down.

"I'm back," he said gently, brushing a curl from his brother's forehead. "Sorry I took so long."

Benedict looked up, blinking sleepily, but the shadows in his eyes lingered.

"You okay?" Edward pressed softly. "You can sleep in my bed tonight, I'll be staying up—I have a lot to catch up on."

Benedict nodded. Quiet. Always quiet.

But Edward had seen too much of that same quiet in himself.

He smiled weakly at his brother. His father was wrong. The title would be passed down, most certainly. But it would pass down to Benedict.

And Edward would make certain of it.

A heavy knock at his bedchamber door tore through Edward's pasty slumber.

"Your Grace, the bath is ready."

CHAPTER 24

ONE WEEK LATER

P icking up that day's mail from the tray in the front room, Alice carried the stack into her aunt's drawing room and rested it on the table to sort. There was a very thick one addressed to Eliza from Baron Portman, the very same Baron Benedict had arranged for her.

"She is corresponding with him?" Alice asked herself. "I thought she was done with him."

There was an invitation from the Valhaven estate; one Alice hesitantly opened as it was addressed to her.

"The Duke of Valhaven and the Marquess Brampton jointly invite Misses Alice and Penelope Winslow, and the Thorpe family to a ball at the ducal estate..." She read the date, a week from then, and the time, six in the evening. She dropped the card, unsure of what to make of it.

Why would Edward invite her to his home knowing how spectacularly their last conversation had imploded?

Bold of me to assume it was him inviting me. It is more for Penelope than for me, and they had to include all of us.

"Is that the mail?" Eliza stepped into the morning room without any greeting

whatsoever. She snatched the letter from her fingers, then glared at Alice. “Were you trying to read my private correspondence?”

Lifting the card in her hand, Alice flatly asked, “How can I read two things at the same time, one of which is still sealed?”

“Knowing you, you would find a way,” Eliza sniffed before marching away.

“I’ll become the Queen of England before that girl marries,” Alice muttered while wrapping her shawl tighter about her shoulders. “I shouldn’t say that. At least she will marry, while the man I love has forgotten me....”

The conversation with Diana came back to her mind.

“Love is not a feeling that stays stagnant, Alice dear. Saying you love him is one thing, but love requires effort—and you must show it too.”

“But—but he is a Duke... What in heavens can I do that every other lady in his vicinity has not already tried?”

“Together, we earned the highest marks in our school,” Diana chirped with a grin. “And men are far simpler than French literature. Now, thinking caps on! Let’s think like a woman. Perhaps there is some man he envies or dislikes being around?”

“You mean being courted by someone else? It did not faze him when I was with his brother, I doubt it would happen with anyone else.”

“Hmm...” Diana looked contemplative. “The only thing that comes to mind is Scheherazade—amusing and entrapping him with a riveting tale that lasts a thousand and one nights.”

This time, Alice did eke out a smile. “As much as I appreciate the sentiment, how about something a lot less... fantastical? Besides, as I said, I need to know how to move on, not try and seduce him. He made it abundantly clear that marriage and love are not what he is willing to give, and I will not settle for any less.

“He’s...” Alice let out a breath, “...not a man that changes his mind when it is made up.”

“He is a stubborn one, then.”

“He is at that, and I do not subscribe to the belief that you can out-stubborn a mulish man,” Alice said, resigned. “I think I have to let him go.”

Gazing at the card in her hand, she whispered, “This shall be the final farewell.”

Studying the note just delivered from Benedict’s footmen, she went to Penelope’s room and knocked. “Elly? Are you awake?”

“Yes,” her sister sounded languid. “You can come in.”

Stepping into the room, Alice found her sister still in bed, looking worse for wear, and a thick stream of compassion wound its way through Alice’s heart. “Are you not feeling well this morning?”

“I am fine,” Penelope exhaled while she made to sit up. “I did not sleep much last night, that’s why I must look a fright.”

Perching on the edge of her bed, Alice asked, “Why were you up?”

Absently plucking the sheets on her lap, Penelope admitted, “I worry, Alice, and stitching does not help. I am fearful Aunt will find out, I am afraid of being shunned,

I am terrified of being shipped off to a convent to have the child and be imprisoned. I am afraid, Alice. There is this tight ball of fear resting just beneath my breastbone, and it doesn't ever go away."

"I know you are afraid," Alice soothed. "But I need you to trust me for a little while longer. We need to get dressed. Here, let me help you." She stretched out her hand.

"Why?"

"You'll see," Alice replied. "It's a surprise."

All through washing and getting dressed, Alice could feel that Penelope had questions, but she would not answer them. Penelope chose a yellow-striped frock that clung sweetly to her bosom and swirled around her petite frame.

"Will you tell me now?" Penelope asked while fixing her hair.

"No," Alice pulled a white pin from a drawer and slid it into her sister's locks. "Now, come with me. Aunt, Uncle, and Eliza are all out today, which is good because I do not want to deal with the fuss."

"In here," Alice opened the door to the scantily used solarium and pushed the door in.

Benedict spun away from the window and the bouquet of roses in his hand drew her eye; the mix of white and red roses was utterly beautiful. His silk cravat was a study in perfection while his forest green waistcoat, which had a subtle paisley design, looked like the bush the roses were plucked from.

Confused, Penelope glanced at Alice, then back to Benedict. "What's—what is this, my lord? Alice, you did not tell me the two of you were court—"

Swiftly, Benedict pushed the flowers against her chest. “I realize this might come as a shock, but I am here to ask for the honor of courting you.”

Penelope’s lips slipped open, then closed, then opened again. “M-my lord... I—I have no words. Aren’t you... isn’t this a bit—”

“Scandalous?” Benedict’s lips twitched. “It is, but scandals come and go. If you are concerned about myself and Miss Alice, you needn’t worry. There is no bad blood between us, and she has encouraged my proposal behind the scenes.”

“He is right, Elly,” Alice told her. “I have no ill will here. I want you to imagine that I was never even involved, because, for a truth, it never truly was. Go on, Penelope, you deserve to be happy.”

Facing Benedict, she reached for the bouquet but paused an inch from taking them. “My lord, I think you should know that...”

“The situation with Rutledge?” Benedict whispered discreetly. “I was informed of the after-effects and I simply do not care. Because I have a plan for that too.”

“You do?” Penelope’s voice was also a mere whisper now. “I—I cannot ask that of you, my lord.”

He cupped her chin and smoothed a thumb over her cheekbone, “That’s the thing; you are not asking. I only request that you trust me.”

A fragile smile curved Penelope’s lips, “I do. But I fear I may need some tea to digest this news with as well.”

“Good,” Benedict all but beamed. “We are off to Almacks. May I compliment your gown? You look as fresh and vital as spring itself.”

It was dusk when they returned to the townhome, and she spotted their aunt's carriage turning the corner; it told her that her family had just returned.

"I think this is the best time to speak with my uncle, my lord," Alice told him. "It might save you the time of returning."

Drawing the window curtain aside a touch, Benedict looked out and nodded. "I... I reckon so." He huffed in nervousness, "I never did have the confidence of my brother," he finished with a small smile.

When the vehicle canted to the carriage gate, he descended first and assisted Alice and Penelope in alighting, and Alice clutched onto her leghorn hat as a swift breeze nearly overtook it. She cast a long look at the sky, fearing it would start raining soon, before hurrying inside.

Aunt Agatha was halfway up the stairs with Eliza a step behind her but stopped short at the commotion and turned to face the three.

"Alice—oh, my lord. I did not know you would be coming around. Shall we put some tea on and have some cake?"

"No thank you, Aunt," she replied while gently holding the invitation Benedict had just given her. "We had enough of both at Almacks."

Fanning her words away, Aunt Agatha tutted, "Don't be rude now, Alice, or speak out of turn. Please, your lordship?"

"No thank you, Mrs. Thorpe, though I do appreciate your hospitality," Benedict replied, charming as ever, before angling his head to Penelope. "I must take my leave. I do hope the two of you enjoyed the evening."

“Without question,” Penelope smiled, her cheeks flushed. “And thank you for having us, my lord.”

A strange sound came from his throat, “For yourself and in private, I would much prefer Benedict . ‘My lord’ is too... stuffed-shirt for me.”

At that, a sharp scoff emanated from the stairwell. “And why would you encourage such misbehavior, my lord?” Eliza asked snidely.

“Not to Penelope,” he said, kindly. “We are courting, and I have an invitation to extend to you all.”

CHAPTER 25

ONE WEEK LATER

“O h, my heart, look how marvelous this is!” Pure delight danced over Aunt Agatha’s face, the fan in her hand beating up a storm as she gazed over the Duke’s foyer a week later. “All the beau ton is here! I cannot wait to make acquaintances.”

Lords in their dark ball suits and ladies clad in every shade of the rainbow twirled with elegant vigor across the dance floor to the sensual strains of a waltz. Chatter and laughter floated in the air, and the champagne flowed freely. Yet no surge of excitement raced in Alice’s veins.

Instead, a hollow cavern of dread had settled in her stomach an hour ago, and pure reluctance now had her breastbone trapped in a cage. It was eight days since the evening Benedict had announced his courtship to the family, and two weeks since she had last seen the Duke, and as happy as she was for Penelope—she couldn’t stomach seeing Edward again.

“This time, dear, you might want to settle for two or three and familiarize yourself with their names first instead of guessing the titles of the whole room,” Uncle Richard cautioned his wife.

“Yes, yes,” Aunt Agatha tutted. “Penelope dear, when you have a moment, thank Marquess Brampton for us. Such a night like this will surely lighten the tedium I have been feeling of late.”

“And since when have you been feeling this way?” Richard adjusted his ill-fitting evening jacket. “You certainly haven’t told me such a thing.”

“I have,” Agatha scowled. “You just have not been listening.”

Letting her relatives quibble in one ear and out the other, Alice looked around, half-wanting and half-dreading seeing Edward among the crowd. She did spy Benedict, though he seemed blissfully unaware of them. He was halfway across the room, engaged in lively conversation with two other men, a glass of sparkling champagne in one hand, the other tucked into his trouser pocket.

She wanted to be anywhere but here.

“Shall we get a drink before the next dance?” Eliza chirped before swanning off to the refreshment nook.

Despite it now having been a week since Benedict had officially broken his courtship with Alice and informed the Thorpe’s of his intentions to court Penelope, Eliza had not uttered a word to Alice. She had looked at her though, with scalding jealousy and bristling animosity.

At first, Alice had just brushed it off as nothing different, but now, Eliza’s silence was not boding well with her. Eliza’s suitor, Baron Portman, had come around twice, and it had taken all of her strength to not be ill when she saw the fake smiles and simperings Eliza had put on for the lord. A lord whom, just a month ago, she had been utterly determined to avoid entertaining.

“I’ll get us some water,” she told Penelope before following her cousin.

While waiting her turn, she spotted her reflection, her grim reflection in a mirror—and couldn’t help but stare; Alice did not see that hopeful, vibrant undaunted

woman stare back at her in the mirror anymore.

She did not see the innocent girl who had longed to dance all night at balls or stroll in the gardens with a beau beneath the stars hoping at most for a curt peck on the cheek. The person looking back at her was one darkened by lost hope, disappointment, worry, and fear.

“I had assumed the rumors to be untrue,” Miranda Valentine sneered behind her fan. “The Duke truly is scraping the bottom of the barrel inviting your kind here.”

Alice huffed in irritation, and before even gathering her thoughts, spun to face the lady squarely. “Pray tell, Lady Valentine,” she began, “when was your last courtship?”

Miranda’s face soured as if she’d sucked a lemon, and Alice walked right past her to fill the glasses with water, only to hear Miranda snidely say to Eliza, “She doesn’t know, does she?”

Her head jerked to the two as she listened in.

Eliza sniffed. “What is between me and His Grace is between me and His Grace.”

Alice’s hand trembled at the mention of Edward. What had happened between her cousin and him that she did not know about? More importantly, when did it happen?

It seems my decision to avoid Edward has been changed without my consent.

Taking the drinks back to her sister, she sat and quietly sipped at hers.

“Do you plan on dancing tonight?” Penelope nudged her.

“No,” she replied. “I haven’t the feeling for it.”

“Not even if Lord Brampton asks you?”

Her gaze shifted to the lord in question; tonight, his waistcoat matched his eyes, his blue-grey brocade and charcoal trousers fitted superbly to his virile form while a sapphire stick pin winked in the folds of his cravat.

The light from the gas chandelier and the candles gently kissed the chiseled contours of his face. He was a fine man; just not fine for her. Not anymore.

“Not even then,” she replied.

“Whyever not?” Penelope asked. “Oh, he is so devilishly handsome tonight, like a fairytale prince. I can only wish he’d ask me to dance—” The wistful sigh left her mouth before she clamped her teeth tight. “I am so sorry, Alice. I feel like a—a deplorable person, for talking of him like this soon after you ended your courtship.”

“You won’t hurt me,” Alice assured her, her eyes flickering above Penelope’s shoulder. “I have made peace with our parting and you, you might not need to make that wish after all.”

Her sister’s thin brows notched into one. “Why?”

“Miss Alice,” Benedict’s smooth voice drawled from behind them. “How do you do?”

“Quite well, thank you,” she rose to curtsy. “Thank you for having us again. Your home is sublime.”

“Wound to my pride as it is, I cannot take any credit on that front. That is entirely on

the shoulders of my brother,” Benedict rounded the chairs. “I happen to be an agent of chaos around here.”

Laughing softly, she said, “I find that hard to believe.”

“It is true,” he smiled, his warm gaze settling on Penelope. “The next time you have a moment, ask Edward why we had to replace all the glass chandeliers with copper candle holders. Alas, I must confess, I am not here to regale you with stories of my youth. Miss Penelope, may I ask you to do me the honor of partnering with me for this next dance?”

Before she could answer, Penelope looked to Alice as if seeking permission. Dutifully, she waved her younger sister on, and while the pair of them swept off to the floor, she cast around for Edward. It had been half an hour and she hadn’t seen hide nor hair of him.

The twenty-piece orchestra soon started the waltz, and many ladies and gentlemen joined the pair; the moment Benedict swept Penelope in his arms, Alice could feel the weighted speculation of everyone in the ballroom buzzing across her skin like barbed insects.

With the room soon thoroughly distracted by the new couple, Alice used their eyes away from her to slip into the balcony she’d been eyeing since the moment she had stepped into the hall; escaping through the French-style doors that led to an unconventional circular balcony that rose over a daffodil garden.

It was quieter outside, and she took a moment to take a deep breath. The ball was rather overwhelming for someone who was not used to such events. So many titled individuals, so much laughter and music, so many expectations and rules.

She saw the silhouette of the elusive Duke immediately, standing out of sight in a

corner, gazing out into the darkness. True night had fallen now; the only light came from the moon and that which spilled out from the manor house.

She could not imagine how many candles had been used to create the heavenly soft glow that filled the ballroom—but how was it that he looked better in shadow?

“I am sorry to intrude,” she choked out. “I—I’ll leave.”

“Nonsense,” Edward said without so much as facing her; his tone level but... hollow.

“The balcony is large enough to accommodate the both of us.”

The night air was cool and carried the budding scents of spring and she breathed deeply while resting a gloved hand on the stone railing. The roar of a ball in full swing seeped through the glass panes of the double doors behind her, even though she’d kept them half-closed for privacy.

“Have you been out here all this time?”

“Yes,” he replied. He slid a finger under his collar. “I felt stifled inside. Strangely enough, I do not feel better out here either.”

“Is it the ambiance or is it something else?” she asked quietly.

“I haven’t slept for days.”

She kept her gaze on the dark flowers but spoke to him, “Why?”

“I shan’t answer that,” he replied.

“Then, will you at least tell me what interaction you had with my treacherous cousin Eliza?” Alice pivoted to him. “When was this and why was it?”

“Leave it alone, Alice,” he said firmly.

“And the fires of hell will turn to ice,” she said as firmly as he did. “I will not leave here until you tell me. I was going to find you and ask you anyhow.”

In three large strides, he immediately closed the distance between them. He snatched her wrist and forcibly pulled her into him, causing her to crane her head up and meet his steely eyes. Instantly, her heart took another rhythm. The authority in his pale gaze was oddly... calming, as it dropped to her lips.

Does he dare kiss me... here?

His brows lowered. “Alice—”

“Tell me,” she ordered.

Muttering a curse, he sighed and pulled away. “Weeks ago, your cousin decided to go to the London Gazette to spread rumors of you and spread malicious lies about how you lost the only possible marriage proposal because of some truly foul... bodily habits.

“She was going to paint you as a vulgar slattern which would have effectively ruined any future chance of having a marriage or good standing with the ton. I stopped her and placed the fear of god inside her. If she uttered one word to any scandal rag, I’d sweep her.”

Stunned, Alice couldn’t find the words. “You—you did that? For me?”

“Of course I did,” he muttered. “I told you I’d protect you, didn’t I? Why would that end because of the divide between us? I can protect you from afar, Alice. I want to.”

“But you—”

A sudden, blood-curdling scream echoed from the ballroom, sharp enough to slice through the music and laughter beyond the doors. Alice and Edward exchanged a single glance—then bolted.

The scent of candle smoke and perfume hung heavy in the ballroom as they burst inside. The crowd was no longer dancing. Gowns rustled as clusters of guests pressed back, gathering against the walls like a tide retreating from something dangerous. Murmurs rippled through the sea of faces—fear, confusion, disbelief.

At the center, Benedict stood tall, still as a statue. His face was pale, his hands loose but ready at his sides.

And facing him was Rutledge .

His once-elegant attire was in complete disarray—plum waistcoat stained, cravat gone, shirt hanging open at the throat. His face, glistening with sweat, was twisted with rage, damp curls clinging to his temples. His eyes, bloodshot and wild, darted from Benedict to the crowd, then back.

And in his trembling hands... a pistol.

“You!” Rutledge spat, voice raw and slurred, thick with drink. “You think this is finished? You think—” He staggered a step closer, the gun lifting higher—the black barrel was now mere feet from Benedict’s chest.

“My lord...” Benedict cautioned, voice calm but low with warning. “Please, put down the weapon.”

The viscount barked a laugh. “Put it down? Is that an order, my lord ?” The mockery

was thick, curling into a sneer. “You—you pompous bastards . You ruined me! You—”

Benedict took a measured step away from the fireline of the crowd. “You are very clearly in your cups, old boy. Don’t do something you might—”

“Don’t talk down to me, you smug son of a bitch!” Rutledge roared, spittle flying, his face blotched scarlet with fury. “Where is he?! Where’s that damned brother of yours? Edward! I know you’re here, you coward!”

“Stay here,” Edward ordered her. He then beckoned a footman over silently and whispered to him, “Get the other men with you and guide the guests out of here, I will not have one of them splintering a fingertip on a shard of glass much less get a bullet to the brain.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the footman bowed.

Anxiously, Alice watched Rutledge wave the gun around like a madman while the footmen began to usher the guests away little by little. Thankfully, the crazed man took little notice of them as he appeared too fixated on Benedict.

“You destroyed me!” Rutledge’s voice was rising, unraveling with every breath. “You and that brother of yours—meddling, scheming, tearing my life apart for your own bloody amusement! I’ve lost everything! Do you hear me? Everything!”

“Everything you lost was your own doing,” Benedict muttered, his voice cutting sharp across the tirade.

Rutledge’s bloodshot eyes narrowed further. “My doing ? My doing? You’re just like him. Just like your brother! Hiding behind your bloody titles, your hypocrisies—while I’m hunted like a dog because of you! ” His voice cracked on the

last word.

He stumbled forward another step. The gun was now so close Benedict could almost touch it.

And then finally—Edward spoke.

“Is this what you’ve become, Rutledge?”

Rutledge spun. His gaze snapped toward Edward, standing calm. That half-second of distraction was all Benedict needed.

He lunged.

His fist connected hard with Rutledge’s jaw—once, twice. A solid punch directly in his eye socket before following with an uppercut that sent Rutledge flailing.

He only had a moment to bask in his victory before Rutledge was back on his feet, throwing himself atop him, sending them both crashing to the table of refreshments behind them.

Distantly, Alice heard the screams of other guests as glass and China shattered and splintered around them; as frantic and horrified as she was about Benedict, she desperately cast around for Penelope. Where was she ?

Benedict was defending himself from Rutledge, pummeling him as they scrambled on the old floorboards until he managed to land a gut punch that had sent the drunk doubling over.

“Are you going to do something?” Alice pleaded of Edward in desperation, her gaze flitting back to the fighting pair.

“Not yet...” Edward whispered. “Benedict can hold his own. Lord knows he will come for my head if I try to drag him off Rutledge presently.”

She held her breath as Benedict kicked the pistol away while grabbing Rutledge by the collar and slamming him into the nearest wall. A familiar gasp had Alice almost whirling to her right to catch sight of her sister, who had artfully and slowly maneuvered away into the remaining crowd. She slipped out from under Edward’s arm and dashed over to Penelope, hugging her tight.

Her sister was trembling in fear while watching Benedict apprehend Rutledge. Most of the ballroom was empty now, except for the few guests who had lingered on and now stared with abject curiosity and horror—while a select group were simply utterly delighted to see the scandal unfolding before their eyes.

“You lost that wager fair and square, take it like a man!” Benedict snapped, the lie rolling off his tongue easily, clearly making sure no word about Penelope slipped out and directing the narrative elsewhere. “I’ll have you arrested for threatening my life. You’ll die in Newgate.”

Rutledge was shaking his head, swallowing thickly, his throat working over and over and over again. His face turned sallow, moments before he lurched forward. Benedict jolted out of the way before the man vomited on Benedict’s shoes, the sick grey and smelling foul.

“God’s blood,” the marquess swore. “You are a mess.”

Stepping forward, Edward’s cold voice dampened half of the room, “Should I deliver you to Grimes?”

Rutledge went ashen, “No. God no...”

“You have five minutes to get out of my house. Consider it a courtesy headstart. I’ll be having you thrown into the prison hulks before your head can spin twice,” Edward snarled. “Unless you would prefer an unending, unrelating banishment to New Holland to work under the blistering sun feeding pigs?”

“I—I’ll go,” Rutledge spluttered, his bleary eyes flickering to Penelope, but not a word came from his mouth to her.

“Ramsay,” Edward called his butler forward. “Kindly throw this dunghill beyond my gates and if he dares darken my doorstep again, be free to put a bullet between his eyes. Oh, and have the constables alerted.”

“My pleasure, Your Grace,” Ramsay smirked, hauling Rutledge to his feet and taking all the more satisfaction from it.

Then, he turned to Alice, but she decidedly turned away and began fussing with Penelope. From the corner of her eyes, she saw Edward step over the broken glasses and crockery, salvage one glass, and fill it from the still-bubbling champagne fountain.

Lifting it like a toast, he announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, I hope this is enough fodder for your breakfast tables for days to come, and please, do not embellish anything for the scandal sheets tomorrow. Now, shall we take a recess for supper?”

CHAPTER 26

“ A ll of London is a-flutter with the news coming out of Duke Valhaven’s ill-fated ball last night. No one knows exactly what happened between the Duke’s brother and gambling-hell owner, Viscount Rutledge—who had recently vanished from polite society of late.

However, from the brief exchange overheard, this humble reporter surmises that Marquess Brampton had taken possession of some precious item Rutledge wants back.

Guesses range from a precious phaeton, family jewelry, or even Rutledge’s luxurious country home that he gambled away. One guest even offered that it was over a spurned woman—but we here at the paper thinks that is far-fetched.

Rutledge is a known rake, Lady M—says. He does not hold onto his paramours to learn their name much less to get possessive over them.

Speaking of the Landon family, it’s common knowledge that Duke Valhaven is not one for marriage and has already committed his ducal role to his brother. At one point the Duke, dubbed “the most eligible bachelor” of the season, had once left a trail of broken and hopeful hearts in society when he decided to not marry.

There are still hopefuls who pray that the Duke will stay and marry well to continue one of the most benevolent ducal families in England.”

Dropping the paper, Alice let out a long breath. This was marginally better than she

had anticipated; all she could do was hope that no one investigated the ‘spurned woman’ angle.

It was somewhat of a truth—but nobody needed to know that.

Looking out the door, Alice considered going to Edward’s home to finish last night’s aborted conversation. The whole house was silent this morning, what with her aunt and cousin crying exhaustion from last night, Penelope in her rooms, and her uncle off to his office in the city.

Alice was all alone.

It would be very easy to slip away, but was it wise to do so?

“ Alice? ” Penelope’s groggy voice cut off her foolish musings as she ambled into the sun-kissed morning room, looking troubled while closing off her day robe. “Did you sleep last night?”

“Not as much as I’d have liked,” Alice admitted, nimbly slipping this morning’s paper off the table.

Taking a seat, Penelope’s brows met in the middle. “I didn’t sleep a wink. I kept tossing and turning, upset and fearing what would have happened if it had gone another way.”

“What other way could it have gone?”

After a moment, Alice shook her head; her sister’s meaning was plain. “Don’t answer that. I’m sorry, I’m still a little out of sorts. I know what you meant. If Rutledge had pulled that trigger or if Benedict had not been able to defend himself, it could have ended very badly.”

“Very, very badly.”

“I still cannot fathom how he managed to get so far as the ballroom,” Alice murmured, more to herself. “His Grace has guards stationed at multiple points long before reaching his...” She trailed off, heat rising to her cheeks, unwilling to reveal just how intimately acquainted she had become with such personal details after her umpteenth visit to his home.

“I’d imagine holding a pistol and waving it like a madman will get you into anywhere you desire to go,” Penelope shrugged.

“Do you want some tea?”

“Yes, thank you,” her sister mused as Alice reached for the pot. “I realize it’s strange, but I saw the moment my world began to crumble before me—the moment he’d held that gun to Benedict... I felt such... such fear . I wanted to put myself between them but my feet—my feet wouldn’t move.”

Sliding the cup to her, Alice smiled, “Your body is wiser than your heart. Alas, fear for the one you love will do that to you.”

“ Love?! ” Penelope’s ears burned bright red, not helped by her sudden and telling overreaction. “I—I mean, it has only been weeks. There is no—it is not conceivable that I have fallen in love already.”

“Perhaps not...” Alice reflected on how long it had taken for her to recognize she had fallen for Edward, and it was far sooner than she cared to admit, “...but you are hurtling toward it like a cart gone astray. Let me ask you this—when you fancied Rutledge, how did it feel?”

“No,” she blurted again. Pinking, she slowly added, “That is to say, I fancied myself

in love with him , it... it wasn't the same as it is now. And now, I know him to be a spineless cad with no morals anyhow. He once glittered like gold, it took too long for me to realize it was only fool's gold."

"And how do you feel about Benedict?"

"He's kind," Penelope's blush softened. "He's thoughtful... and protective. When he looks at me, it is not with pity or a seductive smolder, but with thoughtfulness and consideration."

"As any true gentleman should," Alice nodded somberly. "I am truly happy for you, Elly. You deserve this more than anyone for the strength and courage you have shown these past weeks."

"But what about you?" Her sister's worried tone from before returned. "You should be happy too. What if... what if you never marry?"

"I'll swan off into spinsterhood with grace," Alice said calmly. "Don't worry about me, Elly, I can hold my own."

"But I do," Penelope murmured, her face falling. "You have always been so strong for everyone, it is not fair for you to be cheated out of happiness."

Instead of replying to that, Alice chewed on a portion of her lip, unsure of how much she should tell Penelope. "Last night, the moment Benedict punched Rutledge, did you see Eliza's face?"

"No," she replied, brows knitting, "why?"

"Because she was smirking," Alice said. "It was only for a moment, but I know she was happy to see all the chaos."

Finishing her tea, Penelope asked, “You don’t think she had something to do with it, do you?”

“I don’t see how she could,” Alice considered her words. “She hasn’t been out this week since Benedict announced your courtship, and I can only imagine she was in her room, sulking and surly that he hadn’t chosen her. The only times she left the house were when Baron Portman came around. I suppose she was simply happy to see you be miserable.”

“And for Benedict to die,” Penelope grimaced. “She really doesn’t want us here, does she?”

“Look at the silver lining to your cloud,” Alice smiled. “If all goes well, you might be married soon.”

“About that...” Penelope’s voice dropped to a hush. “How did he know? The only person I have talked to about it was you, so how could he know?” Alarm became rife in her voice as she added, “You don’t think everybody else knows, do you?!”

“Oh god! What am I going to do if it is out there? I thought some ladies were looking at me funny last night! I—I—”

“No, Elly, Benedict knows, because... well...” Alice grimaced before utterly throwing caution to the wind, “I had some trouble finding Rutledge and His Grace offered to help. I know I shouldn’t have told him such private matters, but he is an honorable man, Elly, he would never tell anyone if it was not imperative that the person knows.

“And now Benedict does know, and he says he cares nothing about it,” she added. “I suppose you might be worried that he is fickle, jumping from me to you, but that is not who he is. Think of it this way, he had to meet me to find you.”

“That is rather romantic I suppose,” Penelope replied, resting her chin lightly on her folded arms.

“Don’t overthink what will be, Elly,” Alice soothed her. “We are to visit the fair tomorrow, and I want you to enjoy yourself, not worry. Not even with that disaster that took place last night.”

“That might be rather difficult,” Penelope replied, wrinkling her nose as her gaze flicked to the newspaper Alice had made a poor attempt to conceal on her lap, “I am certain, by now, it is on the tongue of everybody who is somebody in town.”

CHAPTER 27

The fairgrounds were remarkably organized and well-kept, with paved walkways winding gracefully between the grand tents and bustling stalls. Men and women tended carts laden with sticky, sweet confections, their sugary aromas swirling in the summer air.

There was no end to the spectacle before her eyes; wherever Alice turned, some wonder awaited. To her right, strolling musicians filled the air with lively strains from double drums, tambourines, violins, and pipes. To her left, a troupe of tumblers twisted and turned, while posture-masters balanced with near-impossible grace.

“Gadzooks! Is that a dancing bear?” Penelope clutched Alice’s arm in wide-eyed astonishment.

“Bizarrely, it is,” Benedict replied, his voice smooth, entirely unruffled by the dozens of onlookers who shamelessly gawked at him. His gaze, however, remained fixed on the bear. “I do wonder how they trained it to perform such a thing.”

They paused to watch the bear now as it turned a few good somersaults and danced to the bagpipes. His companions were some little dogs dressed in red jackets, and a monkey that occasionally hopped atop the bear’s back.

“Something about this feels rather... unkind,” Penelope murmured, her soft brows knitting. The deep blue of her walking dress set off the fair strands of her hair, artfully swept atop her head in a chignon.

“It is all unfair,” Benedict replied, voice calm but edged with a touch of cynicism. “But many would justify it under the belief that God Himself granted them dominion over all creation.”

They drifted further into the fair, past a cluster of men expertly hurling knives—some even blindfolded. Alice sucked in a breath as the blades struck their marks with chilling precision.

“If you pardon my asking,” she ventured, adjusting the brim of her leghorn bonnet, “how is His Grace managing with all these... whispers?”

Benedict chuckled softly. “Edward could not be less concerned if the rumors were hand-delivered to him on a silver platter. My brother is a master of indifference—unless, of course, it involves his men, his dog Atticus, or me.”

I may be on that list.

“That’s good to hear,” she smiled thinly. “I know how cruel the denizens of your class can be.”

“I am perfectly aware,” Benedict tipped his head. “The ton is a world of glamorous elegance and lavish extravagance, but an ugly fickleness and an unforgiving nature lies at its underbelly.”

They neared a broad wooden structure where puppets danced, and the puppeteer told a story of a warrior and the princess he protected. The epic battle between the warrior and the enemy king was one that had her shocked by the level of sophistication the storyteller had.

At the end, she clapped with the rest of the spectators and dropped a coin in the bucket before moving on.

“Where is he these days?” she asked, knowing to keep her questions short and casual; she could not say anything to spark suspicion.

“Haggling with the stubborn lords at Westminster,” Benedict shrugged. “That is a job I do not envy and one that I am actively dreading to take over when he does pass the torch to me.”

The reminder that Edward was set on leaving England—and her—behind made her already upset stomach tumultuous like waves in the throes of a storm.

Though her pulse thudded, Alice drew her shoulders back. Don’t be a faint-hearted ninny . Think of Penelope and everything that is at stake.

“I am sure you will do fine,” she said. “From what I do know of His Grace, he’ll prepare you for everything coming your way.”

“Oh, oh, my lord,” Penelope hopped on her feet, excitement rippling over her face. She reached for him and tugged him toward a wide wooden pool with painted wooden fish bobbing in the waters. “If we hook five by the time that weight drops to the ground, we get a prize.”

“Lovely,” Benedict smiled widely. “Shall we fish then, my lady?”

While the two moved to take their places, Alice felt her attention drawn to a large tent that advertised the House of Mirrors.

A combination of lamps and sunlight-letting mesh openings in the fabric canopy illuminated the interior of the tent. Nevertheless, the room felt hot and restricting. Many of the precisely positioned mirrors were twisted to make the observer appear larger or fatter than they were, creating a bewildering—and upsetting—illusion.

She meandered to one where her reflection stretched her needle-thin but her head was a bulbous egg, and another that rendered her shorter than the end table in her bedroom.

Even as curious as it was, she left the tent humored and looked around for her sister—only to be approached by a woman, dressed in what she could only say were colorful rags and a headscarf. Her piercing blue eyes pinned Alice to her place.

“You—” the woman said, lifting a spidery finger to her. “You ‘ave ‘de hand of fate around ye... and ‘de murk of death and ‘de grave. The shadows twist and turn around ye, showing light one moment and darkness ‘de next.”

Alice blinked. And blinked again. “Beg your pardon?”

“The fates wind their strings around you,” the crone continued. “One path takes ye into the deep, another takes ye into the silver night, as ye hold yer bleeding heart in yer left hand. Beware the deep, gal, that is where fate snips the cord.”

With that, the woman wandered off, and flabbergasted, Alice stood rooted in place, unsure if she had just been given a blessing or a warning.

Shaking her head, she went off to find Penelope and Benedict, only to find them by the booths of stalls selling oysters and sausages. The two were sharing a hot pie and the tender expression on Benedict’s face as he gazed at a happily chattering Penelope warmed Alice’s heart.

A small twist of regret that she would never get that emotion from Edward did tighten her chest, but she pushed it away by pure force of will.

If and buts...

“Where did you wander off to?” Penelope asked, her eyes brimming with happiness.

“Just looking around,” Alice replied, not willing to bore them with tedium. “I apologize for leaving you. I am your chaperone, after all.”

“No worries,” Benedict grinned, “we hardly noticed.”

Of course not. You two are so in love.

“Shall we explore the rest of this fair?” She asked, as a juggler on stilts passed by them.

After the two finished eating, they roamed through the fair, trying the various games and booths, spending the tickets Benedict purchased for them at the ring toss and dice.

She linked arms with Penelope, watching Benedict attempt to test his strength by hitting a platform with a mallet to ring a bell. On his second try, the pendulum hit the bell so hard, the ring echoed in Alice’s ear for long after they left that booth.

An indigo evening was drawing down on them by the time they headed back to London proper—only, Benedict wanted to take Penelope for a stroll through his extensive gardens before they returned to the townhouse. Alice, having no desire to return to her aunt’s house just yet, gave her consent.

“Will you walk with us?” Penelope asked.

“Not this time,” Alice replied quietly. “I think I’ll find a quiet place to rest my feet. I am a touch fatigued.”

“Not a worry, I’ll have a maid chaperone us,” Benedict swept a courteous bow. “Ah,

and Ramsay can show you to the library in the meantime.”

“Thank you,” Alice replied.

While the two went off, she turned in place, admiring the art on the walls until the butler strode to her and bowed. “Welcome, Miss Alice. I hope you’re doing well this evening. Please follow me.”

She allowed her mind to wander and simply followed Ramsay’s steady pace—until he halted before a door that was familiar... a little too familiar. She slowed her steps. “This is not the library—” She looked to the manservant. “This is His Grace’s study.”

“It is indeed,” Ramsay nodded rather matter-of-factly. “Forgive this old man for taking a liberty, but he has been a bit... unmoored of late.”

“There is nothing I can do about that,” Alice whispered chidingly. “There is nothing I can do for him.”

Ramsay’s shoulders slumped and the silver at his temples glinted in the lamplight around them. “Well, you cannot fault a man for trying, Miss,” he said, a touch softer now. “Especially when I’ve been instructed to burn no fewer than three dozen unfinished letters addressed to you.”

Alice’s head snapped to him while her lips parted. “Pardon?”

“I suppose I should not be disclosing my master’s personal affairs,” he grimaced.

“No, you undoubtedly should not,” Alice nodded but those words—not happenstance in any way—did turn her thinking. “Is he... inside?”

“Yes,” Ramsay nodded. “Staring into nothingness again I might wager.”

“Twist my arm, will you?” She muttered while she turned the knob on the door.

Slipping inside, she realized only a few lamps were lit, and in the flickering dimness, she noted shelves of books lining the walls and leather furniture clustered around the flickering fireplace at the center of the room.

She found Edward within moments.

His face, even in repose, was striking—made all the more so by the shadow of a night’s beard. Sprawled on the rug, he swirled his wine slowly, the deep red catching the light as it shifted in the glass, his expression unreadable yet captivating.

“I don’t need anything, Charles,” he said lazily.

Notching her head up, she murmured, “...I’m not Mr. Ramsay.”

CHAPTER 28

Edward's face flashed in the direction of her silhouette in an instant. "What are you doing here?" His tone was less accusatory, rather, exhausted.

"Penelope and Benedict decided to take a turn about your gardens before he returns us home," she began.

His eyes narrowed. "Did Ramsay send you here?"

"Yes," she admitted, "and I can see why."

"And why is that?" He asked wryly.

"He is worried about you," Alice said as she ambled to his desk, lit a candelabra, and carried it to the small coffee table before him.

The additional light chased shadows over the room and over Edward's stern features. Her pulse raced. For once, he was unkempt: his hair was disheveled—the shadow on his cheeks accentuated the hollows and hard edges of his face. His shirt was untucked and unbuttoned down to his sternum revealing the hard-carved ridges of his chest.

He was beautiful... and beat.

"So... how have you been these past weeks?" she tried.

"Pah . I was tempted with murder in Parliament today," he muttered. "The Greeks

must be hanging their head in shame with how we're bastardizing their beloved demokratia ."

"You went to Parliament?"

"Yes, Alice." He rose languidly, retrieved two crystal glasses from the sideboard, and filled both with the heady wine. Carrying the second to her, he lowered himself gracefully by her side, then added, "I suppose even rakes as myself have work to do."

Her eyes dropped to the glass before she tentatively accepted it and sipped. Her nose wrinkled a little. "This is... strong ."

His chuckle was low and husky. "Is Ramsay's concern the only reason you are here?"

She kept her eyes fixed on the glass. "...No."

"What do you want then, Alice?" He retook her glass and rested it on the end table. "You cannot tell me you abandoned your sister for poor old me."

"You are neither poor nor old," she countered.

" Alice... " his tone dropped to an unspoken order. When she did not reply, he cupped her cheek. "Is it my touch you want?"

"I..." The word came breathless.

His thumb coasted over her cheekbone. "You could have simply asked."

His hand slid into the curls at the nape of her neck and tilted her head back; he was studying her as if he could memorize every feature of her face for eternity. And then, ever so slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers, and there was that hot soft touch again

of his lips upon her own.

Even through the haze of wine and desire, he knew that this was foolish. Reckless in the extreme. He had no right to start this. No right to feel her mouth opening under his, her accepting his questing tongue with such eagerness that the dark needs inside him began to quiver and unfurl. Desire blazed through his veins like wildfire.

Edward's grip on her wrist was a brand, firm but carefully measured, a possessive restraint that sent a shiver rippling through her body. The fire behind them crackled low, the flickering light casting long shadows across the dark-paneled study. But Alice saw none of it—only him.

I shouldn't be doing this anymore... I can't...

Without a word, he moved, guiding her with silent authority as he turned her, pressing her back against the plush rug beneath them. His body followed, covering hers, surrounding her, caging her in a way that was both intoxicating and terrifying all at once.

He said nothing. There were no words needed.

His control radiated in every slow, deliberate movement as he reached up, unbuttoning his shirt with infuriating calm, one button, then another, until the linen fell open and revealed the broad expanse of his chest. Sculpted muscle, the ridges hard and taut beneath smooth, tanned skin, the sight making her breath catch.

And then, with a flick of his wrist, he shrugged it off entirely. The shirt dropped to the floor in a whisper of fabric, leaving him bare to her gaze—powerful, commanding, undeniable .

The next thing she felt was his hand curling around her throat. Not tight—never

tight—but possessive, his thumb resting lightly over the hollow of her throat, the heat of his palm pressing into her pulse. His body caged her, his knee pressing between her thighs, widening them slightly, a clear display of power as he hovered just above her.

He waited.

And she trembled.

Not from fear. No, it was the waiting —the unbearable tension of his nearness, the raw restraint vibrating through his every touch, as if he were holding himself back by a thread so thin it could snap with her next breath.

And then he moved .

His lips descended, hot and demanding, brushing the curve of her jaw before trailing lower, lower, to the delicate pulse fluttering beneath his hand. His tongue flicked out, tasting her, teasing, before his teeth scraped lightly, just enough to sting. She gasped, her back arching, but his grip tightened on her throat, holding her exactly where he wanted her.

When his mouth finally covered hers, it was nothing gentle.

It was a claiming.

The kiss was deep, consuming, his tongue sweeping against hers, coaxing her open for him, tasting her with an aching slowness that left her shaking. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think—only feel. The rough scrape of his stubble against her skin. The flex of his fingers at her waist as his other hand left her throat and began its slow descent, tracing over the curve of her breast, teasing just above the neckline of her gown.

She whimpered.

But he only kissed her harder.

And then, with a slow, devastating pull, he drew the neckline lower, the fabric yielding beneath his touch until her breasts spilled free, bared to the heat of the firelight.

His head lifted, his lips damp, his breathing ragged as he looked down at her.

For a heartbeat, he only stared. “God, you’re beautiful...”

Then, with a guttural growl, he bent his head and claimed her.

His mouth sealed over her nipple, hot and wet, his tongue flicking in slow, deliberate circles before he drew her deeper, sucking with the kind of intensity that made her toes curl against the rug. Heat coiled low in her belly, a delicious ache building as he devoured her, his mouth relentless as he teased her flesh with his tongue, his teeth scraping just enough to make her body jolt with pleasure so sharp it bordered on pain.

She squirmed, her hips shifting beneath him, seeking friction— relief .

But Edward was not a man to be rushed.

The deep sound he made as she moved was more warning than pleasure. His hand flattened against her stomach, pressing her down, holding her there, completely at his mercy.

“Stay. Still.”

No other words. Just the command woven into the tension of his touch.

And then his lips were back on her—dragging across the swell of her breast, his tongue painting hot, wet paths down her ribs as he shifted lower.

His fingers gathered her skirts, pushing them up inch by inch, the cool air brushing over her thighs as he bared her to him. And then he spread her, just enough to make her gasp, enough to make her feel completely exposed, completely possessed beneath his gaze.

His fingers traced along the silk of her stockings, finding the place where bare skin met lace, teasing there with devastating slowness before trailing higher, higher—until the damp heat of her arousal met his touch.

A helpless sound tore from her lips, but he didn't give her the satisfaction of more.

Not yet.

His thumb pressed lightly over the aching bundle of nerves through the soaked lace, circling once, twice—so excruciatingly slow it made her whimper—but never enough to satisfy the ache building inside her.

“Please...” she whispered, unable to stop herself.

His lips curved against her skin.

Still, he didn't yield.

Instead, he pushed the lace aside and pressed a single finger against her bare, slick folds, parting her, teasing her, his breath a low growl as he found her so warm, so ready .

His finger slid inside—one deep, devastating stroke—before retreating to circle her

again. And again. Followed only by his tongue.

Pleasure coiled tighter.

She writhed, trying to find her release, to chase that sharp edge of bliss he kept just out of reach.

But he wouldn't give it to her.

Not until she broke.

Not until she shattered for him.

When he thrust his fingers deeper, pressing his tongue firmly against her pearl and curling just so, the pressure was too much. The coil inside her snapped, her body arching violently as she climaxed with a cry, the pleasure so sharp it almost hurt, rippling through her in wave after wave as he worked her through it, holding her still as she came undone beneath him.

The spike of pleased pain had him holding her fast on the rug, causing her to squirm in agonizing pleasure.

"Edward..." she finally whispered when it was all over, her body trembling in the aftermath, "...you are still... burgeoned."

"I know, sweet," he murmured against her belly, the heat in his voice still raw, still aching. "And you can help me out with that."

Her eyes searched for his. "How?"

Shifting off her, he untied his robe and unfastened the fall of his trousers. Alice's

breath caught as he pulled out his manhood: claspings the thick root, the upthrust shaft visibly pulsed and strained against the confines of his fist.

“Touch me,” he commanded. “I want to feel you.”

Her breath caught as he wrapped her hand around his rampant arousal, her fingers barely circling the thick, heavy stalk. His hand closed over hers, tightening her hold on him, urging a fierce new, ferocious rhythm.

She ran her fingertips over him and swiped her thumb over the wide tip, and satiny moisture seeped from the tiny hole at its center. “Am I doing this right?”

“Perfect, sweetheart,” he allowed. “Tighten your fist, stroke me harder.” His abdomen flexed under her ministrations while his head lolled back and pure pleasure marked every line in his face. “God, I love your hands on me.”

She pumped with both fists, lingering at the engorged crown when that seemed to enhance his delight. Moisture leaked from the slit in the tip, lubricating her touch, making him groan aloud.

Edward reached out, grabbed the back of her neck, and crushed her lips to his again, her hand slamming down at the same time as he thrust up. The pressure inside him surged as heat sizzled up his shaft; he groaned into her mouth as he exploded, his seed a hot geyser against her palm.

He sprawled back against the rug like a ragdoll but pulled her tight to his side. With the musk of their intimacy lingering in the air, he pressed his nose into her hair.

Alice’s breath skittered over his cheek as she fixed him and his trousers to rights. “It is moments like this that make me think....”

“Think what?” He angled his head.

Her words were hesitant, as if she were about to bare her deepest, darkest secret.

“That I will forever be yours.”

His chest tightened. As usual, he struggled to put into words what he felt. He settled for, “Good, because you are.”

She perked her head up. “What?”

“Marry me.”

Her jaw slackened—her traitorous heart gave a leap. Had she heard what he’d just said? “Pardon?”

Leaning forward, Edward clasped his hands between his legs and pinned her with a significantly hopeless look. “I want you to marry me, Alice.”

“Marry you?” She sat up, her brows lowering. “Edward. Why—why would I marry you? You don’t love me.”

“Love is a complication I do not need,” he uttered. “Alice, do you think that is all there is to marriage? Love. Most of our ton marriages have nothing to do with love.”

The stark cynicism sent a chill through her. He stared at her. Those orbs of his darkened with pain so sharp it felt as if they were knives cutting into her heart. “Love is a dangerous thing, Alice. Love leads you into very dangerous situations. I will never fall in love.”

“Edward, I will not marry for anything but love,” Alice breathed, almost astonished that he would think anything else.

“Think of it,” Edward pressed. “You would be the perfect duchess; you are smart, you-you are practical, and unswayed by the biases of the ton. You have a level head on your shoulders, and Lord knows, the pleasures of yours I yearn to fulfill every night in my bed.” His voice was raw and cracking with need.

“You will have all the worldly goods you desire— everything, and the privilege to do as you please. You will be away from that horrid house and your sister will be above reproach with our titles behind her,” Edward finished eagerly, sitting up now in anticipation. “Think about it, it is the perfect arrangement.”

Her heart took another beat. “Perfect arrangement ? But I... I care about you,” she whispered. “So very much, Edward.”

He let out a breath. “You do?”

She nodded, her eyes misting as her throat thickened with tears.

“Enough to marry me then?” He didn’t miss a beat in pressing his advantage.

“...No,” Alice finished. “Not like this, Edward. I won’t trade my heart for money or furs or jewels. A marriage is nothing if there is no love.”

“Alice, please—”

“Do you love me?”

No answer was forthcoming, but she waited patiently even though with every passing second, something chipped away at her heart.

“Do you love me?” she repeated.

“I want to give you everything you deserve and desire!” Edward growled. “Shouldn’t that be enough?”

“Not without your heart, it will never be enough. I-I shouldn’t have come here,” Alice choked out, rising to her feet. Skirts in hand, she headed to the door. “This was a mistake. I need to leave.”

Wildly, she burst open the door and dashed down the halls, terrified that Edward might pursue her and test her resolve, but when she realized that no thundering footsteps were chasing her, she slowed to a walk.

She hurried down the staircase, heart pounding, wondering if she should venture out into the back and find Penelope—just as the doting pair, shadowed by a maid, arrived in the foyer.

Instantly, Penelope caught sight of her sister’s distress and pulled away from Benedict. “Alice? What’s wrong? Your face is bloodless—”

Marshaling all her strength to smile, she hastened to say, “I am more overwrought than I thought I was once. I hate to cut your time short but, my lord, I fear I— we—need to return home.”

“Of course,” Benedict nodded soberly, hurrying to the front to have his carriage summoned.

“Alice,” Penelope whispered, reaching for Alice’s shoulder, her face awash with worry. “Are you ill? What is going on? You were only a little tired when we arrived. What happened?”

Shrugging her sister’s hand away, Alice shook her head resolutely. “Nothing for you to worry about. It is—”

“But I do worry,” Penelope said, ducking her head to find Alice’s eyes—but she avoided her sister’s gaze. “I cannot see you in this state and not worry.”

“It is nothing—” Alice said desperately, trying hard to calm the pain under her breastbone. “Please, stop asking.”

Benedict returned, his steps hurried. “The carriage has—” his gaze lifted up behind them, “...been summoned.”

Penelope’s gaze trailed Benedict’s, and Alice’s eyes followed shortly after. Edward was on the upper level, one hand on the balustrade while he gazed down at them, his dark robe and hair curling at his collar, merging with the shadow behind him.

He towered over her like a stern yet sensual god, silver lightning in his eyes. His smoldering intensity fed the reckless beat in her blood.

After a long moment, Edward simply turned and vanished into the darkness, and only when he was gone could she finally breathe.

“The carriage is waiting,” Benedict spoke into the uncomfortable silence, turning to the door. “I’ll see you two out.”

Retrieving her coat and hat, Alice could not face either Benedict or Penelope; it was clear that something had happened between her and Edward, but she would never say a word about it. She feared that one question would lead to more and more inquiries that might eventually rip her apart to answer.

She seated herself by the rear window while Benedict kissed Penelope’s knuckles and whispered his farewells. Soon after, the carriage began rolling down the driveway. Alice could feel Penelope’s gaze burning into her, but she rested her head in the corner near the window and feigned sleep.

“I know you’re not sleeping, Alice,” Penelope whispered. “I do wish you would tell me what happened to make you so upset.”

My heart is shattered into fragments, that is what.

The raw emotions tearing through her were wholly unexpected and in her ears, she still heard Edward’s voice—or rather, the absence of it.

She took in a shuddery breath.

Why, how many times had she mended a broken pot or piece of clothing? How many times had she taken scraps and made them a masterpiece? She would use all the skills at her disposal and simply fix... herself.

Time heals all wounds, does it not? One day she would look back and only feel a pang of regret, not this crushing, obliterating ache in her heart.

It is time to let him go.

“Do you mind telling me what the devil that was?” Benedict stormed into Edward’s study moments after he had downed another glass of whiskey.

“What was what?” Edward asked, just on the side of tipsy, enough that he did not care his grammar was nonsensical.

“You know damn well what I mean!” Benedict’s mild-mannered personality was gone; instead, he looked like an avenging god on a warpath. “Why did you do that? Why suddenly appear out of nowhere? You very nearly gave Miss Alice a conniption—if you hadn’t already before we found her. What did you do?”

Edward scoffed. “She wouldn’t have swooned.”

“And how do you know that?”

“She’s of stronger stuff than you think,” Edward reached for the bottle.

“I see that,” Benedict looked at him askance, clearly wondering why Edward was drinking himself into a wheelbarrow. “But there is nothing in all creation that will convince me you didn’t do something to make her so strained.”

The brandy burned over his empty stomach and Edward knew he would be paying for his overindulgence and blatant dismissal of minding his health tomorrow—but he was beyond caring. “Leave it alone, Benedict.”

His brother cursed. “You think I am blind, don’t you? I’ve seen how you look at Alice when you think I am focused elsewhere. How you speak around the topic of her in riddles. The invites, the-the portraits! Not to mention how you were on the balcony with her the night Rutledge barged into the ballroom!”

“It is nothing ,” Edward stressed.

“Is that right?” Benedict scoffed, his brow ticking up in cynicism. “When will you just come out and admit that you have something for Miss Alice, man!”

“I do not have the faintest what you mean,” Edward bluffed.

“You might fool the pig-headed men over the whist table, but you do not have one over me. I share half your blood, remember? In fact, I’ve still been waiting for you to explain why Miss Alice was here, in the pouring rain, over three weeks ago.”

Edward’s eyes flicked to meet his brother’s accusatory glare. “How do you know about that?” he demanded.

“I’d left my room for some extra coffee because apparently, my body does not run on the will to stay up on study,” Benedict began. “She was sopping wet and scurried off to your room before I could blink twice. Explain that !”

Edward’s jaw twitched. “That is none of your business.”

“It is when you are so hellbent on hurting the sister of the woman I intend to someday marry,” Benedict snapped. “Are you interested in her? Good god, did you already take her to your bed? What are you doing?”

Slamming the cut down hard enough that the crystal almost crumbled into his fist, he bellowed, “That is none of your business!”

He could not— would not —betray Alice’s trust with anyone, not even his brother, who admittedly would not sway a word. Still, he would not reveal anything—it was bad enough seeing how disastrously his last interaction with Alice had gone.

That night had been nothing but the beginning of an end with what should have been a bright new start. He knew what a colossal mistake he had made and felt that having his heart torn from his chest would’ve been less painful than having her break it.

“Good god, you love her,” Benedict breathed. “You are in love with her.”

“Out,” Edward ordered him. “Get out.”

“Edward—” Benedict flinched when the glass flew past his left ear and shattered on the wall. “I said, get , out .”

Wordless, Benedict turned on his heel and went through the doorway, slamming it behind him. Slumping into his seat, Edward rubbed his eyes and couldn’t help but feel like a heel himself.

CHAPTER 29

For four days, Alice valiantly avoided Penelope—but she knew her time escaping her sister's questions was running out. The most helpful thing aiding her audience was when Benedict would come for Penelope, with one of his maids in tow, and sweep her off to another part of London.

She'd passed the time sewing, reading, taking long walks to Hyde Park, and trading letters with Diana; she was crafting another letter to a friend when Penelope marched into the room, the simple bracelet of jade and quartz she had won at the fair dangling from her wrist.

"We need to talk," she said.

"About what?" Alice tried to play ignorant, but her sister's eyes narrowed.

"Don't do that," Penelope scolded her as she sat. "You are too smart to play the fool. You know what I mean. What happened that night at Duke Valhaven's home?"

Staring at the line under her pen, Alice asked, "Did Benedict mention something?"

"He said he is sure Edward has feelings for you," Penelope said, "but I am confused at that because I have never seen the two of you interact beyond the cordial hellos and goodbyes."

"That... is because we took care to hide it," Alice sighed, utterly tired of keeping up this facade. "We actually met days before you think we did but I had not known his

brother then.”

“How long ago before you met Benedict?”

Setting her pen to the side, Alice admitted, “A week prior. See, before I knew about your condition, I was set on finding Rutledge and making him do the right thing, so I tracked him down to a club he owned on Bond Street...”

The long tale of meeting Edward there and their following meeting—barring all the times they had been intimate, of course; those she kept near to her heart—and how he had helped her to get Rutledge to come around, finally spilled forth.

By the end, Penelope was utterly stunned, and Alice let out a long sigh. “Along the way, I found myself falling for him, but we know—all of Town knows, that he is not in the marriage way.”

A soft, sympathetic smile curved Penelope’s lips. “I’m sorry, Alice.”

“That night...” She braced herself. “That night, he asked me to marry him, and I said no.”

“What?” Penelope’s mouth slipped open. “Why? Wasn’t that what you wanted?”

“Not for the reasons he gave me,” Alice said. “He offered me everything under the sun except the one part of him that I would want, his love, his heart, his affection. Not clothes or carriages or Midas’ gold.”

Shaking her head, Penelope said, “I guess Benedict was right.”

“You cannot tell a soul,” Alice implored her, taking her sister’s hands immediately. “Please, Elly, this must be kept between us and between us alone.”

“So, there happens to be a rather delicate predicament we have found ourselves in,” Penelope murmured. “And I don’t mean the burgeoning scandal of Benedict courting me, I mean—” her hand fell to her belly, “—this.”

“I know,” Alice sighed. “It is very difficult being in that way. But I am sure it will be fine. Has he made any intentions to soon ask for your hand in marriage?”

Penelope shook her head mutely.

“He will,” Alice comforted.

“Don’t you think it is unfair to expect a man to raise another man’s child?” Penelope whispered.

“He knows and still wants to be with you,” Alice reassured her sister again. “When the two of you speak again, let him know how you are feeling and then leave that at his feet. If he takes it up, you will know that he loves you and would do anything for you.

“A woman increasing is not always an ostracized person,” Alice added. “Yes, there are those who have fallen prey to unspeakable actions, but there is always someone there to help with the babe when it comes.”

Belatedly, she looked up and caught sight of Eliza passing the doorway. Alice stilled. Had she heard their conversation? If so, just how much had she heard?

But her cousin kept walking without so much as a glance their way. Perhaps she hadn’t heard—or simply didn’t care to. Penelope, catching the unease in Alice’s expression, turned worried eyes toward her.

“Do you think she heard?” she whispered.

“I hardly think she cares,” Alice whispered back. “But we should probably take care to keep mentions of that condition to a minimum. The walls might have ears.”

“I agree,” Penelope nodded. “It is sad, though, about you and His Grace. For what it’s worth, I think the two of you would have made a splendid match.”

Her gaze turned contemplative. “He doesn’t strike me as one of those men chasing after Diamonds, seeking only a bauble to adorn his arm. There’s a depth to him, something rare. And you—” she paused, her voice softening—“you possess a practical mind and a heart so full of warmth. It is difficult to imagine he wouldn’t see that.”

“If only,” Alice breathed. “If only he felt the same way, because I do love him. But he is too closed off, and I don’t think he will ever let anyone in. He is decided on leaving England and I have no power to stop him. Once his mind is set, there is no turning him.”

“I am sorry about that too,” Penelope smiled weakly. “Benedict is graduating soon, and he will be taking over.”

“I know,” Alice replied with a wistful sigh. “Perhaps it is all for the best.”

Rain was misting on the rifle, but it did little to dissuade Edward’s mind—he eyed the target through the sight of his firearm and pulled the trigger. The field was spread over four acres of picturesque countryside, the shooting ground nestled within the original Royal hunting grounds dating back to Elizabeth I.

“Are you sure we need to be out here?” Felton adjusted his bowler hat. “I can imagine a hundred more things you could be doing, a dozen more places you could be lounging, and one particular woman you could be around instead of this—” he waved his hand to the muddy field and the targets surrounding them.

“Did you truly make a trip from all the way up York to harangue me at every given turn,” Edward scowled while carefully loading another bullet. “And, for the record, it was either this or have my ribs rearranged at Jack’s.”

“ Or ,” Felton stepped up to line his shot, “you could stop being a stubborn bastard, swallow your pride, and go to the woman you seem to be so enamored by—then drop to your knees and apologize.”

Something twisted the knot in Edward’s chest tighter. “I don’t grovel.”

“Then it’s high time you learned, old boy,” Felton replied, his tone brisk as he fired the gun without hesitation.

“She expects marriage,” Edward muttered, the words heavy on his tongue. “That, too, with love and affection. And you know I’ve sworn to be a bachelor until the last of my days.”

“But I can’t seem to understand just why...” Felton huffed as he bent to sweep the bullet he’d dropped.

Cocking his weapon over his shoulder, Edward retold—for the third time that day—the tale of his heartless father. The relentless pursuit of legacy, the bitter spite aimed at his family, the crushing expectation that Edward would follow in his footsteps—all of it poured out once more.

Every word carried the weight of old wounds and unspoken resentment, yet even as he spoke, it all felt too... hollow . A hollow echo of grievances he’d clung to for too long. He finished with a curt, “And I have already promised the position to Benedict someday, besides.”

Felton’s eyes stayed fixed on Edward, unyielding, his silence stretching unbearably.

Then, as if the tension had reached its breaking point, he threw his head back and let out an uproarious laugh.

“Will you stop mocking me,” he grumbled.

“I will, when you decide to pull your head from the ground and breathe fresh air, or at least acknowledge the sun glaring in your face,” Felton laughed. “I still can’t quite grip the inanity of it all. Surely even you must see the madness on the very surface.

“You are willing to punish yourself and a woman who, by all accounts, would assent to your... propositions, without the slightest qualm—over some childish vows?” he went on, his gaze cutting. “If you presented the red hemp and she neither fled nor fainted dead away, then, my friend, you should be fighting tooth and nail to keep her. Surely someone has told you all of this before?”

Edward sighed, then nodded. “Benedict has.”

“Benedict has? Benedict has? Christ up above. Then swallow your pride and admit you love her,” Felton grated, dropping the rifle to his side and facing Edward squarely. “To whom do you owe the carrying of these puerile vows to then? You’ve not committed any unforgivable sins, you’re not a murderer, you haven’t destroyed men for wealth, nor have you gambled yourself into the poorhouse. The problem you have is that you cannot see past your own nose to the flower just beneath it. It is a spite to a man that has long been dead.”

“He may be dead, but even the idea of seeing him with a prideful gleam in his eye someday as I did all he expected from me and more, is enough to make me feel... disgusting and filthy . I would rather have gambled myself into the poor house than see that pride reflected in his gaze.”

“It is fortunate for you that he shall remain dead then, eh?” Felton clapped Edward on

the shoulder before moving back to his firing line. “Besides, he’s probably burning in hell if he is half the cretin you have described him to be, so that is not really a concern either.”

Tilting his head to the sky and the still misting rain, Edward muttered, “I should have gone to Jack’s. At least the beating there did not come with a side of crushing self-reflection and strangled pride.”

Lining up for the next target, Felton smirked, “I’ll always kill your pride when it is warranted, old boy. Now. After this last shot, can we please get out of this deuced rain? If I get ill, you’ll be footing my physician’s bill.” He chuckled. “At least you grew a conscience before something more final happened.”

“Like what?” Edward eyed him.

“She’s attacked and dying on the side of the street?” Felton shrugged.

“Be serious.”

“Oh, I don’t know. She is to marry another man. There.”

That one cut Edward to the quick and his tight swallow had his friend laughing and shuffling him away from the field. “Some warm brandy will go well with that uneasy stomach.”

CHAPTER 30

Arm in arm, Alice and Penelope stepped into the townhouse after a long afternoon spent wandering Pall Mall and lingering at the bookstore—a convenient reprieve from the tension that always seemed to simmer over the house during one of Eliza's visits with Baron Portman.

"Do you think he has left?" Penelope asked, her voice low as if the question itself might conjure him back.

"I do hope so," Alice replied while unlacing her bonnet. "But I am not looking forward to hearing her wax poetic about him over dinner while miserably attempting to conceal the true ulterior motives behind his recurring visits," she shuddered.

"Me neither," Penelope tutted. "Perhaps we are being too cynical? Perhaps she truly has started to take a liking toward the man. I hope she gets married off soon so she can stop being so grouchy around me when it comes to suitors. We used to be close until our debuts."

"I hope so too, but to a baron," Alice tilted her head. "Unlikely."

"Miracles do happen," Penelope replied, touching the bracelet she had hardly let go of from the moment Benedict had won it for her at the fair.

"They do," Alice nodded as they headed to her room. "To the best people."

Just as they went to take the stairs, Aunt Agatha stepped out of the sitting room, her

face tight, her lips flat, and instantly, Alice went tense. “Girls, come in for a moment. We need to speak about something important.”

“If this is about Lord Brampton—”

“It is not,” Aunt Agatha cut in swiftly. “Now come in and sit.”

As they entered, a hushed silence fell over the room. They found Eliza there too and the satisfied smirk she sported made Alice’s hackles rise. Taking the couch, Alice asked sweetly, “What is this about?”

“I... I hoped to say this as delicately as I could, but I am afraid there is no way around it,” Aunt Agatha said quietly. “Which of you is with child?”

Penelope went bloodless. Alice shot a look to Eliza—of course she had heard their conversation; of course she had run to her mother. If she was not afraid of Edward, Alice was sure she would have gone to the Times too.

“Pardon?” Alice asked. “Where is this coming from?”

“Which one of you is increasing?” Aunt Agatha brushed Alice’s question away to bulldoze on with her demand.

“W-why do you think that?” Alice asked innocently. “Is it because Eliza overheard Penelope and I talking yesterday? What right does she have to parrot our private conversation back to anyone?”

“Mother has graciously opened her home to you two urchins, and you think she has no right to know what is happening under her own roof?” Eliza muttered spitefully. “Is that how much respect you have for—”

“Silence, Elizabeth!” Aunt Agatha snapped suddenly. Her piercing gaze fixed on Penelope, who had gone pale under the weight of it. “Is it you, girl? Was it with that man, Rutledge?”

“I—I-”

“It’s me,” Alice blurted abruptly. “It is me, Aunt.”

“You?” Her aunt’s eyes widened. “ You ? Of all people, I thought you had more sense! I thought you were smarter, more responsible! And now—now you’ve gone and ruined us. You’ve ruined us—you’ve tossed us to the rags! Right as we were beginning to make waves in the peerage!”

You. I’ve ruined you. What about myself if I was truly encumbered?

“Oh dear, this is a disaster! Any chance of obtaining a suitable, secure husband for you will be lost, never mind finding one who will take on the child,” her aunt fretted. “Who is the father?”

“I shan’t tell you that,” Alice said mulishly. “I am allowed to keep some secrets to myself, aren’t I?”

“ Secrets? Have you turned insane you wench! You will tell me so I can find the family of this rascal and get him to do the proper thing. Else, I will be pushed to extreme measures!” Aunt Agatha threatened. “I thought you were the sensible one, not some heedless lightskirt who would debase herself like some common harlot!

“Couldn’t you have done the sensible thing like Eliza here and waited for the proper man? Her baron has a shipping business to the Americas and a caravan business up to Scotland. Couldn’t you have waited for a sensible man like that? Now you have ruined us all!”

A subtle glance passed between her and Penelope. Alice notched her head up in defiance. “Well, I am on the shelf, but you already know that. I’ll happily take myself to a convent and vanish from Town if it makes you so uncomfortable. I would hate to ruin your spectacular reputation around London.”

Her aunt’s eyes hardened, “Are you mocking me?”

“She is,” Eliza sniffed.

“I will not stand for that insolence!” her aunt snapped. “And I will not stand for your defiance either. You will tell me the name of the man, or I will not be so lenient with you!”

Alice stood. “I have no intention of marrying, so I suppose I shall ship myself off to a convent and save you and Uncle all the trouble.”

Penelope’s eyes widened and she rose too. “Alice, what are you—”

“No, Elly ,” Alice silenced her sister tellingly with a warning look and a hand to her wrist. “It is better this way. You... you will be fine. I am sure Lord Brampton will marry you soon enough. You be happy enough for both of us now. As far as I am concerned, the one duty I carried over from mother and father is now fulfilled.”

Pure distress hardened Penelope’s face. “N-no, no, you should not be getting punished for such a silly mistake—”

“Silly?” Her aunt squawked. “You think this is some trifling matter, girl? Men have all the latitude to do whatever they please in this land, but not the women. The only currency a woman has is her virtue and her reputation, and Alice has lost both. It is up to me now to make sure our family does not sink with her!”

Turning to her aunt, Alice replied, “Now that you know, may I be excused? I must lie down for a moment... I am feeling rather queasy.”

Aunt Agatha’s face paled immediately. “Y-yes, go to your chamber! At once!”

Without another word, Alice left the room to her quarters, slipped inside, and locked the door behind her. Inside, as tumultuous as it felt in her head, her heart pulled steadily; there was no calamity, there were no what-ifs. She had lost the only good thing she’d wanted in London anyway—Edward.

Maybe it would do her good to be somewhere else for a while.

Only one thing was for certain now—no one could ever learn the truth.

CHAPTER 31

ONE MONTH LATER

A month had passed in excruciating loneliness. But Alice could no longer summon in her heart anything except apathy at the events of the last weeks.

Humming an old tune from childhood while tying her bonnet, she silently readied herself to go on another solitary run to the apothecary and haberdashery, early morning before her relatives had awoken. Though being barred from seeing her sister these past weeks as part of her punishment while her aunt and uncle hastened to come up with some plan—or more euphemistically known as a husband who would turn a blind eye to her burden for a few coin—Alice had made sure to visit her sister in the early mornings and late nights and continue supplying her medicine to hide her worsening symptoms.

In a bitter twist of fate, everything had worked out for the positive, as the truth of Penelope's condition was willingly being ignored by all now, for they simply chose to put it down to her nervousness and sadness concerning Alice.

Leaving her rooms, she quietly tiptoed down the stairs for the front door of the townhouse, when she spotted a familiar signature letterhead on a card lying on the silver tray in the hallway.

With trepidation, she plucked the card up and opened it, and read an invitation to Vauxhall, a celebration of Benedict's graduation.

Should I go? I do not really wish to see Edward, but I know Elly will be hellbent on attending and she won't go without me. That is if Aunt and Uncle countenance it at all. I suppose I could slip away without them knowing...

Sliding it back into the envelope and tucking it into her reticule, she donned her coat and leghorn before stepping out to board the waiting carriage. During the two-hour walk back and forth, she still weighed her mind about attending Vauxhall.

"Why have they chosen such a licentious place, anyway?" she wondered while stepping back into the townhome.

The Grand Walk was particularly delightful and close to it was the Rotunda where many entertainments were flaunted, but not far from there were the many secret lovers' niches that made Vauxhall infamous.

"They should have started in the afternoon," Alice muttered quietly as she snuck back into her room. "But no, the celebrations start at eight, when the place is pitch black and the moon is out," she scoffed.

Penelope cleared her throat as she entered the room. "What do you mean when the moon is out?"

Alice immediately spun, then went to embrace her little sister. "How are you feeling, Elly?"

"I'm here, aren't I? Thus, I've had noticeably worse mornings. As I was saying, what do you mean when the moon is out?"

Plucking the invitation from her reticule, she handed it to her sister, "Lord Brampton is celebrating his graduation in a very spectacular way. We're invited to Vauxhall for the celebration."

“The pleasure gardens?” Penelope’s voice rose octaves as she took the invitation. “Gadz. I have never been there.”

“Neither have I, but we know the whispers,” Alice replied while rifling through her wardrobe, looking for a suitable walking dress. “I know you are set on going, so I will attend with you.”

Coming around to perch on the edge of Alice’s bed, Penelope asked, “Even with His Grace attending? Wouldn’t it—wouldn’t it be a bit...”

“Awkward? Yes, I suppose it will,” Alice heaved out a dark blue walking dress embroidered with a pattern of flowering vines along the hem. She had an ivory one, yet felt this was more appropriate. “But what we might have once had is over. We are all adults here. Surely, we can get along for one night.”

“Do you think His Grace will try to convince you to marry him still?” Penelope asked. “Considering what Aunt is threatening you with, wouldn’t a cordial marriage with a man you do care for be better than a marriage with a man you do not know and will possibly give you more pain? If they do succeed in finding a willing match for you that is to say.”

Stalled, Alice found herself considering the situation; would she take Edward up on his offer, just to save herself from a worse fate? Was that fair to him and was that morally righteous of her?

The answer is no, to both situations.

Besides, it was coming on two months since they had last seen each other, let alone spoken. There was no certainty the offer still stood—no assurance he even thought of her at all.

That notion sent a strange, unwelcome ache curling in her chest. But she pushed it aside for now, those divulgences were strictly reserved for her nights.

“We’ll see,” she replied evasively, forcing a brittle smile. “I’d prefer if Aunt and Eliza do not catch wind of this, however. I am not entirely certain they will countenance my leaving, and frankly... nor do I want them with us on the night.”

“Not a word shall leave my lips,” Penelope bounced on her seat. “Now, let’s find my dress!”

While awaiting Benedict's arrival, Edward reached into the inner pocket of his coat and withdrew a small box, its surface wrapped in rich velvet. With a flick of his thumb, the lid sprang open to reveal a ring nestled within. The delicate white-gold setting cradled a teardrop-shaped diamond, not too dissimilar to the necklace he had gifted Alice earlier. Every facet seemed to capture and refract the light, a testament to the jewel’s singular beauty—exquisite, rare, and utterly captivating, much like the woman for whom it was destined.

If she accepts, my plans will all change tonight.

Snapping the box shut, he slipped it back as Benedict opened the door to the carriage and stepped inside, settling into the seat opposite while casting his hat away. “Apologies for the delay. I couldn’t seem to locate the cufflinks you gifted me last year.”

“I am surprised,” Edward murmured, staring out of the window. “Of all the places you want to celebrate, you chose the most disreputable place in London. Are you planning on showing the woman you love all the secret nooks you have frequented over the years?”

“Good god no,” Benedict shuddered as he wrapped on the roof. “I’ve found new

ones.”

Rolling his eyes, Edward replied, “I could have taken you to Whites, you know. A final brotherly celebration before I leave.”

“I do,” his brother nodded. “But where is the fun in that? There is no dancing, no mysterious walks to wander down, and certainly no fireworks. After all, the fireworks are the perfect metaphor for my incandescent brilliance.”

“If I roll my eyes any harder, they are liable to be stuck at the back of my head.”

“You are leaving England on the morrow, no? What you should be doing is finding Miss Alice, dropping to your knees and groveling for forgiveness,” Benedict pronounced.

Shifting his legs, Edward gazed at the buildings passing by through the window. “Please don’t you start this too.”

“I won’t, but I hope it ends well.”

EPILOGUE

“ T here they are,” Alice murmured, inclining her head toward the two figures waiting at the gate beneath the glow of blazing lamps and silvery moonlight.

At a distance, Edward appeared clad entirely in black, his tall, imposing figure blending into the night. Beside him, Benedict cut a dashing contrast in his tan jacket and brown trousers. As they drew closer, however, the subtle sheen of Edward’s waistcoat caught the light—a shade of blue so deep it nearly vanished into the ebony fabric of his coat.

“Miss Penelope,” Benedict greeted warmly, offering a bow as he approached. “You grow more radiant with each passing day.”

She canted her head while Benedict kissed her cheek; turning her gaze away, Alice curtsied, “Your Grace.”

Edward inclined his head, his dark eyes lingering on her. “Miss Alice. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

“And you, Your Grace,” she said quietly, though her words faltered as she noticed the dark circles under Edward’s eyes and the gaunt stretch of his skin over his cheekbones. Concern flickered within her, but she clamped her lips tight—it was not her place to ask.

“The Rotunda awaits, and we’ve already missed the opening waltz,” Benedict declared, offering his arm to Penelope with a flourish. The two strolled ahead, their

laughter and light conversation trailing behind them as they took to the Grand Walk.

Quietly, Alice followed, with Edward falling one step behind. His silence was a touch unnerving, but she kept her resolve not to speak out of turn.

The Grand Walk was beautifully lit, lanterns casting a warm glow along the gravel path, but the true spectacle lay ahead. The Rotunda stood resplendent, its dome adorned with hundreds of glowing globe lamps. The lights illuminated the second-floor balcony, where a twenty-piece orchestra played a lilting Viennese waltz that spilled out into the night.

A velvet rope and footmen guarded the entrance, checking the invitations studiously before allowing the guests to enter. As they stepped inside, the next waltz began, and Benedict swept Penelope off to the dancefloor.

Alice lingered at the edge of the room, a rather familiar nook—as all nooks were — standing far from the spotlight, smiling as she watched her sister and the man of the hour fall into an intimate waltz. Once, long ago, it had not been uncommon for Alice to remain on the sidelines while watching the dancers shine.

But this time, it was different.

She was acutely aware of Edward's presence beside her. He stood partially cloaked in the shadows cast by one of the great columns, his brooding form unmoving.

Summoning her courage, she stole a glance at him and finally broke the quiet. "A hundred lights and you manage to find the one corner with shadow to glower like a gargoyle."

"It is an inherited skill." Edward's lips curved into a faint, sardonic smile, as he watched the couple swirl lightly in the waltz. "I do my best work in the shadows."

Plucking a fan from her reticule, Alice snapped it open, the humidity around her stifling. “I do remember moments when you did much better in the light.”

Edward said nothing, though a flicker of something crossed his face—surprise, perhaps, or remembrance.

The pace of the waltz shifted. Benedict laughed as he spun Penelope in a dizzying turn, grasped her waist and lifted her into the air; her sister’s breathless laugh made a part of Alice’s heart ache... if only she had that very thing.

Would a life of solitude truly suit me better than a life of unreciprocated love? If the last month and tonight have shown anything, it is that sometimes it feels easier to be alone and not reminded of what I could be missing...

Two gentlemen approached Alice for a dance and twice she accepted, simply for any excuse to escape the stifling tension that seemed to cling to Edward like a second coat. Four sets later, and breathless, she slipped away from the blazing lights and heated bodies to the cool reprieve of the Vauxhall gardens.

The shadowed paths, hemmed in by a thick canopy of giant elms and dense foliage of bushes provided a modicum of privacy in a bustling place as the Retonda was on this night. Certain she was alone, she took a seat on a wooden bench and massaged her tired calves, aching from all the dancing. That was far more dances than she had ever accepted in such a short span of time, and her inexperience was telling.

Just then, the sound of footsteps behind her shattered the stillness.

“Alice.” Edward’s voice, low and steady, carried through the shadows. He was closer than she’d realized, his figure emerging beneath the dim light of the dome. “May I have a word?”

She hesitated, her hand tightening on the folds of her skirts. “W-why?”

Rubbing his face, Edward said, “Because I am a massive fool, Alice, the enormity of it has been detailed by my brother, my friend, and sleepless nights that have annoyed Atticus to no end.”

“Edward...” She reached out but stopped before touching his arm. “What are you saying?”

His breath hitched as though he were grasping for words that refused to come easily. “I—I am saying I have been a coward,” he confessed, his tone raw. “I have hidden behind excuses, behind walls I once believed to be as unyielding as granite, but were, in truth, as porous as limestone.” He let out a rough laugh, dragging a knuckle over his furrowed brow. “The reasoning I clung to, the barriers I built between my heart and my head—”

Footsteps headed their way, and Edward clamped his lips tight as Benedict and Penelope walked to them, whispering and laughing.

“Perfect timing,” Benedict clapped. “The fireworks display is about to begin. We should head that way now. There is a clearing with fewer trees that obstruct the view, that way we can see the fireworks in their full splendor.”

A tick jumped in Edward’s jaw at the unexpected interruption, but graciously, he turned to the two lovebirds and smiled, “Lead the way.”

Benedict looked between them; one brow lifted to his hairline. “Had we... interrupted something?”

Alice shook her head, “No—”

“ Yes ,” Edward corrected. “But we can pick it up when we get a moment of privacy.”

Turning his head to Penelope, the two seemed to conduct a silent conversation before Benedict took to the path that led to a wide field. Some of the guests from the Rotunda were gathered there while guests of the working class and casual visitors milled, eager to catch glimpses of bright lights.

“I trust we can revisit our... conversation, when this is finished,” Edward said quietly, the back of his hand brushing hers.

“You don’t—” she started, then bit her lower lip, “you do not need to finish that. I think I’ve gotten the gist of your declaration.”

Edward shook his head firmly. “No, Alice. I must say it. It is a burden that has been laying heavily on my chest for the last month, and I need to free myself from it—”

Before he could finish, a series of sharp whistles and thunderous booms shattered the stillness of the night, drowning out any further words. The force of the blasts rattled the air, as though the heavens themselves were exploding in colorful fury.

The thick limbs of the trees bowed with the force of the blasts while the sky was set alight with red, emerald, and blue bursts, each one blooming like a flower in full, vivid bloom, or cascading in brilliant ribbons of glowing light.

Alice rose from her seat, eager to catch a glimpse of the spectacle unfolding above. As she leaned forward, the back of her fingers brushed against Edward’s, and instinctively, he reached for her hand, his fingers interlacing with hers. Smiling, she held onto him tightly while gazing at the sky—until a spluttered bang of a cannon turned the semi-peaceful gathering into bedlam.

Ribald screams rent the air in two as the blast sent two men flying across the field and had another's clothes going up in flames.

“Edw—” A sudden surge of strange faces surrounded her and Alice felt herself being ripped apart from the mob, rushing and pushing away from the rogue cannon.

Panic had her screaming, spinning around in place as men and women buffeted her left and right. She caught a fleeting glimpse of Edward, impossibly far away, fighting against the current of the crowd, his face stricken with desperation.

“Edward!” she screamed again, though the sound barely reached her own ears amidst the chaos.

Desperation fueled her as her eyes darted wildly, searching for something— anything —familiar. But beneath the disorienting flashes of red, blue, and green light that streaked across the dark sky, she could see neither Benedict nor Penelope.

“Please,” she whispered, though the word barely left her lips.

Then came the arm.

Rigid, unyielding, it looped around her middle, pinning her arms to her sides. A hand clamped over her mouth before she could cry out, stifling her scream. Her mind reeled as she struggled, every nerve in her body alight with panic. The iron grip at her waist pulled her back against a body she did not know.

Terror and disbelief collided in her chest as a sweet pungent smell began burning through her nostrils and her throat.

“Edward...” she tried to whisper, but the word was lost to the darkness that surged over her, swallowing her whole.

It felt utterly incomprehensible; one moment he was holding Alice's hand, anticipating the moment of upcoming silence and privacy where he could confess the rest of the words in his heart.

Now he spun around as the panicked mob petered out and the workers at the Gardens rushed to help the men who were injured, bleeding, and burned. Frantically, he searched around for Alice, but he could not find her anywhere.

Benedict was in a huddle on the ground, his body a shield around Penelope—but Alice was nowhere to be found. He knew she would not be so foolish as to go off alone, so where was she?

“Good god,” Benedict rose from the ground and lifted Penelope to her feet. “That was not what I had expected when I suggested we see the fireworks.”

“Have either of you seen Alice?” Edward asked in growing concern. “The mob ripped us away from each other and she is nowhere around.”

“Maybe she took cover behind the trees over there,” Benedict nodded to a thicket of trees, and swiftly, Edward strode over to the forest line, but stopped seven or so feet from the swaying oaks.

A flicker of something red poking from the uncut grass had caught his eye. Crouching, he picked up a muddied rag and held it to the light, when the foul odor had his head lurching back.

“Morphine ...” his teeth ground as panic raced up his spine. He turned around to hold the cloth out to his brother, “This is Opium Morphine.”

Benedict looked lost. “What do you mean?”

“Someone took Alice,” he said, tucking the cloth into his trousers’ pocket. Penelope let out a sharp gasp, her gaze darting between the two brothers. Edward’s own head began to spin, but he bludgeoned down any emotion and fell into cold-bloodedness. Striding to his brother, he tossed him a pocket spyglass which Benedict caught deftly. “The Gardens are twelve acres, and since we have no idea where this stranger took her, we may have to search every inch of it...” He turned in place, his eyes narrowing, “Or perhaps not.”

This time it was Penelope asking, “How can we not? She’s been kidnapped, Your Grace! We have to find her—God, we must—”

“I doubt the kidnapper took her to dump her in a circle of bush or a Supper Box,” Edward snapped, cutting through her panic. “Whoever took her would require an escape route. That leaves us with two options: the entrance street or the barges on the Thames.” His tone was sharp, decisive. “You take the road,” he ordered, turning to Benedict. “I’ll go to the river.”

“That’s a plan.” Benedict grabbed Penelope and they hurried down the paved walk, while Edward rushed to the Proprietor's House with the Water Gate outside it on the south bank, hoping beyond all hope that no boat had come yet.

Alice’s lids felt heavy, as if weighed with iron-clad brick, but Alice peeled them open to find herself resting on a post with her hands bound behind her back. The dark mass of the Thames surged before her as the moonlight split the surface into faceted slivers of pale light.

“Where ...” her throat burned, each syllable scraping painfully as it left her lips, “Where am I?”

Boots appeared in her line of sight, the leather scuffed and caked with mud. Above, a strange silhouette crouched before her.

“ R-Rutledge ...?”

He looked nothing like the intolerable but dashing rake she once remembered. His hair hung in greasy, unkempt strands, his face gaunt and shadowed, and his clothes bore the grime of weeks—perhaps months—of neglect. But it was the cold gleam of the pistol pressed to her temple that sent terror spiking through her veins.

“Where are you? Why, your watery grave, of course,” he hissed, his lips curling into a cruel, humorless smile. “The now-deposed lord. Stripped of my title, my estate, every damned possession I once had seized by the Crown. And the club—the one I built with my very own hands, the pride of my ambition—about to be auctioned off to the highest bidder... Your fate now lies in that very Rutledge’s hands. Or, I suppose it would be more fitting if you simply referred to me as Roderick Hammond from now.” His fingers trembled slightly on the gun, his knuckles white as he glared at her unerringly.

The cold bite of the metal to her skin made her wince while fear created a cage around her midsection. “Wh-what are you talking about?” she whispered, her voice breaking.

“Still you must patronize me!” Rutledge snarled, leaning closer as spittle flew from his lips. “You and that insufferable sister of yours!”

“I had everything—my wealth, my looks, women throwing themselves at my feet! Only for your damned Duke to get some crook from the underworld to use my guts as garters. They ripped my life apart! Used me like a puppet, dangled me on a string! Do you know what it’s like to beg for your own survival?” His voice cracked with bitter laughter. “I had to marry your sister—or face the workhouse, or rot in a pauper’s grave! Me! The prodigy of Rutledge!”

Alice swallowed hard, forcing the terror from her voice as best she could. “Y-you

seduced her,” she whispered, her tone wavering but resolute. “It was only fair that you do what was right—”

The blow came fast. Rutledge’s backhand struck her with brutal force, sending pain flaring across her cheek and ringing through her ears. She gasped, her head snapping to the side as her vision blurred.

“Fair?” he barked, his voice dripping with scorn. “ Fair ? Do you know how many bastards I’ve already fathered? Do you think one more mattered to me?” He laughed, a hollow, bitter sound. “I should have taken her—your sweet little cotton-headed sister... But no. Your life,” he hissed, his voice dropping to a venomous whisper, “your life will be just as satisfying for all parties involved .”

All parties involved?

He yanked her roughly to her feet, not allowing her to think—his grip bruising as he forced her to stand. “The boats won’t be coming for a while,” he sneered, his breath hot against her cheek. “But it doesn’t matter. No one will ever suspect that this is where you fall.”

The cold, unyielding circle of the gun’s barrel pressed between her eyes, its icy touch paralyzing. The ominous click of the hammer being pulled back filled the air, and fear gripped her stomach like a vice. Rutledge’s finger was on the trigger when she abruptly blurted, “Did Eliza put you up to this?”

Rutledge paused, his lips curling into a twisted smile. “Your bitter little cousin?” He let out a grating laugh. “ Pah ! How many enemies have you made in your short-lived life, Miss Alice Winslow? No. She did manage to contact me through her Baron’s connections about your Duke’s ball though. A resourceful thing, that one. I should have shot them there.” He leaned closer, his eyes gleaming with malice. “I admire that chit. She wants you gone almost as much as I— ”

He pulled the trigger.

The gun jammed.

Alice flinched, her breath catching as the deafening crack she expected never came.

Cursing, he yanked the pistol away to inspect the barrel. “This damn bullet—”

A piercing whistle cut through the air just then. They both froze. Rutledge pivoted, instinctively raising the faulty weapon, and Alice took the moment to stagger back, her heart pounding wildly.

From the darkness, Edward appeared, running full tilt down the pier, his expression a thunderstorm of rage. “ You bastard! ”

Impulsively, Rutledge raised the pistol across the pier. Drawing the hammer, he took the shot—but Alice pushed into him and threw him off aim as the boisterous whip sent a bullet barrelling into the river.

“You bitch!” Faltering with the pistol, he made to swing it up at Edward again, but before he could react, Edward launched himself forward, his fist driving into Rutledge’s gut with a force that left the man doubled over, choking on a guttural groan. Undaunted, Rutledge rounded and lurched a third time, the butt of his gun passing a hair's breadth away from Edward’s temple.

Alice, now teetering at the edge of the pier, instinctively stepped back. Her breath came in shallow, panicked gasps as her heels hovered perilously over the water’s edge. She couldn’t run—her legs felt frozen, rooted to the planks beneath her.

Edward dodged Rutledge’s attacks with deadly determination as he rammed his fist into the former viscount’s midsection, and there came a sickening crack of bone

snapping. Rutledge staggered, but with a feral snarl, he drove his knee into Edward's side, momentarily forcing him off balance. Seizing the opportunity, he twisted, his face contorted with bitter rage, and fired again—this time, the bullet found its mark.

The missile slammed into her shoulder and sent her careening backward.

“Edw —” Alice's scream was lost in an icy abyss as her back broke the surface and the darkness dragged her under. Freezing water burned her lungs as she fought to surface but panic set in and her mouth was still open, taking water in.

She fought to survive with all her strength, thrashing to catch grip of anything, as the last of her breath bubbled from her. As the world beyond grew blurrier and more distant, a terrifying certainty took hold of her.

I am going to die.

From the corner of his eye, Edward saw Alice tip over, the swift arc somehow tortuously slow to his mind's eye. He plowed another blow to Rutledge's face before Benedict shouted, “I got him! Go after her!” and launched himself into the fray.

Edward didn't hesitate. He pivoted sharply and dove headfirst into the dark water where he last saw Alice, the icy chill biting at his skin as he kicked furiously downward. The murky depths gradually began to swallow what little light remained from above, as it faded with every hefty stroke.

His heart thundered when he finally caught sight of her, sinking lifelessly into the depths, her dress billowing like a ghostly shroud. She wasn't moving, her stillness a dagger to his chest. Edward gritted his teeth, fear clawing at his resolve as he pushed himself harder, his legs straining with the effort.

Kicking harder, he finally reached her and his arms circled her limp form. Turning

her carefully, he pressed her back to his chest, cradling her protectively as he began the desperate ascent. His lungs burned, the water pressing down on him like a vice, but he kicked with everything he had, each stroke carrying them closer to the surface.

Breaking through into the cold night air, Edward gulped a ragged breath, the night a cacophony of shouts and splashes. He caught sight of Benedict on the pier, his knee driven into Rutledge's back as runners bolted down to haul the second man away.

Edward's focus snapped back to Alice. Her hair had come undone, dark, sodden locks plastered to her pale face as he carefully laid her down on the wooden planks of the pier. Perched over her, he leaned in close, his ear to her lips, praying for the faintest whisper of breath.

Nothing.

Swallowing the rising panic threatening to consume him, he tipped her head back and sealed his lips over hers, breathing life into her still body. He pressed again, filling her lungs with air, his hands trembling but determined as he fought against the paralyzing fear that he was too late.

And he did it again. And again. And again ...

Suddenly, a splutter broke the silence, followed by a weak cough. Immediately, he turned her on her side, patting her back to make her rid herself of the excess water. Her body convulsed, water spilling from her mouth as she gasped raggedly for air.

Edward's chest heaved as he collapsed beside her, his palms slapping the wet boards in sheer relief. He sucked in a long, shaky breath, his head tipping skyward as gratitude flooded him.

But there was no time to linger.

“T-thank you for c-coming for me,” she whispered.

His heart twisted at her fragile tone. “ Always. Now, stay with me. Don’t close your eyes—don’t you dare.”

Alice’s lips parted, but he silenced her immediately. “Hush. Don’t waste your strength. Save it—just stay awake.”

The world around her swayed, the edges of her vision fraying into shadow. A sudden shift of movement forced her focus back to him. He moved with the urgency of a man pushed to the brink, shrugging off his coat and letting it fall to the ground in a sodden heap. Before she could even process the image, he was pulling his shirt over his head in one swift, unrestrained motion.

Alice blinked sluggishly, her gaze catching on the taut expanse of his chest. The muscles in his shoulders rippled as he tore the fabric with a grunt. His wet skin gleamed in the pale moonlight. Gone was the Edward she’d always known—the charming, calculating rake without a care for the world—he was now replaced by a man stripped bare to his vulnerabilities, fierce and frantic.

“What are you...” she murmured weakly, her voice trembling with pain.

“Quiet,” he ordered, ripping the shirt into long strips with unsteady hands. “Just let me—” He swallowed hard, pressing a strip of fabric against her wound. Alice let out a sharp gasp as the pressure sent a jolt of pain radiating through her shoulder.

“I know it hurts,” he muttered as he worked to secure the makeshift bandage. “I’m sorry, Alice. But I have to stop the bleeding for now. Here, hold onto me.”

Her body jerked faintly beneath his touch, but she didn’t fight him. Every groan she stifled carved into him like a blade. He tied the knot firmly as his hands grew slick

with her blood. The pressure sent a white-hot jolt of pain through her, and she bit down hard on his hand, her nails raking into his forearm. Still, he didn't flinch.

When it was done, he gathered her closer in his arms, cradling her head against his bare chest. She felt the frantic rhythm of his heartbeat, a wild, uneven thrum that matched the chaos of her own.

She tried to speak again, but he cut her off, his voice breaking as he pressed his forehead to hers. "Don't," he whispered. "Don't you dare. I can't lose you. Not you."

She felt the faintest tremble in him, but before he could say more, a voice rang out.

"Alice!" Penelope's cry pierced the thick night air. Her skirts rustled as she dashed onto the wooden pier. The sight of Edward's bared torso gave her pause for just a moment, but then she promptly fell to her knees beside her sister. "Is she—what happened? Oh God. Was she—?"

Alice managed the faintest smile for her sister, but before Penelope could say more, Benedict appeared behind her, his presence quiet but deliberate. "Penelope..." he said gently, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She glanced up at him, eye wide and glistening with tears. "Benedict, she's hurt. I can't just—"

"I know," he said softly. "She's hurt, but I think she might much prefer someone else's company right now." He leaned in slightly, his hand still on her shoulder. "Come with me. I promise, if they need us, we'll be close by."

Penelope hesitated. Her gaze flickered between Alice and Edward. Then she nodded reluctantly, her fingers brushing Alice's hand one last time before she rose. Benedict guided her away, allowing the two of them some privacy.

Edward exhaled slowly, his focus falling back to Alice. His hand came up to cup her face. “You maddening , stubborn woman. Do you have any idea what you’ve done to me?”

Alice’s lashes fluttered as she fought to focus on him. “I—”

“No.” He cupped her face in his hands. “You listen to me now, Alice Winslow. I spent years running from this—running from you. I told myself I didn’t need love, that I didn’t want it. That I would burn the dukedom to ashes before I ever gave my father the satisfaction of knowing I married.”

His voice broke, and his thumb brushed gently over her cheek, smearing a faint trace of blood. “But none of it matters—not the past, not the title, not my pride—none of it. Because I love you, damn it. I love you so much it has been tearing me apart. And if you leave me now, I will... I will turn around and walk away, but I swear for the rest of my life, I will never find another nor will I ever forgive myself.”

Tears pooled in Alice’s eyes as his words washed over her. Her lips parted, and her voice trembled as she whispered, “ Edward ...”

He bent closer until his forehead pressed gently to hers. Their breaths mingled in the narrow space between them. His next words came softer, weighted with desperation, with the positively real fear of rejection. “Marry me, Alice? Please. Let me spend the rest of my life proving how much I love you.”

For a moment, the world seemed to hang in stillness. The muffled sounds of the night faded into nothing. Her gaze met his. Then, with the faintest smile, she bit her lip and nodded.

Relief washed over Edward’s body like a tide, and he bent down, capturing her lips in a kiss that was equal part desperation, equal part devotion.

The world around them disappeared. The damp chill of the night, the flicker of lantern light, the distant hum of voices—they ceased to exist. Pain still throbbed faintly in her shoulder, but it felt far now, unimportant.

In his arms, with his lips pressed to hers, the fractured pieces of her heart began to mend.

For the first time in Alice's life, she felt whole.

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:16 am

Two months later

“Well,” Alice dropped the letter from her aunt as she addressed Penelope. “It does not seem as if they will be attending our joint wedding then. They are moving back to Kent tonight as the whole family is snubbed by not only the ton, but the gentry too. And there is more. Do you want to know?”

CHAPTER 1

LONDON, FEBRUARY 1816

“Must we go, Aunt?” Miranda, the sole daughter of Duke Rochdale asked, gazing dispassionately out the window as the carriage trundled to Westminster.

“Yes,” Lady Louisa Blakely said stiffly, her fan fluttering. A thin, silver-haired woman, the jet beads on the dowager’s turban quivered the more she fanned herself. “I saw through your chicanery earlier, doing anything and everything to stay away.”

“I truly was ill!”

“No, you were not,” her aunt cut in. “Between feigning a headache, a stomachache, claiming your good dresses were musty, then trying to say you could not attend as the hero in the book you were reading died a horrible death, and you must mourn him, I have become wise to your trickery.”

“He did,” Miranda grumbled, folding her arms.

“Unfortunate fictional deaths aside, this ball is essential,” her aunt added. “This is your fourth season, Miranda, and while I know you would rather be at home, reading over one of your botany journals, tinkering with seeds and soil, or that confounded ambition of yours to write a book...

You must marry. At two and twenty, you are nearing the dreaded Shelf. It matters not if you are a duke’s daughter. All young women of good lineage need a husband.”

“I agree,” Miranda replied placidly. “But not a husband who cares not for me, but more for getting into my father’s coffers. Unsurprisingly, all of the lords who offered marriage were fortune hunters and ne’er-do-wells in the guise of level headed lords.”

While speaking, she felt the carriage turn off into the long stretch of private road to St James’s Park, heading towards Carlton House, the Regent’s home.

“Nevertheless, there must be a lord in Town that is suitable,” the motions of Aunt Louisa’s fans sped up as she tutted. “And this Season will be the one you must marry. And I must make sure it is so, for it is what my sister wanted for you.”

Desperate to change the subject, Miranda asked, “Where is Sam this evening? I thought he would be traveling with us.”

“My son will be attending tonight,” Aunt Louisa replied. “He explained that he would be handling some business in town, but vowed to attend soon after he was finished. He, unlike you, is one that is not hard-pressed to do what must be done. I—”

The carriage lurched to the side, the jarring shift shunting Lady Louisa to the other side of the carriage and she barely slapped a hand on the wall to stop herself from crashing into it. Even though Miranda was seated in the corner, the sudden tip had her flailing, fearing the carriage would end up on its side—but luckily it didn’t. It was only slanted.

“Dear God,” Aunt Louisa gasped while rightening herself and fixing the fichu at her neck. “What on earth happened?”

Shifting the window screen, Miranda gazed out and grimaced. “The wheel is in a pothole, Aunt. I cannot see clearly because of the mist and gloom, but it seems to be a very narrow ditch.”

“Oh dear. We need to get to the Ball,” Louisa huffed. “Wilbur needs to get us back on the road.” Sticking her head around the window, she called out, “Wilbur, don’t just sit there, do something! It is of utmost importance we attend this ball post-haste.”

“I will try, my lady,” a voice came from the front, shortly followed by the snap of a whip.

The crack on the horse’s back made Miranda jump and her heart sank. “Must he do that to the grays?”

“God said, let man have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth,” Aunt Louisa quoted Genesis. “They’re horses , Miranda.”

Miranda’s rebuttal was on the tip of her tongue, but she bit down; she and her aunt had had this argument dozens of times before, and it had never worked out in her favor.

“If you say so, Aunt,” she mumbled under her breath instead. “...Except they’re living things like you and me.”

Her aunt ignored her and called to Wilbur once more, and the man lashed the horses harder. The carriage lurched once but eventually settled back into the rut.

Uneasy, Miranda wondered if there was any way she could call for help, or if there was anyone around to help. She knew she could not act on the first idea but did not feel easy if Wilbur left to find help, leaving only one footman with them.

Gazing out the window, she began to wonder what to do—when a shadowed form appeared through the mist. The man was tall, and from the form, looked to be wearing a Great Hat and billowing coat. Her pounding heart did not settle as she

knew it was easy for blackguards to imitate gentlemen.

As he reached closer, she saw the jacket under the coat had swallowtails, fit for a formal dinner. He approached Wilbur, and though his voice was low and rumbling, she heard him say, “Sirrah, I implore you, do not whip the horses. I will help you get out of the rut. Hold fast, the wheel will be an easy fix.”

She gripped the window as the strange man went off to the bushes and returned with a stout stick. He neared her window and as he tipped his hat up and crouched, she saw a flash of vivid, almost icy blue eyes, the strong slant of his cheekbones, and the chiseled jut of his jaw.

He’s handsome, but have I ever seen him before?

“What is the coachman doing?” Louisa huffed, her dark eyes narrowing.

Miranda, however, had her eyes on the stranger. She spotted the ink black of his coat that merged with his overlong hair but could not see much more than that. She knew he was jostling the stick, but where...

He finally pulled away. “Try now.”

Her aunt jerked, “Who is that man?”

“I don’t kn—” The carriage jerked once, twice... and then miraculously, it pulled free. Whatever that man had done, worked. “—know who he is.”

She opened the window, hoping to see the man and thank him—but he was gone, vanished into the mist and shadow. She blinked; had he been there at all?

Settling back in her seat, she made to remember the handsome man’s eyes, his coat,

and the cut of his jacket. If the man was attending a party, and if he was on this road, chances were he was heading to the Regent's ball. Hopefully, she would find him there and thank him.

The carriage hurried on and Miranda kept an eye on the road for the strange man but did not see him, and so eventually sagged against the seat until the carriage turned to enter a stately drive.

She shuffled closer to the carriage window to gain a new vantage as the wheels crunched over granite gravel. After a few minutes, a wide-open space appeared. Flat, immaculate lawns rolled in all directions from an enormous, gray brick home.

Double wings disappeared behind the main hall, and while it was dark, the gas lamps spotted Corinthian columns of a large foyer—its elaborateness stunned her. The home was obviously used not only for entertainment, but for impressing dignitaries as well.

She gazed at the facade as the carriage came to a gentle stop in front of arched double mahogany doors. The footman, alighting from the driver's seat, let the steps down and she exited. Then he extended his hand to assist her aunt.

While smoothing her gown, her aunt handed the invitations over and after checking, the man led them inside. Every bit of glimmering marble, metal, and mirror showed the Prince Regent's extravagance and his propensity to indulge in the finest things available.

"There is Earl Westport," her aunt nodded subtly to the gentleman, "Rumor has it that he gained a windfall investing in the merchant ships."

"He is also a hardened rakehell," Miranda took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter while glancing around the room; there was no sign of the man who had come to their aid. "No, thank you. I would rather not deal with such heartache."

“ Allegedly. ”

She spotted a few of the lords' gazes resting on her and she wondered if it was because of the off-white gown she wore or if—as on every occasion that she stepped into public—it was because she was a duke's daughter.

“I trust the Prince Regent to have invited the crème-de-la-crème of the ton,” Louisa said, her fan making a reappearance. “Surely there must be an interested and venerable suitor here.”

If the other four seasons have proven right, there will be, but their eyes will be on my dowry, not me.

Instead of meeting the gazes of the lords who beheld her, she tried to find the man with the cutting blue eyes—but he was not here.

Oddly, her heart sank with disappointment.

Ladies and gentlemen in the latest fashions paraded around, jewels flashing as they waded around the lobby's vast hallways, while the staff, their liveries crisp and attractive, rushed to and fro with refreshments.

The butler cleared his throat, “We'll be entering the ballroom shortly.”

While the ladies and lords descended to the ballroom, Miranda paid little attention to the names being called, in favor of looking at faces.

When it was her turn, she descended the stairs and heard the butler announce, “Presenting, the Lady Miranda Wakefield, daughter of Duke Rochdale, and her aunt, Lady Blakely.”

She stepped down to allow the others behind her, finally giving up on seeing the strange man again, and fixed her mind instead on how to navigate the slew of lords that she knew would approach her.

“Presenting, His Grace, the Duke of Redbourne, Dorian Greaves, and his sister, Lady Evelyn Greaves,” the butler announced.

Mildly curious, she turned to the landing—and the glass in her hand nearly slipped from her grip.

It was him!

The man who had rescued her carriage.

Tall and broad-shouldered, the duke’s dark hair and arresting features struck a chord inside her. His fierce blue eyes were like shards of sapphire under slashing brows, and sculpted cheekbones hinted at an exotic influence in his lineage. The candles and gas lamps kissed the chiseled contours of his face, the firm lines adding to his masculine attractiveness.

His expression was unreadable, but a tiny knit to his brows still stayed.

With a knot in the middle of her throat, she admired the silver-gray waistcoat and charcoal trousers fitted superbly to his virile form. A sapphire stick pin winked in the folds of his cravat, as glittering as his eyes.

She peeled her eyes from his form to look at the lady near him; she was petite and short, with soft strawberry blond hair curling down her shoulders, framing green eyes that looked sedate.

“It’s him,” she whispered.

“Lady Miranda,” the hostess, Dowager Applewhite, the most profligate rumormonger of the ton, greeted her. “I am so delighted to see you.”

Fixing her attention back to her surroundings and curtsying, Miranda replied, “As am I, my lady. Is His Royal Highness attending tonight? I would like to pass on my father’s greetings.”

“Sadly, his highness has been called away tonight, but I will be glad to pass them on for you,” the lady replied, then looked over her shoulder, a bright smile on her face while her tone dropped to fawning. “Your Grace, so lovely to see you. May I introduce Lady Miranda Wakefield, daughter of—”

“Duke Rochdale,” the duke murmured, “I heard.”

Miranda’s skin prickled as the duke’s gaze roved over her; his icy, intense eyes seemed to undo her layer by layer. Palpitations gripped her heart. No one had ever looked at her this way before, had ever made her feel this... bare.

Shaking off the troubled sensation, she tipped her head back to meet his gaze as he dwarfed her by nearly a foot. Carefully, she curtsied. “Your Grace.”

He inclined his head. “My lady. I hope you arrived without any more trouble.”

“We did,” she replied, ignoring the way the Dowager’s eyes flitted between her and the duke. “Thank you for coming to our timely need.”

Looking over her shoulder, he stated, “Your aunt is approaching.”

Turning, Miranda prayed her aunt would not do anything to embarrass her and hoped she would not say anything to make it look as if she and the duke had interacted before the worst gossip in Town.

“Your Grace,” her aunt curtsied.

“My lady,” he bowed.

When she held out her hand, the duke took it and kissed the translucent, veined skin above her large pearl ring. Miranda caught the moment her aunt’s face twisted and her heart pounded in panic.

“Aunt—”

“Your hands,” Aunt Louisa said, her brows furrowing. “Why are they so callused? God forbid, please tell me you are not... employed!”

God in heaven.

Miranda suddenly prayed the floor would open up right then and swallow her whole.

CHAPTER 2

Unfazed by the lady's inappropriate comment, Dorian let the insult roll over him like water on a duck's back. He explained, "I fence, my lady."

"Oh." Relief washed over the lady's face, the jet beads on her turban quivering as she nodded at something he'd said. "My apologies, Your Grace. I did not mean any disrespect."

No, I am sure you only meant that the thought of a noble working with his hands is as disgraceful as a harlot becoming a lady.

The younger Miss was red to the tips of her ears, temptingly so. The coral silk evening gown she wore hugged her curves and complemented her softly coiffed auburn hair. The firm, rounded tops of her breasts seemed to quiver in embarrassment... or relief?

He did not know, nor did he care that much; he was not there to attend to little Misses or their fawning aunts—all he needed was to find a suitable match for Evelyn.

As the newest—and most elusive—duke in London, he knew that dozens of ladies had their hats set on him; if only he was marriage-minded. If fate dictated so, he would happily settle for a marriage of convenience where the lady stayed out of his way and he out of hers.

"Please, excuse me," he bowed, unwilling to stay in a conversation that did not profit him much.

She is likely just as conceited and classist as her aunt.

“Your Grace, please—” she stopped him three long paces away. Her lips were pressed tight, painful horror spreading across her face.

Objectively, he could admire her as a beautiful woman, softly rounded cheeks tapered to a piquant little chin, wide moss-green eyes, and a delicate bone structure. Her lips, rosy and full, parted on a breath, and he noted the bottom one had an inviting divot at its center.

“—before you go, I must apologize for my aunt,” she let out a breath. “She is very... opinionated. I hope you do not think she meant to insult you.”

“A lot has been said of me over the years,” Dorian murmured, genially sliding one hand into his pocket “But the calluses on my hands are nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I am sure they aren’t,” Miranda replied tightly. “I have always held it that the most disgraceful thing one can do is to rule by proxy.”

“Have you now...” Dorian said evenly, absently curious to find out what she meant. “And have you ever stepped foot inside parliament?”

She blinked. “Well, no, but... it is simply judicious.”

“And what about outside of parliament, hm?” he asked, his tone slightly mocking. “Do you expect a lord to labor with the common folk?”

Flustered, Lady Miranda replied, “Erm, why not? It could set a precedent.”

“It could start a scandal,” he retorted, suddenly finding himself dually amused and irritated by her ingenuousness. “You are very idealistic, my lady. And na?ve.”

She lifted her chin, “I don’t see why having hope for the better is na?ve.”

“In this Town, it is,” he finished. “Please excuse me.”

Again, she stopped him, “But wouldn’t you like to have a spirited conversation.”

“I would,” he muttered, and hope birthed anew in her visage—only to get crushed when he added, “But not with a spoiled little Miss wearing rose-tinted spectacles while viewing the world. Now, I must get back to my sister.”

Striding away, he searched the room with one sweep of his eyes and spotted Evelyn speaking to two ladies, twins by the look of it. He ground his teeth, hoping these women wouldn’t be pandering to her to get to him.

“Evelyn,” he called to her while the two turned. “May I have a word.”

“Sure,” his sister smiled up at him. “But before that, Ladies Eugene and Euphemia, may I introduce you to my brother, Dorian Greaves, Duke of Redbourne.”

As he predicted—and feared—the women turned into simpering piles of panderers in mounds of silk. They curtsied, “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Your Grace.”

He bowed, “My ladies.”

“I am dearly honored to be one of the first to meet the most elusive duke in London,” Euphemia smiled seductively. “I think I would make headlines if I were also one of the select few to make a turn around the room with you.”

His brow ticked up, “I am not here to dance, my lady.”

“Such a shame,” her shoulders slumped. “I do hope you change your mind.”

Ladies and light-skirts alike swarmed him, and he took care to avoid being near them, conscious that these rumor rags made fortunes off his supposed exploits and consequences. The only females he avoided the most were the marriage-minded Misses.

“Would you please excuse us.”

The two shared a look before curtsying again and walking off, and as Evelyn made to speak, he lifted a hand, “I know what you were up to, aiming to introduce me to well-intentioned, nice young ladies . But need I remind you, we are here to get you married, not me.”

Evelyn’s eyes lit up suddenly. “Well, on the topic of marriage, I have been thinking about you.”

“Me?” Dorian looked over her shoulder at the woman who seemed to be wearing a whole peacock on top of her head, the perilous tilt of brown and black feathers.

“Yes,” she smiled at a group of ladies passing them. “You do know that you must eventually marry. You are the one to carry on the family name, after all.”

“You can do the same,” he put in while spying a few lords looking his sister's way.

Spluttering, Evelyn replied, “By immaculate conception?”

Eyeing his sister gravely, he added, “I am fine where I am now, but you are one-and-twenty. I do not want you to face the Shelf, Evie.”

“It is my first Season,” she beamed, tucking a strand behind her ear. “Surely I am not facing spinsterhood anytime soon.”

“Not at all if I have anything to do with it.”

“Can you at least try and enjoy yourself tonight? I have counted no less than twelve ladies looking at you, trying to get your attention.”

“Well, I have no intention of giving it.”

An elegantly dressed man, slender, tall, with blond hair styled perfectly, approached them then. His face was handsome, with high cheekbones and dark brown eyes. Clad in shades of gray and silver piping, he bowed.

“Your Grace, I apologize for the impolite interruption. I am Sam Blakely; Marquess of Bigham, and I would be truly grateful if you would allow me the first dance with her ladyship.”

Blakely —now, why did that name sound so familiar?

“You may ask her yourself,” he stepped aside with a flourish.

The man looked like the decent sort but if more grew from this dance, he would have to make sure this man had a spotless reputation, or he would not get within a mile of his sister.

As the strains of a waltz emerged from the orchestra, he spotted Lady Miranda weaving her way through the mirrored ballroom. It did not look like her purpose was to find a dance partner for the floor—but rather, to escape it.

Why?

Snagging a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, he contemplated the situation further. She was a duke’s daughter; she should have suitors lined up a mile long. Why

was she looking to escape the room?

While keeping an eye on his sister, dancing her heart away, he unvaryingly allowed his gaze to follow Lady Miranda around the room. Lords stopped to speak with her, Earls, Marquess'—all men of grand stature tried. But while she appeared polite and conversed with them, he did not get the feeling her heart was in it.

Lady Miranda was not one the ton considered as beautiful, with her unabashedly red hair—more than once he had heard people scoff, there is nothing so common as red hair—and generous curves were not the features on current fashion plates. Yet the moment he had laid eyes on her, he'd been struck by a bolt of attraction that disconcerted him.

What would it be like to explore her body, to feel the lush swell of her hips, the dip in her waist and upward, cradling the full curves of her breasts, feeling their sensual weight...

He jerked so hard in his step, the liquor in his glass sloshed to the rim.

“Good god, where did that come from?”

Confusion and anger at himself swept through him and his fingers tightened around the glass. This was certainly not what he had prepared for when attending this ball.

The music swelled and he turned his attention to Evelyn and felt pleased how delighted she looked as the lord spun her on the floor; he had never before seen his sister look as charmed as she seemed then.

Yet his eyes flickered inevitably to Lady Miranda.

Had I been too harsh with the girl? She was only extending her gratitude.

“Dare I believe my eyes,” the familiar tone of his old friend from Eton, Alexander Vere, Marquess of Portland, came from behind him. “Dorian Greaves is out from his self-imposed citadel of stone.”

Snorting, Dorian turned, “You are back from traversing the East, I see.”

“And it was glorious!” Alexander grinned; his copper hair looked burnished under the gas lamps and candles as he swirled his punch. “The Indians have this majestic book of coupling that will make my escapades that much more interesting.”

“I am surprised you have not already lured the daughter of a Maharajah into a seductive web,” Dorian tutted.

“And who says I didn’t? They don’t call me Narcissus reborn for nothing.”

Having won the bloodline lottery, Alexander was considered the pinnacle of female fantasies. He had the face of Narcissus: high cheekbones, squared jaw, full lips, and dancing cerulean eyes.

“Is that so?” Dorian asked, “I thought you were the faux version of Apollo.”

Slamming a hand to his chest, Alexander mock groaned. “You cut me, Sir, you cut me deeply.”

“You’ll survive,” Dorian muttered, his gaze landing on Lady Miranda again.

Coming to his side, Alexander nodded to the lady, “You have your eyes on Lady Miranda, then, eh? You and every lord from London to the coast. You might have your work cut out for you though.”

“I do not have my eyes on her... but for argument's sake, why is that?”

“This is her fourth Season,” Alexander adjusted his coral-colored cravat. “She has received seven offers for marriage but turned them all down. She nearly married one only to find the man was up to his eyeballs in debt and had two mistresses clamoring for his attention.”

“A very timely discovery,” Dorian murmured. “There is no doubt her dowry would have been spent in days, paying his debts and buying jewels for his mistresses.”

“One more thing,” the marquess nodded again to her. “It is widely known that she will not marry for anything less than true love.”

“I blame Miranda Press,” Dorian snorted. “Notions of true love in a culture of marrying for rank, fortune, reputation, and political connection is beyond belief.”

“It happens,” his friend shrugged. “I do acknowledge your ennui though. I’ve missed it.”

“I have not missed you and your madcap escapades,” Dorian replied.

“You willingly jumped into the Thames at midnight that time,” Alexander grinned. “And you climbed the belfry at Eton just because we dared you that you couldn’t. Admit it, Greaves, under all that indifference, you are no less a madcap yourself.”

“Not anymore,” Dorian said, “Not when I have responsibilities. I have left the carefree boy behind me. Since my treacherous uncle forced me to grow into the man I had to be, I cannot let my old habits creep back in.”

“Is one of those old habits called smiling,” Alexander laughed. “If you frown anymore, your face might get fixed that way. And if you want to dance with Lady Miranda, the best way to go about that is to ask her. You’ve been staring at her long enough.”

A quick glance at his pocket watch showed it to be nearing ten, and there was going to be a very short pause before the next dance.

I do owe her an apology.

“Excuse me,” he said to Alexander while his eyes remained fixed on Miranda. She had lifted her head at the right time to meet his gaze and hold it. Tugging his jacket down, he made his way across the ballroom, holding her gaze as he went.

Her brows were wary as he came to stand in front of her. “From what I have observed, you have been very popular with the gentlemen tonight.”

“I am the prized golden goose on display for hunters near and wide,” she said flatly. “Well, I am afraid their efforts were in vain as my skills in flirtation are altogether abysmal.”

What is he doing here?

The twenty-piece orchestra started the waltz, and many ladies and gentlemen who had hovered watching others play, swept onto the dance floor, moving.

“A man’s own manner and character is what most becomes him,” he said calmly.

“Cicero,” she parroted.

“You are well-read, my lady.”

“I suppose it goes with the title of a spoiled young Miss ,” she said, lips flickering dryly while pointedly ignoring the pointed stares at them. “All we do is read and hope to amass enough arbitrary quotes that when a gentleman mentions them, we can name the speaker. I have it on good authority that it impresses them.”

“I said little .”

“Pardon?”

“I said little, not young.”

“My mistake,” she replied, “I suppose these rose-tinted spectacles of mine do migrate to my ears.”

A smile crept into his eyes and lurked in the corners of his mouth. He was so beautiful, in a uniquely male way. Tension crackled in the space between them, and she could not deny that his strange, magnetic attraction had been there from the moment they met.

What she did question was if he felt it too.

The man’s face was a placid lake; hardly any emotion broke through to the surface. While her heart hammered in her chest, he looked as if he were watching paint dry.

“I believe a waltz will be announced,” the datted man said calmly, staring at the room.

She cocked her head. “Is that an invitation to dance, Your Grace? Because it sadly lacks in charm.”

“Charm is not a skill I have honed over the years,” he muttered. “But, as for the dance, I would not mind the honor of being your partner.”

“Why, after asking so matter-of-factly, I feel compelled to oblige.”

He noticed the whispers emanating from a gaggle of ladies posted by a nearby potted

palm. Their fans beat the air in titillated synchrony, and when the ten-piece orchestra began to assemble and he extended his hand to hers, their damned fans began to stir up a hurricane.

Closing over the top of her hand, his touch had an engrossing warmth, one that made her grow still. The heat of his palm seeped through her satin gloves—the sensation sent off quivers inside her belly.

When the flutes spurred to life, he led flawlessly, and she followed with equal grace. Their bodies swayed together in perfect synchrony, but the space between them was as rigid as the unease she saw in his eyes.

“You do not dance much, do you?” she asked.

“No,” he replied. “I am not one to socialize much either.”

“Why? Not one to entertain silly little misses, I presume?”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. “Forgive me for those ill-considered words. I was not being as judicious as I should be when I said them.”

“You were not taught to think before you speak?”

“I was, but you must understand, I am not here for myself,” the duke replied, spinning them. “This is for my sister and her happiness.”

“She seemed pretty fine when she danced with my cousin,” Miranda chimed. “Matter of fact, I think they are two couples away from us.”

His head snapped to the side, then back to her. “I wondered why I recognized that name.”

“It is my aunt’s married name.”

“Relax.”

“I am,” she snapped.

“If this is you being relaxed, I wonder what you are like when you are tense.”

She clamped her lips together and danced. He moved well, light on his feet, the hand on her back warm and steady. “I am trying to right my wrong here, please give me some acknowledgment for it.”

“I acknowledge it,” Miranda replied. “But I do not accept your apology, not yet anyhow.”

His gaze dropped to half-mast. “And why is that?”

“I feel as if you are being sincerely insincere ,” she answered. “Probably just a way to appease my silly little—”

“For God’s sake, stop with that, will you,” his freezing accent cut her off, eyes flashing. The sudden surge of emotion inside them made her heart lurch into her throat. “I had thought you a woman of sound mind; clearly I was wrong.”

“Was your purpose for dancing with me to insult me twice, Your Grace?” Luckily, the music drew to a close on those words. “Because if that is the case, you have succeeded.”

Not even pausing to curtsy, she walked away, chin raised, and left the glowering man standing alone on the dance floor. She didn’t care that this caustic cut would be the talk of the town by morning; with a man like Duke Rochdale, it was best to keep

going and never look back.

CHAPTER 3

A headache was brewing at Dorian's temple as he tried to read that morning's edition of The Times. His aunt, Lady Agatha Bakeforth, Viscountess of Surrey, clad in the morning robe was chattering with Evelyn about the ball last night...and all he could think of was the infuriating Lady Miranda.

His fingers flexed on the thin sheet; he wanted to shake her for being so stubborn, so... so maddening.

"If you grip that paper any harder, you will surely rip it in two," Agatha said calmly. "Is anything troubling you, dear nephew?"

"No," he declared surlily.

"Hm." His aunt tucked a stray curl of her silvering hair behind an ear before plucking up her Gazette. "Would it happen to be because of this, Reclusive Duke Redbourne humbled by Lady Miranda. Every jaw in the Prince Regent's home met the floor when the lady walked away from him with nary a glance back. Many are wondering—this concerned citizen who witnessed the incident included—if the two have a past that the general public is unaware of.

I am convinced that he broke her heart, Lady A—says.

No, no, no. Lady P—scoffs. The good lady sees the duke for who he is, a degenerate profligate who has no business approaching a pure, sweet soul.

No one knows who Duke Rochdale is as the man had made it a point to be private to the point of mysterious. Should I read more?"

"I would rather you did not," Dorian scowled while reaching for his coffee. "Everything about last night was... not good."

"Curious minds do want to know," Evelyn dipped her knife in the tub of peach preserves. "What did happen?"

"A misunderstanding," he said through gritted teeth.

"Oh, that says it all," Aunt Agatha murmured. "I would wager half my prize horse at Tattersalls that you made an untoward comment to the poor girl, and she took it to heart."

The mouthful of drink Dorian had almost surged to his nose. Fortunately, he managed to swallow it down, even though it rested on top of an unsettled stomach. He did not like how easily—and accurately—his aunt had read the situation.

"Can we please drop this train of conversation?" he asked.

"I suppose," his aunt inclined her head. "But be aware, this will come up another time. Anyhow, dear, can you tell me about your time with this Marquess Bigham?"

"Ah, Samuel," Evelyn sighed dreamily. "He is a bright, handsome man, and I absolutely adore him."

"You met him for an hour last night," Dorian turned a page with more force than needed. "I would advise you to meet other just as bright and handsome gentlemen before you set your mind on the former."

"And I might agree to that if you would try to stop looking like a hulking troglodyte

and scaring half of the possible lords from approaching me,” Evelyn commented. “Poor Sam told me he had to pray to God to get the courage to speak to you. Do you know how thunderous your face is at times?”

His head snapped up, brows lowering. “I do not.”

“Look in the mirror,” his aunt put in. “You are doing it now.”

Glancing at the mirrored backdrop on the sideboard, Dorian ground his teeth—once again, she was right. His face was thunderous, brows lowered and jaw tight.

“I have a responsibility to make sure no unworthy candidate asks for your hand, and if they are scared off by my face, they are clearly not worthy enough.”

“And what about you?” Agatha asked. “This Season should be about you too. You do know that you are expected to marry soon. I do not know where this distaste of marriage and commitment comes from, because I know your father and mother showed you a faithful, loving marriage for as long as they were alive. It is sad that they were taken from you before their time, but the sentiment remains.”

“The foundation they laid is not the matter here,” Dorian folded the paper and waved it. “I simply do not need to pander to the narrative that I must marry as soon as possible.”

“Are you...” his aunt paused; her delicate brows lowered. “Are you somehow perturbed that these ladies might learn how you went about to rebuild your estate and home? Are you worried they might shun you?”

“Why would I be?” Dorian asked, “If they are ashamed that I rebuilt my fortune breaking bricks and hammering nails, it speaks that I made the wrong choice in entertaining them.”

“What your uncle did—”

“Made it fair enough for me to banish him to Ireland,” he cut in. “He deserved more, but I left him with some dignity. Which, sad to say, is still more than the ladies of the ton who are all taught to sit around all day doing nothing but looking beautiful, and do not understand or appreciate hard work.”

The closest secret he kept to himself was when he had inherited his father’s estate and found it run into a rut—he’d taken a broken title and forged it back into gold, lifting himself back up out of the ashes. Born into privilege but sunk into poverty, he had a pointed view on those who flitted away their time as if every ticking moment meant nothing.

“Some men, too,” Evelyn remarked.

“Dandies do not matter to me,” he shrugged. “I will be hard-pressed to find a possible wife who is not turned away by my calluses and scars. The smell of an occupation makes them break out in hives while they leisurely play croquet or whatever ridiculous pursuits they filled their time with.”

“Is it possible you misread Lady Miranda?” Evelyn asked.

“I am sure I have not,” he replied. “I know the caliber of women when I meet them.”

“Meaning?”

“I made an unfortunate comment about her being spoiled, and when I tried to apologize for it, she didn’t take kindly to it.”

“Pardon me,” a footman said from the doorway, making them all turn to the man, his face fully eclipsed by a massive bouquet of white roses. “Lady Evelyn, this gift has been received for you from a Marquess Bigham.”

“Oh my,” Agatha blinked, taken aback. “Where do we place such a massive arrangement?”

“In my room, of course!” Evelyn beamed brightly while taking the card. “She walks in beauty, like the night

Of cloudless climes and starry skies;

And all that's best of dark and bright

Meet in her aspect and her eyes

Thus mellow'd to that tender light

Which heaven to gaudy day denies . Oh, my heart, he knows Lord Byron.”

“The rats scurrying down the dark alleys of Town know Byron,” Dorian muttered. For want of something to keep his hands occupied, he reached for the newspaper and turned to a part on business even though he had read it all earlier.

He didn't much mind how his sister and aunt shared another look. Agatha tutted, “Good gracious, he is a wet blanket this morning.”

“I wonder why,” Evelyn asked airily. “Methinks it could be a very brave lady who decided to snub him on the most visible stage in London. The house of handsome Prince Regent.”

“And it is clear he is not interested in apologizing for whatever harebrained comment he'd said,” Agatha nodded.

“Will you two stop talking over me as if I am not two feet away from you?” Dorian asked, eyes narrowed.

“Methinks he should apologize, to save face if anything,” Agatha nodded sagely. “I do know of Lady Miranda and with her brilliance and idealism, I am sure she said something to rub his practicality and pessimism the wrong way.”

While unhappy that the conversation had circled around to Lady Miranda, Dorian also felt that he was losing ground in an uphill battle he had not even initiated. “Is there anything I can do to get you two conspirators to stop needling me?”

“Find the lady and apologize to her, truly this time,” Agatha replied.

“And what guarantee do you have that she will accept this time?” he asked.

“That is for you to find out, isn’t it?” Evelyn smiled brightly.

The knock on the drawing-room door had Miranda looking up from the embroidery on her lap. Sam was peeking in, his blond hair flopping into an eye. “I am sorry to interrupt you, but would you care to share tea with me?”

“Sure, Sam. I’d love to, just give me a moment,” she finished the knot and then stuck her needle into a pincushion. As she made to stand, her toe nudged her prim long-haired Persian Cat named Duchess who meowed, unhappy at being moved.

“I’m sorry, Duchess,” she petted the cat before heading off to join Sam.

The tearoom was elegantly appointed, with buttermilk damask covering the walls and an Aegean blue Aubusson upon the floor. The furnishings were upholstered in soft white suede.

“Where is Aunt?” she asked while taking a seat at the oval tea table.

“You know Mother does not wake up until after noon,” Sam replied while uncovering the tiered cart beside the table that held several covered dishes, as he seated himself

beside her. “I requested a simple repast, one that we could serve ourselves. I hope you do not mind.”

“I like this very much. It is ever so cozy.” She smiled at him. “And that smells delicious. Is that Cook’s meat pies?”

“Yes, it is,” Sam called a maid forward who made their tea and coffee. “How are you doing?”

Suddenly suspicious, Miranda narrowed her eyes, “We came home at two in the morning from the ball and I would assume I am doing just as well as you. What have you heard?”

She watched his hands, which were long and well-suited for playing the pianoforte—which he excelled at in times he needed away from his legislative duties—as he reached for a paper.

“Last night was a touch...” he unfolded the paper, “... unprecedented , I suppose is the best word. All of Town is aflutter with the snub you leveled at Duke Rochdale last night.”

Rolling her eyes, she took her cup after thanking the maid, “That man is unbearable.”

“Do you want to hear what is now being said about you?” Sam asked.

“I would rather not, but I am afraid that I will not be able to escape it, so go ahead,” she sighed while tipping another splash of cream in her tea. “I have a slimming diet, but it depends on what they say. If they hint at us being in love, I might have to console myself with one of Cook’s blackberry tarts.”

“ Rumors abound of Duke Redbourne and his unforgettable dance with Lady Miranda and some are aflutter with reasons why he was so unsightly snubbed .”

Lady P—asserts the two are in love and states clearly, it is obvious to see. Lady S—suggests that His Grace failed to earn Lady Miranda’s good graces, stating that the good lady is smart, a very brilliant, well-read woman who sees the Duke as he is, a profligate womanizer and a disgrace. Lord F—recounts outright, the lady is simply bitter at being passed over for someone who is not the hoyden tomboy we know her to be. ”

Sighing, Miranda sat her cup to the side and reached for two tarts. “I do hate how accurately I have anticipated the ton’s response.”

Setting the paper aside, Sam asked, “Had you met Duke Redbourne before last night?”

“No, but he has justified to me why I have never met him before,” she replied. “A boorish man,” she shivered in displeasure. “Troglodyte. You seem to know more about him than I do.”

“Actually.” Sam’s mouth twisted in regret. “Not much, I’m afraid. The lads and I knew about him but we do not know him. He is a very private man. I have never seen him out and about, not at Whites, or Brooks, or Boodles. I have not spotted him at Almacks, Vauxhall, or even Tattersalls.”

Her brows dipped. “Did he appear out of nowhere then?”

“I do know he took over his father’s station at seven and ten, but was at Oxford at the time. That was fourteen years ago,” Sam said. “But his uncle held regency over his fortune and estate until he got to the age of majority. From then on, he... seemed to vanish from the public eye.”

“Oh,” she blinked. “That is strange. Fourteen years ago, when he was ten-and-seven. That means he is one-and-thirty now.”

“Yes,” Sam replied. “And I can see the question brewing in your mind. No one knows why he is not married.”

Shaking her head, Miranda asked, “What about you and His Grace’s sister?”

Sam’s face changed. “I sent her a bouquet this morning, and I hope that when we do meet again, we’ll be able to hold a deeper conversation than what we had at the ball. She is a sweet, lovely soul.”

“Are you sure she is his sister?” Miranda asked dryly. “There is nothing sweet about her brother and I cannot see that as a family trait. Maybe she was switched at birth?”

“I think you two would like each other,” Sam mused, then offered, “I plan on asking the gentlelady for a visit, and if I do get the honor, would you like to come and meet her?”

Meaning I might come across her troglodyte brother.

“I’ll consider it,” she replied, noting when he plucked the timepiece from his lapel pocket. “Do you have somewhere to go?”

“With Lord Harcourt,” Sam replied. “He needs help organizing his hunting party later this month.”

“I see,” Miranda nodded. “Better be off then.”

As he stood, a footman hurried inside, “My lady, Misses Horatia Greene and Lady Letitia Croyner are here for you—”

“Oh, just let us in. This is important, nigh on crucial, vital, critical, all the alternative expressions!” one of the aforementioned ladies barged into the tearoom, her male-inspired riding habit, epaulets and all, complimenting her blond hair and bright brown

eyes.

Miranda, used to her friend's flair for the dramatic, shook her head. "Is your puppy finding lost treasures in your backyard again?"

"Yes, but that is for another time," Horatia plunked herself into a seat. "This is about Duke Redbourne and the seventeen reasons you should stay away from him!"